# SHADES OF MEANING

## *There's More to the Tonal Quality of Men's Wear Than Simply Showing the Colors*

By Anne Hollander

Male finery lost its option for splendor two centuries ago. Since then, the more ceremonial the occasion, the less colorful the dress of the gentlemen, who all end up going to the ball in black. And during the day, only a limited range of shades is deemed appropriate for the serious work of making money or policy. The dimmer the color of his suit, the more prestigious the man and his accomplishments.

At certain forms of play, however, gentlemen can appear brightly clad, but such garments are strictly codified, beginning with the pink coat for fox hunting. And therein lies one longstanding past truth about men's clothes: because of their essential commitment to social codification, their use of color can't function separately from their social meaning. Rich purple, for instance, might be handsome, but only for silk pajamas and never for a serge business suit. Bright yellow is for sweaters and slickers, not for evening wear. Opportunity hasn't been lacking for men to wear every color, but until recently, it's been a matter of rigid decorum compared to the choices open to women, who could always wear bright purple tailored suits, as well as yellow at the opera or on the beach.

About the same time men abandoned the spectrum for public wear, they also lost out on the free use of creative fantasy and imaginative sexual rhetoric in clothes. They became the esthetic property of women, as the elements of male dress congealed into a few basic forms and embellishments. Well-dressed men undertook, along with middle-class responsibilities of every other sort, the task of expressing the entire scope of social and professional differences through a limited formal language, including correspondingly narrow limits for color. Since small changes in shirt or suit cut, shoulder width, trouser hang or collar shape carried so many of the meanings conveyed by male fashion, colors had to pace their variations to match such delicate shifts. Strong color has too much emotional power: used violently on the refined, slowly evolved shapes of male dress, it can become a joke. Evening tails rendered in, say, bright yellow connote musical-comedy costume, not sartorial daring—and for men, wearing something with the wrong connotations is far worse than wearing something that's unbecoming.

At the beginning of the 19th century, these vastly different principles of dress began to form a gulf between the sexes. Women, deprived of active worldly power, took to exploring the most extreme methods for expressing psychological power through dress. Such possibilities had formerly been shared by the elite of both sexes during the days when class separated individuals even more sharply than gender. But as the bourgeois 19th century advanced, women's clothes staked all the claims to being visually overwhelming. Of all the elements employed to create that effect, color was most important. In the middle of the century, the development of aniline dyes made it possible to wear intense colors that had never been seen before. Mood and purpose could be expressed (or more effectively denied) by a haze of dazzling prismatic tints or by a thunderbolt of magenta. Women have kept tight hold on such options ever since.

During that period, which saw the chromatic eclipse of men during business hours and in the ballroom, they were intensifying their show of colors on the battlefield. For centuries, military uniforms had exhibited a haphazard character. Most military costumes simply consisted of whatever serviceable civilian dress a man owned, embellished by a badge to identify the army in which he served. Only aristocrats and their retainers decked themselves out splendidly for war; not until the 18th century did large national standing armies come into existence, requiring complete outfits distinguishing their ranks, in addition to separating their men from the enemy.

Such clothes reflected current fashion—coat, waistcoat, knee breeches and tricorne, all worn with powdered hair. But while elegant civilian dress was comprised of lustrous brocade or embroidered velvet in colors suitable for candlelit drawing

rooms, military uniforms consisted of matte-finished fabric in bright primary hues combined with white, enabling them to be seen at a distance, like flags. Considerable contrasting trim was applied—such as facings of red on blue coats and edgings of yellow on green—and a new psychological glamour came into being along with visibility. In the field, troops knew who was who, while in review and on parade, the sight of men forming ranks of different brilliant colors aroused a considerable degree of excitement (easily confused with patriotism) from spectators.

The tide of civilian fashion, reflecting the Industrial Revolution and its sweeping social changes, was heading inexorably toward masculine sobriety. By the end of the 18th century, a romantic trend was already in motion, bringing a detached dandy ideal of elegance expressed in dim color, unobtrusive adornment, dull texture, simple cut and clear silhouette. Throughout Europe, however, by the end of the Napoleanic wars, bright-colored and shining military uniforms had become a highly specialized form of gaudy male plumage, with their own exquisite standard of tailoring, substantial prestige and direct erotic appeal. Civilian and military fashion were taking widely divergent paths.

Black and white, the most dynamic color combination of all, was originated by men. Although wearing black hasn't always expressed the same meaning in social usage, black clothes have always played on an ancient double-faced symbolism. Black signifies both modest humility and demonic power; white signifies modest humility as well as divine power. To wear either invokes a great force, yet denies it at the same time; wearing both together generates optical vibrance and a strong emotional atmosphere. The chic Burgundian dandies of the 15th century, who first wore black with white neckwear, used the combination to great effect among the period's prevailing jewel-toned court garb.

When modern-man appeared in the 19th-century ballroom in his austere black and white evening clothes, he was easily the equal of a hussar in full red-and-gold panoply or a woman in fifty yards of purple flounces. The more extreme military or feminine dress became, the more intensely potent seemed the black-and-white garbed gentleman—at once ascetic and satanic. The Romantic hero thus perpetually tempted and mocked both the colorful pulse of feminine life, with its flux of need and feeling, and the crudely vainglorious soldier.

The second half of the 20th century has seen the sexes and the professions remodeling their relations and striking new bargains. Tailored clothing in restrained shapes and sober colors is worn for business by men and women, while both wear multiform fanciful dress in an extreme range of colors for sport and leisure. The sexes invoke each other's old conventions: gentlemen may carry handbags and women may wear tuxedos. And most military uniforms have been toned down to suggest disciplined effort, not personal display.

For private life, the creative possibility of clothes has been hugely and cumulatively influenced by film, television and advertising. Elements and combinations suggesting cowboy gear, science-fiction and outer-space wear, Oriental dress and yesteryear costumes, as well as industrial protective garments and work clothes, all keep sliding in and out of contemporary design for both sexes. Modern eyes and taste easily accept Hollywood fantasy versions of such themes, along with authentic borrowings—often both at once. Aptly blended into designs for all forms of leisure dress, such allusive components have vastly enriched the limited sportswear conventions contributed by proper British upper-class clothes for hunting, shooting, yachting, tennis and cricket. In 1981, nothing is obsolete or out of bounds; everything has possibilities.

And color, of course, plays its usual large part. Despite all the new latitudes for shape and form, brilliant hues in smooth matte-finish textures sharply juxtaposed with white are still associated with outdoors activities, doing something physically arduous and singleminded. Now, the military flavor of such colors is gone, leaving only the idea of raw competition. The public presently cheers teams in red, yellow and blue, not armies; and ordinary citizens running for their health in these combinations can inwardly share some echo of that applause. Since pure, bright colors blended with white are also worn by children, they also suggest the energy and wholeheartedness of childhood; in fact, adult playclothes in kindergarten shades often have an infantile flavor stitched in along with the vigor and zest.

Unobtrusive color mixtures in complex woolen weaves remain associated with complicated states of mind and adult mental processes, accompanied by relaxed or restrained movement. Tweed, once worn only in the country for shooting, now garbs sedentary professors buried deep in libraries. But the entire range of soft tweeds, along with the gentlest of bluish, grayish and tannish flannel, plus cashmere and worsted, are also worn by ruthless, competitive business executives and politicians. Such individuals engage in difficult negotiations, directing all their energy to beating the opposition without so much as clenching a fist. Suits in softened ambiguous shades and conventional cut, worn with shirts of pale rose and mauve, help neutralize the tension in such work. Calm clothes not only make the calm man (or woman), but suggest calm proceedings. Such garments constitute a denial of violence.

Wearing deep, warm colors like amber and smoky topaz or claret and tokay, especially in plush and silky textures including suede and fur, is to admit a love of pleasure, while revealing a passionate nature. Although women have always worn them, more feminine clothes than usual are exhibiting rich colors, perhaps to emphasize the emotional and sensuous qualities that feminine ambition has now transcended. Savoring pleasure and showing depth of feeling are newly valued masculine virtues that male dress has begun to reflect. For decades, it seemed as if a man's capacity for passion had no public medium of expression but the necktie. Now, traditional shirts and blazers appear in colors worthy of a Renaissance prince, while vests and sweaters glow deeply and warmly on their wearers. All these possibilities, formerly available only to women, now advance and expand the course of masculine expression in clothes, suggesting a broadening outlook for male expressiveness. The future, in fact, looks brilliant. GQ

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