



## Fashion

by Shaun Cole

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The green carnation is one of many fashion items that have served as signifiers of homosexuality. Photograph by Stefan Knapp, courtesy Pettersen Associates, Chicago.

Throughout the twentieth century there was an undeniable association between homosexuality and fashion. Even in the two centuries preceding the last one, an overt male interest in fashion had associations of effeminacy and, consequently, of sodomy.

The illegality of homosexuality and the moral disapproval that it attracted forced gay men and lesbians to live virtually invisible lives in Britain and North America and in many other parts of the world in the first part of the twentieth century. But gay men and lesbians found ways to express their identities through their dress choices.

The adoption of a series of secret codes allowed gay men and lesbians to spot each other, while remaining invisible to the outside world. The gendered nature of clothing led some gay men to adopt overtly feminine dress and some lesbians to adopt overtly masculine garb as markers of sexual identity.

In the 1960s and the 1970s, however, changes in society and in the self-perceptions of many gay men led to a questioning of traditional dress choices. Many gay men adopted an increasingly masculine image.

The role of gay men in the fashion industry has also changed, from an unspoken assumption that gay men worked in fashion to an overt acknowledgement of the immense contribution they have made at all levels of the fashion industry. The increase in interest in fashion by straight men over the last thirty years has also led to changes in gay dress choice and in the perceptions of what it means to be interested in fashion.

### Secret Codes

Up until the gay liberation movement of the late 1960s the most important criterion of public dress, for the mass of gay men and lesbians, was to be able to "pass" as heterosexual. Despite this need, many were aware of the dress codes and items that could be used to signal sexual orientation. These symbols of identity often took the form of a specific type or color of accessory and, like other secret symbols, developed and changed over time.

The primary signifier at the time of the Oscar Wilde trials in the 1890s was the green carnation. Indeed, the color green continued to have gay associations in clothing through the first part of the twentieth century. In his ground breaking study *Sexual Inversion* (1896), sexologist Havelock Ellis observed that homosexuals had a preference for the color green and that in Paris green cravats were worn as a badge.

Before World War II, especially in New York, a red necktie was one of the better known signifiers, mentioned by a number of the elderly men interviewed by George Chauncey for his book *Gay New York* (1994).

One of the most international and enduring gay signifiers was suede shoes. By the 1960s, particularly in Britain, this signifier was well known even to mainstream society. Anyone wearing suede shoes then was

viewed with suspicion.

### **Overt Effeminacy**

For some gay men, dress choice became a means of openly declaring sexual identity. Rather than choosing clothes that enabled them to pass as heterosexual, these men often wore clothes that made their sexual identity overt. Living in a society where the prevalent belief was that gay men were female souls trapped inside male bodies (and lesbians male souls trapped inside female bodies), some gay men made the obvious and daring choice of wearing items of dress designed for women.

Overtly gay men sometimes adopted the most obvious signifiers of female mannerisms and dress: plucked eyebrows, rouge, eye make-up, peroxide blond hair, high heeled shoes, women's blouses. Both contemporary novels and newspaper reports make much of the effeminate appearance of gay men.

Adopting such an appearance was dangerous, for it was risky to be overtly homosexual. In his autobiography *The Naked Civil Servant* (1968), Quentin Crisp recalls being stopped a number of times by police because of his effeminate appearance.

However, for many the risks were worthwhile. Dressing as a "flaming queen" was a means of entering into the subculture of gay society. Also, by adopting female characteristics and by adhering to strict gendered rules of sexual behavior, queens could attract allegedly "normal," straight sexual partners.

The adoption of effeminate dress codes began to wane with the rise of gay liberation, but it continues to play a role in gay life. The debate among gay men about overt effeminacy may be summed in the following questions: do effeminate gay men re-enforce the stereotypes that gay activism has attempted to dismantle for forty years? Or do effeminate gay men make a political statement that celebrates the diversity of gay cultures and lifestyles?

### **Lesbian "Butch" and "Femme"**

Many lesbians also adopted the clothing of the opposite gender. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the adoption of male dress was a means for many women, including many lesbians, to protest the status of women and the roles assigned to women in patriarchal societies.

Until the 1970s, the public image of lesbians was very much centered on masculinity. Elizabeth Wilson observes that "for a lesbian, a hint or more than a hint of masculinity in dress might be less of a challenge to society than a way of simultaneously signalling and defusing the threat of one's identity." As a means of asserting difference and signalling to other lesbians, many women-loving women adopted certain "masculine" markers, such as a collar and tie or trousers.

Not all lesbian women felt drawn to the adoption of male clothing, preferring instead more conventional female attire. Many accounts of lesbian bar life note the prevalence of "butch" and "femme" identities and behavior, where butch lesbians were expected to form relationships only with femme lesbians, and lesbians were expected to identify with one role or the other.

The advent of both the women's and gay rights movements led to a questioning of the stereotyped dress choices that had previously been available to lesbians. Trousers had increasingly become acceptable for women and by the 1960s conventions of women's (and men's) dress had changed considerably. "Androgyny" became a key word in fashion and this manifested itself in various ways. Initially, the move was towards a feminine look for men, but the radical lesbian and gay community rejected this in favor of a more masculine look for both men and women.

The rise of radical feminism entailed a rejection of fashion-forced femininity. A new stereotype was born--

that of the dungaree wearing, crew-cut lesbian feminist.

The 1980s and 1990s saw a new diversification in lesbian dress. The breakdown of the old butch and femme divides, the changes instigated in women's dress by feminism and punk, and the increasing visibility of lesbians in public life opened up the debate about what lesbians could and should wear: Were lipstick lesbians hiding behind a mask of heterosexuality? Were "S&M dykes" pandering to notions of patriarchal dominance? How could Black women express both their sexuality and their cultural background?

### **The Menswear Revolution**

During the "menswear revolution" of the 1960s the association of fashion and homosexuality began to diminish. With the rise in subcultural fashions and the dissemination of Carnaby Street fashions around the world, it was suddenly acceptable for young men to be interested in fashion, to spend time and money on clothes and appearance.

But it should not be forgotten that the Carnaby Street fashions developed from a gay style. They were initially sold to a gay, "theatrical and artistic" clientele by a former physique photographer named Vince from a shop near Carnaby Street. John Stephen, who was later to be known as the "King of Carnaby Street," had worked at Vince's shop and produced the clothes faster, cheaper, and for a younger market.

In America, too, a close fitting "European style" was worn primarily by gay men, sold from "boutiques" in Greenwich Village and West Hollywood.

### **The Move to Masculinity**

By the late 1960s gay men throughout the western world had begun to question their position as second-class citizens and their stereotype as effeminate "queens." Along with the demands for equality and recognition, gay men began to address their appearance. There had always been gay men who dressed in a conventionally masculine style, but in the early 1970s gay men in New York and San Francisco looked to the epitomes of American masculinity--the cowboy, the lumberjack, the construction worker--for inspiration for a new dress style.

The clones, as they were known, adopted the most masculine dress signifiers they could find-- workboots, tight Levis, plaid shirts, short hair cuts, and moustaches. Their clothes were chosen to reveal and celebrate the contours of the male body.

"Clone" was an appropriate term as more and more gay men adopted the new masculine look and moved to large cities, where it was possible to live an openly gay lifestyle, often centered around bars, gyms, clothes, drugs, and sex (described eloquently in novels of the period such as *Dancer from the Dance* [1978] by Andrew Holleran and *Faggots* [1978] by Larry Kramer).

Some of these clones also developed their sexual tastes by experimenting with sadomasochism. Consequently, they sometimes adopted a "Leatherman" appearance and lifestyle, which involved a strict codification of dress and a new system of signifiers, most notably colored handkerchiefs in a back pocket, specifying particular sexual interests.

The hypermasculine image has continued to be important even after the supposed death of the clone in the late 1980s, when the image became associated with an older generation of pre-AIDS gay men. Gay men have interpreted and demonstrated their masculine looks through the celebration of muscular "gym" bodies and clothing that shows off those bodies, as well as the emergence of other masculine subcultural styles such as the gay skinhead.

### **The Fashion World**

The myth of homosexual influence in fashion has a grounding in reality. In his book *Hard to Imagine*, Thomas Waugh argues that before the advent of gay liberation there was a "highly interconnected trans-Atlantic web of gay intelligentsia and denizens of high Bohemia," which included men such as Noël Coward, Cecil Beaton, George Hoyningen Huene, Jean Cocteau, and Horst, and which operated to define the image of glamor in the London and New York worlds of fashion, design, and show business.

Historians of the modern gay experience have documented the large proportion of gay men who have worked in creative fields (such as fashion and the theater) and service industries (such as restaurants and catering). Ross Higgins, in his study of gay men's involvement in fashion in Montreal, has shown that gay men were involved at all levels of the fashion industry there. The same is undoubtedly true throughout North America and Western Europe.

Throughout the twentieth century many of the top couture fashion designers were gay, even though social pressure called for them to keep their sexuality quiet if not secret. Indeed, many of the greatest names in twentieth-century fashion were gay or bisexual, including such figures as Christian Dior, Cristóbal Balenciaga, Yves Saint Laurent, Norman Hartnell, Halston, Rudi Gernreich (who was one of the founding members of the first American homophile organization, the Mattachine society), Giorgio Armani, Calvin Klein, and Gianni Versace.

As designers took over from traditional tailors and gentleman's outfitters in men's fashion, there was a new gay influence. Because gay men were often more willing to experiment with new ideas, styles, and fabrics in clothing, designers such as Jean-Paul Gaultier began to look at what was happening at street level and in gay clubs for ideas for their men's collections. Moreover, gay men bought clothes that were influenced by and styled towards a gay aesthetic, so their taste influenced fashion in both obvious and subtle ways.

The advent of the "new man" (as a media icon) in the 1980s was a result of men's reaction to major social changes brought about by a second wave of feminism, notably in the workplace. As a consequence it became acceptable for straight men to be interested in their appearance, clothes, and grooming products.

Increasingly men began to be portrayed as sexual objects in advertising. Calvin Klein's huge billboard advertisement for underwear is only the most famous example of this trend. New magazines aimed at a wider, heterosexual male consumer were published, but even here a gay influence could be perceived. It was not just that gay designers were creating the looks, but gay stylists, hairdressers, and photographers all exerted a fashion influence.

For example, stylist Ray Petri (featured in the *Face I-D* and *Arena* magazines) drew on looks that he saw in gay clubs to create a whole new style known as Buffalo.

The early 1990s saw the advent of "lesbian chic" in the fashion world. This manifested itself most visibly in a series of photographs in *Vanity Fair* in 1993, including a cover that featured lesbian singer k.d. lang cavorting with supermodel Cindy Crawford.

Today it is perfectly acceptable for straight men to be interested in fashion and to be obvious consumers of clothes, grooming products, and fashion or "lifestyle" magazines. Popular figures, such as footballer (and husband of former "Posh" Spice Girl, Victoria) David Beckham, are avid consumers of clothes and even acknowledge their debt to gay men's influence on fashion.

## **Conclusion**

In an age where homosexuality is tolerated and to a great extent accepted in major urban centers, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish gay and straight men (and gay and straight women) on the basis of their dress. Acknowledging this, Elizabeth Wilson poses the following question: "Throughout the queer

century we have disguised and revealed our deviant desires in dress, masquerade, disguise. Now that everyone's caught on in a postmodern world, what do we have to do to invent new [gay and] dyke style?"

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### **About the Author**

**Shaun Cole** is curator of Designs at the Victoria and Albert Museum. He is author of *"Don We Now Our Gay Apparel": Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century* and has curated numerous exhibitions, including "Graphic Responses to AIDS" (1996), "Fashion on Paper" (1997), and "Dressing the Male" (1999), as well as two innovative "Days of Record" to document Tattooing (2000) and Black British Hairstyles and Nail Art (2001).