

VOGUE MAN

ARABIA

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FIELD OF DREAMS
SAUDI ARABIA SHAPES THE WORLD'S NEXT SOCCER STARS

COUTURE FOR MEN
FASHION'S HIGHEST FORM IGNITES YOUR SELF-EXPRESSION

A photograph of Olympic champion Ahmed Hafnaoui standing on a rocky shore, surrounded by several children. He is shirtless, wearing dark trousers and a gold medal around his neck. The children are also shirtless, wearing swim trunks. They are all looking towards the sea. The background is a clear blue sky and a calm sea.

BRINGING HOME GOLD

OLYMPIC CHAMPION AHMED HAFNAOUI IN TUNISIA

DOLCE & GABBANA

CIRCLE OF COUTURE

Best dressed is no longer a woman's world as men turn to haute couture in this era of individualism

Words SEBASTIAN CABRICES

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aute couture, the ultimate luxury universe where each sleeve and hem is fashioned by hand, brings forth visions of aristocratic women in ballgowns posing against sweeping staircases. Lately, however, there's a new silhouette demanding attention and desiring to be bejeweled and swathed in sumptuous textiles and

embroidery. The era of men's couture, as confirmed on the runways of Valentino, Balenciaga, and Azzaro, has returned. "Couture is about uniqueness and giving," Pierpaolo Piccioli says about Valentino's recent offerings for men. "The world is changing. If you do it on the runway, you celebrate the big changes on the street." The 2020s are reviving a fashion panorama reminiscent of the furor that tinted the post-war industry – designers being a sign of artistic survival and considered after-crisis heroes, clients regaining financial stability, and brands seeing tangible ways to create new market opportunities. For his FW21 couture show, Georges Hobeika included six men's looks, including statement coats in embellished teal and pink fur. Men's haute couture is experiencing an evident rise in popularity and demand, while its concept is once again put into tension.

It was only in 1997 when haute couture saw a contemporary renewal of its strict order. The elevated concept of dressmaking – coined by Marie Antoinette's modiste, Rose Bertin, and popularized by the Paris-based English couturier Charles Frederick Worth in the late 19th century – experienced a rather imminent shake-up with Jean Paul Gaultier presenting men's looks at his debut



couture show. Denim pants replaced duchess satin skirts on the runway, while the sobriety of Savile Row-like tailoring was absorbed by a theatrical performance by Tanel Bedrossiantz at Gaultier's last runway show in January 2020. Nonetheless, according to Cesare Cunaccia, former Vogue Italia editor-at-large and fashion lecturer at LUISS University in Rome, the rise of couture collections for men shouldn't be taken as a novelty but understood as a circular phenomenon. "The frenzy for couture is not

new," affirms Cunaccia, a couture connoisseur who mentions having met Cristóbal Balenciaga as the most remarkable memory from his childhood. "Even Worth had already revolutionized an existing idea, but he made couture a dream, an obsession for the aristocrats," he says. "But this phenomenon as we see it today, Gaultier has already done it, something disruptive and abstract that, beyond being politically correct, was socially daring; it dared creativity."

Before couture as we know it was established, the dandies had already motivated menswear to reach for more refined and audacious looks to fulfill their aesthetic demands. The "clothes-

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wearing men," as described by Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle, served as primary clientele to Savile Row tailors, whose bespoke suits were the couture offer for men of the time. In the stylish area of Mayfair, the gentlemen at Anderson & Sheppard revolutionized menswear with their distinctive London Cut and dressing Britain's most prestigious clientele. Leon Powell, senior coat cutter at Anderson & Sheppard, believes the bespoke experience is protected from men's tailoring trends. "Obviously, you're going to have customers with suggestions on the length of a coat or wanting a slimmer lapel, and we try to accommodate them, keeping the standards of the very classic. Trends change for the individuals, not for us," affirms Powell of the soft draping style characteristic of the Savile Row institution.

If the dandy was the original precursor of bespoke tailoring, who are the men pushing and buying contemporary men's couture today? Pier, 22, a young Italian regular at the couture shows across Europe, speaks of his chamber-inspired black tuxedo from Dolce & Gabbana Alta Sartoria as his way of "creating a wearable piece of art through the vision of Stefano and Domenico." Ali Samli and Goran Svilar, luxury businessmen and Dolce & Gabbana customers since the 90s, agree that "beyond logistics, fashion is about emotions." At Alta Sartoria, they have found the answer for their appeal to everything Italian. In the world of high dressmaking, "the next level of exclusivity is not connected with the price but to accessibility," says Polimoda's director, Massimiliano Giornetti. "With a market now saturated by the ecommerce offer, consumers are looking for real, exciting emotions," he reflects.

There also exists a tangible challenge for tailors and couturiers to maintain tradition and standards, as there is a level of commitment to that style that has grown loyalty. "Some customers have been coming here since the 60s because they trust our judgment, they enjoy the clothes, and our style suits them," says Powell. "Also, you can't go Aston Martin when you're a Lamborghini,"



"HAUTE COUTURE IS ALSO ABOUT FASHION, AND FASHION MUST CHANGE AND EVOLVE TO REMAIN RELEVANT"

RIGHT Singer Giveon wearing bespoke Valentino at the 2021 Met Gala
BELOW RIGHT Harry Styles in custom Gucci at the 2021 Grammy Awards
BELOW Timothée Chalamet wearing Haider Ackermann at the 2021 Met Gala



advises the tailor, confident of the work being done in their shop. Fashion history has had its own ruptures and events altering its course, but what challenges are facing the business of couture – and couturiers – today? “To keep savoir faire alive, to offer the best couture quality to the creation, I think we have to welcome changes and evolution. Haute couture is also about fashion, and fashion must change and evolve to remain relevant,” suggests Azzaro’s Olivier Theyskens, whose first couture collection for the house came with a high dose of energy in its menswear.

The evolution in the perception of masculinity and the ambiguity of gender in clothing have been the most notable rupture in modern couture. Although a revision of the history of costume could reveal how non-binary menswear was in the past, contemporary designers have opted to make these defining lines less explicit. At Valentino, Pierpaolo Piccioli practices subtracting narratives, embellishments, and gender to focus his couture work on attention to skill. “Couture is for people. I don’t care about gendered fashion. It’s an inspiration which is fluid, no-boundaries: a trench coat is for men and women,” said the designer of his couture showing for SS21.

Couture might not be best friends with contemporaneity and how it interprets its concept, but it does know how to contend in the game of intelligent adaptation. Whether happening in a tailor’s shop in Savile Row with a prince or a rapper in the ateliers of Balenciaga – where Demna Gvasalia and team conjured the founder’s genius to create provocative, impossible shapes of beauty – modistes are inviting men to experiment; helping them glimpse the kaleidoscopic world that a pair of wise hands, a thread, and a needle can open. **VM**

Men’s couture through the ages



LOUIS XIV (1638-1715), the Sun King, was not only known for increasing France’s military prowess and building Versailles, but also for inventing fashion as we know it today. He was instrumental in making Paris the capital of fashion (taking Madrid’s crown) and France the home of luxury. He established the textile, clothing, and jewelry industries – he even made his son burn a coat not made in France. His strict dress code at Versailles birthed modern haute couture, with his personal style colorful, flamboyant, voluminous – and vastly copied.



BEAU BRUMMEL (1778-1840) was the first of the 19th century dandies in Europe, who were always immaculately dressed and highly groomed. An arbiter of style and taste, Brummel put his first stamp on fashion while at Eton, by adding a gold buckle to his uniform’s white cravat. As a favorite friend of the Prince Regent, Brummel’s influence stretched to the upper echelons of society, where he was instrumental in introducing enduring styles, such as abandoning wigs in favor of short hair, and wearing pants, not breeches.



JEAN PAUL GAULTIER immediately sent shockwaves through the fashion world when he launched his namesake brand in 1982. With his singular silhouettes, fashion’s *enfant terrible* redefined what was possible for men’s style. His line of kilts for FW1984 had tongues wagging (with the designer commenting, “A man doesn’t wear his masculinity on his clothes. His virility is in his head.”), as did his hot pink men’s sailor suits, and the showstopping 2020 couture show featuring exaggerated tailoring and his signature trompe l’oeil creations.