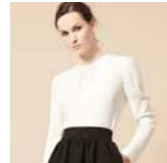


MAKING YOUR MARK

A well-tailored suit, for a man, signals professionalism and success – but what is the equivalent for a woman?

HANNAH ROTHSCHILD explains her quest to develop her own style of power-dressing without turning into a monotone clone



Men have it so easy in the boardroom; this isn't a rant about glass ceilings or quotas, but a paean in praise of the suit. This simple garment offers a kind of sartorial lingua franca, an internationally acceptable outfit for all males from the age of nine months to 99 years (it's even preferred coffin-dressing for the deceased). Its name is derived from the French verb *suivre*, meaning 'to follow'. Yet the suit consists of two, sometimes three, pieces, offering ample opportunity for individuality: the film director Stephen Frears wears bespoke Prada with red Converse; AA Gill designs his own tweed; Alan Yentob prefers unstructured Armani; Peter Mandelson is strictly Savile Row. Most men get by with a couple of basic suits, varied subtly with a change of tie or shirt.

Few women can pull off a trouser suit; Hillary Clinton and Cherie Blair have tried. Notable contemporary exceptions include the architect Sophie Hicks, who looks sharp in vintage Alaïa, and the writer Nicola Shulman, effortlessly chic in velvet suits, one in dark blue by Chloé and another in maroon by Marc Jacobs. The skirt suit is kinder to the average female form but makes most of us look like air hostesses or head mistresses (though the former high mistress of St Paul's Girls' School, Heather Brigstocke, liked to dazzle dads in skin-tight pinstripes with fishnets).

A beautifully cut suit should last a man for life: but to remain contemporary and age-appropriate, to look sharp and relevant, women need to update their wardrobe regularly (I've been waiting since the late 1980s for a mad Moschino shoulder-padded suit to come back into fashion). 'I make a choice to show off my legs or a bit of chest, but never the two at once,' one high-flying executive told me. Much has been written about women harnessing their erotic capital. It might work in some situations, but everything depends on how you want to be perceived. Younger women can show off their knees, upper arms and waists. A hint of chest is fine



until the décolletage turns crepey. Winston Churchill advised men to forgo diets, stop worrying about age and find a better tailor. But where is the Savile Row for women?

I do a multiplicity of different jobs. As a journalist, I write in jeans, tracksuits, T-shirts, whatever is clean and comfortable. For my work as an observational documentary-film-maker, my wardrobe has to reflect the life of the subject I'm profiling. Dressing is tribal, and before I start filming I study the milieu and the clothes with the care of an anthropologist. Years of experience have taught me that as long I look like 'one of them', most people will ignore my camera. Making a film about the art world led me to invest in that art-fair staple, a Prada dress. Following the interior designer Nicky Haslam necessitated quick changes – a building site in the morning, a ladies' lunch, and then a black-tie premiere at night. Shadowing Peter Mandelson meant morphing into a Labour Party apparatchik (thank you, M&S).

In the past few years, I've faced my biggest sartorial challenge after joining the boards of various corporations. Once, my clothes were a form of camouflage; suddenly, they had to present a carefully co-ordinated statement. I was entering predominantly male environments where first impressions count and stick (don't think men don't notice what you're wearing.

They do and will comment, just not necessarily to your face). As Melanie Griffith's character in the 1988 film *Working Girl* found out, clothes can be utterly transformative. So what did I want to project? Richard Branson wears jeans to meet his bank manager; a suit might suggest desperation. Christina Hendricks' character in *Mad Men* uses every weapon in her considerable arsenal to get noticed. Condoleezza Rice, during her time as US Secretary of State, made one concession to frivolous femininity: a single string of pearls.



I studied how other women managed. Caroline Michel, the CEO of talent and literary agency Peters Fraser & Dunlop, is one of the few who can pull off a million-dollar deal in a curve-hugging Dolce & Gabbana dress; the gallerist Martine d'Anglejan-Chatillon looks sensational in sharp black pants – no wonder, since they are vintage YSL. Then there are women who find and stick to a particular style – the philanthropist Jane Willoughby, who teams hunting stocks with tailored frock coats; the Queen, with her matchy-matchy bags and shoes; British documentary producer Jess Search's wide, coloured shirts and loose-fitting men's suits.

At Tina Brown's 'Women in the World' conferences in New York, every American executive who appeared on stage, all the heads of media, internet, finance and public bodies, were each other's doppelgänger; all beautifully turned out, helmet-haired, be-suited, toned, middle-aged women. Was this apparent loss of individuality and self-expression a prerequisite for being a successful female? Or was there a subtler message? By presenting this bland, sartorially homogeneous front, this tribe of women was saying: 'Don't look at what we're wearing; listen to what we have to say.' This, of course, is a tactic men have used for several centuries, with great results.

I identified my key criteria for boardroom success: first, no bold fashion statements. Being the only woman is enough. I needed to look neat (a huge personal challenge). The clothes must be well cut from a fabric that holds its shape; no good leaving the house looking pristine, only to arrive at a meeting like a paper bag. Breasts and thighs must remain firmly behind the scenes until otherwise instructed. Clothes should demonstrate that I care, but not too much. Outfits need to be versatile for a variety of events and temperatures. I set about creating a capsule collection – trousers, dress, jacket and skirt – that could be styled with scarves, jewellery and shirts. With those in place, I could step out with confidence. I was prepared to make a reasonable investment, but not to spend silly money. The hard bit came next: finding them.

There were a few mistakes before those master brand-curators at the Cross in Notting Hill came to the rescue with an introduction to a British label called Goat. Working from a small basement in Marylebone, Jane Lewis makes stylish, beautifully cut, flattering dresses, jackets and trousers in Italian crepe. 'I don't design for design's sake,' she explains. 'These clothes are about cut and versatility. I dress young and old women, for business and fun.' I have road-tested her clothes in New York, London and the Middle East, at both dress-down and dress-up events – one word: brilliant. No



Hannah Rothschild. Opposite, from far left: a look from Goat. Rothschild with Alan Yentob

£115 Aspal of London

£295 Joseph

£1,910 Louis Vuitton

£365 Miu Miu at Mytheresa.com

£250 Goat

wonder the Duchess of Cambridge and Victoria Beckham love a Goat.

With the basics in place, it was time to add a few personal twists. To help make that tricky transition from day to night, I invested in an embroidered Etro jacket, a significant but hardworking purchase. I am hankering after a delicious Prada frock coat embellished with oversize daisies; to buy or not to buy: that is the question. A navy-blue Sylvie Schimmel leather biker jacket is a great way to dress down for field trips. Joseph and Vanessa Bruno cut fantastic trousers. Zara and COS make sharp, fashionable clothes; Whistles stocks interesting designers; and for my curves, Agnès B basics work particularly well.

Thank heavens for online shopping; RIP pavement pounding. Navigating the world of high finance, an arena with a language of its own and some baffling conventions, presented a steep learning curve, but at least I have, finally, the appropriate armour for the boardroom battles. Perhaps I would never have to worry about dressing for the office again? Then a call came in: would I like to be a part-time senior editor and writer for *Harper's Bazaar*? Hell yes. My thoughts turned quickly to clothes. What do they wear at a women's magazine? A friend accused me of being shallow. 'Just be yourself,' she advised. 'Myself? Where's the fun in that?' I asked, thinking about the chameleon-like joys of adapting to another environment, being part of a totally different tribe. What happened next, as they say in fashion, is another story. □

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