

International Crisis Italian Menswear vs. American Menswear

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Keywords: fashion / men / style

Abstract

Imagine yourself in New York City. It is a comfortable Saturday night and you are dining outside of a swanky restaurant, enjoying a cool glass of Italy's finest white wine. The city is buzzing with people hurrying off to the latest "hot spot" in the city. The women are dressed in their finest, and the men...well, take notice of the men. Most are wearing a baggy cotton T-shirt, blue jeans, and a pair of sneakers. Some men were feeling a little brave this evening and pulled out cotton polo and a pair of loafers. There is nothing too exciting about these men, but wait. You see something else. In the distance, a tall lean man comes walking down the sidewalk. His hair is styled vertically, despite gravity's stubbornness. He wears a bright pink graphic tee topped by a metallic brown jacket over khaki linen pants and matching brown, patent leather, pointed shoes. To any fashionable woman, this man is a godsend. He is of rare form in an American city. He defies all typical style guidelines in American men's fashion. To the average American onlooker, this pink panther is either gay or from another country. Yet this man is a European-influenced American fashion icon. American menswear has struggled with a reputation for being sloppy and tasteless. European fashions have traveled across the ocean to assist the troubled American man and improve the perception of men's fashion.

Introduction

Traditionally, American menswear has been based on one key factor: comfort. The majority of American men were never willing to sacrifice their comfort for a stylish outfit or good look. They preferred to wear inexpensive clothing that was loose and could be simply carried over from season to season. The color selections were muted and basic so the wardrobe could easily be mixed and matched creating new ensembles with the same garment. That same garment would be worn repeatedly and never discarded until it was ripping at the seams and faded to a whole new shade of color. Currently in today's world the fashion industry has evolved and small minorities of American men have become far more fashionable and stylish. These Americans are no longer concerned with just comfort but also their appearance. These American men want to look powerful while in the work force. Others prefer to look sexy while on the streets while some Americans combine the two looks. The change in attitude toward clothing is striking in the menswear market but nothing compared to the fashion forward European man, particularly the Italians. The Italian man craves innovative design and is not too

masculine to experiment with anything cutting edge. American men stereotype the Italian menswear as flamboyant and feminine while Italian men characterize American men's fashion as sloppy and generic. Over time the two worlds clash and Italian menswear influences the American menswear market.

American Menswear

The average American man has a larger build compared to the average European male, primarily in the shoulders, girth and bottom. In 1988 the Olympics took place at the Seoul stadium where Americans complained that the seats were too small. The reason: American bottoms are larger than Europeans (DeCalo). The "beer belly" is also all too common for Americans in addition to overeating. Obesity is a major issue in the United States and indeed affects the dress of American men. Men prefer baggy clothing that does not cling and leaves room for comfort. This baggy look was initially adopted by the hip hop culture and passed down to other American cultures (White). Another prominent style of dress for American men is the preppy look. Most people associate the preppy look with Abercrombie and Fitch, Ralph Lauren, and Perry Ellis. These contemporary designers created the casual American look which primarily consisted of jeans and a T-shirt or Polo shirt (Business World). The look is simple and crisp with minimal design detail and an emphasis on comfort.

To fully understand how the typical American man dresses, the thought process behind purchasing clothing needs to be evaluated:

When a male consumer needs to purchase, say, a suit or an unmatched jacket-and-trouser set, he will consider primarily (and just a few years ago, exclusively) the factor of wearability, fit, and comfort: every man has conducted the classic test-gesture of raising his arms like airplane wings and then bending his elbows. Next comes the quality of the fabric (lightness, softness) and the quality of the construction (precision of the stitching, strength, and geometric precision of the checks or stripes of the fabric). The choices concerning the style, the color, and the accessories are minor variants, and are often suggested or guided by the shop owner or salesman. (Balesrti and Ricchetti 2000)

The American man is not concerned with the detail of his garment or its trendiness but rather with its durability. Looking at a men's section in any department store in the United States, garments are displayed as sets. Matching shirts are placed near matching pants and usually a mannequin is displayed with the complete ensemble. This set up is easy for American men to understand and helps them put together outfits and purchase at a quick pace. They want to get in and out with minimal shopping. Overall, the American man prefers comfort over style and convenience before detail.

Italian Menswear

Menswear in Italy is very different compared to the American style of clothing. The Italian man is described as knowing his individual style and choosing colors according to his moods. He is comfortable with his appearance and makes a tasteful fashion statement (Business World). Unlike American men, Italian men base clothing decisions on detail such as cut, color, style, and pattern. Europeans have a smaller stature than American men; therefore the cuts are slimmer and more fitted. It is common to see an Italian man walking down the streets of Milano or Firenze in a skin tight T-shirt and slim cropped pants. Americans consider the Italian style feminine and a little flamboyant; not just because of the cut but also garment color. Color selection in Italian menswear has variety ranging beyond your basic black, navy, brown, khaki, and white. A bright pink or pastel blue is a popular choice for Italian men deciding on the right color for a basic shirt. Colors give character to an outfit and unlike most American men who prefer to go unnoticed in their clothing, Italians like vibrant colors. They wear eccentric patterns that are not your typical stripes and checks. Emilio Pucci is a legendary Italian designer who is famous for his exquisite and exotic patterns that he designs for his clothing. They are psychedelic and retro with lots of color and movement.



Figure 1. Italian Fashion. Dario is a perfect example of Italian fashion with tightly fitted clothing and bright colors as well as extreme detail in garments.

Most high end designers are based out of Italy, such as the prominent Emporio Armani. Armani is responsible for recreating the work suit. The Italian look featured a looser, more comfortable fit, using softer materials in neutral colors such as camel. The suits are slim and retain an easy elegance that distinguishes the garment from the stiffer look of the typical men's suit. Italian men are far more fashion forward than American men and focus on dressing fashionably and feeling confident. They prefer to have an individualistic look that sets them apart from one another.

Influences of Italian Style on American Menswear

Italian influences on American menswear are prominent and continue to grow and expand. Some suggest that the expansion of Italian influences is due to the acceptance of casual wear in the work place, replacing the classic tailored suit (Balestri and Ricchetti). Men still need to look professional and 'powerful' and baggy pants and T-shirts won't give that affect. Italian fitted styles will provide a confident look and put-together appearance. Outside of the work place, status is another concern of most American men. They want to appear to have money and luxury. If they have a well groomed exterior consisting of status designer shoes, bags, and clothing, then men feel powerful.



Figure 2. Italian Influenced American Menswear. Stefano is an Italian American man who is influenced by Italian fashions found in Philadelphia. His clothing is fitted and fashion forward. He combines unlikely separates and shows a great deal of attention to detail.

Besides the working American man and his status, designers and retailers have an affect on the American menswear industry. Italian designers are coming to America and designing lines of clothing for certain retailers and selling them to American men. One designer named Michael Bastion designs clothing for men that is available in stores such as Saks Fifth Avenue, Neiman Marcus, and Bergdorf Goodman. His collections consist of classics such as linen pants, corduroy shorts, denim jackets, jersey polo shirts, and five-pocket jeans with some new features that give them an Italian influence. He lines suits with shirt fabrics and chino pants' pockets with heavy cotton so keys do not wear through. His slim-cut woven shirts have vents at the shoulders and darts at the waist for a more comfortable yet stylish fit, and his cashmere/silk knitwear is shorter at the waist and longer in the sleeves, accurately fitting men with long arms (Kissel).

American men are becoming more aware of their appearance and the clothing that they choose to wear. In an interview, Italian American man Stefano Di Rocco gives his opinion on the Italian influence on his clothing selections:

My greatest influence came from my Italian relatives both in Italy and in the US. I grew up in a traditional Italian family that placed an emphasis on clothing and appearance in general. My grandmother was a seamstress and she always tailored suits, pants, and dress shirts for me as a child.

He also commented on typical American menswear, stating, "American menswear places emphasis on physical comfort and less emphasis on style. American menswear is also tailored to fit the typical American male's physique: unfit." Overall, Di Rocco felt that American menswear is not made to fit everyone and that there is no real design to the clothing. Everything is baggy and out of proportion. Italian menswear is fitted and provides Di Rocco with confidence in and outside of the workplace.

Conclusion

The difference between American menswear and Italian menswear is the variance in cut, color, and style. Italian menswear is fashion forward and gives a great deal of attention to detail and design. Men are respected who can wear tight fitting clothes with various cuts and embellishments while pulling the look off with confidence. There is nothing more attractive than a man that dresses fashionably and pays close attention to detail. The Italian influence on American men is profound and hopefully will continue to spread throughout the country. Currently, the Italian influence is prominent in the business world and cities around America. With the booming menswear industry, stylish American men will soon be walking the sidewalks all over the country.

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