

CLASSIC DRIVER

Return of the dandy: Eccentric elegance is back

Lead

Open the pages of a quality men's magazine and you'll read that the latest fashionable affectations include one that has its roots in the early 19th Century - that of the dandy. But Simon de Burton questions whether dandyism can ever be described as a 'fashion' or, indeed, an 'affectation'...

It is, of course, possible to find an exhaustive definition of the word on Wikipedia. But to look up the meaning of 'dandy' on the internet is about as dandyish as having to rush away from the lunch table after 55 minutes because you're only allowed out of the office for an hour.

Defining a dandy



Far more dandy-like is to languidly flick through a suitably ancient, leather-bound edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, my relevant volume of which places the definition between Dandurand, Raoul (Canadian statesman) and Danegeld (an English tax levied by Aethelred II). And it does not make especially aspirational reading.

"It is probably derived," says Britannica, "from the French dandin, a 'ninny' or 'booby'." The entry further adds that the Northampton Mercury newspaper of April 17, 1819, reported that the term "had recently been applied to a species of reptile very common in the metropolis, [the name of which] appears to have arisen from a small silver coin struck by King Henry VII, of little value, called a dandiprat; and hence Bishop Fleetwood observes the term is applied to worthless and contemptible persons."

A completely natural state



All the same, characters such as the Englishman Beau Brummell and the French poet Charles Baudelaire turned dandyism into high art by dressing exquisitely, making a profession of taking their ease and displaying a general contempt towards convention - especially when it came to working for a living.

Many modern would-be dandies appear to believe that all that is required to achieve dandy status is to dress in some moderately loud or slightly eccentric clothing. This is not, of course, the case. True dandyism is an indefinable and completely natural state rather than an affectation - which means that picking up fashion tips from a magazine is about the last thing a real dandy would ever do.

Embracing the old





Instead, his style is his own and, if anything, he eschews recognised fashion in favour of establishing it himself - before, of course, abandoning it should it become popular. And he never, but never, wears a garment in an attempt to make an ironic statement (a floor-length fur, for example, or a pair of corduroy breeks).

No, a true dandy will appear in a set of clothes that few others would dare to wear, yet he will be utterly at ease in them and, while the fit will be perfect, he will carry them without effort. It goes without saying, of course, that the quality will be the best and the makers will, invariably, be obscure - or, very likely, long dead since true dandies have no qualms about wearing old garments.

A feast of individuality



So, to anyone out there who hopes to find the route to dandyism by following fashion, our advice is not to bother. Because if you have to try, you have probably already failed.

But if you're having this read to you by an impossibly beautiful maiden while you recline on a chaise longue dressed in salmon pink velvet and nibbling marron glacé with a crested silver fork... well, that's another matter and we apologise profusely for interrupting.

Photos: Rose Callahan, from 'I am Dandy', Copyright Gestalten 2014

Gallery

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