

by W.C. McRae

Remember when Thursday was "queer day"? In our high school, wearing yellow (or was it green?) on Thursday was considered to be a gay signal. Pink was taboo any day. Wearing shorts (not to be confused with cut-offs) was suspicious. Jewelry, other than class rings (very butch), was understood to be part of the gay dress code. We were certain that "gay" was something you could tell from the outside, like a badge: an earring, legs crossed too tightly.

The predictive value of these beliefs was not very great: many of the more assiduously "masculine" of our number would go on to be gay. But the purpose of our beliefs in any case was not to single out the gays in our midst; it was probably not even clear to us then what "gay" was. But by constructing a category of "gay appearance," we could then — all of us, gay and straight — conform to categories of behavior that validated our masculinity. Without fixed, and highly visible, notions of what constitutes "gay," how could the category of "masculine" — surely its opposite — establish itself?

Straight men dressed one way, and gay men another. This belief was sufficient insurance that the twain would never meet.

Unless, of course, they wanted to.

In the past decade such certainty has evaporated. Today any attempt to determine sexual orientation by a man's clothing or behavior would be doomed to confusion. "Right now the gayest-looking guys on the street," writes Vince Aletti, *Village Voice*, July 8, 1986, "are more often than not, straight men enjoying their trickle-down revolt into style." Young, and not-so-young men, all seemingly straight, everywhere incautiously sport colors, cuts, fashions, prints, textures, fabrics, earrings that ten years ago would have been identified as "fag stuff." In fact, fashionable images of masculinity today, as marketed by Hollywood and Madison Avenue, bear an uncanny resemblance to the image of the "fairy" that we were all so wary of resembling in high school.

The relationship between Real Men and fashion has always been fraught with suspicion, sexism and condescending fascination. Male culture decreed that there was a sphere apart from itself where clothing and manner were dandified, color and fabric flamboyant, care for appearance and comportment fastidious, and where virtue was easy. This realm, rightly or wrongly, was identified as gay. However, for fashion, glamour, or style to exist, mainstream men's culture has always engaged in covert borrowing from and collusion with the realm defined by the former's exclusion from and disdain of the latter. Style was deemed to be the purview of gays and women — after all, how could a Real Man be concerned with something so ephemeral?

Men's fashion, reputedly indulged in, endured, in order to attract the opposite sex, has, however, always existed largely to send messages, to transmit identities — to other men. Peter Davis, *Esquire*, June, 1986, recalls in his youth that "we [young men] were advertising ourselves to one another, floating pictures of maleness in one another's path, almost literally trying on new skins to see which would fit and look best." Out of the repertoire of images provided by media, advertising, film, and experience, we choose those men or images that attract us, and then imitate them. Fashion takes us back to that high school frame of mind when the way you dressed or acted dictated how you were treated by the guys. If we are children when we are at the movies, we are adolescents when we shop. Now we have new images, and new desires to be like the new images.

Davis' article in *Esquire* concerns fashion photographer Bruce Weber. Weber is responsible for the Calvin Klein underwear ads, the Obsession perfume photographs, those photos of the Olympic swim team. The

DEALING WITH STYLE

Revamping Masculinity



"Weber look" is now appearing everywhere — handsome, disinterested, usually under-dressed males self-consciously draped across vague backgrounds; sections of male torsos, void of faces, exquisitely tanned and muscled, wearing slight underwear. It's been called Beefcake, and "gay pin-up." Notes Davis: "You don't know if his pictures are supposed to appeal to men or women, you don't know if he is trying to attract men or women himself (or both or neither), you don't know if his models are straight or gay..."

Why have magazines refused to run Weber's ad campaigns? Why was there furor when the Calvin Klein underwear ad appeared a hundred feet high in Times Square? Davis conjectures that our collective unease results because Weber's images "make a man attractive... to another man."

That men are sexy is no surprise — we've been sold goods on that pretext for years. But that men are sexy to other men? Here we're crossing into new territory. Homoerotic territory.

But as Michael Bronski states in *Culture Clash*, the gay male subculture and advertising have always operated symbiotically; a gay subtext exists in many ads. "Because sex is the foundation of much advertising philosophy, and because gay men are often connected with sex, many gay images have found their way into the popular culture as techniques to sell things," Bronski writes.

Weber's photographs, however, up the ante. Not only do his models display beautiful male anatomy that is undeniably attractive, they do so in such a way as to avoid seeming stereotypically "gay." Formerly, for many, a gay was a "fairy" who wore yellow on Thursdays, not an Adonis in underwear. The gay-as-sissie stereotype enforced itself through sexism (effeminate = woman = inferior). But

what if gay is butch? Is it still "straight" to recognize attraction to straight images? Is it homosexual, or just homoerotic (that unspoken but tacitly assumed attraction — not necessarily sexual but not non-sexual — of man to man)?

To pose questions about the givens of masculinity is to redefine it and revamp it, thus creating a new market for the new products of the "new" masculinity.

Bronski notes that a previous generation used "images of men in ads... calculated to make the buyer feel he needed this product to fit in." Ads promoting the Playboy lifestyle, for instance, let it be known that benefits accrued (sex, position, influence) from possessing the appropriate things. However, in the '70s, new male images began to focus on being different. Independent. Sensitive. Sexy. Unencumbered. Images that found their closest equivalents in the mythologies of a gay subculture. According to Bronski, "The exotic implications of hidden homosexuality have huge sales potential."

But using a semi-nude model to promote, not even to display a product, is like using Renaissance paintings to sell fig leaves. One of Weber's assistant photographers told Davis, "With most of what we do, we're not trying to sell clothes directly. We're creating a look that suggests a way of life, then we're letting people fantasize about that. For some it may be a sexual fantasy, sure. For others it's a fantasy of freedom." The product here is not the jeans, the scent, but the attitude of the image itself, the *elan* of possessing the style inferred by the opaqueness of the image.

In an issue devoted to Style (January '86), *GQ* describes 1986 style as showiness, uniqueness, eccentricity, *chutzpah*. There is no mention of wealth, position, power, intelligence, or influence. Style, as it's represented

in the neo-gay image of the unyielding torso, reflects a democratizing presence in fashion. Its elitism doesn't come from cost, but from knowledge. You know what to own. Style '86, like so many Yuppie preoccupations, results from the aesthetizing of previously unaesthetized objects.

Like underwear.

It would be nice to conclude that since mainstream culture has admitted and explored its fascination with certain gay stereotypes, it would be more understanding of individual gay people and of the gay subculture in general. But this egalitarian attitude in regard to gay style has not markedly increased tolerance to gay people.

Part of the reason for this is that certain colors on Thursdays, or floral shirts, had nothing to do with *real* gay men (when's the last time you wore a *yellow* shirt?). Mainstream culture defined a category of comportment as gay, but never examined whether in fact it contained gay people. The category is still there, but no one *gay* is in it.

The more that "straight" encompasses, the more gay is camouflaged — as straight. How then are we recognized?

In these sober days, by how straight we look.

Gay men have always attempted to "pass" by assuming overtly "butch" mannerisms and styles, and some gay style is little more than masquerade for the benefit of appearing straight. Sara Davidson, in her biography *Rock Hudson: His Story*, reports that Hudson's taste was decidedly straight: a friend once described his tastes in household furnishings as "early butch": "He loved giant statues of eagles, lions, and horses, and his favorite color was red." His friend found his taste "so determinedly masculine" that he asked Hudson, "Do you ever worry about the gay part of you showing?" Hudson replied, "There's a little girl in me that I just trample to death."

Other gay men, not so internally homophobic as Hudson, have chosen to play "image fuck" with traditional male roles. For years the "look," as it has existed for gay men, has had more to do with exaggerated images of "Real Men" — the construction worker, the cowboy, the cop, the leather man, the clone — than with a reversion to an assumed more feminine side. The nuances that make up actual gay fashion semiology might well be missed by the casual observer — the tell-tale bandana in the pocket, the key chain on the 501 belt loop. Molly Brubach, *Vogue*, July, 1986, makes an observation on women's fashion that is equally valid for a gay man's relation to his appearance. "To the extent that we have been an oppressed class, we have, like other oppressed classes, devised our own means of communication and support, leaving our oppressors on the outside... We aspire to a style of dress or an ideal body type that we can all understand, that takes as its basis some fantasy we all share." Fashion for gay men wasn't designed to furnish the signs by which others could identify us. "Once you're conscious of being different, you naturally want to know exactly how that difference shows," writes Aletti. "Not just *How do I look?* but *What am I revealing?*" Gay style evolved into subtle codes that were visible only to the initiated — to the distress of those who would like to identify us more readily.

During his testimony against a Gay Rights Bill, Oregon State Senator Tony Meeker proposed that gays and lesbians are not real minorities since "you can't tell who they are by looking."

Of course, he's partly right. What you see isn't always what you get. You can't tell who we are by the way we look, because we look more like they do, than *they* do. Our culture's resistance to gay people stems not only from the ambivalent fear, *apres* Bruce Weber, that "gay looks too good." Rather, society resists, and fears, acknowledging that it has contained us all the while — and to its surprise and chagrin, no one thought to notice.