

THOM BROWNE'S COOL DAYS

Meet the American who's credited with single-mindedly reviving men's fashion. By *Sharon Krum*.

As anyone in a similar position would do, when Thom Browne was just starting his menswear business, he asked friends if they were interested in becoming customers. "I was doing bespoke out of my apartment. I just needed people to buy some things," he recalls. "And they said, 'Well, Thom, I don't really think it's for me. It doesn't even look like it fits you!'"

Today, Browne, 42, can laugh about it, but the truth is those friends' reactions were hardly unexpected. To anyone unfamiliar with the Thom Browne universe, his meticulously crafted suits don't look like they fit, at least conventionally. With jackets cut close to the body, sleeves stopping at the upper wrist, pants slim and hems ultra short, the "shrunken" proportions do challenge expectations, not to mention the wearer.

"You have to be confident walking around the street like this because you get a lot of comments," says Browne. Such as? "Hey, where's the flood!" or "Hey, Pee-Wee!" Yet while his clothes have prompted prolonged stares from strangers and some snarky posts on the internet ("I know shorter pants are in style but it just looks like your tailor is blind," wrote one), they've also been credited with revolutionising menswear, motivating men who viewed casual Friday as a religious commandment to suit up and feel hip.

"He made menswear relevant again," says blogger/photographer Scott Schuman, aka The Sartorialist, one of Browne's early champions. "He came up with

a completely new silhouette. American menswear was off the map for so long ... he made such a big impact."

In fact, since opening for business in 2001, beyond building his eponymous bespoke and ready-to-wear business, Browne became the first guest designer for Brooks Brothers' new concept line, Black Fleece. He also collaborated with Harry Winston on a jewellery line, won the 2006 Council of Fashion Designers of America award for menswear and, most recently, *DNR* magazine's Collaboration of the Year award (with Brooks Brothers). Not bad for a guy who says he knew nothing of fashion when he was growing up: "I didn't know it even existed. I wore navy sports coats and grey flannels and khakis. I grew up in a big family and what we cared about was sports. All I did was swim."

Now all Browne does is fashion and, unlike some designers who in person may telegraph little of their aesthetic, he's his own best advertisement. Every day he wears his signature suit: usually grey, with a vest, white shirt (unironed), tie clip and the last buttons of both his shirt and jacket undone. In summer, he may team the jacket with shorts. Year round, unless the mercury really plummets, he eschews socks. His hair is buzzed short. It may be 2008, but his wardrobe is closer to 1962.

"I love the sensibility of that time, but I think it's more interesting when you try to bring it to this time," he says of his designs, which reference the Brooks Brothers of his childhood, collegiate wear and the slim congressman suits that once roamed Capitol Hill. "You »

Photography Stuart Ramson



PHOTOGRAPHY: STUART RAMSON / DAN AND CORINA LECCA.



look back at pictures of the '50s and '60s and everybody looked good because they all looked appropriate." Indeed, Browne loathes it when people don't look "appropriate" – the thought of men wearing jeans to work (paging all internet millionaires) can quietly send him over the edge. "Casual Fridays and the whole 'casualisation' was the biggest mistake in the world. People looked horrible. Having too much choice and not dressing appropriately for certain situations is a really bad idea."

Not surprisingly, he's taken with the idea of uniforms, ideally a tailored suit. "There is something confident about that, in not having a preoccupation with what you're putting on in the morning. Guys thinking too much about dressing is not attractive." Maybe so, yet Browne's clothes do ask men to think about fashion, to engage with it, in the way an off-the-rack suit does not.

Browne grew up in Allentown, Pennsylvania, studied business, then moved to Los Angeles to become an actor, garnering mostly commercial work. It was then he started buying vintage suits and tailoring them into what is now his signature style. He moved into fashion "because I could never find anything for myself. I wanted to wear jackets and trousers and suits, but I wanted to make sure it also looked cool. Giving it proportions that were so not suit-like was the way to make it look cooler. I stood out like a sore thumb in LA. If I had a dollar for every person who asked me why I was so dressed up ..."

In 1997, Browne quit acting and moved to New York, working in Armani's showroom and later as fashion director of Club Monaco, before launching the Thom Browne label. The idea was to create suits in his beloved slim proportions, while extra features such as grosgrain ribbon on

the cuffs and along the lapel, striped linings and buttonholes finished by hand would add another point of difference for the discerning.

His custom-made line was – and still is – made by an Italian tailor in Queens, and from the start the fabrics were heavy on Australian wool. "I didn't realise how much I actually used," says Browne. "I was buying the best and it was Australian." (More than 60 per cent of his Spring/Summer '08 collection is Australian merino and sponsored by Australian Wool Innovation.)

Browne's clothes were different and they generated noise. His timing was also fortuitous, with bespoke becoming cool among a younger set. He says his customer base, which includes bankers, architects, lawyers and actors, is made up of individuals who appreciate how the garments are made. "The musicians who wear my stuff were wearing jeans and T-shirts and now they think it's cooler to wear my jackets and ties. That's what I wanted, for jackets and ties to become the anti-establishment that jeans and T-shirts were."

While the core of Browne's business is suits, which average \$4,000, his world now extends to shirts, knitwear, ties, coats, T-shirts, shoes, even sterling-silver tie clips, and he launched a womenswear range last year. Yet suggest his look may not fly at a conservative law firm, for example, and he'll challenge you. "My clothes are very appropriate for people to wear to work. That's why I say get it tailored. If some banker came in and said, can I have my pants like this (indicates a shorter hem), I would say I don't know if you want to do that. Maybe just to the shoe?"


Yet for all his success – Thom Browne is sold in 16 stores around the world, including the US, UK, Japan and Hong Kong – the question is how he will develop the label beyond its signature.

"I'd like to see him picking up different colour stories; he wouldn't have to change the silhouette, or play with patterns or stripes," says Scott (The Sartorialist) Schuman. "His design vocabulary in a sense is very small so, whatever ends up happening, when you buy you are forced to look a certain way." Browne has heard his critics and counters that the brand is evolving. "I do have different fits. This is the signature and it will always be here but every season evolves in different ways."

You could say designer collaborations are the new black so it was no surprise that with the heat on Browne offers materialised. When *US Vogue* editor-in-chief Anna Wintour asked him to name his ideal collaboration and the answer was classic American house Brooks Brothers, a deal was midwived. "I was very respectful to the brand," says Browne of the slim pants, capes and cardigans he created for Black Fleece.

While some wondered how button-down Brooks Brothers customers would respond, the line has met expectations, says Arthur Wayne, director of communications and international marketing. "It has attracted a new client to the store but also given our existing client new options." The grey flannel suit for both men and women (about \$3,000) has been the best seller.

There comes a point in a designer's career when initial resistance to their look gives way to acceptance and then, finally, imitation. Recently, a friend told Browne a mid-market chain was showing his shrunken silhouette in their windows.

Browne laughs. "The worst thing in the world would be if their design teams said, 'We can't do Thom Browne any more [because] it's not selling.' Whoever copies whatever, I don't really care, because they can't do Thom Browne." 

Great lengths: While his pants are sold unhemmed so buyers can dictate the length, Browne (pictured above) loves them ankle-baring short, with no break in the leg. "It's very architectural in a way," he says, "very clean and rectangular." The clothes pictured are from his Spring/Summer '08 collection.