

Ben's Handkerchief and Pocket

What is clear is that Ben's handkerchief and top pocket serve no practical purpose. Even if he were able to remove the handkerchief, it's unlikely that he will ever use it to do those unpalatable tasks expected of those handkerchiefs we keep in our trouser pockets. But being without practical purpose does not mean that pocket and handkerchief have remained unchanged. While they persist in having no practical use they can have no practical use in different ways.

(There are contemporary cases where the whole top pocket, handkerchief question has been solved by abolishing the pocket and thereby depriving the handkerchief of a home.)

Much can be gained by comparing the arrangement of Ben's handkerchief and breast pocket with some of the changes of form this area has undergone.

We can begin with a large, brightly coloured silk square travelling to, and from, the breast pocket. This version of the handkerchief brought together an hygienic purpose with an aesthetic dimension. The sprig of bright colour. The pleasing disorder created as the handkerchief spills out over the boundaries of the pocket. The ever-changing shapes the handkerchief assumed as it was put back into the pocket. All these qualities partake of an aesthetic whose principles are quite opposite to the restraint so characteristic of the male suit.

Later versions of the handkerchief and top pocket move away from this aesthetic of exuberance and chance. In their place there appeared a carefully ironed, white handkerchief, shaped into neat triangles. This was inserted into the pocket so that the triangular 'towers' would peep over its rim. The occasions when it was removed from the pocket were limited because once out of the pocket any restoration of its regular look and fixed arrangement would be impossible. Smart and neat had taken the place of the colourful and unruly. The final form taken by the decline and fall of the handkerchief and breast pocket are the white, paper 'towers' that rest just beneath the rim of the top pocket. Here tidy has joined with convenience. Any aesthetic dimension seems to have evaporated altogether.

At first sight, Ben's pocket handkerchief lies somewhere between the poles of the sartorially impeccable and the cheap and nasty. It has been arranged into a carefully arranged square that enables it to fit precisely into the pocket. The geometric principles associated with the 'lower'

forms of handkerchief display, its neatly ironed appearance and its practical redundancy, are all indications that the maintenance of a look is the most important consideration here. The absence of any creases on the handkerchief material, the way in which it fits into the pocket aims at the creation of a frozen look, a look where there are no signs of use can be seen. All this might suggest that Ben's handkerchief and pocket are result of some sort [of](#) misguided action such as wearing a matching tie and handkerchief, or ironing a crease in one's jeans. However, Ben doesn't look like the sort of person who would commit such crimes.

Ben dresses with a great deal of care and his choice of clothes ensures that his look is a distinctive one. His style rests on bringing together garments that are not usually associated with one another so it is more than likely that his handkerchief and breast pocket were chosen as a way of demonstrating his distinctiveness.

There was a time when it was considered *de rigueur* for the well-dressed man to wear a brightly coloured handkerchief in their top pocket; nowadays it is regarded as something too flamboyant for the category of the well dressed. There no longer exists an unbroken tradition determining how, where and when one should wear a handkerchief in a top pocket. This means that the individual, who is now deprived of the validation that a living tradition would afford, will make such decisions on the basis of a personal style. Ben's taste intersected with a particular form taken by the handkerchief and top pocket. But what he is wearing is not just [an](#) instance of historical mimicry. He has reworked his dress as part of his broader recognition of the importance due to the canon that is the *well-dressed* male. (Although we are only given the upper half of Ben a ghost of the 'correctly' dressed male haunts his style.) At the same time he is asserting his distinctiveness by reworking a well-known form- in this case the handkerchief and pocket- in a way that makes it unique to the wearer.

After Thoughts

We haven't quite finished with Ben's handkerchief and pocket. The problem they present us with is that they don't fit into the historical, cum formal, sequence I sketched in the earlier part of this discussion. They are not part of its narrative of aesthetic decline and so they must be sought in a different place. While recalling past forms taken by the handkerchief and breast pocket, there's no

desire on the part of Ben's dress to create an exact copy of any of the historical models described earlier. Historical accuracy, as might be required for the costumes of a stage, or film, production, is not what is taking place here. Ben's breast pocket and handkerchief have an elliptical relation to the history of dress, in which case, where are they to be found?

Ben's handkerchief and pocket, indeed everything that can be seen of the rest of his dress, belong to a family of male styles of dressing that can be described as *fastidious*. These forms of male dress are assembled (usually by the wearer) according to an uncompromising application of a set of aesthetic principles along with intense care being taken to make sure the details of any particular dress are 'correct'.

Ben's pocket, and particularly his handkerchief, exemplifies these qualities. The pocket follows the traditional form of male dress and is stitched in such a way that it retains its geometric shape. This means that it resembles a narrow slit hugging the main body of the jacket. The narrowness of the pocket ensures that the handkerchief has to be folded in such a way that it is able to slide into place with a square edge just visible over the top of the pocket. By adopting this tight geometric presentation of the handkerchief, Ben is rejecting other forms of display in the historical sequence. In these styles of dress and wearing this 'composition' of the body is total. No area of the body escapes such forceful dressing.

Normally care and precision are demanded in the making these types of dress but the overwhelming desire is that this care and precision be visible. When 'nothing is left to chance' merges with the primacy of visibility the result often imparts to the wearer and his dress a static look. It is as if they have arrived at their destination. They appear complete, with no signs of becoming.

Throughout Ben's dress one can detect the presence of 'something' in addition to what we can see at first sight. This is not an accident, it is deliberate, and is the effect of what we may call 'historical templates'. In the case of Ben, one such template is the form and position of the breast pocket in the traditional male jacket. Another such template is one recalling a time (admittedly vague) when breast pocket handkerchiefs were *de rigueur* for the well-dressed man. What gives it

a degree of distinctiveness is that it is making its appearance in a time when there is no longer any social insistence that a handkerchief be placed in one's breast pocket.

Because of their distinctive relation to their historical templates, the dress styles typified by Ben's attire are not fashion. Of course, fashion often visits the past looking for things that it can bring forward and re-work into garments that will live in the present. But fashion's present is not the same as the present occupied by Ben's dress. As we observed earlier, Ben's dress is not fashion. Its reach is singular and has no desire to perpetuate itself via 'fashion'. His dress has no desire to displace those garments that surround it under the banner of the fashionably new.

So where is Ben's pocket and its handkerchief?

They have to emerge at that point when there is no longer a strong conventions governing men's dress. Any prospective 'wearer' can browse the history of dress in search of those times and places where he feels that past and present can be fruitfully joined. Because the example we have been discussing no longer presents itself with the force of fashion-the pocket and handkerchief are not recruiting posters- they can be modified according to the personal aesthetic of the individual wearer. It is here that time enters the picture. Neither the past, nor the present, are fully present in these styles of dress but nor are they allowed to erase one or the other. Ben takes (and keeps) the form of male dress of the not so distant past and adjusts it by switching materials, colours and patterns. What eventuates is something that is both of the past and of the present.