

CRITICAL SHOPPER | THOM BROWNE

One Size Fits Small

By Mike Albo

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THE Thom Browne store on the corner of Hudson and Franklin in TriBeCa is designed to look like an antiseptic office from the 1950s: the windows are ribbed with old-fashioned blinds, the floor is made of poured terrazzo marble, and there is not a computer or iPod in sight. Actually, aside from the clothing and the smartly attired employees, there isn't much in the 2,000-square-foot room except for an old desk, a three-way mirror, a couple of midcentury leather chairs and a coffee table with a glass ashtray and one pair of stiff gray gloves on it.

When I visited last week, the clothes were hanging equidistant from one another on racks in four corners of the room. Near to the door was a section of suits and garments in shades of gray, including a thick navy cardigan with white stripes on the sleeve for \$3,450, a short-sleeve knit jersey in thick gray and white stripes (\$590), two white oxford shirts (\$250 each) and a white Sea Island cotton button-down for \$520. I stepped back to make sure there wasn't a sign above it that read: "These clothes are for Prince Harry! Don't touch!"

The cardigan was worth more than my income for the month and, therefore, worth more than me, so I had to try it on. It felt nice, but it seemed two sizes too small, and the cuffs landed on my forearms. This made sense, though, because Thom Browne makes fastidiously tailored suits, coats, sweaters and shirts that are meant to be worn in a narrow Pee-wee Herman kind of way.

At this point, you have probably seen his clothing — the high-seam floodwater pants, narrow lapels, snug jackets — in some worshipful style piece or magazine spread. You may have seen Mr. Browne himself wearing the distinctive clothes. He is a very handsome, symmetrical man, often photographed. He always looks dapper and clean-shaven, his ankles exposed, his jackets tight and sleeves receding above his wrists. There is no lint in this man's life. In interviews, he seems like kind of person who keeps a neat desk, files his receipts months before tax time, eats three square meals, and has one simple cocktail after work. In other words: not me.



Jamel Toppin for The New York Times

After a stint at Club Monaco, Thom Browne started his line of bespoke suits in 2001, opening a made-to-measure shop in the meatpacking district. Just five years later, he won the men's wear award from the Council of Fashion Designers of America. He has been credited with creating an entirely fresh look for professional men, inspiring them to dress sharply again after years of casual Fridays, lazy surfer style and wearing baseball caps to work.

His aesthetic is a throwback to a now-mythical American era when men kept their finances in orderly ledgers, repressed their desires, darned their socks and tipped their hats. But for all its tailoring and nostalgia, somehow Thom Browne's clothes don't seem uptight. His distinct look appears light and good-natured, not dogmatic and snobby. Here at his store, you can see this aesthetic at its infancy, as he experiments with his vision and expands from nerd-suits into a full line of men's wear.

Across from the gray-hued garments, for example, was a selection of jaunty sweaters. A \$3,450 thick navy blue cardigan had white stripes on the sleeves, and a V-neck tennis sweater for \$2,875 looked as if it had been ripped off Jay Gatsby's dead body.

Past the three-way mirror was a rack of hilarious outerwear, including an overcoat in a queasily cheery yellow plaid for \$4,500 that no one should buy unless he is an exhibitionist looking for a more eye-catching cover-up before exposing himself on the subway platform. I slipped on a shortened tan trench for \$5,400. Its hem rested above the knee, and the attached waist belt cinched high around the chest, giving me a squat shape. Hand me a brown beanie and I would resemble the Nowhere Man from "Yellow Submarine."

In another corner was a rack of beautiful formalwear that successfully blended Mr. Browne's traditional and experimental sides. The jacket of a \$5,800 tuxedo had black ribbing on the lapels and a fitted body that challenged, finally, our boring tuxedo hegemony. A white tux shirt with a subtle embroidered bib and extended cuffs (\$550) seemed as beautifully constructed as a building by Santiago Calatrava.

I WANTED to try on a suit, but felt a little inadequate. When I wear a suit, I don't look like a lint-free Thom Browne type. I look like an eco-terrorist whose lawyer is trying to clean him up for his indictment. Nevertheless, I selected two suits in my size from the rack of gray matter: one a light gray wool suit and one in a charcoal herringbone. (Each was \$4,800.) I took them back to the changing area, which is just a narrow passage of wall space sectioned off by wood partitions. I carefully hung the suits on silver pegs and threw my own unworthy duds on the floor.



Jamel Toppin for The New York Times

The jackets had the trademark fit: shortened sleeves, narrow lapels. Both pairs of pants were insanely tight in the waist and gave me the weird lower paunch of a seventh-grade math teacher. "Just know that the pants all have three inches of material so they can be let out," said the nice, twitchy salesman. (Behind him, through another door, was the new made-to-measure shop, where customers can have their clothes properly tailored and hemmed.)

The salesman went off to help a much wealthier customer select a sweater, and I tried on an extra pair of hemmed pants that were hanging in the back. These fit well in the waist, but this time the rise of the leg was shortened far past the floodwater length I have seen on Mr. Browne himself. Nothing was making sense anymore. I began to lose sense of logic and proportion. I wished Thom had been there because I needed help getting his aesthetic down.

I look forward to the day Thom becomes a juggernaut brand, on a par with Martha and Oprah. I want him to have his own magazine and television show where he will give easy lessons on how to pull off this look, as well as how to be orderly, symmetrical and happy with one simple cocktail. I guess I have to wait until he makes his foray into the down-market of men's wear that dirtier, scuffed-up cheaper world of H & M's, Banana Republics and Zaras, where many of us live out our linty lives.

THOM BROWNE

100 Hudson Street (between Franklin and Leonard Streets); (212) 633-1197.

WELL-APPOINTED A spare, spotless officelike space of meticulously tailored, undersize suits, sweaters and shirting for super-rich chic geeks.

APPOINTMENTS It takes time to get the Thom Browne style right. If you are serious about buying something, make an appointment.

POINDEXTERS Dressed in their floodwaters and tiny jackets, the staff is nerdy, friendly and ready to help you figure out the weird sizing.