

CRITICAL SHOPPER

Where Men Don't Ask, 'Do I Look O.K.?'

By Mike Albo

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ON the second floor of the new H&M Store on 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue, I watched many men assiduously shopping for new clothes. Some had girlfriends, but many were alone. A large college-age man tried on rumply tweed Rex Harrison-style hats and debated the importance of one that had a fat button at the temple. Next to him a group of Hasidic teenagers fingered the fabric on white slim-fitting shirts; and two good-looking young men mulled over the potential of a simple black blazer.

“Yo, try it over a collared shirt, open up its buttons, with a little bit of a chain right here. Hot. Furreal”



Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

If there is one gender myth that doesn't seem to die, it is that men hate to shop; it's as old and tired as the '60s comedy punch line: “Aren't women terrible drivers?” But now, nearly a decade into the reality makeover era, the everyday man in America has been fluffed and preened and “zhuzhed” so many times that he knows perfectly well how to look good, how to buy nice clothes for himself and, most important, where to get them for prices within his Fast Cash limits.

This new H&M store, stuffed with finely cut clothes at a superbly low expense, is packed with regular guys looking for good threads. The male population of America goes to H&Ms across the country to find nice basics all on its own. The stores always feel large, comfortable and free of fashion snobbery — a perfect representation of fashion's new populism.

This is the newest hive for the Swedish emporium, and perhaps its most grand. The store takes up the first two floors in a new 30-story building — one of those clear and smooth shards of glass being poked into ground all over Manhattan — cater-corner from the New York Public Library. It's significant that H&M is here, in such a major piece of real estate, and also significant that the store devotes almost half of its retail space to men's clothes.



Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

Headless mannequins are displayed in its windows. They float on platforms like colorful pinned beetles, while above are offices with floor-to-ceiling glass, populated with living people wearing their day-job best. The store should look into outfitting and displaying them, too.

The first floor, a vast atrium, is geared mostly to trends with a rapid turnover. For women, it seems to be tops in bright pinks and yellows mixed with black leggings in bumblebee contrast. For men, there are those trendy graphic printed zip-up hoodies that have made their way from cool sneaker stores on Flatbush Avenue into the mainstream.

Upstairs, a large and more subdued men's section occupies the back half of the space. Here are all the pants, jackets, pullovers and shirts a budget-conscious guy needs to get through the year. Over all the clothes seem to be a distillation of the laid-back/dressy look that prevails in men's fashion: the downbeat dandy.

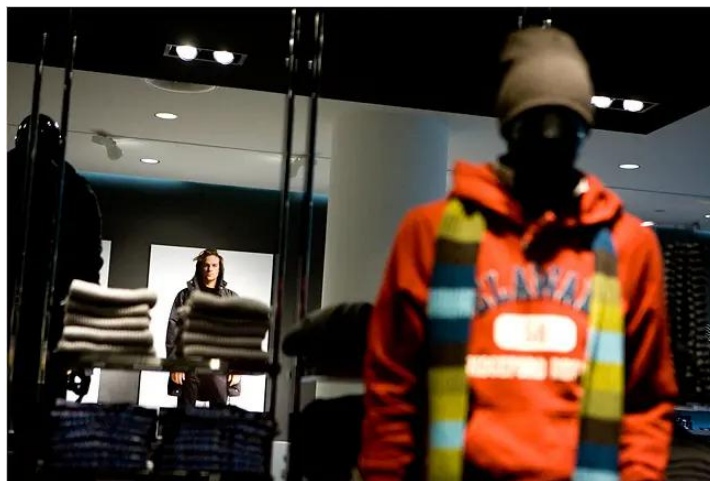


Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

These are men who have a Justin Timberlake-ish particularity to their wardrobe and like to layer — to roll up sleeves and turn up collars and expose a little chain. The mannequins reflect this, dressed in oxfords and cargo pants and jackets and scarves that have been pinned and styled so that they curl and unfold around the chest and wrists and stomach as if they were standing in front of Usher's wind machine.

I thumbed through the racks of the store's L.O.G.G. (Label of Graded Goods) line and found nice, basic long-sleeve tees in a soft jersey cotton, available in dull masculine shades of dark blue and black (\$12.90). A softened cord blazer (\$49.90) was wrinkled but had enough construction to keep its shape if, like me, you are often too tired to hang it up when you get home.

One standout was a gray knit hoodie, an update of the boxy surfer poncho reminiscent of my sophomore year in high school (\$29.90). This fit me much more snugly, and its button collar and soft woven fabric made it wearable to places beyond a basement grain-alcohol punch party. Nearby was a padded jacket with a bitmapped camouflage design (\$49.90), scaled down and way more muted than the trendier bright colors available downstairs.



Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

THE dressing rooms were crowded, but despite the madness, the attendants were all very nice as I brought in a pile of clothes. They didn't even glare at me when I apologetically hung it all up on the rack to be returned. This is a good thing, because it took me time to adjust to the sizing here. For example, when I tried on a white short-sleeve henley shirt (\$14.90) in a small, it barely fit me because I am used to our traditional North American Gargantua-scale, where a small T-shirt is actually an extra large and would fit me only after constantly eating Nachos Bell Grande at Taco Bell for six months.

I also tried on a light blue Western shirt with white snap buttons, and some black wool pants in a muted tweed, but both were also way too small and needed another trip to the racks.

A wool peacoat (\$129) didn't seem that warm, but maybe it was just designed to pose as a winter coat, since it was 80 degrees outside and didn't seem as though there would be a winter anytime soon. This coat, as well as many shirts, jackets and sweaters here, had epaulets on the shoulders, as if it was obligatory and we were in an Army-Navy store.

Actually, there is a noticeable militaristic feel to all the clothes up here. The color palette leans toward drab olives, navy blues and heather grays, and most shirts (with their epaulets) are meant to be tucked into clean flat-front pants. It's as if a wartime military style has soaked into our culture so deeply that it has become almost forgettable. Gee, I wonder why.