

Where Have All the Real Men Gone?

By Alan Bennett Ilagan

Judging from the current crop of fashion ads and male models out there, the embodiment of sexy masculinity is either an androgynous, pubescent, hairless youth with the raw skin of a freshly-plucked chicken, or the collegiate, well-built, tanned and shiny frat boy with the initials of A&F. Neither rings quite true to life, and while both may appeal to certain sectors of the fashion world, where is this trend taking us?

Whether selling cologne, jeans, or underwear, the men of today's fashion runways are looking more and more like women, and even those hairy exceptions are preened and presented with the peacock-strutting-precision of traditionally-female upkeep. Surely these fashion models are gay – what straight man would be caught dead sipping tea while naked? What heterosexual guy could get away with those dangerously-low-riding jeans that outline every curve of his package and show off an equally-racy thong?

All of these models – the Abercrombie guys cavorting naked together on the beach or the underwear-clad pals chumming it around – display a certain gay sensibility. Yet the intent cannot be to illustrate and promote homosexuality. That still doesn't sell in the mainstream world, though our fashion sense certainly does. Gay men are about ten years ahead of straight men – eventually they'll come around to what we're doing, it's just a matter of time. In other words, within the world of fashion there may not be such a distinction between gay and straight, and so the preference of the models is whatever the viewer chooses to impose upon them.

The newest face of Calvin Klein, known ubiquitously as Travis, is the personification of masculine/feminine contradiction. Travis has the shoulder-length tresses of Goldilocks, but the rest of his body is seemingly hairless. (A cover shoot for a recent issue of W Magazine however shows his real body, replete with a golden treasure trail and a little nest of chest hair. Calvin chose either to shave it all off or airbrush it away.)

Travis is well-built, definitely defined, but his hair and face are rather feminine. His expressions run from soft and blank to soft and pouty, but we've never wanted our models to be exceptionally expressive. The bulge in his shorts says he is most assuredly a man, but his perfectly-coiffed and cared-for follicles beg to differ. His entire body is smooth ~ the better to see every nuance of muscle definition.

Perhaps in response to the widespread advertising that all men are now hair-free, Yves St. Laurent has featured a furry guy for its new cologne campaign. Ad-designer Tom Ford said he wanted a real man, and apparently today's real man is stubbly, hairy, and uncut. As if to underscore the point that cologne is all a man needs to be wearing, our ad guy is completely nude (well, at least he was in the French edition).

But is this hairy guy beary? His pose is soft, almost-feminine, and wholly submissive. Lying back with arms above his head, he is prone for all the world to have their way with him. His hair is long, flowing, wavy, and well-groomed. Even his dick hangs delicately down, covered in its foreskin like little red riding hood and completely non-threatening. Nothing about this ad suggests this real man will act as such. He is the perfect companion for his hairy cousin – the guy from the Lacoste ads.

This is the one featuring the naked guy reclining in a chair, legs crossed to conceal his maleness and a devilish but innocent smile on his face. He looks pretty masculine – short buzz-cut, lots of body hair, a carpet really - but he's daintily sipping from a cup of tea, held up by a saucer. The nelliest of gay men don't drink that way. All that's missing from this tea party is an extended pinky.

In both of these hairy cases, the guys are posed in a decidedly-unmanly manner. It negates the power of all that hair and musky masculinity, so what was the point in the first place? These two ads exemplify the identity crisis that seems to be going on regarding what a man should be. In a way it's a good thing – forcing us to re-examine what is masculine and feminine in an increasingly androgynous world.

Who are these ads aimed for? Gay guys who like their guys to look like girls? Straight guys who might be swayed by feminine men? Gals who like gals but could go for girly guys? It may not seem important – and all that they probably consider is whether or not they have gotten our attention. Some may scoff at the idea of using this “gayness” as a selling point. But personally I don't feel raped or cheated by these ad-makers. I enjoy looking at near-naked guys, and if they appear to be gay, so much the better. If they're utilizing a certain gay-sensibility to achieve beauty and desire, so what?

Much like our perception of ballet dancers and interior designers ~ we really don't care whether or not our male models are gay. We don't mind gay sensibility in fashion ads. If Travis or Marcus or Joel turns out to bat for our team, not many would profess surprise or shock. It goes with the territory. In this sense the fashion world may be far more advanced than the rest of society. Hopefully we will follow suit.