

Drake's of London by G. Bruce Boyer

"Whenever I'm asked about my style I always say it's the English look the way the Italians imagine it to be."

And well put. I'm talking to Michael Drake, as in Drakes of London, the decidedly upscale purveyor (provisioner?) to select *addresses d'or* of clothiers. Actually, one of the most interesting things about the Drakes signature is its appeal to discriminating gentlemen from a wide variety of perspectives. Drakes of London accoutrement can be found in shops as divergent as Commes des Garçons (at the more edgy end of the fashion spectrum) to Knize Vienna (which is, as Drake says, "more conservative than the Catholic Church").

You've probably noticed Drakes ties or scarves at your favorite venue. But the "hook" to this story, as *pisseurs de copie* like to say, is that Drakes has an on-line store stocking all of the firms accompaniments to the tailored wardrobe, as well as a selection of more casual items, such as a comfy cashmere shawl-collared cardigan (at 650 Eng. pounds), or a dashing parasol umbrella with a Royal Stewart tartan canopy, solid wooden shaft and shoulder strap (at 385 Eng. Pounds, and something of a collector's item).

Born in a small village suburb of London, Michael Drake, the talent (I don't use that word often or lightly) behind the label, is witty and well-read (so refreshing; it's not that most designers don't read, it's that so many of them can't), a paragon of style (basic English with a French sensibility and an Italian sense of color), and a creative spirit of the first water.

"I had two older cousins who were very snappy dressers, each with his own style. From one I got hand-me-down shirts with 40s-style soft collars and dark backgrounds, a French Agnes B sort of thing, while the other cousin was decidedly less bohemian and liked to wear evening clothes. He had one of those fabulous old polished wood wardrobes with all the special drawers for shirts, hanger space for ties, and secret little boxes for cuff links and probably other things he didn't want his mother to find. I still have a thing about those wonderful old wardrobes.

"Someone in the family knew someone and used his influence, and so after school I got an interview with the managing director of Aquascutum, Gordon Wood. He set up a management/apprenticeship program for me that included spending time in each area of the business, and I started at the bottom, cutting fabric swatches to illustrate customer orders. I was lucky to have this sort of learning experience, it was a great education because it was where I was first introduced to cashmere and vicuna from Crombie of Aberdeen, the famous Fox flannels, Shetlands from Alexander's in Peterhead, Scotland, and the rest. I would come in on Saturdays to work with the retail staff.

Gordon Wood took an interest in what I was doing, and I discovered having a mentor like that is incredibly important because it keeps you focused, you want to do your best. Eventually I ended up in the office between him and the owner, and when celebs came in, I was the one asked to show them around and take care of them. It was a big deal and heady stuff for a young chap because so many celebs shopped at Aquascutum in those days. I remember helping Michael Caine pick out a raincoat, I think it was for *The Ipcress File*, and working with Cary Grant. The wonderful director Billy Wilder was a customer, and the astronaut Neil Armstrong, and so many others.

Then I was put in design, and absolutely loved it. I worked for Tony Boeg, to this day the most sophisticated man I've ever met. He was 6' 4" and had a great eye for detail, passionate about style, and the chicest sense of color – he'd wear green-and-blue striped ties, things like that – just a fabulous dresser, and he'd take me along on trips to the suppliers, to the mills in Scotland for example. It gave me solid, first-hand knowledge about fabrics and who produced the best quality cloths."

About this time Michael also enrolled in the London College of Fashion, eventually winning an Art Bursary, which was a cash award and a life membership in The Royal Society for the Arts. The money was to be used for study travel in Italy, but like any intelligent young man, he spent it with his girlfriend on a holiday in Spain. As it turned out, Michael was so successful at Aquascutum – he designed the house check still used today, started the firm's first luggage and sportswear lines, and expanded the business in the States to the finest independent stores – he left to start his own business.

"By then," he notes, "Aquascutum was selling to the best stores in Europe, and the States and I was meeting all the great retailers who came to the London showroom, a really international mix of people at the top of their game. I was only twenty when I went to the States for the first time and met Cliff Grodd of Paul Stuart, Wilkes Bashford, and Murray Pearlstein of Louis Boston. It was in 1967, and these men were legends in the clothing business. I had another expert mentor in Aldo Milli, Aquascutum's Italian agent, the most passionate, creative rep I've ever known.

"Since I was designing the collection at that point, it was decided that I should work with these special customers – a relatively new concept at the time. I should add that it's still the way I do things."

Making these connections and friendships abroad constituted the third building block for Michael. He had the cloth knowledge, understood and developed his sense of style, and now had the working experience with the best shops in Europe and the USA. In 1977, with partner Isabel Dickson, he founded Drakes of London with a collection of scarves. "Designing a small selection of scarves seemed a good place to start," he says, "because the market was so boring: solid cashmeres and tartans, a few polka dots and paisleys was about as exuberant as it got. I knew there was room for something better." He never looked back.

Ties became a passion. "I love the craftsmanship involved in making authentic Ancient English madder silks, and we're now the world's leading producers and purveyors of real madder neckwear. It's almost a lost art, the dyestuffs and the silk screen printing technique on heavy foulard and twill silks, and then hand-cutting and -sewing the tie. It's Old World artisanship."

"I've said many times that my look is a mixture of English and French with a bit of Italian thrown in as a spice, and it came from my experience in dealing with so many stylish men who helped me develop my own style. I particularly like the way the very best French dressers do the English look, a classic tweed suit with perhaps purple socks, great shoes, and a wonderful cashmere waistcoat in a slightly off shade of green. That's my kind of thing."

Inspiration of course comes from anywhere. Alpine flowers, tropical fish, art exhibitions. "I think anyone interested in understanding unique color combinations should take a look at the paintings of Matisse in Morocco," Michael points out. "I also think simplicity is important, but in an urbane way, if you see what I mean. And by sticking to what you really are. Clothing can be a simple way of saying complicated things anyway, and style is the personal touch. That's why I always talk about the *hand writing*, which is more than merely a detail or a gimmick, it's a level of style that runs through everything in an identifiable way. Ralph Lauren's a great example of that, and Armani. A designer has to find a balance of being able to keep the hand writing while still moving

forward. The details taken as a whole *are* the design.”

What the design at Drakes is all about is great silk neckwear, creamy cashmere scarves, Egyptian cotton shirts, cuff links of vintage beads and sterling silver, fine merino hosiery, classic knitwear, and the odd accessory. Things like chocolate brown suede gloves with purple cashmere linings, dove grey formal braces with silver braid fasteners, or the perfect pure Irish linen handkerchiefs in a full-sized 48 X 48 cms. So much of the workmanship of Drakes products – it seems a shame to even give these items that industrial name, better to say creations – done by hand for the aficionado who knows the quality and taste level when he sees it.

The Drakes purview does not preclude the bespoke. Michael Drake is a champion of the custom-made. “We do a considerable amount of bespoke neckwear,” Michael's quick to point out. “The interest today in bespoke is very encouraging. I'm a big fan of Savile Row and the Italian tailors who put all that handwork into a garment, and make it look and fit so perfectly. People who want the best quality look for special things, not something with a label found in every store in the world. Discerning men – great dressers from the past like Astaire and Cary Grant, Agnelli and the Duke of Windsor, and retailers today like Hirofumi Kurino (of United Arrows Tokyo), Michel Barnes (of Arthur and Fox, Paris), Cliff Grodd (of Paul Stuart, New York), Albert Goldberg (Old England, Paris) – are always on the lookout for style and quality. We've kept true to ourselves by offering what we think is good and in our handwriting, rather than chasing the quick money and the next fad.”

Drakes of London, www.drakes-london.com, e-mail drakes@drakes-london.com