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Dress Codes

David Colman

For Neutral Grays, The Mood Is Positive

SPRING, which in recent years has welcomed an Easter parade of colors in the men's wear department, is now humming a more sober song.

Pastel black. Dark white. Call it what you will — silver, pearl, fog, pewter, all of the above — gray in all of its smoky hues has infiltrated the predictable neutral men's wear palette and taken it by storm. Well, maybe not storm. Maybe just mostly cloudy.

"Light gray is the new khaki," said Tommy Fazio, the men's fashion director for Bergdorf Goodman. "I've been noticing that customers are reacting to lighter and lighter grays. It's a fresh new neutral that a lot of things look good with."

Gray, a longtime favorite of designers as diverse as Rick Owens, Miuccia Prada, Hedi Slimane and Thom Browne, has been drifting into fashion for a few seasons now. This spring stores are awash in it. Italo Zucchelli at Calvin Klein made it the cornerstone of his spring collection. While not a traditional color for men for anything more than sweatshirts and tees, its appeal is clear: it is less of a statement than a black suit, which for all of its allure to creative types, is not suitable business attire for a lot of men, or a white one, which despite the best efforts of Milan and Paris to suggest otherwise, looks good only on hip-hop stars and aspiring gigolos. Yet gray has a German-banker-turned-art-dealer edge that tan, olive and navy do not.

"Gray feels like the city," said Michael Bastian, whose new men's wear line has been nominated for an award by the Council of Fashion Designers of America. "Plus, I think people are just really sick of black. I never bought into it being the urban color, anyway. Gray has this crisp, neat-as-a-pin thing going for it, whereas black seems lazy and at the same time like it's trying too hard."

Mr. Bastian, who made an urban pair of shorts and a zip cardigan in light gray this spring, will be adding more grays next year. "We were just doing our colors yesterday, trying to think of names for them," he said. "We have mouse, elephant, pigeon, dolphin. The variations are endless."

As are the choices. Elephant's breath gray, which is how Ian Fleming described the interior of his Ford Thunderbird, is certainly the color for a suit this spring. There are smart versions of it from Gucci, Prada, Dior Homme, Thom Browne and Calvin Klein, as well as from more-mainstream labels like Theory, Club Monaco and Banana Republic. There are also light gray springtime sweaters in cotton or fine-gauge wool, bringing to mind not a summery seaside on Bay of Biscay but, say, the West Side Highway.

Even so, gray resists easy characterization. "It's the most versatile neutral color," said Gary Fischer, the director of human resources for an advertising agency in New York, who has bought several gray suits in the last few years. "The other day I went to a funeral in the morning, came back, did several interviews, went to a business lunch and went to a dinner party later, and it felt really appropriate the whole time."

His khaki suit, meantime, "feels played out," he said.

"I wore it the other day, and it seemed so wrong. I might as well have been wearing a white denim three-piece suit."

Gray and khaki do share a remarkable versatility. Nothing looks better with the range of pastel dress shirts now available than a light gray suit. Similarly, raw denim jeans, which have made a comeback, are complemented by a light gray crewneck. Sidewalk-gray jeans summon up the hard-rock '70s without resorting to gimmicky cuts and embroideries. And a simple gray T-shirt can play down a pair of colorful pants without making the whole look too "outfit-y."

Its fans see even more virtue in it. Thom Browne has made gray a staple of his line. "For me, there's something so timeless about it," Mr. Browne said. "It's so fashionably unfashionable. There's something about it that feels like a '50s- and '60s-inspired fabric. Even if it isn't literally from that time, it evokes that sensibility and makes you look very smart and very individual."

For Rick Owens, the gothic-glamour designer who lives in Paris and is not much for suits and ties, the color summons up the elegant shades of the Boldini portrait of the belle époque dandy Robert de Montesquiou. "I also think of Jean-Michel Frank, who they say had 40 identical gray suits in his closet," Mr. Owens said. "That always seemed to me to be so severe and ascetic and at the same time so extravagant."

As drab or cold as gray may seem to some, he said, "it naturalizes color a little bit."

"It's gentler than black and white, and that's my intention when I use it."

That's part of the beauty of gray. Who can say what it is, exactly? They don't call it a gray area for nothing.

