

Ivy Style

The Museum at FIT, New York,
September 14, 2012 – January 5, 2013

Curated by Patricia Mears, with co-curators Richard Press and G. Bruce Boyer

Catalogue: *Ivy Style: Radical Conformists*

Patricia Mears, ed., New York: The Fashion Institute of Technology and New Haven: Yale University Press,
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The Fashion Institute of Technology's *Ivy Style* brings together a range of garments, historical and contemporary, pertaining to the Ivy League Look. The term 'Ivy Style' refers to the men's collegiate style that emerged out of America's elite Ivy League universities in the middle of the last century. The style reached its zenith in the early 1960s, by which time it had become mass fashion. Ivy style can lay claim to chinos, blazers, repp ties, penny loafers, button-down shirts, sack jackets, longwing brogues, desert boots, madras plaids, boat shoes, Shetland wool crewnecks, Redwing boots and even Levi's jeans.

While the exhibition addresses what is arguably a historical phenomenon, it remains highly relevant to men's fashion today. Ivy Style and its more fashion-forward offshoot Prep have enjoyed somewhat of a revival in recent years. Patricia Mears, the Deputy Director of the Museum at FIT, co-curator of *Ivy Style* and editor of *Ivy Style: Radical Conformists*, explains in the catalogue's preface that the *Ivy Style* project was inspired by her discovery of the many blogs dedicated to Ivy Style and its offshoots Trad and Prep.

The impetus for *Ivy Style* may have been digital, but the tone of the exhibition was decidedly nostalgic. In order to evoke an Ivy League campus of the 1960s, the curators presented the garments in sections decorated to resemble iconic campus settings. These included a campus quad, a classroom, a chemistry lab, a campus outfitter and a dorm room (Image 1). Each section was a sort of vignette, outfitted with props including mid-century furniture, luggage, globes, and original school flags. A stream of music played over the speakers, with marching-band music intended to convey the atmosphere of an Ivy League football game. While it is unlikely that anyone would forget that they were in the basement of a Brutalist building in midtown Manhattan, the exhibition sought to transport visitors to the time and place of Ivy Style's heyday.

Image 1: Installation shot, the university shop, Ivy Style exhibition, courtesy of The Museum at FIT

Fantasies of American privilege and affluence frame the Ivy League Look, and we can 'take' *Ivy Style*'s campus theme as part of this narrative. It seems that *Take Ivy*, the 1965 Japanese book with a cult following among devotees of the Ivy League Look, was an inspiration for the curators. The settings in the exhibition were reminiscent of those documented in this definitive pictorial record of the Ivy League Look, with its photographs of Ivy-clad students partaking in iconic collegiate activities such as getting ready for rowing practice, walking through the quad and studying in the library. This is fitting, for as the exhibition noted in relation to a 2009 Tom Browne outfit, the Ivy League Look has been kept alive in Japan with an almost monastic dedication. The fashion researcher Masafumi Monden addresses this phenomenon in the *Ivy Style* book, yet there were no examples of Japanese Ivy League clothes on display in the exhibition. Also absent were the British interpretations of the Ivy League Look; in Britain, the clothes took on new meanings as they were worn by the working-class youths of the Mod and Skinhead subcultures.

With its American campus theme, *Ivy Style* takes the style's name at face value. The curatorial team did acknowledge in one of the exhibition's labels entitled 'Ivy Style at Mid-Century' that with the GI Bill's democratisation of post-secondary education and the mass marketing of the Ivy League Look, the style came to be worn by a much wider segment of American society during the post-war period. It was not just privileged students but grown men, graduates and non-graduates alike, who sported the Ivy League Look. Yet in the exhibit the only nod to Ivy Style as mass fashion came in the form of a charcoal J. Press flannel suit, emblem of 1950s conformity in *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (novel: 1955, film: 1956). As an exploration of the fantasies that narrate Ivy Style, the exhibition can be forgiven for this somewhat reductionist approach to the Ivy League Look.

Mixed in with archival pieces from the likes of Chipp, J Press, Gant and Brooks Brothers were clothes designed by Ralph Lauren, Tommy Hilfiger, Jeff Banks, J. McLaughlin, Michael Bastian and Thom Browne. These contemporary pieces ranged from straight reproductions of Ivy Style to much more fashion-forward interpretations. A

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1980 Ralph Lauren ensemble of saddle shoes, flat-front chinos, blue oxford-cotton button-down and repp tie illustrates the close connection between Prep and the Ivy League Look. This contrasted with a 2003 outfit in which a Ralph Lauren blue blazer was adorned with a skull patch, had its lapels turned up and was matched with blue jeans and an open-neck, popped-collar shirt. A 2012 Michael Bastian outfit was styled in a similar manner, featuring a black blazer with contrast stitching and the sleeves rolled up, red-striped shirt with contrast white collar, yellow belt, grey jeans and black penny loafers. Even more fashion-forward was Thom Browne's 2012 offering of a darted green blazer, crop-top shirt, green and pink tartan pants and 22-hole brogue boots. Spikes covered the groin, knees and shoulders. While these outfits would certainly give purists cause to complain, they did illustrate how the Ivy League Look has been reinterpreted in recent times.

Image 2: Installation shot, Ivy Style exhibition, Brooks Brothers, prep ensemble, 2012, lent by Brooks Brothers, courtesy of The Museum at FIT

A Brooks Brothers' contemporary offering of a 1940 'prep' ensemble reissued in 2012 was less adventurous but more aesthetically pleasing to this reviewer (Image 2). It was a traditional Ivy Style ensemble of flat-fronted slim chinos, blue 3-patch pocket blazer (with yellow piping), white oxford-cloth button-down and Columbia repp tie. Brooks Brothers helped fund the exhibition and their button-downs adorned many of the mannequins. This seemed like an appropriate curatorial decision rather than a corporate shill. After all, Brooks Brothers did invent the button-down, and this timeless classic served as the perfect canvas on which to display the myriad of original jackets featured in the exhibition.

Resembling a school hallway, one section of the exhibit focused on crested school blazers going back as far as 1919. Some of these blazers were surprisingly garish, featuring candy stripes or pastel piping. As the exhibition explained, these were worn at the elite prep schools that served as feeders for the Ivy League universities. On the other side of the room were odd jackets in various tweed patterns, taken from the Richard Press collection. The labels explained that the tweed 'odd' jacket, paired with grey flannels, was first marketed to make use of the surpluses of tweed and flannel that followed World War II. The majority of these jackets featured the 'sack jacket' design established in 1914 by Brooks Brothers as part of their '#1 sack suit.' The sack jacket is thus designated because of its deconstructed design, which contrasts with the waisted jackets found in British tailoring. Also essential to Ivy Style tailoring is the natural shoulder, which reduces or omits padding in order to follow the natural shoulder-line of the wearer. The original jackets on display at *Ivy Style* prove that even the Ivy League Look has not been immune to changes in men's fashion, with lapels expanding and receding over time. Remaining mostly constant, however, is the sack construction, natural shoulder lines and other Ivy Style details such as the hook vent and 3-roll-2 button stance. Non-Ivy Style details such as darting and ticket pockets also demonstrate that there has always been some diversity to Ivy Style tailoring.

Image 3: Installation shot, the dormitory, Ivy Style exhibition, courtesy of The Museum at FIT

The chance to see these original jackets and other archival pieces was *Ivy Style*'s main draw, as one need only go as far as the local high street or shopping mall for Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger's contemporary reinterpretations. The original Ivy Style outfits were styled by the exhibitions' co-curators - J. Press founder Jacobi Press's grandson Richard Press and noted menswear writer G. Bruce Boyer. One highlight was a decade-crossing ensemble of cream wool trousers (1930), green collegiate cardigan (1925) and pink oxford-cloth button-down (1975). Another highlight was 'The University Shop' section of the exhibition, which included a tweed sport jacket, a tan gabardine raincoat, a duffel coat, a navy blazer, a grey flannel suit, a seersucker suit and a stack of oxford-cloth button-downs. Sport has had a big influence on the Ivy League Look and the exhibit had an assortment of original Ivy League athletic clothing, including letterman tops, on display in 'The Athletic Club.' Sleepwear is an often-overlooked facet of men's fashion, but 'the dormitory' featured a collection of Ivy Style slippers. In light of the informality that prevails on campuses today, it was amusing to see that even in their bedrooms, Ivy League students of yesteryear wore button-down shirts, ties and woollen trousers, simply swapping their jackets for dressing gowns such as the mid-century Brooks Brothers robe on display.

The only real oversight at the *Ivy Style* exhibition was the shortage of original Ivy Style shoes. A search on eBay reveals many options for anyone seeking out an original pair of Ivy Style longwing brogues, and there is a

veritable online cult surrounding original, made-in-USA Bass Weejun penny loafers. Yet the majority of the shoes in the exhibition were contemporary. An exhibition label did describe the importance of the Bass Weejun penny loafer, but the only example on display was a made-in-El Salvador version from 2012. While some nods to Japanese and British reinterpretations of the Ivy League Look would have been appreciated, the F.I.T. cannot be faulted for omitting these more peripheral aspects of the style. Emphasising the fantasies of affluence and privilege that narrate the Ivy League Look at the expense of its more popular manifestations, *Ivy Style* nevertheless did an impressive job of capturing the productive tension between the modern and the traditional that has kept Ivy Style alive into the twenty-first century.

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