



CUFF LOVE

THIS ESSENTIAL TOUCH OF ELEGANCE IS BACK; HERE'S WHY.

WHEN I WAS 19 AND IN COLLEGE, I dated a guy with a pierced ear and floppy mop of hair that he'd pull into a short ponytail. It was the '80s and to me, his look was creative, rebellious, and totally enticing. Now in my early 40s, I see a guy with a pierced ear and immediately think mid-life crisis or unwilling to grow-up (either way, not a great relationship prospect).

Since my youth, I've always found jewelry (other than that one earring) particularly unappealing on men. (Only if you want to be cast

on the Sopranos can you pull off donning gold chains and a pinky ring.) There are, however, two notable exceptions: the guy who attracts my attention these days would wear a vintage watch and great cuff links!

Unfortunately for my love life, most American men virtually gave up wearing cuff links with the advent of button cuffs; casual dress codes made the situation even worse. In fact, over the last 40 to 50 years in the U.S., with the exception of collectors and celebrities, cuff

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links surface mostly for formalwear, or when given as gifts to ushers in wedding parties.

But recently, according to Karen Alberg, editor-in-chief of MR magazine (the leading men's retail trade publication), "all of this is changing. French cuff shirts have been sell-

ing so well that by fall '04, they generated a significant share of dress shirt volume, more than half in many upscale stores." Among the reasons for this upswing: the celebrity factor. "Wardrobe stylists began outfitting rap stars like Usher and Jay-Z in bold striped

shirts and drop-dead cuff links (precious metals, gemstones). The look caught the eye of both MTV watchers and corporate types who don't want to look like rappers but do want to add some personality to a classic suit." (Alberg adds that some of the most interesting men she knows wear unmatched cuff links, a look that admittedly takes some confidence to pull off...)

Alice Kwartler, a cuff-link expert and Manhattan based antiques store owner, agrees. "Cuff links are the best way for a man to express his individuality and have fun doing it. They can match cuff links to their tie colors or bring out patterns in a suit. Once men begin to wear them, they realize how cuff links add polish and totally finish off a look."

Kwartler offers some useful tips on building a cuff link collection:

- Start with a basic metal cuff link in sterling silver, white gold or platinum. Look for a texture that will coordinate with the fabric of the suit. Mixed metals work well.
- Once you have your basic pair, add color. Transparent enamel cuff links come in every conceivable palette; most versatile are blue, green, red/burgundy, purple/violet as well as black and white. Look for the underlying engraving work as well as interesting shapes (octagon, hexagon and rectangle). Enamels match up well with ties, expressing your personality while always appropriate.
- Add some theme cuff links to your wardrobe. Most popular among men: horses, dogs, turtles, snakes, any sports-related themes (golf, sailing and fishing) and whimsical looks (martini glasses, poker, gambling motifs).
- Semi-precious stones set into gold can work for day and evening. They also add color to a suit. Start with the blue family: sapphire, lapis, blue moonstone and chalcedony as well as amethyst, carnelian, bloodstone and smoky topaz.
- Black onyx and mother-of-pearl as well as gemstones with diamond accents make great evening options.

To care for your cuff links, Kwartler says, "Put them away in a specific place and protect the enamels so they don't get scratched. Make sure they are securely fastened when you put them on and remember to check your shirts before you send them to the laundry. I can't tell you how many stories I've heard about men who've lost their cuff links in the wash and press process."

HT EIMSSNI GILKNI

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Soon after, "cuff buttons" or "sleeve cuffs" (identical buttons joined by a short chain) fastened the sleeves. Popular motifs of the time were painted miniatures or buttons inscribed with the initials of the wearer and his beloved.

By mid nineteenth century, what was later to become known as the French cuff first appeared. Manufacturers came up with a sleeve fastener that could pass more easily through the slits than a button could. The most common were metal chains, levers, swivels and (an American creation) the dumbbell design: front and back joined together by a gently curved shank.

The Industrial Revolution with its starched collars and cuffs inspired American companies to invent the one-piece cuff link. In England, the early Victorian era was marked by simple gold, silver and

ivory designs. Everyone in the middle and upper class began wearing cuff links from the nineteenth century onward. Later, Victorian designs were characterized by gold, enameling, and Etruscan, Greek and Renaissance revival styling. Stones for evening became popular, primarily semi-precious (mother-of-pearl, moonstones) as well as opals and micro-mosaic designs.

France's Art Nouveau and England's Arts and Crafts movements crossed over in 1880 with more naturalistic lines and symbolic imagery of woman, insects, flowers and plants. In the early twentieth century, Dandyism reigned under the supreme style of the new British monarch, King Edward VII. He set the standard of dress for all men throughout Europe. Platinum began to be used, offering a lightness of design and a more secure way to set stones. Enameling set off by vibrant rubies and other gemstones worked for day and evening. Cartier, Faberge and Tiffany were all designing more and more cuff links and were the big houses of the day

During the 1920s and '30s, Art Deco, the Jazz Age and Café Society dressed up the shirtsleeve even more. The most popular look was the evening stud and cuff link

set in black onyx and diamonds. Boucheron, Cartier, Chaumet, Van Cleef & Arpels and Verdura were the master jewelers of this era.

The Depression and World War II made jewelry a low priority but in the late 1940's, cuff links came back in style, bigger and chunkier with new mechanisms and more whimsical designs.

During the 1960s and '70s, links were completely out of vogue. The fashions of Carnaby Street and Woodstock, Nehru shirts and love beads took over menswear. Then briefly, during the Reagan years of conspicuous consumption, cuff links reappeared on the shirt sleeves of Wall Street.