

Dress to impress

By Rick Moorman

I was very pleased to receive a number of reactions to my last column in The Times, and interest in stories about the history of certain elements of our clothes.

At the moment, I am at the Ipso in Munich, an international fair for sporting goods ranging from equipment to clothing and such a fair gives me more opportunity to observe people and their habits than I can handle. The percentage of suits at these events is nil: the only ones you see are worn by security guards who ask to see your entrance pass at random intervals, immediately inspiring me to make these hardworking men an offer on some wearable, well-tailored and, most importantly, non-shiny suits. Casual clothes are the order of the day. The fast-paced world of extreme sports does not, after all, require a suit, but not dressing your best can still prove awkward and even embarrassing to both a vendor and a visitor.

One of the most noticeable items are the trousers that get me thinking about the birth of casual style. It must have been in the time of the first exploration voyages that the first real casual trousers, which the English call Duck Trousers, the word Duck actually being a translation of the Dutch word 'doek' (for fabric) arrived. Explorers lived for months or even years aboard dangerous ships and during their journeys, their sails often broke. Repairs often left the sails smaller and the remnants were kept. When the time came for the crew to go ashore in search of leisure, they, like people today, wanted to look their best and made new, clean pants out of sail cloth. The off-white colour quickly became the standard for this sort of trousers and when our boys went ashore and were asked about their pants, the Dutchmen never got further than saying 'Doek broek,' which quickly evolved into Duck Trousers.

The roots of these trousers are still visible in casual wear today, especially in translations, colours and prints. At the moment, camouflage prints are in and are worn by young people en masse, especially in styles where the crotch hangs at knee-height and you get the feeling that anyone wearing those trousers could fall down at any minute because they lose all freedom of movement. An the other end of the spectrum, the sports branch is pretty inventive. People come up with a waterproof coating and the perfect snowboarding pants are created.

Amid all this creativity I feel like Rick in Wonderland, but I'll also be happy to get back to the fashion world I feel at home in. Believe me, sometimes wearing a suit can be a relief and while a roomier pant leg may work from time to time, it's smart to stay away from collapsing pants with camouflage prints.

Rick Moorman has stores in the Netherlands and Belgium. He gives advice and readings on clothing in the business world.