



The Transatlantic Look

*Meetings with Joseph Abboud,
the Boston-born clothing designer, and
sightings of Troy and Rib on
the runway*

I WANT to build a great raincoat," Joseph Abboud says to his design team. The setting is Abboud's twenty-seventh-floor office-studio on Fifth Avenue, and none of the floating company of four or five young men and women—bright, energetic, alive to the shades of Abboud's mood—who flit in and out of the meeting seem to find the statement remarkable. It's what they expect from Abboud, forty-four, an internationally known men's (and lately women's) fashion designer. He uses an argot of ambition rarely seen in interviews with artists or writers or filmmakers, who shrink from using the *G*-word about the products of their hands or hearts or eyes. Earlier, in an interview in his small, sample-strewn office, Abboud boasted proudly if mixaphorically, "We changed the face of neckwear," speaking of the earth-toned, intricately patterned ties whose designs he sketches insatiably—in doodles while he talks on the phone, in notebooks on long flights, and on the dissolving surfaces of his dreams. "Let's stay on the silk issue," Abboud says, as the raincoat meeting threatens to stray into wool. At another juncture: "Let's save that for the trouser discus-

sion." In Joseph Abboud's world silk is an issue and trousers achieve the dignity of discussion.

Coming soon to a select group of stores across the country—"Fifty or sixty doors," Abboud says, in retail-speak—will be Abboud's "American Soft" collection of men's wear, a new look that he predicts will define "the way men will want to dress five or ten years down the road." Abboud is not alone on that road. Italian designers like Zegna and Armani pioneered the soft look, and the Americans Donna Karan and Calvin Klein are also going soft. This trend and Abboud's track record in the market argue that he may be right about what men will be wearing in the early 2000s. He has had his own label for nearly ten years; before that he designed for Ralph Lauren; before that he sold and bought clothes for Louis, Boston, the Tiffany of clothiers. The psychosexual reverberations of the rubric are unfortunate, though, for men's wear. Will future historians of this *fin de siècle* seize on "American Soft" as a text for our time? Abboud might have been wiser to run that one by the boys on Madison Avenue.

The clothes themselves, to quote from

DNR, a men's fashion magazine, are a wearer-friendly mixture of "crepey" and "drapey" wools and blends "devoid of any drop-dead bold patterns." They have to a marked degree what one of Abboud's fellow Bostonians, the art historian and collector Bernard Berenson, called "tactile values"—they want to be held, felt, *touched*. They are meant to be worn mixed and matched—suit coats as sport jackets, suit trousers as slacks—in a way that is familiar to women but not to men. Traditionally men have had two wardrobes, one for the workweek, the other for the weekend, although most men, of course, don't regard the mistakes cluttering their closets as anything so grand as a wardrobe. Like the great Italians, Abboud designs for the narrow band of customers—one percent of all buyers—who are willing to spend \$500 or more for a suit, and who make up the new world market in designer-label men's clothes. Abboud may be the sole graduate of Roslindale High School in that one percent.

BORN in Boston's polyglot South End to first-generation Lebanese-American parents, Abboud had an all-Boston boyhood, pedaling a swan boat in the Public Garden as his summer job and working for a clothier as firmly identified with the city as the sacred cod. At Roslindale High, where he played football and ran track, he was voted best-dressed in his senior class ("I always loved clothes"). His first after-school job was as a salesman with Anderson-Little, where today you can still buy a suit for \$100—about the price of an Abboud shirt. Brainy and hardworking, he won a scholarship to the newly established University of Massachusetts at Boston, whose downtown campus was a short walk from his South End home and was even closer to the smart clothing shops of the Back Bay, where Abboud would window-shop and indulge the dream of his destiny.

One day, on a vagrant impulse, and not answering an ad, he walked into Louis, Boston, the city's poshest clothing store, and asked for a job. For a freshman of limited means, a kid who worked to help support his family, this took guts. To

by Jack Beatty

most locals, Louis, Boston was an intimidating place, a citadel of swank in a city whose dress code owed more to Cotton Mather than to Yves Saint Laurent. Yet Abboud's classmates at Roslindale High had not voted him best-dressed for nothing. Slim, with rugged and vaguely Continental good looks, he wore clothes well and was well-spoken and personable enough to seem a plausible salesman. Courtesy of Louis's layaway plan, Abboud was now the best-dressed student at U Mass-Boston.

In truth, that was no strenuous distinction. This was, after all, the late 1960s, the era of tie-dyed shirts, patched jeans, fashion by Army surplus. Attending the same university a few years earlier, I went to classes with my employer's name, "W. T. Byrns Motor Express," stitched in white

lences, and in working at Louis, a mecca for the discriminating and well-heeled buyer, he had the perfect job for someone mad about clothes. On one of his first Saturdays at Louis he sold a customer \$2,600 worth of shirts and ties. "And this was in 1969!" he exclaims.

"I was very proud to be around beautiful things," he says of his days at Louis. Explaining just why this tie went well with that sport coat, he was refining the taste, honing the eye, creating the vocabulary of style, that would one day win him unprecedented back-to-back (1990 and 1991) Designer of the Year awards for men's wear from the Council of Fashion Designers of America.

Encouraged by one of his professors (he majored in English and French literature), Abboud applied for and won a fel-

lowship to study at the Sorbonne. He was to cross the Atlantic on the *SS France*, which sailed from New York; to get to the ship he had to take a plane. "I had never been on a plane before," he remembers, the wonder of his rise still fresh to him. In Paris his education in style gained dimension. Living in the Latin Quarter for a year and a half, he feasted on a rich diet of sartorial possibility. A scarf worn

just so. The insouciant gesture of a cravat. The second skin of a tailored suit nipped at the waist. And surely it was in haughty Paris that Abboud learned to say things like "A red tie is contrary to the dignity of the tie and of male dress in general."

RETURNED from France, graduated from U Mass-Boston, Abboud faced three choices: he could pursue a graduate degree in French literature at Yale, he could begin a career as a high school teacher, or he could take a full-time job in management at Louis, with a chance to visit the posher precincts of the world looking for beautiful clothes. Not many of us get such choices, and Abboud, attractively, knows it. He stayed at Louis for eight years, from 1972 to 1980, be-



Joseph Abboud at work

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across the pocket of my blue work shirt, and no one thought me odd—at least not on that account. Abboud, who went directly to work from school, wore a coat and tie. "Half the kids thought I was a professor," he says. In fact he sold clothes to one of his professors. He had the salesman's gift for filling but not drowning si-

lowship to study at the Sorbonne. He was to cross the Atlantic on the *SS France*, which sailed from New York; to get to the ship he had to take a plane. "I had never been on a plane before," he remembers, the wonder of his rise still fresh to him. In Paris his education in style gained dimension. Living in the Latin Quarter for a year and a half, he feasted on a rich diet of sartorial possibility. A scarf worn

coming a protégé of Louis's president, Murray Pearlstein. A famed retailer with an eye for quality in people as well as clothes, Pearlstein inherited his family's business from his father, who got it from his father, who emigrated from Russia and opened a pawnshop that took suits as well as other valuables in pawn. Abboud's parents had both died when he was twenty-one, and Murray and Dorothy Pearl-

stein filled a hole in his heart. "I owe the world to that family," he says.

But eventually we all leave our families, and so with Abboud, who accepted a job at Ralph Lauren's New York headquarters and soon was made an associate director of design. At first Abboud could not quite get with the Lauren aesthetic. "It all seemed a little too traditional—too preppy—to me," he says. "I could take the distinction of designing one of the worst seasons he ever had." Abboud laughs at the memory. "I was off-message for what Ralph wanted to do," he says, adding, "I knew that I had to do something different. After all those years in the business, I asked myself, 'Am I really any good? Or am I only good because I'm with good people—a Murray Pearlstein, a Ralph Lauren?'"

"It came to the point where I had the opportunity to start my own company," he says, indicating by that studiously vague formulation that he will say no more about how he managed to finance the launching of his own line. Cash may often be the stuff of conversation ("I got the car with what Aunt Mary left me in her will"); but money, the one remaining taboo in American discourse, is still too awkward for words.

Picture Abboud as anxious in the months leading up to his first season, in the fall of 1986, obsessively asking himself, "Does anybody really need another label?" The market answered—decisively. "I sold every important store in America. Bergdorf, Saks, Neiman Marcus, Louis." Two years later he went into partnership with GFT, a major Italian apparel conglomerate. Now he could scale up his fledgling business to the measure of the world and design not only clothes but "environments" and—sweet smell of success!—a fragrance. Fame and fortune lay before him. He needed only the kind of break that Ralph Lauren got with the 1974 Robert Redford movie *The Great Gatsby*, or that Giorgio Armani got with the 1980 Richard Gere movie *American Gigolo*—a chance to dress a star. Enter Bryant Gumbel, who started wearing Abboud clothes while broadcasting the 1988 Olympic Games for CBS and still wears them on NBC's *Today* show. "I couldn't ask for a better friend," Abboud says, unsurprisingly, of Gumbel, the first and best-dressed man millions see five days a week.

GUMBEL was one of several celebrity customers I saw at Abboud's fall show of men's wear, held at the Sony Music Studio, an antiseptic hall on Fifty-fourth Street in New York. Faux scruffy, streaky-blond models with noms de mode like Troy, Nikitas, Atesh, Hansel, and (my favorite) Rib paraded down a runway to thought-obliterating music wearing a hundred outfits made up of several times a hundred parts. The twenty-minute show takes eight months to prepare. "It is pandemonium backstage," Abboud says. "I straighten ties, see if their shoes are laced—and I always have to remember to check their flies just before they walk out."

The results? A collection of clothes with great eye appeal—relaxed, undressy, and wearer-friendly, in keeping with Abboud's vision of versatile clothing. Grays, taupes, charcoals, chocolates, maples, tobaccos, camels, olives, lichens, sages, ferns, mosses, mushrooms, black gabardines, and oatmeal Donegals predominated; there were no reds.

I especially coveted the "Eucalyptus Chevron Wool Velour Overcoat With Removable Sheared Beaver Collar," as it is listed in the show catalogue, and the "Barley Wool Velour Sportcoat"—the kind of garment you could wear only if you had the nerve (not to mention the cash) to live out your least plausible fantasies. To wear a barley-velour sport coat, after all, is to send social signals most men would be hard-pressed to live up to. This is a problem for men's designers. The words that came to mind when looking at the runway models in not all but some of these clothes were "gigolo" and "playboy," not "investment banker" and certainly not "family man." Yet Abboud manages to sell more than 100,000 suits a year in a world market big enough for barley-velour sport coats.

Asked to sum up the evolved Joseph Abboud "look," the man who created it obliges. "If you put Giorgio Armani over here and Ralph Lauren over there," he says, indicating the range in men's clothes from the mod to the traditional, "we are right in the middle. Think of it as a 'transatlantic look.'"

How right that Abboud should find his niche spanning the ocean his parents crossed long ago, drawn by hopes for their family and America that he and it have vindicated. ☞

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