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CROWNING GLORY

Steve McQueen's magnificent wardrobe stole the show in classic 1968 heist film, *The Thomas Crown Affair*.

by **wei koh** original photography **munster**

There's a reason the smartest names in men's elegance — including Tom Ford, Ralph Lauren, Timothy Everest, Mark Powell and Oswald Boateng — all regard *The Thomas Crown Affair*, the 1968 Norman Jewison-helmed film starring Steve McQueen, as one of the most influential moments in men's style. To this day, the film remains one of the most empowering intersections between masculinity and sartorial expression ever captured by the camera's lens.

Think back to the era in which it was born, and you'll find that the film defiantly went against the grain. Late '60s American cinema was focused on gritty social realism. To put it in perspective, a year after *The Thomas Crown Affair*, an X-rated movie about a male street hustler titled *Midnight Cowboy* would win the Academy Award for Best Picture. Even escapist fare like Arthur Penn's *Bonnie & Clyde* and Samuel Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* boasted central characters sublimated in paralytic angst moving inexorably closer to violent ends.

So, it was perhaps understandable for reviewers to dismiss a movie like *The Thomas Crown Affair* — replete with Faye Dunaway's 31 costume changes, Ferrari GT 250s, Rolls-Royces and, in particular, Steve McQueen's British-tailored splendour — as mindless eye-candy. Admittedly, the narrative foundation of the film is not the strongest. Dreamt up by lawyer and screenwriter Alan Trustman, its central character is a new-world Boston brahmin — the 36-year-old, divorced, polo-playing arbitrage specialist and self-made millionaire, Thomas Crown. Because his life is so coloured with ennui, he's compelled to get his adrenaline double-tap by masterminding a daring daylight bank robbery using unwitting henchmen who don't know his true identity. Enter Faye Dunaway who plays a cagey insurance investigator — the cat to his mouse. While they duel in wits and emotion, the true duel is one of stylistic one-upmanship.

Agreed, the characters are underdeveloped and the plot is without true genius. As one reviewer put it, "If style could be purchased, Norman Jewison... has turned out a glimmering, empty film reminiscent of an haute couture model: stunning on the surface, concave and undernourished beneath."

However, this comment entirely misses the point of *The Thomas Crown Affair* which, as a pure exercise in style, is as significant to cinema as



Three-piece Glen plaid suit in homage to Thomas Crown by Timothy Everest (www.timothyeverest.co.uk); cotton shirt with French cuffs, woven silk tie, and silk pocket square, all from Charvet; sunglasses from Persol, all property of *The Rake*.

Three-piece pinstriped suit from Mark Powell, property of *The Rake*, cotton shirt with contrasting collar, woven silk tie, and printed silk pocket square, all from Tom Ford.

***The Thomas Crown Affair* “is the most stylish movie ever created.”**

Kazimir Malevich’s experiments in total non-objectivity are to art — which is to say, instrumental. If style were a religion, *The Thomas Crown Affair* would be its *Bhagavad Gita*. Style is expressed in everything from the award-winning languid cool score, to the split-screen technique of the credits and bank robbery (a first unveiled at the World’s Fair of 1964 and used only once before in commercial film by John Frankenheimer in McQueen’s *Le Mans*). The message is clear from the multiple images flashing in the opening credits: What’s more beautiful than one image of a perfectly tailored Steve McQueen? Well, multiple images of him as the bank-robbing Savile Row-suited Narcissus!

“There is none higher. It is the most stylish movie ever created,” says Mark Powell, the British sartorial impresario who invented the gangster-chic tailoring seen in the cult hit film, *Gangster Number 1*. Alfred Dunhill image director Yann Debelle de Montby concurs: “It is an incredible work, as it declares to all men that being elegant is a joy.” Says James Sherwood, author of definitive Savile Row tome *The London Cut*, “It reconnects us with the passion we derived from military dress or court uniforms. It reminds us that in the centuries before, it was always the man, and not the woman, that was the style star.”

Not since films like Astaire’s 1935 *Top Hat* had the world seen such a joyous celebration of male sartorial self-expressionism. The

message encoded in every lavish frame of *The Thomas Crown Affair* is this: It is the male birthright to be dressed sublimely. The film was the tipping point of the ‘Peacock Revolution’ to come in the ’70s, and without it, movies in which men are not just protagonists, but also the transcendent aesthetic focus — like Hal Ashby’s *Shampoo* and Paul Schrader’s *American Gigolo* — might not have been possible. However, unlike the two later films, McQueen’s movie resonates with a huge male audience because of his unique union of virility and elegance. There is nothing fey or foppish, nothing Lord Sebastian Flyte-like, in McQueen’s portrait of ‘Tommy’ Crown. He is every bit an Alpha male clad in bespoke armour barking out virility. McQueen had to overcome a great deal of studio skepticism on whether (given his rugged persona, both on- and off-screen) he could pull off the portrayal of a dashing, urbane tycoon. Yet, in much the same way that wardrobe and sardonic wit transformed former bricklayer Sean Connery into a convincing gentleman spy, exquisite suiting empowered McQueen to confound typecasting. Here, the clothes definitely made the man.

Every detail of his dress in the film is executed correctly and with perfect sartorial precision. There is never a misstep, though certain colour combinations (such as the outfit he wore to seduce Dunaway’s character: a soft-pink striped shirt, mauve necktie and silver black

pocket square combined with a grey three-piece suit) certainly flirt with hyperbole. In the decades to come, only Alan Flusser, who dressed Michael Douglas as Gordon Gecko in Oliver Stone’s *Wall Street*, and Giorgio Armani, who dressed Robert DeNiro as Al Capone in *The Untouchables*, would come close to devising similar sartorial expressions of male empowerment.

It was British tailoring legend Doug Hayward, who also created Michael Caine’s super-lean suits in *The Italian Job* (the precursor to Hedi Slimane’s narrow-shouldered silhouette), that was tasked with outfitting McQueen in an array of suits to dazzle the senses. While there is a belief that McQueen’s suits follow the lean silhouette popular in men’s tailoring of the era, our examination of the film proves this inaccurate. Indeed, the suits created by Hayward are quite the opposite. They are perfectly representative of classic British tailoring, and fully express the same renewed masculinity that is presently emerging in men’s elegance thanks to Tom Ford and Ralph Lauren Purple Label. Looking at McQueen’s outfits in the film now, you can still imagine them being completely relevant and stylistically pitch-perfect today.

They are all three-piece suits that create an air of brash formality in sharp contrast to the rapidly devolving late-’60s world around McQueen. The coats’ shoulders are well structured and feature light



roping to create a powerful, almost predatory stance. Slightly slimmer lapels serve to build the expanse of chest. The coats are two-button with well-suppressed waists to create a more Atlas-like silhouette. They feature nice bespoke hallmarks such as large sleeveheads and slightly more voluminous backs to aid mobility. There are even some downright cheeky details like the single-button, fishtail-sleeve cuffs on several of the suits, including the legendary grey Prince of Wales suit in the opening scene.

The waistcoats in the movie are generally without lapels (although there is one brown suit that has a lapelled waistcoat) and are straight-cut at the hem with a slightly higher line to give greater length to McQueen's legs. The waistcoats are all buttoned at the last button, which is correct for a straight-cut hem. Though McQueen's plain-front, high-waisted trousers are relatively full, they end in narrower hems to marry with his slim British benchmade shoes.

More prevalently, *The Thomas Crown Affair* reconnected men with classic men's elegance at a turbulent time when popular culture was beginning to deracinate the very foundation of traditional dress. In a few short years, denim, shoulder-length hair, safari suits and all manner of bohemian chic would engulf men's style, and it would be precisely 40 years before the neo-classical period of contemporary style would re-emerge to combat a world where the common man was indistinguishable from the Bowery-prowling clochard.

This sense of joy, of complete masculinity directed into external expression, has never found a more pure expression than in the

uniform of the film's first scene. Here, McQueen checks his gold Patek Philippe pocket watch, which is hung double-Albert style with a fob drop. He is resplendent in a Prince of Wales Glen plaid three-piece in contrasting shades of grey. The details of his suit are extreme, from

the super-high side vents to his roped shoulders to his single-button cuffs. His light blue shirt with large mother-of-pearl cufflinks is counterpointed by a royal blue silk tie knotted with a dimpled half Windsor. The lenses of his Persol shades match the shocking blue lining of his suit. A dove-grey pocket square, staged 'Astaire Puff-style' fills his breast pocket. It's a crazy outfit, an almost totally over-

the-top piece of sartorial bravado... but it works. Says tailor Tim Everest of the moment when McQueen steps out of his Rolls-Royce in this magnificent form, so full of bravado and devil-may-care cool, "It's this outfit that made me want to become a tailor."

McQueen's clothes continue to shape-shift in each scene, from the charcoal-grey three-piece in the Swiss airport, to the oddly centre-vented blue/grey pinstripe three-piece in his banker's office, to what is perhaps the most stylish of the suits in the film: a midnight-blue outfit with a gorgeous double-breasted waistcoat worn with a subtly striped shirt with a collar pin and a four-in-hand-knotted, double-pleated tie. Faye Dunaway's character is asked, "Do you find him handsome?" "Yes," she gushes — and we can't help but agree. Today, as men get reconnected with classic elegance, the film is more relevant than ever. Because encoded in its every frame is the message that it is your right to look magnificent. 

“McQueen’s movie resonates because of its unique union of virility and elegance.”