

SHIRT STORIES: A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF A CHARVET DEVOTEE

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

"Charvet is the greatest artist in creation!"

—James McNeill Whistler

French shirt maker Charvet's legend is immense, large and uncontainable. It runs like an overflowing river crossing epochs, insinuated into the greatest works of literature, and infused into the sartorial vocabularies of the world's best-dressed men. At one time or another, Charvet has dressed Gary Cooper, Édouard Manet, W. Somerset Maugham, John F. Kennedy, The Duke of Windsor — the list goes on. And while allegiances to tailors are asserted within national boundaries — it's hard to imagine Prince Michael of Kent rocking that Rubinacci — the universal affection for Charvet knows no bounds. Indeed, if Gatsby had been less inclined to nouveau riche exhibitionism, he would have replaced Turnbull & Asser for the place that artist Jean Cocteau called, "where the rainbow finds ideas".

It is incredible the number of times Charvet is mentioned in the world's great stories. Dandy aristocrat Lord Sebastian Flyte of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, "entered — dove-grey flannel, white crepe-de-Chine shirt, a Charvet tie". Proust took time off romanticising Madeleines to recall in *Remembrance of Things Past*, "tightening from time to time the knot of my magnificent Charvet tie..." In *A Man in Full*, Tom Wolfe described his protagonist as assembling "the richest-looking ensemble he possessed: a navy hard-finished worsted suit with pinstripes, nipped at the waist, a tab-collared shirt with a white collar and spaced-out pale-blue stripes on the shirtfront, a solid French-blue crepe-de-Chine silk necktie from Charvet in Paris..."

Founded in 1838 by Christophe Charvet in Paris' heady Place Vendôme, Charvet was something of a revolution in retail concept. Previous to Charvet, shirt- and tie-makers travelled to visit their clients. Charvet was the first to establish a shop front to offer an even wider array of fabrics and an emotional home for custom shirt- and tie-making — where men could realise the very fabric of their dreams.

Said current owner Jean-Claude Colban, "It was an inspired era, the time of Beau Brummell and when Balzac wrote his treatise on elegance. Charvet was the requisite shirt shop for all the trendy French nobles, in particular, the Jockey Club — fashion-forward young blades united by their passion for horse racing and dressing magnificently."



Boldini's 1897 portrait of French Symbolist poet, art collector and dandy Robert de Montesquiou, the subject gloriously attired in a Charvet shirt and tie.



Siblings Anne-Marie and Jean-Claude Colban, heirs to Charvet's legacy of magnificent shirtmaking.

Soon, word of Charvet spread throughout Europe, and an unlikely partnership emerged when Charvet became the official shirt maker to the British King, Edward VII. Jean-Claude Colban chuckled, "At the time, it was something of a scandal that the royal warrant was given to a French chemisier — you can imagine that the man tasked with writing out this warrant must have done so through gritted teeth."

GUARDIANS OF THE REALM

So, how did Jean-Claude Colban and his sister Anne-Marie Colban end up running Charvet? Here lies an interesting parallel with Patek Philippe, where the Stern family, its former dial supplier, became aware of the brand's financial woes and decided to rescue and preserve the most iconic name in Swiss high watchmaking. And so it was with the Colban family and Charvet as well.

The formidable Denis Colban, father to Anne-Marie and Jean-Claude, was an importer of English shirt fabrics and an adviser to General Charles de Gaulle. One by one, the two men watched as the great French shirt-making houses fell on hard times. When the great General informed Colban that the most iconic of these, Charvet, might soon fall into 'American hands', he became determined to save this Gallic sartorial gem from these vulgarians. Said Jean-Claude

Colban, "At the time, he rarely visited the old Charvet shop on 8 Place Vendôme. That was because there was a rule that all suppliers had to use the back door. It was rather nice that on the day he purchased the brand, he finally walked in through the front door."

What was Jean-Claude Colban's major contribution? It was a system of distributing work that organised shirt-making into specific areas of expertise. He created a production line, while still retaining handmade artisanship that allowed Charvet to endure for the next half-century amid a rapidly modernising world. A single shirt passes through an organised structure where it will be worked on by three or four sets of hands. The next person always checks the work of the previous person, so all the work is double-checked.

How do you tell if a shirt is well made? Look for matching of patterns and regularity of stitching. Said Anne-Marie Colban, "I can see from the thickness of the collar if it is a fine shirt or not. It should not look like cardboard; it should not be constructed in layers; and it should never be fused. Our buttons are made from the outer part of the mother-of-pearl shell and attached using a small tail to make them easier to button. We also cut our buttonhole parallel with the cuff rather than at 90 degrees to it, which is the norm, because it is so much easier to button this way."

ALWAYS THE TASTEMAKER

Charvet's revival was compelled by its unwillingness to stand by the sidelines as a simple spectator to shifting times — a rarity among the iconic names of men's tailoring. And today, Charvet continuously innovates and creates new fabrics, and it has its pulse on the evolving paradigms in men's elegance. Said Jean-Claude Colban, "We have always been tastemakers rather than followers."

Charvet, unlike any other bespoke clothing firm, avidly seeks out new concepts. Said Anne-Marie Colban, "There has been an evolution in shirting that we call the 'shabby look', where men actually want their shirts to look as if they have spent all night in a train. The objective is to take this aesthetic and introduce our craftsmanship and quality to arrive at this pre-wrinkled look. We remove the linings, cuffs and collars, and create shirts with no bands and no stays." Said Jean-Claude Colban, "There is also a trend today for narrower collars to work in conjunction with slimmer neckties. We make many narrow ties in our bespoke department for clients, but we are thinking of reintroducing thinner ties in our ready-to-wear line."

He continued, "We had, for many years, received the request from our customers to have a very fine denim shirt. Traditionally, the characteristic of the denim shirt is that the dye is unstable and it fades after use. But our issue was, at what point could we consider this acceptable in a beautifully tailored dress shirt? So, we arrived at two shades that are quite stable — if the fabric had been one shade more profound, the colour would have bleached away during washing."

Anne-Marie Colban picked up from her brother, "These shirts are often ordered with French cuffs and spread collars, and there is a lovely dichotomy in using denim for such a dressy shirt. We often even do these shirts in brown stitching, with brown buttons and brown monograms to emulate the colour scheme of jeans."

What both Colban siblings noticed was that men are becoming far more body-conscious, and as a result, they are making shirts with far smaller bodies than before. Said Jean-Claude Colban, "It is a cultural issue. What is considered a good fit changes with time, particularly in the United States. Ten years ago, we had to oversize shirts, but today, we have to undersize, because everybody wants their shirts very fitted."



Artist Jean Cocteau called Charvet the place “where the rainbow finds ideas.”



JEAN-CLAUDE COLBAN ON CHARVET'S NECKTIES

"When you weave tie silk, especially with a dense fabric, it comes out packed and rigid. To give it lustre, fluidity and spring, we have to process the fabric. This process is not often used because heat is involved, and heat means there is some melting which in lesser fabrics would compromise the handle of the material. But our fabric is well made enough to begin with that it can take this process. Fluidity, shine and spring — these are hallmarks of a good tie. We soften them using this heat treatment, then it is steamed and finally the materials go through steel rollers that flatten the tie and give it shine. Without spring, you cannot create a tie with a good knot.

We had been making seven-fold ties from the start and as ready-to-wear ties until the late '60s. But an interlining can bring an improvement, which is the fact that when you tie a knot, you end up pulling a lot on the tie. Now, tie fabric is cut on the bias to give it a bit of spring. But when you pull on it too much in one place, you can cause it to stretch out and deform. Conversely, a tie with a thick interlining lies stiff and dead on your chest and because of the additional thickness, never makes for an elegant knot. A true seven-fold tie is a tie that has no interlining at all. A fake seven-fold tie — unfortunately, there are many around — is lined with the same type of silk used for the surface, but interlined with something rather thick. Often, when you hold what you think is a heavy silk tie, you are actually holding a heavily interlined tie.

We decided we want ties that handle largely like seven-fold ties, but with a type of interlining to protect the shape. So, we designed a complex and secret interlining which helps the silk keep its resilience and spring, but is not an obstruction when you tie a knot."

Said Anne-Marie Colban, "You also have to look at the prevailing look in men's suiting. Today, men have returned to a very 'Savile Row' type of suit, which features a high armhole. As such, the armhole of your shirt must be correspondingly high as well, so that the shirt doesn't disturb the fit of the coat." The Colbans also introduced a slimmer silhouette into their ready-to-wear line.

THE POWER OF SELF-EXPRESSION

Embarking upon my first visit, it was with some trepidation that I crossed the street from my hotel to Charvet's magnificent eight-storey Place Vendôme headquarters. After all, I was on my way to the institution that has dressed some of the greatest men in history. Taking a deep breath and crossing the threshold, I was met with a prevailing sense of warmth from the genuinely sweet-natured staff — as inviting as the warm winter light streaming through the shopfront window and igniting the banquet of rich silks in fiery colour.

After a leisurely discussion, my shirt specialist Alain whisked me upstairs to try on a ready-to-wear shirt. It was soon determined that due to my disproportionately large neck, we should go the made-to-measure route.



INCREDIBLE COMFORT

For a man who is notoriously affected by the 'Princess and the Pea' syndrome, a loose thread or irregular seam has driven me into apoplectic fits and Tourette-like outbursts — Charvet shirts are the real-world equivalent to what the poet W.B. Yeats called "heaven's embroidered cloths". They also seem to last forever; in a pinch, I will simply throw them in the washing machine.

What's the secret to their incredible endurance? Said Jean-Claude Colban, "It's simple, we use the best two-fold cottons on the planet. Thirty to 40 years ago, there were only two types of shirt materials, single-yarn cotton and the superior two-fold cottons that would last a lifetime. But today, many shirt makers are tricking the public by using single-yarn cottons with a silicon finish, which initially gives the shirt a soft lustrous handle, but is soon washed away. There are also compact single-yarns that give the appearance of thickness but do not have the hardness of two-fold cottons."



Let me first say that Charvet, regardless of whether a shirt is ready-to-wear, made-to-measure or bespoke, makes shirts only one way — the best way. I soon learnt that ready-to-wear shirts are made on a single pattern, while made-to-measure shirts use a combination of existing patterns. For example, Charvet often combines a smaller body with a larger neck size to get a trimmer fit shirt, which was exactly what I wanted. In made-to-measure, you may select any collar style and any combination of fabrics for your shirt.

In bespoke shirt-making, however, you are limited only by your imagination. In this process, an interim shirt will be made for you and fitted before the actual shirt is made. Charvet's tailors will actually cut the collar directly on your neck while you're wearing this interim shirt.

Jean-Claude Colban, who by this time had very generously come down to meet me, explained, "One difference is that with ready-to-wear shirts, we do not pre-shrink the material, but we do pre-shrink made-to-measure and bespoke shirting using a special process called *décatissage*, which features an abrupt change in temperature. As such, it is advisable to slightly oversize a ready-to-wear shirt by 0.5cm in the neck, and 0.5 to 0.8cm in sleeve length." I was also asked what kind of watch I wore and if I wanted my left cuff larger in diameter

to accommodate Royal Oak Offshores and Richard Milles.

Then came a discourse on shirt collars: Spread collars and high collars are very fashionable, but not all collar styles are suited for all men. The first thing to look at is the height of the neck. If you look at a shirt on a table, a high-collared band will always look more beautiful than a low-collared band. But if your neck is short, this style can be very uncomfortable.

The shape of the face is also important. For example, a man with a very round face should stay away from the spread collar, because it has a tendency to accentuate this roundness. If someone has a longer face, he may benefit from a collar that accentuates the horizontal line. I was glad to discover my lumpy potato-shaped face could accommodate a rich variety of collars.

What kind of shirt did I end up ordering? As I imagine it would be with all new initiates, my first shirt was white — rather unimaginative but exquisitely made. So, I'd rather flash-forward one year and discuss my 11th Charvet shirt. Because it is only on completing your 10th Charvet shirt that your education, emotions and imagination are in full swing. Fuelled by a burgeoning sartorial maturity, you begin to discover the individual motifs that unite to create your signature shirt.

Suddenly, it clicked for me, and I understood the joy that Whistler, Manet, Proust and all those great men felt. Said

Anne-Marie Colban, "We love it when men come here and spend almost an hour just creating one shirt. We understand that this is the pleasure — almost a type of therapy."

My one year's worth of therapy with Charvet resulted in shirts with an extra trim body and higher armholes to complement similarly lean silhouetted suit coats. I veered away from Charvet's traditional style of a light, pliable collar and cuffs, choosing, instead, stiffer cuffs as I felt they sat more cleanly at the juncture of the wrist and hand, and were not disturbed by the gravitational deviancy of heavier cufflinks with a tendency to drag sleeves down. With regards to the collar, I wanted a more audaciously extreme, slightly arrogant-looking spread than existed in Charvet's already rich palette of choices. Said Anne-Marie Colban, "But this is simple, we will make it one inch more spread on either side for you." In terms of colour choices, I became obsessed with varying black and white graphic patterns; and on my 11th shirt, fell in love with large-motif black and white checks.

Upon witnessing the finished shirt, Anne-Marie Colban expressed, in her signature reverential tone, "When I look at a man's shirt, I see his passions, his dreams and his ambitions. I see his personal sense of art." 