

THE
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HARDEST
GIFT

THE CASE FOR GIVING SOCKS

OUR STYLE EXPERT WEIGHS IN ON THE LOWLIEST GIFT OF ALL— AND PROVES IT'S WHAT WE REALLY WANTED IN THE FIRST PLACE
By Benjamin Leszcz | Photograph by Natasha V | Styling by Serge Kerbel



ARE THOSE CASHMERE?

Why, yes, they are.
Pantherella, \$90,
www.harryrosen.com

My friend Jeremy Gans, a filmmaker, has some unusual ideas about clothing—and the role of government. “Socks should be free,” he recently told me. “The government should give them out, just like they did in the Soviet Union—as a reward for filing your taxes!”

Notwithstanding the absurdity (and historical inaccuracy) of Gans’s argument, the man is on to something. Socks, in their most basic form, are the apotheosis of ordinariness: elasticised foot-shaped fabric pouches. They’re not only insubstantial, but also fleeting. “Socks belong to the universe,” says Gans. “Holes suddenly appear; your dryer eats them; or they just disappear.”

In the same breath, however, Gans tells me about his favourite pair of socks: a purple-and-blue striped set he purchased for his wedding (for a princely sum he has since suppressed). “I’m a contradiction,” he says. “I don’t believe in spending money on socks—especially expensive socks, which are the height of excess—and yet I love them.”

Gans may be a contradiction, but his experience resonates. Socks, for many, are subject to what psychologists call the value-action gap—the gap between what we believe and what we buy. (It’s typically applied to SUV-driving tree-huggers, but it’s apt here.) Even if a \$50 pair of socks brings a man \$50 worth of pleasure—more pleasure than, say, a \$50 belt—the purchase is difficult to justify.

It is thus that socks, and especially extravagant socks, are the holiday gift par excellence: few men can justify purchasing them for themselves; they are genuinely useful; and they offer a sustained pleasure that is tactile, aesthetic and ego-affirming. (“People notice,” Gans says.) Never has a Christmas cliché been so inspired.

Over the past few years, a corollary of the taste for tailored trousers—coupled with the blog-fueled rise of the new dandyism—has meant that men’s socks have enjoyed an unusual burst of attention. The result has been a renaissance for heritage hosiers like Pantherella, the 75-year-old English company known for its “hand-linked toe seam,” and Corgi, who have been hand-making cashmere socks in Wales since 1893, and who sheath Prince Charles’s feet. There’s also been a surge in upstart sock makers, like Sock it to Me, based in Portland, Ore., whose bright patterns feature gnomes, toothbrushes and moustaches, and Happy Socks, a Swedish brand that aims at combating gloomy Scandinavian winters.

“Menswear is very codified,” says Happy Socks co-founder Mikael Soderlindh. “Socks are perfect spaces of expression. They can say a lot about you, and as men have become more daring, no pattern or colour is unwearable.” Even in formal settings, socks are a discreet place for self-expression. The British designer Paul Smith, a founding father of the classic-with-a-colorful-twist aesthetic, has said that bright socks offer conservative gentlemen “a nudge rather than a push” into foppishness.

Even if total conformity is the objective, a pair of hand-made cashmere socks offers a pleasure that is entirely private. Take, for example, Corgi’s cable knit model. At \$180, they offer unmatched comfort—as well as the reassuringly warm feeling that comes from knowing your socks cost more than your colleagues’ shoes.

* Top row (left to right): Corgi, \$32, www.jcrew.com; Marc Jacobs, \$20, www.holtrenfrew.com; J. Crew, \$14.50, www.jcrew.com; Daniel Buchler, \$25, www.holtrenfrew.com; Holt Renfrew, \$25, www.holtrenfrew.com; Etro, \$165, www.harryrosen.com; Corgi, \$32, www.jcrew.com; Penrose, \$35, www.harryrosen.com; Bottom row (left to right): Boss Black, \$20, www.holtrenfrew.com; \$15, www.holtrenfrew.com; Paul Smith, \$35, www.holtrenfrew.com. Middle row (left to right): Robert Graham, \$30, www.harryrosen.com; Robert Graham, \$30, www.harryrosen.com; Royalties, \$110, www.harryrosen.com; Pantherella, \$90, www.holtrenfrew.com; Diesel, \$20, www.hbc.com; Happy Socks, \$13, www.hbc.com; Richard James, \$40, www.harryrosen.com