

Off the cuff

The re-arrival of the French cuff has brought back an oft-overlooked opportunity for style and individuality. Euan McKirdy takes a look at the kaleidoscope of design options available.

Campaigners for equal rights between the sexes have long been aware of a startling imbalance. While the list of accessories and adornments for members of the fairer sex is a document as long as an elegant, bejewelled arm, replete with rings and bangles, the list of jewellery that men, in conventional society, can get away with is strikingly pared down. A wedding ring, a fine wristwatch perhaps. If you're being generous, one could include the humble necktie in the list of ways men can express themselves through their clothing.

But what many who bemoan the lack of outlets for men's sartorial creativity often overlook are some of the most elegant, deeply personal pieces a man can own – his cufflinks. Thanks to a recent resurgence in more formal tailored shirts, including French cuffs (also known as double cuffs), even for everyday business attire, the cufflink is once again king. The advantage of cufflinks is their inherent usefulness, which, along with their discreetness, makes them ideal for less-flashy men who nonetheless want to show some of their individuality and taste. It's been a while coming, but the last few years has seen a rise in

the re-acceptance of the French cuff as part of the average executive's business dress, meaning that men now have the opportunity to seek out a plethora of cuff designs, styles, shapes and materials. Pretenders to the throne include the silk knot, known as "monkey's fists", a cheaper option than the more ornate metal cufflink. Then there is an almost-bewildering array of other types and styles.

Cuff buttons, flats, chain links, snappers, kum-aparts, one-piece links ... it's a lot to take in. Cufflinks have been a part of men's formalwear since the late 17th century and were first mentioned in the London Gazette in 1684. Since those first early steps, when metal links started to take over from their forebears, the bejewelled cuff-string, an item that made its mark as far back as the Middle Ages, the cufflink has become the accoutrement of choice for the young man about town.

Since those early days, cufflinks have been with us in a variety of shapes and sizes. Trends come and go, but never did the humble button ever look like a serious contender for fully replacing the cufflink – a utilitarian surge in the 1980s and 1990s relegated the cufflink to all but the

This page, from left to right: Charming cufflinks by leading British fashion designer Paul Smith, A/W 2009 collection; grey mother-of-pearl is embedded in cufflinks by Hobbs & Kent. Facing page, clockwise from top: Links of London, renowned for its variety of icons, create unique salmon cufflinks; Paul Smith's signature multistripe design is a stylish choice for men; Cartier's classic Roman numerals show a man's sophisticated side; Rose-hued four leaf clover cufflinks from the A/W 2009 collection by Alfred Dunhill. Stylish wrap-around cufflinks by Tateossian London.



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Over the years, cufflinks have taken on a new dimension of elegance and sophistication and the design has evolved to match this new found confidence.

Above, from left to right: The red enamel dragonfly cufflink is a sharp design by Alfred Dunhill; a clever and sporty design complete with ball and racket by Links of London; simple tribal designs from Tateossian London; elegantly tribal for Tateossian London. Below, from left to right: This coat of arms, originally designed by Alfred Dunhill, was resurrected for the A/W 2009 collection; cobalt blue, industrial chic cufflinks by Versace.

most formal of occasions, but since those dark, unimaginative days, the cufflink has witnessed a splendid resurgence, wresting back its place as a day-to-day accessory for many businessmen. This current heyday of the cufflink sees an importance placed on the object that far outweighs its size, but instead speaks volumes about the significance of it, where every respectable men's emporium has a dizzying range to choose from. Couture houses such as Armani, Gucci and Cartier pride themselves on the originality and quality of their cufflinks. A spokesperson for Alfred Dunhill told *Priority* that cufflinks are the male equivalent of rings or necklaces – “jewellery for the cuff” and a “vehicle for expressing the wearer's personality”.

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confidence. Jewellery designers, so often constrained by the limitations and conservatism of men's jewellery design, have rightly seen the humble link as a vehicle for self-expression and have thus experimented with different colours, motifs and materials in ways that would not be possible with, for example, watches. Alfred Dunhill are exploring new trends in cufflink design: recently the house has seen innovation and new materials as trends in cufflinks. “We have some very special cufflinks that are carved from provenance materials. For example, we have made cufflinks from authentic materials: from a Ferrari 250 GTO car, a Spitfire plane and even the firebox from the Flying Scotsman locomotive,” explains Alfred Dunhill. Another trend noted by Alfred Dunhill, that symbol of male elegance, is a more modernist take – the use of carbon fibre materials and PVD coatings are a real trend.

Ascot Chang, the highly-regarded Hong Kong-based shirtmaker, has had a long history with cufflinks and French cuffs. Tony Chang, son of the eponymous founder, says that although the French cuff has its roots in more formal scenarios, “Nowadays people wear French cuff shirts in a much more casual way, such as without a tie or even without a jacket. French cuff shirts are now made with fancy patterns and trendy colourful fabric. Cufflinks to match these shirts can be more creative and interesting. Especially in Hong Kong, cuff links have become collectable items for men.” Similar to timepieces, however, cufflinks in recent years have trended towards larger sizes, stopping short of ostentation but still elegantly asserting themselves as statement jewellery.



Almost every material imaginable has been used to create cufflinks, from wood, mother-of-pearl and ivory to the more common precious metals. The not-inappropriately named Links of London have a range of styles, from the classic to the playful, Tateossian London, known as the “king of cufflinks” provide the biggest and most innovative collection of cufflinks on the market and Hobbs & Kent, a high-end US cufflink brand, re-interpret classic designs with luxe materials and organic textures such as walnut wood, mammoth tusk, ebony wood and stingray skin mounted in sterling silver. Their new Ex-Arte line, a limited edition collection is a collaborative vision between Hobbs & Kent and today's emerging artists and features exclusive designs by the artist that are hand-applied to porcelain and mounted in sterling silver.

However, no matter what your taste runs to, simple cufflinks, either plain gold or platinum, never go out of style and are thus always a good bet. In fact, the current trend is “Moving towards a slightly more toned down look,” Ermenegildo Zegna tells *Priority*. “The bling look is on the decrease with a more discreet and elegant look on the up.” While many men tend to err towards the more formal occasions for getting their cufflinks out of their presentation case, there really are few instances when they are not considered appropriate these days. Alfred Dunhill tells *Priority*, “Our collection includes a variety of designs, suitable for both day or night. We also have the innovative “Night and Day” cufflink and the Rotating Buckle double sided cufflinks that allows the wearer to choose which side of the cufflink features on the cuff.”

While any one man may own multiple sets, some take on great significance and it is no surprise, given their popularity and versatility, that they



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are often used symbolically, passed on from father to son, perhaps, or given as a gift to mark a momentous occasion. Indeed, the idea that cufflinks can be something collectable and represent enduring value, means that they make ideal heirlooms. Chang doesn't disagree. “I have a pair of my father's vintage 14-carat gold cuff links with abacus,” he says. “A valuable piece of jewellery is always suitable to be handed from father to son.” The ease of customisation, similar to rings or other small items of jewellery, make them ideal for any number of organisations, groups or institutions that a man might belong to.

And as the battle of the sexes wears on, it transpires that the cufflink is being coveted by their usual wearer's significant others. As fashion evolves, women have seen the benefit of an elegant cufflink to an increasing degree and many jewelers now offer lines of fasteners designed specifically for women ranging from the sublime, studded with diamonds and other precious stones, to the cute and fun, perhaps a set of ladybirds featuring impeccable touches, such as delicately placed Swarovski crystal eyes – a perfect accompaniment for businesswear. ■

Above: Diamond cufflinks add a touch of elegance to a dress suit. Left, from top: These dual textured cufflinks from Links of London add an interesting twist to a dress cuff; black diamonds set in sterling silver from Alfred Dunhill, the perfect finishing touch for a classic tuxedo.