



# The decorative ARTS

The interior designer and socialite *Nicky Haslam* applies the same imagination to dressing himself as he does to the houses he revamps. Here, he explains his sartorial style

PHOTOGRAPHS: MARK C O'FLAHERTY

Nicky Haslam, 76, at home, wearing a suit by XXXX to come



*I went to the last Chelsea ARTS BALL dressed as Rudolph Valentino in a white silk LOINCLOTH and ropes of PEARLS*

**S**artorial sounds an awfully grand way of describing what I wear. It somehow implies correctness and rigid wardrobe control. If only either were in my nature, let alone in what I wear. My style, if so it can be called, is a far more haphazard, day-to-day affair. Sartor, it seems, is an alternative word for tailor, but for many periods of my life, I've hardly been conscious of one.

While at Eton, the Regency dandy Beau Brummell created his original fashion dictum: only wear sombre black, white and grey. It remained the uniform while I was at the school, but during the tweedy holidays I'd gaze enviously at the teddy boys in their impudent elegance. On leaving in the late 1950s, I met David Bailey and instantly craved his mod look — the current street fashion — and was soon wearing boxy, Italian-cut suits from Bilgorri's in the East End, pointed shoes from Brixton market, and — a treasured gift — a narrow, horizontally striped tie by Jacques Fath, no less. A little later, Levi's became available; we wore their stiffness — which was barely relaxed by bathing in them — with black windcheaters in emulation of our young Hollywood gods. The die was cast; I had a whole new way of dressing.

In an essay on dandies, Max Beerbohm insists dandyism is one of the decorative arts, that “to clothe the body that its fineness be revealed and its meanness veiled” is a valid aesthetic aim. Looking pleasing or interesting to others is making the best of a bad — or even good — job of the basic material, akin to improving walls, designing harmonious surroundings or choosing beautiful accessories, and it is also, fundamentally, polite. I have always hated my looks, longing instead to be a chiselled, dark string bean rather than a dumpy mouse, and therefore have from necessity applied a form of decoration on myself as imaginatively as I have for the many and varied interiors I've designed.

I never had any inclination towards being a dandy like that arch practitioner Alfred, Count D'Orsay, though it must have been quite fun, for him, not least when “crowds gathered to see him descend, insolent from his toilette”. As for the handful of exquisitely turned-out men in 1950s London, such as Peter Coats, Bill Ackroyd, Michael Cabron-Waterfield (who was known as “Dandy Kim”) and the gloriously outré Bunny Roger, however soigne their style, it smacked of the archaic.

I wanted to be up-to-date, aware of advances in fashion whether street or designer. I've kept my eyes peeled for changes, and admired the style of 1930s and 1940s movie stars, the bowler hats and pinstripes of City gents, the

sleek silhouette of continental playboys, the lumpen scowl of bovver boys, the glittered glamour of rock stars, the rule-breaking slouch of hip-hop and — I'm afraid often laughably — have adopted them. I'm a terrible actor, but putting on some other motley gives me confidence, which maybe is why I had a ranch in Arizona in the 1960s (show me a guy who hasn't wanted to be a cowboy), have dyed my hair raven (who hasn't yearned to be Elvis?) and even attempted a pathetic imitation of that acme of elegance, the Duke of Beaufort, whom everybody wants to be.

Oddly, now I don't much enjoy actual fancy dress — my heart leaps to my mouth when an invitation decrees circus or Star Wars. But it wasn't always so. Shortly after leaving school, I went to the last Chelsea Arts Ball at the Royal Albert Hall dressed as Rudolph Valentino in The Young Rajah, in a costume consisting solely of a white silk loincloth and ropes and ropes of large (plastic) pearls; all well and good, until the mahogany stuff I'd used for an Indian-dark tan leached treacherously onto the pristine whiteness, a lesson in “however exotic the get-

up, make sure it's practical”. I was far more comfortable at Bunny's infamous “fetish” party, in 1956, going with a friend who had an absolute thing about police gear; he dressed me in full, authentic bobby-on-the-Beat uniform, with, I might add, pleasing results. Ever since then I've underplayed any theme. At a recent Raj White Night-themed birthday party in India, where all the guests were elaborately turbanned, I was more simply dressed in white britches and a bum-freezer jacket, hoping it had a Imperial mess-kit look.

I'm sure an important aspect of ones appearance being satisfying to oneself and others is clearing unwanted growth — no hairy neck. For that, I'm reliant on Derek Hutchins, who has dealt with every phase of my hair at Me, his calm Kensington salon, since — as my old friend the Italian jeweller Fulco di Verdura used to say — before the Anschluss. I never quite know what moisturisers are meant to do, but Sisley's magic men's skin stuff is a daily essential. And, of course, there's the hygienist, and a regular pruning of all tufty nasal and aural excrescences. And there is a rigidly adhered to “don't”: don't ever wear evening studs, certainly not jewelled ones, with a soft-front shirt. They were — and should — only ever used with those board-stuff shirts you can't button. The same goes for cuff links. I'm supposed to have said they're “common”, but I never did. I maintain they are ageing, especially on young guys, like cigars — if they knew how awful they look smoking them, they never would.

Everyday-wise, while I'm not quite such a flibbertigibbet as Juliette Novembre in Nancy Mitford's The Blessing, who couldn't think of any occasion without seeing an exact picture of how she would be dressed at it, I do like to work out what might interest/amuse/delight those I'll meet. Notice I don't say impress. That's not part of it, and I dread looking “distinguished”, rather I prefer “contemporary”, though that covers the contemporary in various periods. Spending much time on building sites in overalls and a hard hat, I am greeted with “Mornin', mate”, rather than sniggers of “Wot's that woofter doin' 'ere?” And elsewhere, jodhpurs aping Clark Gable's early movies, chinos and loafers like Robert Wagner in the 1950s, or the pre-war chic of Austrian tracht. And, of course, with age comes more formality. I've used many Savile Row tailors; only one can cut, but they all charge the earth — well, about 4,000 chunks of it. Luckily now I've found an exceptional tailor in Hanish, whose deceptively formal-sounding Bespoke Attire makes superb things, executed swiftly and smoothly by his alert awareness of cut and style, and for comparative peanuts to boot. So, I go forth more soberly now, and though often not adhering to Brummell's strict axiom, I do see he had a point. ●

Haslam and Sybil Christopher, Richard Burton's ex-wife, in New York in 1964



At the Atlantic Bar in London in 2001





Haslam in his work attire: a hard hat and overalls