Storied Lines

With a little help from fashion icons, stripes have managed to climb from the bottom of the ranks in medieval society to this year's spring runways.

BY DARYL BROWER

The boldly striped styles that sauntered down this year's spring fashion runways (and there were lots of them) may have raised a few eyebrows, but that reaction was nothing compared to the ones those linear bands garnered in medieval France. In 1254 Louis IX, better known as Saint Louis, returned from the Crusades with a few Carmelite monks in tow. The brothers were garbed in striped cloaks, a clothing choice that set French tongues wagging—and not in a complimentary way.

Medieval society used dress as a way to define class, literally barring such unsavory types as lunatics, lepers, jugglers, and prostitutes in striped clothing. Figures depicted in such garb in the art of the time denoted some sort of social deviance: Heretics, hangmen, and prostitutes were identified as such by their striped garments, as were biblical characters of questionable morals—Judas, Delilah, Salome, Saul, and Cain, to name a few. In his book *The Devil's Cloth* (Washington Square Press, 1991), historian Michel Pastoureau speculates that this stripe-averse sentiment was fueled both by a line from the Bible, "You will not wear upon yourself a garment that is made of two," and by the medieval mind's need to clearly distinguish between figure and ground. Stripes—with their single plane of alternating colors—were tricky to view, and as such became a visual symbol of impurity.

But back to the Carmelites. The sight of holy men dressed in stripes was just too much for polite French society to bear. Crudely mocked as the *frères barrés* (the barred brothers, *barré* being a double entendre for illegitimate), the monks were met with jeers, catcalls, and oftentimes violence wherever they went. To still the unrest, Pope Alexander IV demanded they give up their cloaks; the Carmelites summarily refused. Arguments and threats ensued. The monks held their ground. The dispute ended in 1295, when Pope Boniface VIII issued a papal bull banning striped clothing from religious orders. The Carmelites conceded and abandoned their scandalous stripes in favor of a more devout white habit.

FROM FORBIDDEN TO FASHIONABLE

Stripes kept their suspect associations for a few more decades (in 1310 a cobbler in Rouen was put to death for wearing stripes; that he was married and a member of the clergy confounds the issue a bit) but gradually began to move from, as Pastoureau puts it, "the diabolical to the domestic." The design once associated with questionable status eventually became a symbol of a different kind of class distinction: servitude. By the fifteenth century, stripes were the standard garb of kitchen help–and stable boys and chambermaids. As the years progressed, noblemen began slipping stripes into the livery of their men-at-arms and eventually their own dandified clothing. By the late eighteenth century, stripes were a full-on fashion statement. Supporters of the American and French Revolutions draped both themselves and their surroundings in stripes; by 1800 they were the height of style and it was considered trés chic to receive guests in striped tents set up in salons.

The year 1858 heralded the introduction of what would become a fashion staple: the Breton stripe. Originally known as the *marinière* or *matelot*, the Breton was the official uniform of the French Navy, a simple pullover shirt that featured twenty-one blue stripes (one for each of Napoleon's victories) on a white ground. The design supposedly made it


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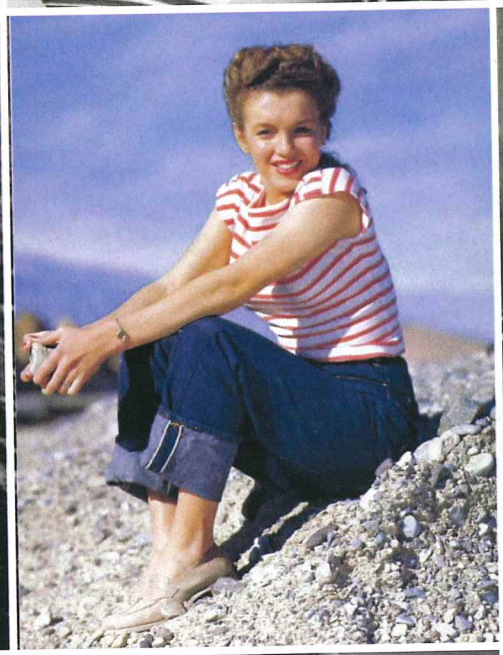
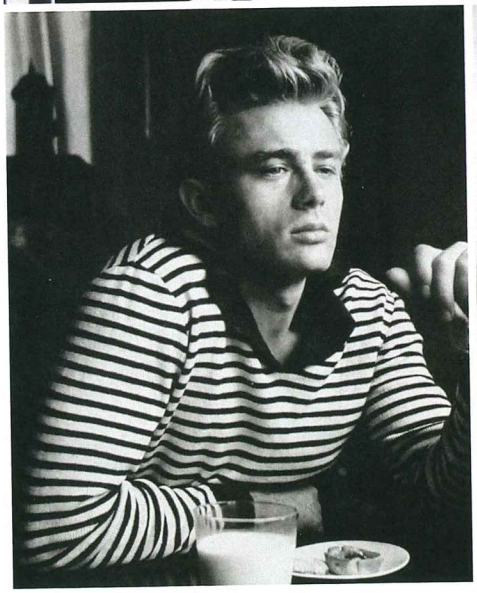
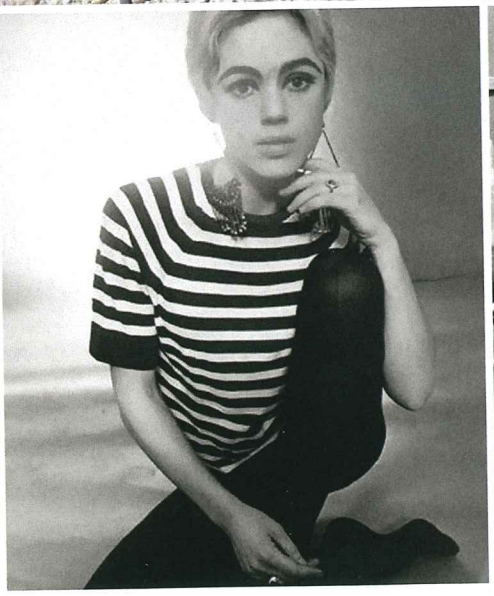



From top, left to right: Al Capone, Brigitte Bardot, Coco Chanel; Audrey Hepburn, Marilyn Monroe, Jean Seberg; James Dean, Edie Sedgwick, Pablo Picasso.

easier to locate a sailor who'd gone overboard. Practical and comfortable, the Breton remained the workaday uniform of mariners until 1917. That's when Coco Chanel visited the French Riviera and was instantly smitten by the striped shirts she saw there. A photo of Chanel wearing the shirt with palazzo pants had everyone clamoring to copy the look; she began selling them in her shop, and the style has remained a fashion staple ever since.

By the 1900s pinstripes had become the pinnacle of striped style. Historians are split on how this pattern of fine lines on suiting fabric originated; some say it began with use in British banking uniforms—subtly varied stripe designs distinguishing among differently ranked bank employees—while others contend that the pattern was a more formal adaption of the striped shirts so popular for boating (i.e., the Breton stripe). Whatever the impetus, stripes took a turn back toward the illicit during the Prohibition era, when American gangsters and jazz musicians suited up in flashy pinstriped suits that featured stark white stripes on a dark ground. By the 1940s stripes were deemed more banker than bad guy, with more quietly styled suits becoming the standard for men's business dress.

Breton stripes reemerged as the uniform of the beatniks in the 1950s and were soon appropriated by fashion icons like James Dean, Audrey Hepburn, and Edie Sedgwick. In Britain, the mods slipped into more boldly striped styles, pushing the boundaries of fashion. Jean Paul Gaultier made stripes edgy again in the eighties, and various takes on them haven't strayed far from the fashion spotlight since. Luckily for us, there's little to risk in trying them all.

STRIPE TYPES

AWNING STRIPES, whose name comes from the colorful canopies that began popping up on main streets during the late 1800s, are bold and bright, in a pattern usually reserved for upholstery, windows, and cushions (though fashion designers have worked them into everything from dress shirts to ball skirts).

MISSONI STRIPES, created in 1953 by fashion designers Tai and Rosita Missoni, are a colorful zigzag pattern that reached the peak of popularity in the early 1970s. Target brought them back into the fashion forefront with the launch of its Missoni for Target line in 2011.

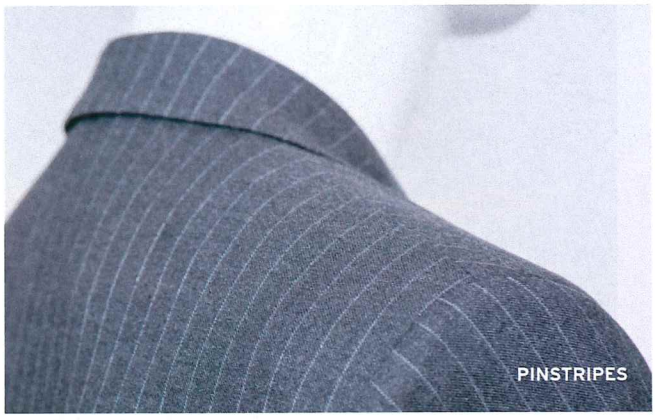
PINSTRIPES are very thin (not wider than about an $^{1}/_{18}$ inch) stripes spaced up to an inch (2.5 cm) apart. A single-warp yarn creates the individual stripes, which appear to be made up of tiny pinpoints.

CHALK STRIPES, often confused with pinstripes, are thin stripes that resemble lines drawn with tailor's chalk. Each is created with a series of threads that resembles a rope, and while the width of the stripe varies from garment to garment, it's always wider than the pinstripe.

SHADOW STRIPES are faint impressions achieved by using yarns of the same color and varying the twists in a woven fabric. The shadow effect comes from the way in which the light strikes the twists.

ROMAN STRIPES are narrow, multicolored stripes of uneven width that repeat over the fabric. The term is also used to describe a striped-quilt design.


AWNING STRIPES


PINSTRIPES

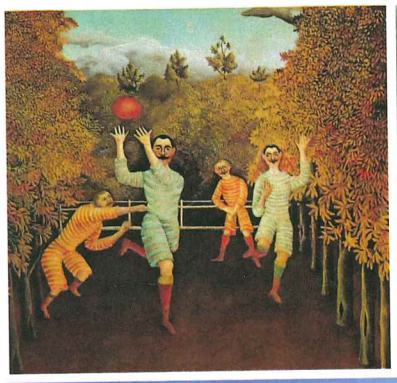
PATTERN PROTECTION

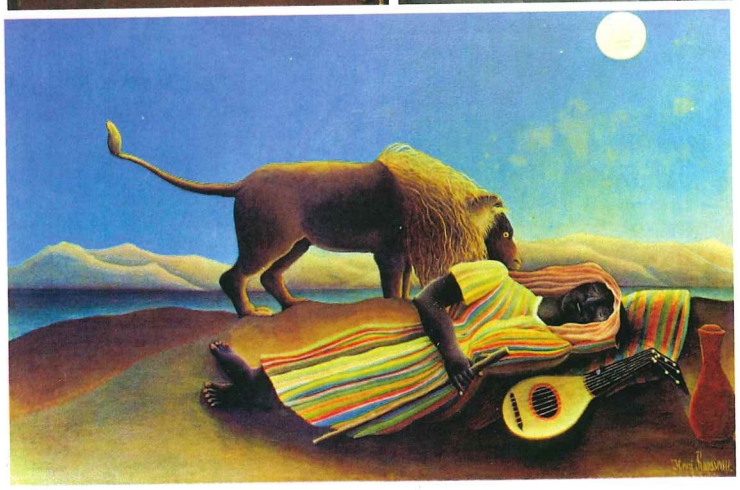
The medieval revulsion to stripes wasn't limited to a mere fabric pattern. Zebras (which most authors had only heard about, not seen) were included in Satan's bestiary.

While a zebra-striped coat on a city street will stand out in a crowd, in the jungle a zebra's stripes actually work as camouflage to confuse its predators. In a herd, the stripes create an optical illusion, blending the animals together into one giant blob that a lion figures is too much trouble to deal with.

MODERN ART

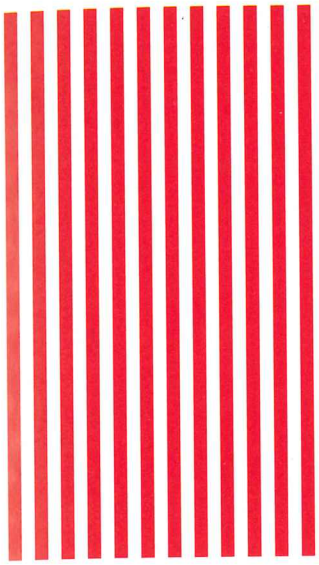
Along with Picasso, Henri Rousseau also shows an affinity for stripes, depicting them as fanciful attire on many of his subjects. *Clockwise from left*: *The Football Players*, 1908; *Boy on the Rocks*, circa 1985; and *The Sleeping Gypsy*, 1897.





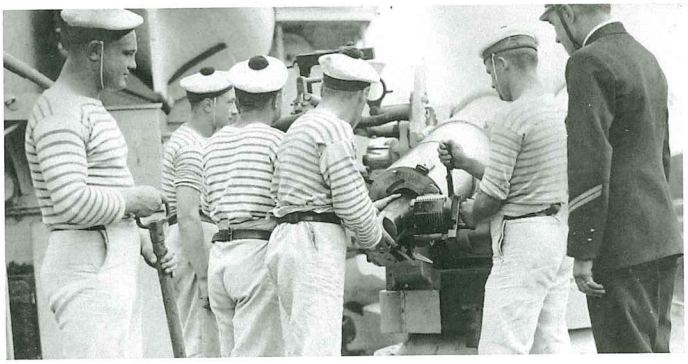
STRIPED SIREN

Winston Churchill's "siren suit," a one-piece pinstriped number that the prime minister designed himself to wear day and night during the air raids of World War II, sold at auction in 2002 for nearly fifty thousand dollars.



SEEING STRIPES

Researchers at Birkbeck, University of London have determined that vertical stripes can trigger a migraine. The reason? Study leader Alex Shepherd told United Press International that "certain types of patterns, such as vertical stripes, make the visual system highly excitable, lighting up the visual cortex with activity as the neurons do their job."



NAUTICAL TIES

While sailor shirts were directly responsible for the fashionable Breton stripe, the European hosiery trade, which produced mostly striped stockings, breeches, hats, and gloves for technological reasons, could tie this particular maritime garb—a jersey undershirt cut from knitted fabric for warmth—to hosiery history.

Balmain

Tommy Hilfiger

Balmain

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TRUE OR FALSE?

A perception expert at the University of York in the United Kingdom found that when two women of the same size wore horizontally and vertically striped dresses, the woman wearing the horizontal stripes appeared thinner.
Go figure. ✂