

**T**o hell with humility: my fiancée is a style virtuoso. Often surrounded by clones in halter tops and pencil skirts, Abby will dance through the night in a silver onesie, three-quarter-length on the legs but full-sleeved, worn over a silver swimsuit. In her outlandish Louis Vuitton shoes, floral straps flapping in and out of the schooner-glass-size holes in their preposterously raised wooden heels, she moves to the beat with as much seductive elegance as she would in a pair of lovingly battered Converse sneakers. On our wedding day, she's intending – conservative onlookers might say “threatening” – to wear a see-through, double-layer silk dress, a hand-painted black design at its billowing base, in place of the traditional chintzy alternative.

Women's fashion is quirky, bold and, at times, crazy – and Abby refuses to miss out on the fun. I find her sartorial bravado devastatingly attractive. And I'm not alone in such praise. Steffan Sacco, beau of the flamboyantly dressed stylist Sarah Bonett, is equally enamoured with his partner's outlandish dress sense. “I love the fact that what Sarah wears isn't your typical suburban fashion outfit that you can buy from chain stores located all over Australia,” he says, singling out her Herve Leger bandage dress for special praise.

Part of the attraction, says Sacco, is Sarah's imperviousness to a bland status quo. “I love that she looks different without buying into trends you see everyone else wearing.” There's also the implied confidence and the eye-turn factor (yes, we secretly love you being the centre of attention). Besides which, a daring guise – tastefully appointed and carried off with confidence – is aesthetic dynamite.

Kelvin Ho, whose partner is Jacqueline Perrett – communications manager, Australia at Sass & Bide – agrees. “I appreciate Jac's thrown-together look,” he says. “It's laid-back and understated but still luxurious and considered. A tan-and-black Balinese '70s batik sarong and her draped suede coat deserve a special mention, as do her Jil Sander pumps.”

But surely, I hear female readers cry, men would prefer us to live, work and sleep in hotpants and the kind of bikini tops that look more suited to slicing hunks of cheddar on a deli counter?

Okay, guilty as charged – to an extent. Traditionally, men have valued women's fashion according to how much the fabric – be it by a complete absence or a clinging presence – reveals what lies beneath: the female contours we're biologically predisposed to gawp at. When English model Jean Shrimpton caused an outcry by wearing a miniskirt to the 1965 Melbourne Cup, the protests were much more muted from the male camp. We can't help it. We have evolved with a nerve that runs from our loins to our tongue, and a woman in tight jeans getting off a bar stool triggers an involuntarily response in the former that causes the latter to unfurl like a famished cartoon mutt's. “I'd never say the Pirelli calendar isn't exciting,” admits Ho.

Yes, we're simple creatures – but not stupid. Blokes – even those who watch *Top Gear*, flick through *Zoo*

*Weekly* magazine and take pride in the volume of their belches – are not *entirely* unsophisticated. We get the complexity and nuance of Test cricket over the whack-and-sprint spectacle that is Twenty20. We appreciate the painstaking intellectual effort that goes into making the latest smartphones, speaker systems and supercars immeasurably superior to their equivalents from the technological doldrums of only five years ago. Why shouldn't we be applying the same savvy to our partner's wardrobe, and judge it with our big head rather than the small one? Especially given how much more stylistically savvy we have become about our own clothing in the past 10 years – the term “metrosexual” is proof of that.

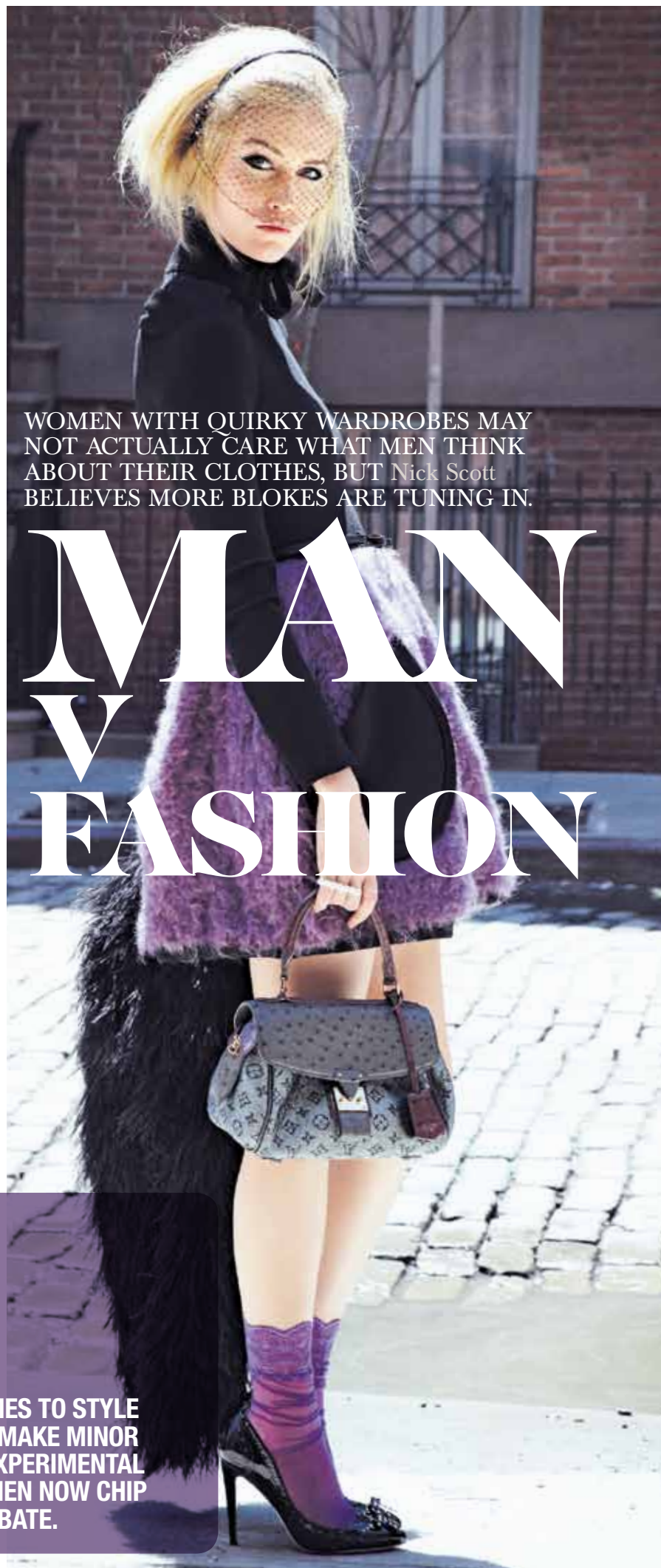
**T**he internet has played a big role in making guys appreciate the outer reaches of women's fashion so much more than we did a decade ago. When we talk about the web's impact, we tend to think of specifics – WikiLeaks, social media, instant written communication – and often overlook how much the mass exchange of ideas and expectations has homogenised the developed world and created more of a consensus on the hot topics of our times. As with the British and decent food, it was inevitable that men would “get” fashion eventually. Indeed, when it comes to the many style blogs that make minor celebs of experimental dressers, heterosexual men have started to chip in to the debate.

We're not totally in tune with women's fashion sensibilities yet. Not completely. Even for more open-minded men, there's flamboyant and there's self-consciously zany. When “out there” becomes somewhere in the orbit of Planet Zarg – we're looking at you, Lady Gaga – most of us still recoil.

And we're still only passive, if more appreciative, observers. The day that men become passionately engaged with the choosing of their lady's garments – as opposed to leaning over railings outside Westfield, wondering whether we dare suggest that we “give you some you time” and go check the scores in the nearest licensed hostelry – is still a few evolutionary baby steps away. But we're getting there – slowly, belatedly, but surely. And if this is, as I suspect, a cultural sea-change, perhaps more adventurously clad women will become the ultimate male fantasy.

Will the hired dolly birds at formula one promo parties soon be wearing Jean-Charles de Castelbajac? Can we expect to see Florence Welch, in clown-chic blouse and giant clogs, on the cover of *Zoo*?

That's probably stretching it. I'll happily predict, though, that the conventional icon of sexual allure – the pouting princess in hotpants and low-cut top – will shortly seem even more of a crass, kitsch anachronism than she already does. ●



WOMEN WITH QUIRKY WARDROBES MAY NOT ACTUALLY CARE WHAT MEN THINK ABOUT THEIR CLOTHES, BUT Nick Scott BELIEVES MORE BLOKES ARE TUNING IN.

# MAN v FASHION



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