



Over an intimate dinner *a deux* one evening, a close female friend leaned over and admitted something in a hushed and secretive tone that implied obvious shame: “I just adore a hairy chest!” Not since the notoriously thatchy decades of the Seventies and Eighties (think hairy icons Burt Reynolds and Sean Connery) has male body hair been remotely desirable or fashionable. Admitting to liking the hunter-gatherer pelt is tantamount to feminist treason.

In the age of the metrosexual male, the macho, car-fixing, beer-swilling ‘medallion man’ has all but disappeared and – despite having spent her life proving to men that she is completely independent and capable of looking after herself – this is something my female friend bemoans.

Controversial, I know. However, working as a fashion and grooming editor and

having my fingers firmly on the male aesthetic pulse, I suspect that (at least for the time being) her luck is in.

#### WHY HAIRY IS BACK

Some may not have noticed, but the hairy ‘macho’ male has crept back into the fashion spotlight. Yes, over the past two years, top fashion labels such as Yves Saint Laurent and Armani, and skincare companies such as Lab Series are all using male models who, in stark contrast to the usual hairless pretty boy model archetype, personify the traditional macho man with their abundance of untamed facial and body hair.

Initially, I scoffed. That was until several of my contemporaries began to experiment with facial hair. A good friend who previously underwent painful chest and back waxing each month decided to

# THE RETURN OF THE MAN

After almost 15 years of the pampered and preened metrosexual, does the recent slew of high-profile hairy chests and beards herald the return of the macho man or is hirsute merely *en vogue* this season asks Paul Ewart.

revert to an *au natural* state (he now feels comfortable with his man-rug, apparently) and one recent acquaintance in his mid-20s was so proud of the fuzz decorating his upper lip (which can only be described as the ultimate Seventies moustache) that he actually lavished grooming wax on said ‘tache, daily.

Not so long ago, facial hair was a masculine affectation favoured only by unconventional minorities (hippies, old Germans and Austrian men, French footballers and British real-ale aficionados). The vast majority of right-minded men shaved daily. Now, everything we thought about beards has undergone a paradigm shift. Pick up any men’s style magazine, look at any fashion billboard (H&M’s current campaign model sports an impressive beard) or watch any TV series or movie, and you’ll see that the hairy ‘macho’ man is back with a vengeance.

#### NO MORE PRETTY BOY

Who would have seen it coming? The hairless ideal for male beauty, which (in recent history anyway) began in the early Nineties with the likes of the *Arena* man, Brad Pitt and a host of advertising images, featuring a plethora of male models, all clean-shaven, ultra-groomed and without one patch of body hair between them, continued relatively undisturbed. Men who were smooth rejoiced; men who were hairy faced the painful decision of whether to a) get waxed/lasered/shaved or b) live life as a style pariah, spending their free time plaiting their back hair. Now, it seems, the worm has turned.

But the question is: how did this remarkable social rehabilitation occur? Facial and body hair comes in and out of fashion. Like masculinity, it is cyclical. Look at bulbous wigs of the 18th century, or the fork-like pointy beards of the 17th century. And these fleeting hair trends aren’t only confined to men: unshaved armpits on women, anyone?

Though hipsters began sporting goatees in the Fifties, the more widespread return of the beard in the Sixties became an emblem of a defiant counterculture’s refusal to go along with the status quo.

The cause of the current revival is more difficult to pin down. For some, it might be argued, the resurgence of the macho man is the result of a counter-strike against that whole metrosexual feminisation of guys.

#### BRINGING HAIRY BACK

These A-list men have done wonders for bushy chests, hairy eyebrows and hirsute necks and faces everywhere...

#### Che Guevara

Although vintage, Che’s bearded visage is instantly recognisable (and influential). It screams non-conformist and continues to inspire legions of disenfranchised youths and middle-aged men in mid-life crisis.

#### Zachary Quinto

Unveiling a bizarrely-shaped patch of chest hair (in addition to his permanent, thick facial stubble) in *Heroes* season 2, Zachary (aka Sylar/Spock) is cornering the sci-fi geek contingent for macho man promotion.

#### Dave Grohl

Definitely the coolest beard in the rock world. Grohl’s facial growth has definite longevity – it seems to have been around for ever (post Nirvana) – and his wife’s apparently a big fan, though the ‘rock god’ thing obviously helps.

#### Robert Pattinson

The *Twilight* heartthrob introduced a whole new generation of teenage girls to the delights of a hairy (albeit pigeon) chest. Will this exposure ensure a future crop of hairy fans?

However, for the majority, it’s simply a matter of wanting to be on-trend.

#### WHAT THE FUZZ IS ALL ABOUT

As with most trends, celebrities have helped the macho aesthetic go mainstream. Hugh Jackman, for example, has a mane of chest hair so impressive that it would make his X-Men alter-ego Wolverine blush. Even newly post-pubescent pin-ups are sporting chest hair these days: take tweenage girl’s man-of-the-moment Robert Pattinson for example, with his healthy crop of pectoral fuzz. Even Brad Pitt, who was the Nineties poster-boy for the baby-smooth metrosexual, now sports seemingly omnipresent facial hair of some sort. Finally, if you needed any more proof that body hair is cool, look at fashion tour de force, Tom Ford, whose perennial open shirt proudly displays his pelt of man fur. And when Mr Ford, aka the arbiter of cool, decides to forego waxing, then the ears of stylish men around the globe prick up.

You need only glance at a typical men’s lifestyle magazine and see the number of editorial and advertising pages devoted to grooming and fashion to know that these are subjects that are of genuine interest to readers. And, according to research carried out in 2007 by Boots pharmacy, the male cosmetics market has grown by a staggering 800 per cent since 2000, making it far and away the fastest growing sector within the cosmetics and beauty industry. How does this sit with the apparent resurrection of the macho man?

#### MASCULINITY REDEFINED

Well, Tom Ford may have facial and chest hair, but he’s also immaculately attired in tailored suits, readily admits to taking care of his skin and using Botox. Undoubtedly, these ‘macho’ male models will use moisturiser, exfoliate and hit the gym five times a week to keep their six-pack in shape. In fact, it might be said that men opting for facial hair may require even more hours of manscaping than those that are clean-shaven.

What is certain is that masculinity is not a stagnant concept, whether it’s merely a marketer’s tool or representative of a shift in our cultural ideologies, the definition of being ‘male’ and what it is to be ‘masculine’ is fluid and constantly evolving. Men who might tag themselves as being ‘retrosexual’ (men who actively rebel against metrosexual culture by foregoing grooming products, growing facial and body hair, and so on) are mistaken in thinking that men have never been concerned about physical appearance. On the contrary, male beautification has been on a cyclical loop throughout history.

Perhaps the sweet smelling ‘new man’ in touch with his feminine side is a figment of advertisers’ imaginations and the new macho man is happy with his natural body hair, raw scent and rough skin. Perhaps the economic downturn is causing men to cut back on their hair-removal budgets. Or, (and I think most likely), these hirsute men (and their admirers) are enjoying a fleeting moment in the fashion spotlight. Like flares, platform shoes, combat trousers and all those fashion trends we’ve blocked from memory, the macho man aesthetic will soon go the way of the Dodo, at least temporarily. Either way gentlemen, enjoy this period of machismo while you can. I give it two years - tops. ☺