

Menswear

The soft power of the blouson jacket

The unassuming garment is the one redeeming feature of 2023's 'stealth wealth' look



A blouson from Tom Ford's SS2024 ready-to-wear collection, shown in Milan in September © Swan Gallet/WWD via Getty Images

Nicholas Foulkes 50 MINUTES AGO

When we reach the end of 2023 I imagine that most people will be able to express their feelings in two words: good riddance. There are two other words I will be happy to see the back of: stealth wealth.

The term has been around for years, but in 2023 it took on a new meaning. It seems that anything grey, taupe or from Loro Piana is classified as “stealth wealth”, with *Succession* held up as the definitive user manual.

I admit I was hooked on this Tolstoyan TV saga, but while I noticed plenty of wealth, I saw little stealth. Private jets, motorcades of SUVs with blacked-out windows, a wardrobe of luxury watches, and a costly Loro Piana habit — the Open Walks are a giveaway — have always struck me as signifiers indicating high levels of affluence. Did viewers of *Succession* expect women wearing tiaras in the bath and men in top hats lighting large cigars with high-denomination banknotes?

But [stealth wealth](#) has paid some dividends, one of which has been the rehabilitation of the humble blouson jacket. If there is such a trade association as the Blouson Promotion Bureau, then it should erect a statue to Kendall Roy (played by Jeremy Strong) as he sported a seemingly limitless selection of blousons.



Kendall Roy (left, played by Jeremy Strong) with siblings in 'Succession' © Home Box Office

Don't get me wrong, I love a biker jacket or sheepskin flying jacket, but I somehow feel a little fraudulent wearing them, since (a) I do not have a motorcycle licence and (b) nor do I pilot a biplane. However, the leather or fabric blouson, zip or button-fronted, with ribbing at the waist and wrists is not pretending to be anything other than what it is.

It is this unassuming quality that appeals to Alessandro Sartori, the cerebral artistic director of Zegna. "The blouson has humble origins," he explains. "It was first created as a workwear jacket for postmen, firefighters, military personnel, law enforcement officers, etc and that humble birth became the key to its success. It was so cool, practical and versatile."

Sartori has designed a version, the Oasi, in water-repellent cashmere (£3,175, [matchesfashion.com](https://www.matchesfashion.com)) that he says can "substitute for a classic blazer or sport coat to create practical, aesthetically clean, and very luxurious and modern silhouettes".

Peter Hawkings, the newly appointed creative director of Tom Ford, is also a fan of the blouson, which he has designed to “make it feel like an elegant add-on to our suits”, he says. “It is also perfect for weekends. When I want to go out for Sunday lunch at Riva, I will wear my pleated pants and matching blousons with handmade buttonholes and tailored detailing — it feels elevated but not too formal.”

If there is one man who knows about how to tailor a blouson, it's Henri Zaks, proprietor of Seraphin in Paris. He deserves the title “blouson king”, but his name is virtually unknown beyond a small circle of initiates permitted to enter his atelier on the Quai de Valmy. For most of his 56-year career he has worked *sub rosa* for the brands that we all know: at one time or another he has made for Hermès, Louis Vuitton and Dunhill, among others. I was introduced to his work by the late Joseph Ettedgui, for whom he used to make leather coats, jackets, parkas, gilets and — yes — blousons. Now he has chosen Connolly, owned by Ettedgui's widow Isabel, as the only place other than his workshops where it is possible to be measured up for one of his celebrated custom blousons.

What makes the Seraphin experience unique is the combination of Zaks's enthusiasm for his materials. I have been with him when a new delivery of hides has come in — perhaps elk from Svalbard or Eritrean lambskin. He bubbles with boyish enthusiasm, his eyes shine and he rushes downstairs, past workshops full of craftsmen polishing skins with sheepskin mittens, to the vaults, where he pulls out roll after roll of leather to talk me through the various properties and the handle, encouraging me to inspect it closely, ball it up in my fist, inhale its aroma and generally admire its characteristics.



Connolly vicuna reversible bomber jacket, £12,000, connollyengland.com



Zegna Oasi cashmere jacket, £3,175, [matchesfashion.com](https://www.matchesfashion.com)

Zaks took his first job in a leatherwear factory in 1967 when he was 17. It was here that he met his wife, and in 1975 they set up their own business in a basement next door to the ultra-French Paris bistro L'Ami Louis, recruited a couple of Sicilian tailors and started to sell to luxury menswear shops.

His genius was to use leather in the same way as any other fabric. “At the time, leather was very slow for summer because everything was dull and heavy,” he recalls, so he decided to make things that were light and colourful. His first hit was a patchwork multicoloured blouson with suede and leather: “Jean-Paul Belmondo bought five or six.”

That is often the way with Zaks — his work is highly addictive, Mike Tyson once bought six jackets at once, while François-Henry Bennahmias, the ebullient outgoing chief executive of Audemars Piguet, has a wardrobe of 18 bespoke Seraphin blousons in leather and suede, ranging from conservative blue and brown to lime, pistachio and purple.

“I love that this is one of those slightly hidden treasures that you could find off the beaten track, whether it be in Paris, in Milano . . . in Italy or in France, places where people have a craft that they’ve been developing for years and years,” says Bennahmias. “They are not brands per se, because they manufacture for many others in their career. But they have got the ultimate knowhow that makes me want to be closer to them because I am not chasing brands in my clothing; I chase quality and look.”

Choosing quality over branding is, for me, the essence of stealth wealth. Granted, pistachio, lime and purple may not be the most understated of colour choices, but Connolly understands the stealth-wealther as few others, which is why, alongside numerous suede options, there is a choice of cashmere (from £2,650) and vicuna (from £12,000).

In reality there is very little visible difference between the two and only the feel of the fabric gives it away. But if you choose the vicuna you will enjoy the inner comfort of knowing that you have spent five times as much for something that looks like workaday cashmere.

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