

Take a hard

Masculinity is one of the hottest trends of the upcoming season and a new wave of power dressing is hitting catwalks worldwide, writes Kavita Daswani



When Lady Gaga took the stage at the recent MTV Video Music Awards wearing a black suit, white shirt and slicked-back short hair, she was doing more than channeling her alter-ego, Jo Calderone.

While the superstar has never been one to follow fashion dictates, her get-up that night also tapped into one of the hottest trends of the season – masculine, powerful and, in some cases, vaguely androgynous clothing.

The luminaries of the fashion world offered up lots of menswear-inspired looks on the autumn/winter 2011-2012 runways; Chanel's charcoal-grey trousers and slender blazers, Dolce & Gabbana's reimagined tuxedo jackets and floppy satin bow ties, the oversized satin-collared smoking jackets from Stella McCartney. In an extension of the boyfriend jeans and brogues sported by women in the past couple of seasons, the new masculine pitch in high-end fashion recalls the power dressing of the '80s, while still hooking into pop culture, socio-economic and political references: Kate Middleton as a new fashion force, two female potential incumbents in the White House, high-profile women CEOs at Fortune 500 companies and the fact that, according to the US Census Bureau, more women than ever are starting up businesses in the US.

Similar trends are recorded in the Asia Pacific region; a 2010 study by MasterCard Worldwide showed that 35 per cent of small and medium businesses throughout the region are now run by women, with annual average growth rates running from eight to 42 per cent depending on the country.

This masculine look "signals a turn towards seriousness and no-nonsense professionalism, and not just at work," says Constance Dunn, author of the 2010 style book *Practical Glamour*. "Women in all spheres have had to rethink and re-evaluate their lives, futures and most fundamental attitudes." Dunn says that the lacklustre global economies of the past few years has had a lot to do with the trend; women now have to be even more conscious about their appearance when competing for jobs in a restricted market.

"The use of masculine fabrics, subdued colours and prints, classic silhouettes and few details – such as frills, bows or lace – signal a 'let's get serious' shift that is being felt by all women," she says. "The power dressing trend is a logical response to the need felt by women to shorten the reins and exert more control over our destinies."

Any social undercurrent aside, however, women still want to look beautiful, elegant and even sexy, while wearing the stronger, harder-



Power dressers from top: former British prime minister Lady Margaret Thatcher; US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton; France's first lady Carla Bruni-Sarkozy; Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. Left: Kate Middleton

edged clothing, Susanna Forest, owner of the Susanna Beverly Hills boutique, has made a 35-plus year career out of dressing powerful women; she regularly sends tailored suits to US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, and has outfitted the likes of singer Barbra Streisand, Sheikha Moza, the Queen of Qatar who has been listed by *Forbes* magazine as one of the world's most powerful women and has graced *Vanity Fair's* recent best-dressed list, is a customer.

"I call it the heels-and-skirt look," says Forest. "It's for women who deal with men every day, who have to still be feminine and elegant, who have a lot of class."

Forest's signature look involves sculpted jackets, strong shoulders, a perfect fit. Pants are lean and skirts skim the knee; both are paired with high heels. She has always relied on substantial fabrics – tweeds, fine wool, cashmere, delicate silk for blouses. For autumn, there are fitted dresses with upturned collars, and a tailored black dress with matching coat. She says the new emphasis on this much more polished way of dressing has a lot to do with the world's two latest – and most elegant – royals: the Duchess of Cambridge, aka Kate Middleton, and Princess Charlene of Monaco.

"I have women coming in here with pictures of these royals on their BlackBerry, telling me that's what they want to dress like," says Forest. "It's even more important now. These past few years people couldn't find jobs. So women are creating their own businesses, and learning how to look successful."

In Hong Kong, that power-player aesthetic has long been popular, with women – whether focused on careers or not – typically preferring a Chanel boucle suit and taupe pumps over a floaty skirt and peasant shirt. That perennially soignée and uber-polished appearance is a hallmark of the ladies-who-lunch set. Hong Kong stylist Tina Leung, who has styled the likes of billionaire Pansy Ho and socialite and entrepreneur Michelle Li, agrees that "power dressing has never really gone away and has always been especially prevalent in some careers, such as lawyers". But, she adds, there is a heightened masculinity in current collections.

"I try not to follow trends too much, but just add a dash here and there if they're comfortable with it," she says. "I'd look for a well-cut blazer with a strong shoulder and a nipped-in waist. This would fit women of all sizes and occupations. A blazer thrown over practically anything adds masculinity."

