Bowler hats may be out, but pinstripes still a must for British bankers

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by Michelle Hoffman

LONDON (AFP) - "A man of renown never wears brown." Deciphering the codes of style in London's City is, for some, as simple as a children's rhyming game.

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Slideshow: Fashion

But the "square mile", the nickname for the financial district to the east of central London, is also the global hub of international bankers, and it's perilously easy for newcomers from New Delhi to New York to fall afoul of the unspoken fashion rules of their English hosts.

As trendsetters stir in stylish west London, preparing for the start of this season's fashion shows on Sunday, further east women and men bankers, brokers and traders march from subway to skyscraper in an undistinguished blur of navy blues, blacks and grays.

Sure, it looks like a dark amorphous mass. But to a trained eye, it is rich in detail. Insiders and image consultants say City style shines in its quirks and finishings, and that the best of it blends traditional English tailoring with the trends of an international crowd.

The combination is hard to get right, and hardest for foreigners faced with a sea of pinstripe when they arrive from Tokyo, where crisp white shirts are still de rigueur, or Milan, where powerbrokers can still pull off pastels.

New foreigners stand out of the City crowd, said one broker who blends in. "Americans have the breast pocket. No one wears breast pocket in this country. It's very uncouth," he tells AFP.

German financiers come in with the "mismatched jacket and trousers combo", while Italians love a good, large tie knot.

"Only English people wear pinstripes. It's a sign of Englishness," he added, asking to

remain anonymous. International bankers tend to eschew the stripe, while those trying to "sell their Britishness" play it up.

"Everyone here in London dresses like 'Alfie'," laughs Michelle Sterling of Global Image Group, referring to the film remake starring Jude Law. "Skinny ties, pinstriped suits with tapered legs, pink shirts," she said, approvingly.

To Glyn Hayes, from Aston-Hayes image consultancy which works with City banks, the tradition of the tailored Saville Row suit lingers.

Unlike the US's boxier cuts, or the more flowing forms of a continental European style - think Armani -- English suits are based on a narrow cut, fitted to the waist, with attention to details like double vents on the jackets and turn-ups on the trousers, said Hayes.

Don't even consider brown or beige in this part of town, his colleague Leonie Roberts warned. For good measure, she sings out the "man of renown" refrain.

"Men make their mark with their cufflinks," is offered, however, by way of concession.

Shirts are always double-cuffed in London's City - buttons strictly verboten. Silver or gold cufflinks display class status, while kooky ones show off creativity.

A mix of deadly serious -- pinstripes and dark suits -- and slightly eccentric is another mainstay of City style, which explains the occasional appearance of bow ties and musty vintage outfits, redolent of mothballs and rescued from someone's grandfather's wardrobe.

The serious is easy to explain, said image consultant Sterling: pinstripes give off authority with their straight lines; well-polished shoes show an essential attention to detail; dark-light contrasts exude power.

She attributed the pink hues and tousled hair to "creativity" in Londoners. Aston-Hayes' Roberts, less diplomatically, said it shows a certain "lack of attention to grooming" among some traditional English folk.

“Women risk failure more than men, since they have a far greater margin for error and no set code. "Women get it more wrong more often," she said.

But for all the loyalty to the old Saville Row code, the City has bowed to trends brought in by its foreign denizens, particularly the "Made in USA" dress-down day.

Barclays Bank, in its upcoming headquarters move from the heart of the City to the

Canary Wharf district further east, will also migrate from suits to casualwear, a "sea change" that press spokesman Andrew MacDougall chalked up to the "Americanization of the place".

Forty or 50 years ago, MacDougall said almost wistfully, things were stiff and proper among British bankers.

London was "all pinstripe suits and bowler hats.

"Then the bowler hats went, the umbrellas went, though pinstripe suits remain... to a degree. Now you may even see the occasional green or brown suit!"