

*This is a pre-copyedited author-submitted version of an 800-word commissioned article on the historical tailor, Zack Pinsent, for the textiles magazine Selvedge. The final version can be located in the print edition: issue 94, April 2020, p. 22-23.*

## **Boi Brummell**

*Annebella Pollen reflects on Zack Pinsent, a nineteenth-century style social media influencer*

“Come to Brighton, my dear fellow”, the quintessential Regency dandy Beau Brummell is reported to have proclaimed to a friend; “we will live in Chintz and salt-water”. Squint your eyes in 2020 and you may be transported to 1820 at the sight of Brighton’s Zack Pinsent, a young man with a bespoke clothing company producing historically-influenced garments for weddings and re-enactments. His commitment to Regency history extends to sporting pantaloons and frock coats full-time on the city’s streets. For this action, and his striking good looks, with which the high collars and towering top hats are off-set, Pinsent has become a social media starlet in recent times.

A self-taught enthusiast, Pinsent boasts an international clientele for his craft. Testimonials attest to his skills in historical reconstruction; he uses historical materials and methods wherever possible. Although his website does not include any garment examples to view in close detail to test these claims, abundant images of the man himself, in striped pink silk waistcoats and ostentatious caped greatcoats, create a powerful form of persuasion through performance. One is buying Pinsent's daily dedication to leading the dandy life as much as one is buying a piece of bespoke clothing.

This public consumption of a life is certainly evident in Pinsent’s social media presence, where only a tiny minority of his online images relate to his garment construction business. 99% of photographs record Pinsent himself. On Instagram, for example, his earliest contributions from 2012, aged just 18, mixed informal selfies in period dress with sunsets, holiday snaps and pictures of meals. In the early days of brand building, the tailor’s self-presentation was very twenty-first century – he dressed up and pouted for the lens, with his iPhone in the frame, like a Kardashian. Later images are less candid and spontaneous, taken by a professional's hand. The most recent iterations are highly choreographed scenes, providing an immaculate view of an immaculately-attired figure, slim, high cheek-boned and with rosebud lips, with garments perfectly matched to settings, including the Royal Pavilion. While Pinsent’s identity is closely linked to Brighton – he is locally-born and his style evokes the golden era of fashionable male display at the seaside - his international reputation is built online. He is perhaps better known in Japan and the USA than he is at home, not least because his particular cultural export is a version of an English gentleman straight out of a Merchant-Ivory production.

Pinsent’s personal narrative, oft-repeated, is that he embarked on his retro reinvention after ceremonially setting fire to his last pair of jeans, aged 14. This ritualistic act is styled as a rite of passage and a demonstration of his uncompromising faith in the power that freedom from dressed norms can bring. I couldn't help but be reminded of the promises of the interwar Men's Dress Reform Party, who similarly hoped to 'kill' or 'burn' fashionable men's clothes of the 1920s. The key difference, however, is that that dress reformers of a hundred years ago sought a more comfortable alternative to the period's stifling formality for men. Pinsent's perverse turn to a more complicated and more elaborate form of dressing does not seek to be rational. What the two approaches to revising men's dress share, however, is a concern with correcting what it means to be masculine in a rapidly changing world of gender expectations, and restoring colour and pleasure to men’s dress.

As a young gay man in Brighton, Pinsent uses historical style to queer the exacting aesthetic expectations made of twenty-first century men online and in the public eye. Instead of turning to bodybuilding and tattoos, Pinsent's self-presentation focuses on the outstanding cut of his jib, the rakish angle of his headgear and the complex knotting of a cravat. The end result is undoubtedly attention-grabbing but is not incomprehensible to contemporary viewers. His hundreds of meticulously styled portraits, generating millions of likes, are the lingua franca of a generation used to designing a mythic version of themselves via social media platforms. Pinsent simply does it on horseback or with a wig and cane.

It is evident that Pinsent the model is as much the product as Pinsent the tailor. His international appearances are styled as 'meet and greets' rather than opportunities for clothing manufacture. While Pinsent pores over original garments and researches published scholarship in order to make his pieces historically authentic, there is a fundamental contradiction at work. Dressing in meticulous recreations of early nineteenth century attire may suggest a set of values incompatible with being a social media influencer, but Zack Pinsent reflects Beau Brummell in wit as well as style. Quipping "It's all about the Gram" in a banyan or standing in Times Square in a top hat in 2020 creates a dynamic and playful interplay between past and present that adds to the charm rather than spoils its effect.

Annebella Pollen