

Real men wear pink

By Tiffany Figuiredo

He's inspired a collectors' club and copycats, so it's only natural to heed the wisdom of a man who's obsessed by fabric, detail and color.



We dig Robert Stock. Not only has he managed to get our men out of khakis and white dress shirts and into bold colors, stripes and paisleys with his woven Robert Graham shirts, but he isn't the sleek, suave, semi-effeminate silver-haired fox one would expect to be the man behind such a snazzy brand.

On the contrary, Robert Stock is a man's man, an hombre, a dude, a balding guy from the Bronx, no less. With his jeans and sneakers and scraggly beard, he looks more the part of a regular Joe than the type of high-maintenance designer from whose brain such beautifully detailed fashions usually spring.

Yet clearly, Stock has the soul of an artist: how else to explain the audacious color and pattern combinations, intricate, elaborate embroidery work and the fact that the motto "Knowledge, Wisdom, Truth" is sewn into every garment?

Stock is no overnight sensation. Although he launched the Robert Graham line in 2001, his fashion career began in the 1960s when he met fellow Bronx native Ralph Lauren, who was peddling his tie collection at a clothing store where Stock worked. The two ultimately teamed up to create Chaps, a still-successful midprice clothing line. For years, Stock enjoyed success as a sportswear designer under his own moderately priced Robert Stock label, but it wasn't until he met an English fabric maker named Graham and indulged in his love for beautifully tailored Savile Row-inspired shirts that his career skyrocketed. (Stock bought out Graham's share of the business after the man discovered that he had no affinity for the apparel industry.)

In less than a decade, the Robert Graham shirt has become iconic. Hipsters to geriatrics, boxers to bankers, the very small to the very large wear the shirts everywhere from the boardroom to the nightclub. And though other clothing makers have tried to copy Stock's style, no one comes close to his obsessive attention to detail.

We talked fashion with Stock during a personal appearance at Neiman Marcus in Fort Worth this spring. "We use at least four, sometimes eight different fabrics for each shirt design," he says. "They all have their own

custom buttons, stitching and embroidery, and some have appliqués. No two are alike because they aren't mass-produced. Even if you buy an all-white Robert Graham shirt, there will be several different textures in play."

Stock says the popularity of the flamboyant shirts, even in a state like Texas, where most men will hardly wear pink, is no mystery.

"It's simple," he says. "They're made to fit an American body, so they look great on everyone. Most importantly, we appeal to women. A woman will buy her husband a shirt, talk him into wearing it, and he'll get a ton of compliments. He feels good and then it becomes a way for him to express himself. You'd be surprised ... some of our loudest shirts end up appealing to the most conservative men."

Stock is often inspired as he travels around the world, especially to India, which he says is one of the most colorful places on the planet.

"You can't help but be inspired by all that color — the people, the sari silks, the cities, the countryside. It's also a spiritual place, and you can't help but feel more spiritual and connected after being there. I try to convey a positive energy through my clothing. That's what the 'Knowledge, Wisdom, Truth' label is about. These are feel-good clothes."



The beauty of a Robert Graham shirt often lies in an upturned cuff or collar. The line is expanding into knit shirts (right), jackets, vests, cuff links, ties and other accessories, plus a full women's line.

Photos by Cal Crary



Fort Worth entrepreneur Ron Sturgeon owns hundreds of Robert Graham shirts and got a tour of the factory in India earlier this year.

The collector

Each Robert Graham shirt design is named after a place or person, sometimes famous, sometimes not, who inspires Stock, who in turn inspires loyalty among his best customers. There is even a by-invitation collectors' club with its own newsletter.

One of the most avid members of this club is local serial entrepreneur, real estate investor and author Ron Sturgeon, who wears Robert Graham shirts almost exclusively and estimates that he has hundreds in his closet.

"I've bought around 300, but you can only wear so many shirts," he says. "I'll sell the ones I'm not wearing on eBay. I'm a casual guy and will rarely wear a jacket or short sleeves. In a Robert Graham shirt and jeans, I feel stylish and modern and get a lot of compliments."

A few years ago, Sturgeon met Stock at a personal appearance in Pebble Beach and the two struck up a relationship that led to Sturgeon touring the Robert Graham factory in India earlier this year.

"It was a really nice tour of the plant," he says. "I was expecting everything to be mechanized, but was surprised at the level of detail that goes into the shirts. The piecework and embroidery that the workers do by hand is amazing."

At the end of the tour, Sturgeon was presented with a shirt design that Stock specially selected and named R.D.S. after him. "That was cool," he says.

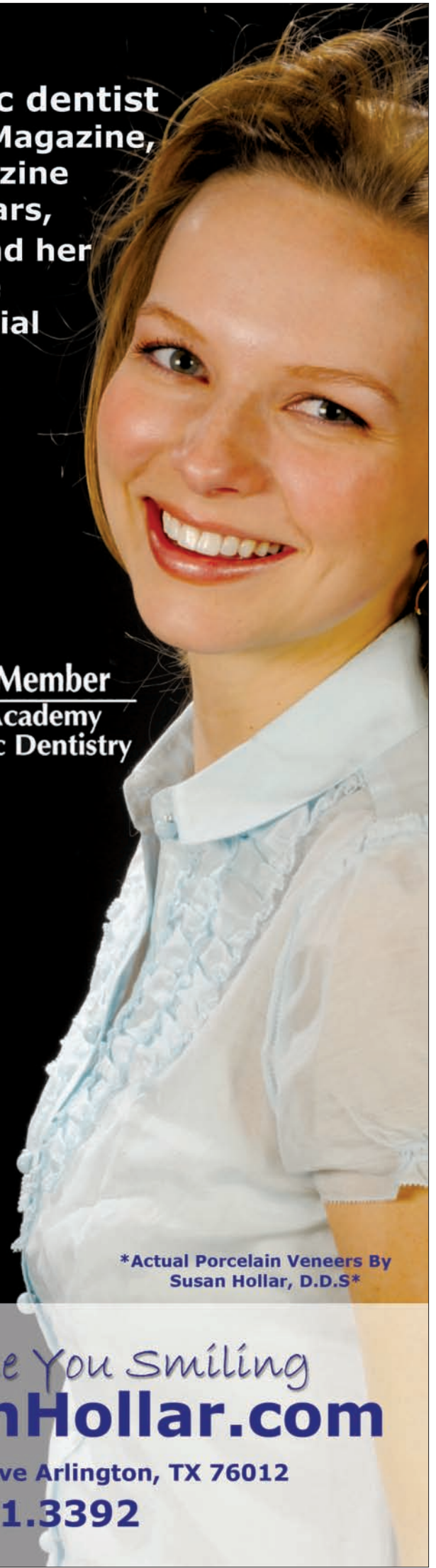
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