

A GOOD COAT CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE

There are really only two reasons to buy a luxury coat: desperation or revenge. The first time I bought one, it was a black Rick Owens trench from the Fall/Winter 2016 collection that I found at Dover Street Market in New York City. Was that out of desperation or revenge? It was the first time I got a check in the mail for something I'd written, and I was desperate to prove to myself that this is the kind of person I was and who I would be: an aspiration and a promise. And I was taking revenge against all of the gatekeepers and lackeys who had never paid attention to me, a public school kid from the Los Angeles suburbs who was, by most accounts, a "nice guy." Now I felt like a goth villain from Final Fantasy, which wasn't exactly the goal, but closer.

Almost all of the coats I've bought have been to complicate my reputation as "a nice guy." The Prada snow coat, with a print of sunbathers on the beach, brought out a sense of irony: nostalgia or optimism, it could go either way. I wore my black 1999 Raf Simons coat, structured and single-breasted with buttons attached to a chain, the night the editor of *Viscose* threw a birthday dinner in Mexico City, the first destination party I'd ever attended. One night at Berghain in Berlin, where I lived for four years, I wore a tan Burberry trench coat with nothing underneath except Calvin Klein underwear.

I had an impatience to be noticed. Somewhere in the national subconscious, coats commemorate a kind of arrival — at adulthood, on the scene, or at a personal milestone. I watched the movie *Kramer vs. Kramer* so long ago that I can't remember the plot, except for the opening scene, when Dustin Hoffman says the first thing he did after getting an important job was buy a Burberry coat.



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When the fashion critic Rachel Tashjian first saw an Alaïa coat, from Pieter Mulier's first collection in 2022, she thought to herself, "This is the kind of coat an adult wears." It was a thick wool peacoat with enormous lambskin buttons, bunched at the back to form a kind of skirt. She saw the coat at Bergdorf Goodman and Moda Operandi for $5,000, and thought, "Absolutely no way." She tracked it online for up to a year before it showed up on YOOX for only a thousand. It's now the coat she wears most often, a reason to look forward to the changing weather.

“If you live in a city where it gets cold, your coat is your car,” Tashjian says. It should be something you can rely on, able to go over your clothes without looking bulky or strained, like a kimono or an opera coat. “It’s the building block of everything else in your wardrobe,” she says. It’s also the first thing people see when you approach on the street. “I’m always looking for things that are beautifully designed and are somehow at once functional and a showstopper.”

A coat that looks good on the rack doesn’t necessarily mean it will look good on you. It has to look right on your body, which shows how well you know your proportions. When I bought my Prada military bomber jacket with a black fleece collar, the shop assistant at Voo in Berlin told me, “I’ve seen other people try on this coat, and it just looks really Tom of Finland. But when I saw you try it on just now, I thought, ‘Yes.’” I think a part of this is because I’m Chinese, which, I agree, softens the military look. Also, my legs are longer than my torso, so the high crop cut of the jacket looks flattering. During the winter, I wear it almost weekly.

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Etienne Bolduc, a collector and archivist of Japanese menswear, says a good coat shouldn't be a statement piece, but a kind of staple. "I don't think it's necessarily that good to be original," Bolduc says. "Personally, I don't think I'm that original." Often, when he's traveling, he'll pack something that is versatile in function and style, something he can wear several nights in a row to any variety of events. He'll wear two sturdy staples onto the plane: a leather jacket under a trench coat. Both are rain resistant.





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"The coat shows how much you understand yourself," Tashjian says. A coat declares one's sense of purpose in the world, and therefore, it must be functional. It declares, in an instant, the organizing principles of your personality, which only a friend might know after many conversations.

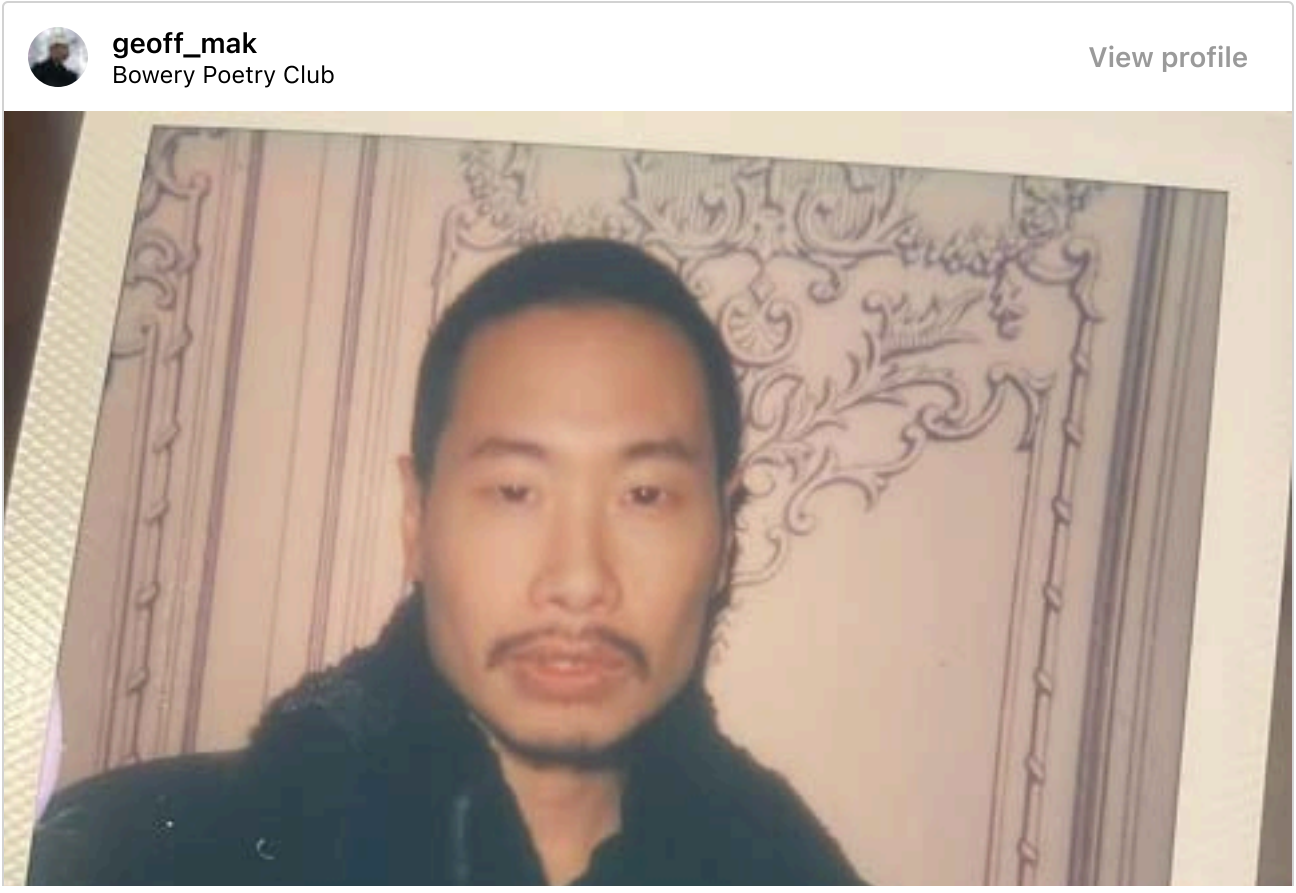
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Bolduc compares the relationship between wearer and coat to the intimacy between people. When he goes out, he observes pairs at restaurants and can always tell when one is clearly not interested in the other; when the other is just a trophy. “It shows when someone is used to wearing suits because they feel really comfortable wearing a blazer,” he says. “While someone who's less comfortable, you’ll see because they’re not going to know where the pockets are.”

There’s a way of knowing your coat that only arrives in wearing it as much as you possibly can. The peacoat, Bolduc says, comes from the Navy. Its collar is designed to block the wind from any direction. The bottom zip on certain jackets allows the wearer to walk — or drive — more easily. When I started bringing novels with me on the train, I noticed that the pockets of my Rick Owens trench coat were big enough to fit a paperback. After I bought my blue Balenciaga parka, I thought the dramatic funnel collar, which covers my mouth, was for show, until I realized, during windy winter days, that it

had a way of trapping warm air close to my chest, so I didn't need to wear a scarf.

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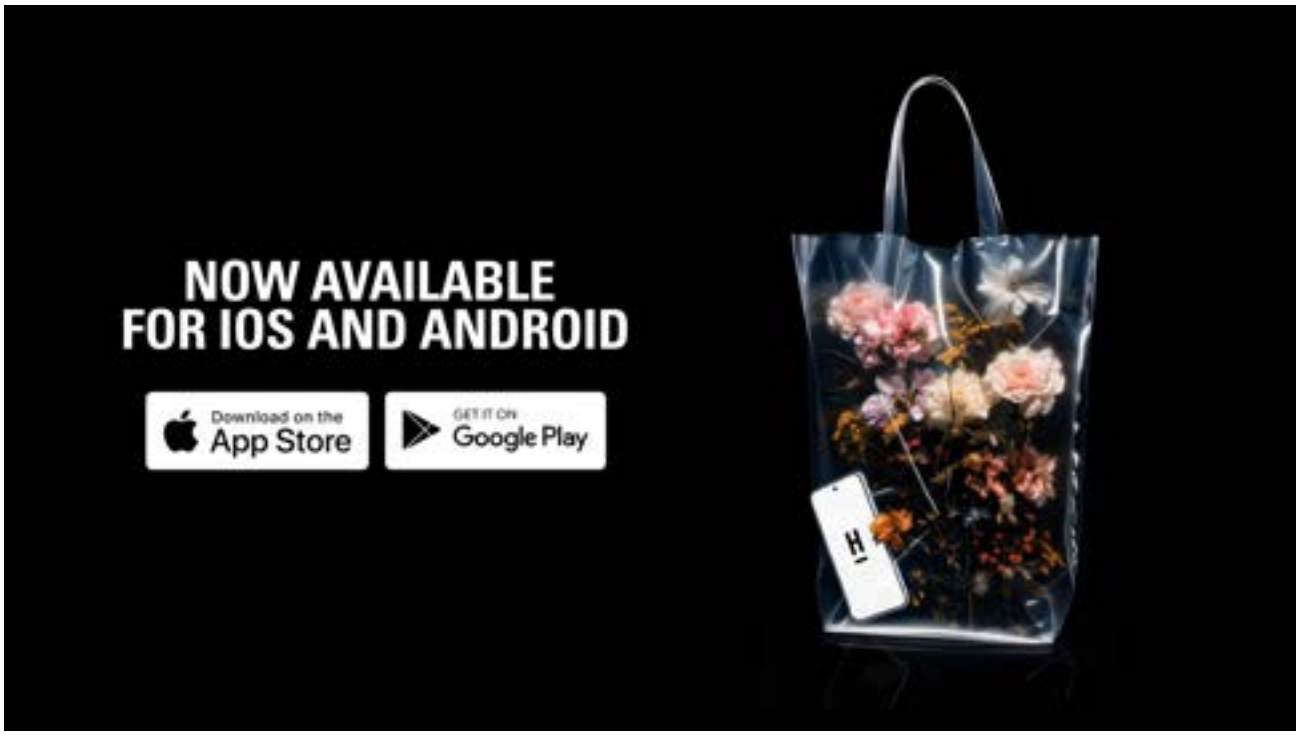
That dreamy night @elprincipitx invited me to read at Bowery Poetry Club, and @j.bilhan said “Are you wearing Prada?”

Yet there will always be an element of the irrational, something like the erotic, involved in buying a coat. In *Critique of Judgment,* Kant writes that beauty, on the highest level, can renegotiate how one conceptualizes the world. There is an element of beauty that can’t be defended or rationalized, and the memory or impression it makes on the mind lasts in unpredictable ways. One winter in Berlin, I saw a Margiela down coat at a boutique, a kind of charcoal color, with pincushion-like buttons in a diagonal grid. I thought the design accomplished the impossible: a puffer coat that managed to look dreamy. It struck a nerve that I now know existed solely for the perception of excellence. I didn’t buy it. At the time, I didn’t think I could justify the purchase. But let me tell you, I have thought about that coat every year for the past seven years. I’ve tried looking for it online, but nothing ever shows up. The coat exists purely in my mind, like the memory of a miracle that only I saw.

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I'm not telling you to shill out thousands of dollars every time you see a coat that moves you. Tashjian likes to say: "I shop all the time, and buy very rarely." If you're doing it right, there will live in your mind the ones that got away. They're like the lives you've never lived, to inform the one you *are* living. It's an education that comes from wanting something you can't have, and not by having it. In an essay on fashion, Rachel Kushner writes, "We long to change and eventually do. Who is to say that the longing wasn't the most purposeful agent of that change?"

Recently, Tashjian told me that she started dressing up to go to the doctor's office. At first, it felt old-fashioned and funny, "like getting dressed up to go to the bank." The ritual had an element of the ridiculous, which meant that it was human. She thought to herself, the only difference between her and her dog is that she needs to wear clothes, and her dog does not. "And I think the coat is the apex of that philosophy of clothing yourself, as if this is the marker between man and dog," she says. "It shows how seriously you take your humanity."



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