Style

Four eyes good

Personal history | Where does a man look to find eyewear inspiration? Michael Caine, of course, says *Alex Bilmes*

Michael Caine photographed at home in England in 1964 with his mother and brother — Harry Dempster/Getty Images

It was as plain as the unadorned nose on my face: I needed glasses. Last summer, slowly at first, almost imperceptibly, and then rapidly and obviously, after 44 years of exemplary service, my eyes began to let me down. Nothing dramatic, just that the small print was increasingly illegible, menus had to be held up to the light, and reading a text on my phone necessitated a series of squints and grimaces. At Specsavers on Tottenham Court Road, London, an optician confirmed what I had guessed: I had astigmatisms in both eyes, and while I could see all too clearly into the far distance, up close a blurry haze was obscuring the picture. (Let us not linger here over mid-life metaphors.)

I don't doubt there are people who, on learning of a physical setback such as this, might feel deflated. Like stiffening knees or bafflement at the popular appeal of Snapchat, fading eyesight is surely a reliable indicator of approaching decrepitude. In my case, given that until recently my eyes were pretty much my only remaining fully functioning body part, I confess I did feel a pang of disappointment, knowing that they, too, had packed up along with everything else. But the sad truth is that instead of being dejected, I was delighted. Excited. Inspired, even. I couldn't wait to get started. A whole new world of acquisitiveness and affectation awaited. Yippee!

Call it vanity. Call it late capitalist decadence. Call it shopaholism. But I was now in the market for an entirely new kind of luxury accessory. For a style snob, that is its own kind of bliss. Here was a fresh object of desire that I could research, fuss over, spend money on, and, ultimately, feel superior about.

For most men, once we get past adolescence, opportunities for sartorial daring are limited. One can splash out on a Swiss watch, of course. One can go for silly ties, like the *Channel 4 News* chappie. Or shouty socks, like the hunky Canadian PM with the lustrous hair.

Those truly desperate for attention can adopt a more flamboyant affectation — quirky cufflinks, novelty braces, bow ties, earrings, neck tattoos, those funny leather bangles that Italian men wear, all the customary signifiers of needy non-conformism. But, splashy watch apart, none of those options is greatly to be encouraged. So most of us must be satisfied with pressing our crisp white shirts and shining our smart black shoes and making sure our navy suits fit. Important stuff, but not likely to set pulses racing. And no way to express a bit of personality, or individual attitude.

How to own and wear something that makes you look more distinctive, more dashing, without appearing irretrievably gauche, unforgivably infra dig? One answer: specs.

The face all style-conscious British men of a certain age have in mind when they go shopping for their first pair of glasses is Michael Caine's. More specifically, the Michael Caine of *The Ipcress File*, from 1965, his first appearance as Harry Palmer, Len Deighton's anti-establishment spy. Caine's Palmer was emblematic of a relatively recent British archetype: the working-class man who refused to know his place. The kitchen-sink James Bond. And unlike his friend Sean Connery's 007, Caine's spook wore glasses: dark, thick-rimmed spectacles that somehow made him seem more potent, more modern, rather than less.

Caine wore the glasses off-screen, too. Unlike other movie stars, he made no attempt to hide his weak eyesight. There's a wonderful photograph by Harry Dempster, from 1964, the year of his breakthrough, of the actor taking tea with his mother and his brother. He's reading the paper and smoking a cigarette. He is giving the camera a heavy-lidded stare, from behind Palmer-style specs. He looks immaculate.

I don't know which iconic four-eyes springs first to the mind of the American male when he's eyewear shopping. Possibly it's Caine for him, too? Or Gregory Peck as owlish Atticus Finch? Malcolm X in his brow-line horn-rims? Woody Allen? (Less so now, I imagine.) I assume the chic but squinting Frenchman thinks of Yves Saint Laurent, while the nearsighted Italian has Marcello Mastroianni in *8 ½* to emulate, if he can get close enough to the screen to see him.

But I'm a Brit, and the first pairs of specs I tried were very much in the Harry Palmer mould. Having been given the good news, I didn't hang about in Specsavers. I went to Knightsbridge, to Cutler and Gross, suppliers of quirky glasses to the creative classes since 1969. I spent a pleasant hour trying on different frames, and different personas: 1960s cold warrior in two-tone D-frames; 1980s adland titan in aviator-style tortoise-shell; mid-century starchitect in donnish round frames.

In each pair I fancied I looked a bit like someone else: Henry Kissinger; Maurice Saatchi; Philip Johnson. (A pattern of megalomania was emerging.) In none of them did I feel quite like myself.

After much hemming and hawing, I settled on a pair remarkably similar to those I'd thought of first: thick retro acetate frames the colour of dark tortoiseshell. Very Harry Palmer.

I took my first ever — and, so far, last ever — selfie and posted it to Instagram. It got a record number of likes. (A record for me; nothing to trouble a Kardashian.) And almost all the comments were complimentary. "SWOON!" wrote a friend. She added a blue heart emoji. "Solid Colin Firth vibes," wrote another, referring to the character Firth plays in *A Single Man*, the forensically stylish Tom Ford film. "#peteryork", wrote a rival magazine editor, referring to the noted style guru and man about town. I was thrilled with all this attention, of course. How could I not be? But the best comments were those that mentioned Caine.

> I thought I looked like the star of a 1960s thriller, my family thought I looked like a mid-life style crisis

In the flesh, not everyone was so complimentary. "Hmm, not bad," said my friend Camilla, not a woman known for fence-sitting. "Only 30 per cent Ed Sheeran." At home, the reception was even less kind. "No, I don't like them," said my daughter, aged eight and never wrong about these things. "You don't look like you." She wasn't keen, and neither was her mother. I thought I looked like the thrusting star of a 1960s espionage thriller, they thought I looked like a forty-something father of two from west London in the midst of a mid-life style crisis. (I think we know who was correct.)

They're beautiful things, those Cutler and Gross specs, and I still put them on from time to time, and feel temporarily masterful and defined. But after a couple of weeks of wearing them every day, I set them aside. I hadn't really been wearing them, they'd been wearing me. It was all just a bit too fancy-dress.

I started again. I spent some time merrily browsing the new breed of specs shops that have been popping up in London in the past few years, the best of which seems to be Cubitts. But none of them felt very me. I tried on Jeff Goldblums and Robin Days and Buddy Hollys and Harry Potters and even Dumbledore half-moons. I didn't find a pair of pince-nez but I'd have tried those, too, if I had. The only designs I didn't attempt were those wire-frame, rimless, oblong Silicon Valley chief executive glasses, the type worn by the late Steve Jobs and his replacement, Tim Cook. Because, really, why bother? If you're that desperate to look like a bureaucratic functionary from Mitteleuropa, why not just go all in and move to Zurich?

And then I opened the door at E.B. Meyrowitz, in the Royal Arcade in Mayfair, and a bell tinkled, and the fog cleared. It was a lightbulb moment.

Emil Bruno Meyrowitz, a Prussian émigré to South Africa, founded his first optician's shop in London in 1875, subsequently opening in Paris and New York. Meyrowitz became famous for his distinctive designs. Customers included Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, Grace Kelly and the Duchess of Windsor. Charles Lindbergh wore a pair to cross the Atlantic. The London business passed through a number of hands until 1993, when it was acquired by its present owner, Sheel Davison-Lungley, who designs the glasses and runs the business with her two sisters and her son, Jamie. (The New York and Paris shops are independent.)

It was Sheel, as I have come to know her, who greeted me at the door on my first visit and guided me through the process. ("Guided" is not a strong enough word. Sheel led the process, I followed behind, slightly mesmerised.) She is an extraordinarily empathetic and commanding woman in early middle age, and she tolerated my trying on of myriad shapes and styles and colours, on a number of separate visits, without ever deviating from the decision she made as soon as she clapped eyes on me.

I needed a pair of her New Yorkers, a classic style, in black acetate, possibly even matt black, and I needed to have them made for me bespoke, so that the bridge could be widened to accommodate my characterful nose (she didn't say "characterful", that's my euphemism) and the width could be adjusted to suit my longish face, and the depth changed, too, and the browline altered. Basically, we had to start from scratch, and she had to bring order to chaos.

On that first visit, Sheel led me up a tight spiral staircase to her office, seated me in an armchair, and sized my face by sight alone. She wrote down some measurements for the frame-maker to work from, and continued to stare closely at me, working out the correct proportions of the frame she would commission. It was rather like what I imagine sitting for a portrait might be. Quite intimate, to be watched so attentively, but Sheel has forgiving eyes and she was beginning the process of making me see better and look better. I felt safe.

Ten weeks later, I went back to pick up the glasses she made. They are incredibly light, comfortable to the point that I quickly forget I'm wearing them, and quietly stylish. Even my daughter approves. Inside the right arm, in Sheel's handwriting, it says "EB Meyrowitz Handmade". Inside the left arm, also in her handwriting, my name. When I'm not wearing the glasses they sit in a leather pouch stamped with the Meyrowitz spirit animal, the griffin. I like them so much I'd keep wearing them even if, by some miracle, my eyesight were to improve. Sheel says the Meyrowitz style has elements of nostalgia, but that there is a modernism to her designs. "They make people's faces more exciting," she says. "More interesting." At least in my case, I think she's right.

Bespoke frames are not cheap — acetate frames start at £1,000; buffalo horn at £2,000 and tortoise-shell at £9,000 (she recently sold a pair of tortoise-shell glasses for £22,000) — but Sheel will happily sell you a pair of off-the-peg New Yorkers for £595 and you'll still look better than any speccy four-eyes has any right to.

I'm going to ask her to make me some prescription sunglasses next, in time for summer. Maybe buffalo-horn frames, in a different style, something a bit heavier, more daring. I'm thinking Harry Palmer.

Alex Bilmes is editor-in-chief of Esquire

Meet Celia Pym — knitwear's own 'damage detective'

Interview | Can darning be art? In this artist's hands, even a moth-eaten sock is a masterpiece, says *Flora Macdonald Johnston*

It was something of a surprise for 39-year-old London-based artist and teacher Celia Pym to be shortlisted for the foundational 2017 Loewe Craft Prize. Usually her knitted, mended and darned creations are just for fun. The submitted piece? An Albemarle "Norwegian Sweater" (pictured left) that she picked up from Annemor Sundbo's Ragpile collection in Norway.

Despite its incredibly tatty and moth-eaten condition, Pym made her mark on the garment and refilled and repaired the holes with a neutral white thread, giving the finished product a rather beautiful blurred effect, like white spots on a television screen.

Pym describes her style of mending as "unapologetic". Her work uses a mix of threads, colours and texture so that something as simple as a pair of socks or a scarf becomes a strange visual kaleidoscope under her attention. "I'm interested in what's wrong and off," she says of her mending skills, which invariably make old moth-eaten cashmeres and long-loved heirlooms far more beautiful in the remaking. "I like it when things are lumpy and bumpy. It's nice when you can see the landscape of damage, which although I am mending, I am also distorting."

Celia Pym — Sophie Robehmed/BBC Women's Hour

Pym's fascination with repair started in 2007, when she inherited a jumper belonging to her great uncle, who was also an artist. The jumper was studded with holes, fraying thread and mismatched sewn-on patches. "My great-aunt had already had a go at repairing it, and it was such a beautiful way of visibly seeing time, you could really feel the trace of a person." According to Pym, her process of restoration on the jumper was "a rather pointless exercise. I wasn't mending it to be beautiful, but it felt like I was preserving a relationship."

Now the self-proclaimed "damage detective" has gone on to do several exhibitions, most recently at the Victoria and Albert Museum's *Maps of Wear and Tear: The Art of Darning*. Pym encouraged strangers to bring items of clothing that they wished to be mended; in exchange she would hear their stories and repair the garment for free. Next to her was a tracksuit, and for each item of clothing she mended she would mirror the mark on the tracksuit, sewing in the exact same spot using different coloured threads.

"The tracksuit became a mending map of holes," she says, "and it was wonderful. The end-product was a visualisation of my darning but also a memory of the exchanges that took place. People would open up and talk to me about their clothes, their lives and history — it was intimate and personal." The exhibition was a huge success, and over 94 participants showed up to take part over its four-day duration.

Did anyone bring a luxury item? "Oh God, no!" Pym laughs, "I didn't receive a Dior gown or anything, usually people just bring me jumpers from Cos and Gap. You only really want to mend what you live in."

Things are only getting busier for Pym. "I was commissioned by the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco to repair damaged clothing and costumes they had in storage from places like Les Ballets de Monte-Carlo."

Her favourite item? "I mended this gold cape, one of the costumes from the ballet; it was made from this old golden silk and sequins, and over time it had started to rot and was terribly dusty. The whole piece was so fragile, I wanted to tack down what little silk remained."

Did she put her eccentric Pym twist on the item? "Yes, museums and conservationists are all about making as little impact as possible so as not to increase damage. I don't think that's my role."

Pym's practical and nurturing personality is infectious, not to mention deeply desirable. "Over time I have realised that I am mending more than just a garment, I'm into other people's problems. People come to me and I'm like, 'Right, what can we do about this?' I actually qualified to be a nurse in my early thirties, I think it is all to do with caring."

But what does the future hold for this mending maestro? "As an artist I am looking for interesting people and material. I need to be out in the world looking for stories," she says. "Hilton Als wrote a beautiful line in The New Yorker about 'living his weirdness'. That's me. I'm awkward and comfortable at the same time."

I'll be darned.