

# **Art and Fashion in the 20th Century: *Vivienne Westwood and Jean-Paul Gaultier***

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## **Introduction**

Artists and fashion designers, throughout history, have come to appreciate one another in the world of art and couture, and although the two have somewhat blurred or blended together since modernist times, they remain as two separate fields, and are equally successful in their approaches to reveal messages, express culture and display modern views. Within this essay, discussions of fashion and the visual arts will be brought forth as examples of individual fields that have effectively merged together, with increased vigour in the 1990s. This essay will point out various written statements of art and fashion, and then bring into account the transformations of combining and displaying visual arts with couture. The designs of Vivienne Westwood and Jean-Paul Gaultier will also be referenced to portray the ideas of integrating art and fashion.

## **20<sup>th</sup> century art and fashion – avant-garde – fashion accepts widespread ideas**

Throughout the years diverse fashion styles, mediums and concepts have advanced within society, making fashion a major vehicle for self-expression and a different way to display new types of visual art and wearable art. Fashion has indeed changed rapidly throughout the decades, as did the visual arts within the various movements. Art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was no longer just a painting, drawing or sculpture; it became more elaborate and more modern or avant-garde. Art seemed to take the stance of being a display of anything, even if the artist did not create the work; some artworks were even dubbed as not being art, because they were so ahead of their time and vastly different to what society was familiar with. Concepts, for example, became more important than the actual object. Fashion during the 20<sup>th</sup> century also exhibited avant-garde qualities in terms of experimental designs that were often eccentric or unorthodox (Lehnert, 2000; 112). Rosalind Coward (in Finkelstein, 1996; 82) argues that fashion cannot be read adequately unless one moves beyond the popular view that fashion is merely about annual change in colour, styles,

shapes and accessories. Fashion is much more revealing as a key to analysing the present moment in art and culture. Coward goes on to say that fashion adopts many prevailing ideas for a category in couture, and asserts that “there are hierarchies of fashion but no repudiations of it” (Finkelstein, 1996; 83); “fashion is about the ordering and categorising of the individual’s knowledge of certain cultural formations” (Finkelstein, 1996; 83). This can be seen in many 20<sup>th</sup> century fashions, where art movements like Dada or Pop are expressed in the realm of couture designs.

### **Art and fashion blend**

Robert Radford (1998) argues that throughout history, fashion has been recognised as being “other” in the arts arena, but it exercised many antagonistic approaches in the world of fashion to keep its status from being classed as art. However, art and fashion started to move along hand and hand during the 1990s and on into the present.

It conflicts absolutely with the concepts of permanence, truth and authenticity, and is regarded as being particularly dangerous when it insidiously enters the citadels of art...as though virginal art were at constant risk of defilement. It would seem however, that all this system of values has recently shifted, now that the conditions of post-modernity and the demonstrations of the New Art History have exposed the insecurity of arts big ideas and have established a widespread cultural permission to recognise the new authenticity of fashion, in the sense that it most accurately reflects and communicates the values and complexities – the anthropological, if not moral, truths – of contemporary lived experiences. Increasingly critics and curators are persuading us of the growing proximity between the practices of Art and Fashion (Radford, 1998; 152).

Consequently, couture shares and makes use of numerous design fields, and attaches specific practical functions so that even the most apparently impractical virtuoso design would be at least wearable and evidently convey a lineage of potential sellable garments, along with the additional role of encouraging publicity (Radford, 1998; 156). This type of wearable art, in some dominant couture events or catwalk shows, is classed as a type of high art or unattainable fashion, simply created for publicity or exposure (Lehnert, 2000). Radford (1998; 156) elaborates on the ideas of connecting art and fashion with practicality; stating that fashionable practises are repeatedly a major part in communicating and producing designs within art and fashion. However, a large amount

of fashion is somewhat restricted by specific material functions and inappropriate issues can often occur within the designs. While fashion can become an exquisite art piece, reasonable functions must also come into play, mostly for the presentations and short-lived use of the garment (Radford, 1998; 156). An example of this is the pair of 12 inch high-heel Mock crocodile shoes created by Westwood in 1993. During a fashion parade, celebrated model, Naomi Campbell stumbled and fell on the runway, while wearing these outrageously high platform shoes. Although quite a remarkable design, they are very impractical, thus making these objects a short lived fashion and more of an art form.

### **Fashion borrows from art**

During the mid to later 20<sup>th</sup> century and even more so today, couture and art have merged and blended together quite successfully, creating a world of avant-garde creativity, culture and expression. Modern fashion started to constitute anything that could be worn on the body; fashion designers began to use ideas from the artistic realm and created many imaginative styles within the layers of vogue. Gerda Buxbaum (1999) claims that fashion borrows from art and vice versa; both principles operate in terms of illusion, displacement, multiples of practical layers and interweaving, often making fashion and art difficult to distinguish between. Barbara Vinken expressed that at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, fashion became what art wanted to be and the spirit of the age was made evident. Fashion became more popular within society and adornment of the body became the new art vogue (Buxbaum, 1999).

### **1990s fashion and innovative designers**

Lehnert (2000; 98) purports that fashion during the 1990s was “subject to fluctuation” and that many fashion couture’s embraced the earlier styles, making them more dominant than ever before. The 1990s fashion did not bring about any new looks as such, “but they spawned a series of spectacular variations on existing shapes and styles” (Lehnert, 2000; 98). Fashion constitutes the ideas of affordability and wear-ability in most cases, but some of the 1990s fashion and more so today, exhibits and follows its own rules within the terms of art forms. Many designers like Gaultier and Westwood, employ their own characteristic and distinctive ideas within the history of fashion; often formulating

designs of astonishing and completely unique styles (Lehnert, 2000; 107). Gaultier succeeds in creating designs that obscure the philosophies of masculinity and femininity, establishing themes with cultural motifs of androgyny. Collected works by Westwood also use the wide variety of European cultural history and display an array of specific humour, convincing concepts and classic feminine clichés (Lehnert, 2000; 107). Westwood was indeed one of the most creative, innovative, and prominent fashion designers during the 1990s and continuing today with changed ideas and issues that address 'eco fashion'.

### **Jean-Paul Gaultier**

Described as one of the most influential, ready-to-wear fashion designers, Gaultier first sketched ideas for fashion collections in the year of 1966, at the age of fourteen and was later known universally as the *enfant terrible* of French fashion. His designs exhibit imaginative forms of exceptionally clever humour with a mixture of ostentatious, tomboy styles and iconic glamour, using traditional and modern fabrics with mixtures of pattern structure, bold colour and diverse cuts (Lehnert, 2000; 93-94). Gaultier has designed and produced high-heel shoes that resemble upside-down Eiffel Towers, bracelets that have the impression of tin cans, sweatshirts trimmed with satin and lace, skirts for men and varieties of underwear styles transformed into outerwear (Buxbaum, 1999). His designs are accompanied by mastery of technique in his knowledge of fashion history, with fun-loving and witty ideals (Feldman, 1992). Collecting, transforming and blending are main attributes within Gaultier's work, suggesting similar methods to visual art practises, and blending a combination of resources to create masterpieces.

Gaultier's main ambition was to create a collection of fashions to end all collections, described by Stephen Gan (1997) as being an assortment and mishmash of genres, religion-marrying, race-defying and border-erasing, which men and women would be at liberty to choose. Ever since the late 1980s, Gaultier was known for his gender-bending styles; dressing women in pinstriped suits and men in skirts (Buxbaum, 1999; 138), with the objective to transform the entire wardrobe for both sexes by embracing clichés, challenging them through couture, and categorically presenting male and female

collections with equal importance (Baudot, 1999; 290). Emphasis on sexuality with the use of corset garments was another attribute within Gaultier's designs. A custom designed corset that Madonna wore in 1990 for her *Blonde Ambition* tour, expressed an ideal contemporary fashion in society (Lehnert, 2000; 94) (Baxbaum, 1999; 138). Gaultier's corset designs indeed bring back a previous style but in a new light, acting as innovative fashion and avant-garde art. They were artistic in form, colour, pattern and embroidered details, suggesting a new type of women's attire and expressing femininity (fig. 4-5). Gaultier's main idea for Madonna's idiosyncratic corset, was to free the allegory that corsets previously had; ruling out the ideas of subjugation for women (Seeling, 2000; 430).

Gaultier made no boundaries within his styles and thus was free to create any desired design, whether it was beautiful or not; this is particularly a hallmark within much of the modern visual arts. He brought together new forms of art through couture and was the first to use a diversity of models to parade his work, including old, young, oversize, slender, ugly and beautiful (Seeling, 2000; 430) (Buxbaum, 1999; 138). In 1998 Gaultier was influenced by traditional Mexican styles, particularly the art and fashion painted and also worn by the artist, Frida Kahlo, forty years prior to his fashion trends (Seeling, 2000; 434). Gaultier's work is certainly a unified expression of diverse ranges in cultures, artistic features and fashionable styles.

### **Vivienne Westwood**

Westwood, one of England's most extraordinary and well-known fashion designers, famous for the punk style, began to put aside her earlier designs and brought together a more radical cut of clothing in the 1980s (Lehnert, 2000; 120). She continued to surprise viewers with a variety of creative styles during the 1990s by producing many collections that focused on sexuality, feminism, freedom, status and historic silhouettes. Westwood refuses to compromise, thus reinvents and often exploits or manipulates past concepts; creating outrageous, yet still beautiful garments that are relentlessly copied, but in a more diluted form (Watson, 2003; 382-384). Her designs established a new form of art, with remarkably diverse or avant-garde costumes that gave evidence of a typical post-modern

fashion. Westwood decided that fashion had to be about ideas, expression, passion, wit and fun, much like the visual art concepts, but still embracing global concerns and providing assorted ideas for culture (Franklin, 2010; 173). In 1997 and 1998 she re-created historic paintings through couture, naming the fashion show *The Five Centuries Ago Collection*. The presentation of her work was a creative array of garments combined with a range of textile mediums, colour, detail and pattern, combining "...traditional methods with modernity and undisguised irony" (Seeling, 2000; 458). This provided spectators with new connotations between garments with unique personality and style.

Some of Westwood's more well-known styles included the dress of outcasts, Pirate and New Romantic looks during the 1980s, consequently giving her adequate attention in the fashion world. Although some of her work portrays a type of fashion that would never be worn in society, it draws attention to the artistic values in vogue, advertising new concepts and giving society a new view on modernism; Westwood stated: "creativity comes from technique" (Lehnert, 2000; 109). Exposed seams, torn fabric, radical cuts and bras or corsets as outerwear were only a small collection of Westwood's successful designs, which were part of the Deconstruction era. Restrictive clothing was abandoned during the time of Coco Chanel, when women wanted to feel comfortable in fashion, however recently Westwood adopted the so-called restrictive garments, like corsets, and transformed their statement of underwear into sexy attire for outerwear, and like Gaultier, her bras worn over the top of dresses and corsets soon became a famous look in many fashion events (Watson, 2003; 382).

Corsets by Westwood were first designed and created in 1987, and in the 1990s she had several of them printed with scenes from 18<sup>th</sup> century paintings and decorative arts. Frans Hals *Catharina Hoof*, 1620, and Francois Boucher's *Shepherd Watching a Sleeping Shepherdess*, 1745, were two paintings in particular that were re-illustrated for Westwood's contemporary corsets (Bell, 2004-05). During 1993 and 1999 Vivienne focused mainly on combinations derived from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1995-96 Westwood was inspired to revisit the theme that "women do not understand the full extent of their coquettishness" *Les Femmes ne Connaissent pas toute leur Coquetterie*, by French writer La Rochefoucault (Bell, 2004-05). *Vive la Cocotte* was also another

outstanding collection; many of the designs included body extensions with lightweight metal cages around the bust and hips, which amplified the female body proportion into a perfect hourglass figure. Subsequently some of the fashion was close to being unwearable, but these exaggerations re-explored and defined a contemporary statement of sensual sensation (Bell, 2004-05). “In her interpretations of historical dress, Westwood has continued to emphasise the idea of constriction as a way to define the body and its movement and to direct posture...she draws attention to the figure through exaggeration and distortion of the body shape...[and] has found a way to theatricalise arousal and eroticise power, while celebrating skill and the craft and history of materials” (Bell, 2004-05).

## **Conclusion**

Recently art has expanded into so many different subject areas with the use of any desired material. Performance or installation art, for example, is seen as a powerful way to display concepts within the art world, and displays of fashion, for instance, are types of performing visual arts, as it reveals the mediums, style and concept or practicality of the garment. Blends of art and fashion were successfully achieved in the 1990s, but not all designs in catwalks and voguish events were wearable in society. They more willingly advertised elements of what individuals could expose in society. To some extent art relies on fashion to be displayed in a different format, from the colour of the fabric, to the cut, layout and pattern, to the actual picture or drawn illustration, after all not every fashion designer can draw appealing images, and not all artists can create costumes to wear, therefore fashion and art are collectively rewarding. While fashion displays an array of artistic qualities, some art also reveals many diverse styles within the ideals of couture. Fashion and visual arts now play an important role in the creation of successful attire and expressions for society. Gaultier and Westwood have certainly altered fashion changing it into an innovative art form and expressing many designs that were somewhat outrageous in the 1990s, but soon became an accepted style. From punk styles to glamorous or elegant designs and outrageous forms, all collections by Westwood and Gaultier exhibit varieties of artistic quality and fashionable trends; injecting a breath of fresh air into many fashion houses and art professions, and exhibiting couture as a creative art.

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### **Other research links:**

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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHFSzgh1YQ0> – Naomi Campbell's fall  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dbxu1SHNKg8> – Westwood's fashion show proves to be tricky for model.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOKCIQY0Tw4> – 1994 spring/summer collection.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wonwps-3dqQ&feature=related> – Westwood's shoes