

Vivienne Westwood: The Exhibition

Until 21 September 2008

Teachers' Pack

Our teachers' pack takes you through the exhibition and is also a timeline of Vivienne Westwood's work. Activity suggestions are general ideas which can be differentiated to suit most year groups.

The Early Years

Vivienne Isabel Swire was born in Glossopdale, Derbyshire, on 8 April 1941. Her mother had been a weaver in the local cotton mills and her father came from a family of shoemakers. After the war, they ran a sub-post office in Tintwistle and in the late 1950s moved to north-west London.

Leaving grammar school at 16, Vivienne briefly attended Harrow Art College. She studied fashion and silversmithing, but left after a term because, *'I didn't know how a working-class girl like me could possibly make a living in the art world.'* She worked in a factory and trained to become a primary school teacher. In 1962 she married Derek Westwood and in 1963 her first son, Benjamin, was born.

Vivienne always enjoyed cutting a dash. As a teenager in the 1950s, she customised her school uniform to emulate the fashionable pencil skirt and made many of her own clothes. She made sleeveless shifts, with a single seam and darts, from exactly one yard of fabric.

Activities

- Redesign your school uniform. Don't forget to consider boys and girls outfits. Think about the practicalities of a school uniform. Will this affect your design and the kind of fabric you use?
- Make a wearable shift dress from exactly one yard of fabric! How will you embellish it?

Let It Rock

Vivienne Westwood met Malcolm McLaren in 1965, and their son Joseph Ferdin Corré was born the following year. Their working relationship, which lasted from 1970 until 1983, launched the Punk fashion. Vivienne recalled, *'I felt there were so many doors to open, and he had the key to all of them. Plus, he had a political attitude and I needed to align myself.'*

McLaren was born in 1946 in Stoke Newington, where his family had a successful clothing company. He attended art school between 1964 and 1971 and enjoyed the idea of using culture as a way of making trouble. He was obsessed by fashion and music and saw them as an inseparable part of a rock'n'roll outlaw spirit. Rejecting the dominant hippie look, he wore brothel-creeper shoes and drape coats.

In 1971, McLaren opened a shop called Let It Rock at 430 King's Road, London. He sold vintage

and repro Teddy Boy clothes, as well as garments made by Vivienne. Tiring of this, he then changed the name to Too Fast to Live, Too Young to Die and sold customised biker gear. Over the next decade the shop underwent further changes of identity, each accompanied by a stylistic makeover by McLaren.

Sex

In 1975 Westwood and McLaren's focus shifted to another fashion minority. McLaren renamed the shop Sex and scrawled above the door, *'Craft must have clothes but Truth loves to go naked.'* The interior was sprayed with pornographic graffiti, hung with rubber curtains and stocked with sex and bondage wear.

Marco Pirroni, of the group Adam and the Ants, recalled: *'The country was a morass of beige and cream Bri-Nylon and their shop was an oasis.'* It took great liberalism and bravery to wear rubber in the street. If you shopped there, you didn't go anywhere else. Westwood saw a kind of loveliness in this forbidden clothing: *'All the clothes I wore people would regard as shocking. I wore them because I just thought that I looked like a princess from another planet.'*

Sex was intimidating and it attracted a bizarre clientele, with voyeurs and fetishists mixing with proto-Punk King's Road shoppers. Jordan, the shop assistant, was even more extraordinary. She wore rubber clothes, a beehive hairstyle and theatrical make-up. On her daily commute from Sussex, British Rail put Jordan in a first class compartment for her own protection.

Seditionaries

In 1976 McLaren renamed the shop Seditionaries - Clothes for Heroes. Its futuristic interior featured images of an upside-down Piccadilly Circus and a ruined Dresden. Spotlights poked through roughly hacked holes in the ceiling and there was a live rat in a cage.

McLaren was now manager of the Sex Pistols and a key figure in the emerging Punk Rock phenomenon. The Seditionaries collection brought together all the subversive elements in Westwood and McLaren's recent work. There were the ripped garments of 1950s pin-ups; the leather, chains and badges of bikers; the straps and buckles of the fetishists. As Westwood said, *'You couldn't imagine the Punk Rock thing without the clothing.'*

Seditionaries clothes were never cheap, but the fans improvised their own gear and the look spread rapidly. Punk provoked open hostility and is still potent today. Westwood viewed it as a heroic attempt to confront the older generation, but inevitably it was absorbed and disarmed by the mainstream. Westwood, then in her early forties, turned her attention to subverting the Establishment from within.

Pirate

The early 1980s marked a turning point in McLaren and Westwood's career. McLaren was immersed in music and Westwood, for the first time, began to see herself as a fashion designer. But she needed a new direction, saying: *'We wanted to get out of that underground tunnel feeling of England, that dark feeling.'* McLaren said, *'Do something romantic. Look at history.'*

The shop was again remodelled and settled on its final apotheosis of World's End. The interior became a lurching galleon with small windows, a low ceiling and a sloped decking floor. The shopfront had a drooping slate gable and a large clock displaying 13 hours, the hands travelling rapidly back in time.

Out of it came Pirate, McLaren and Westwood's first catwalk collection. It was shown at London Olympia in spring 1981, to a blast of cannon fire and rap music. The clothes evoked the golden age of piracy, an age of highwaymen, dandies and buccaneers. As in Punk, the garments were unisex. The collection immediately entered the mainstream and McLaren and Westwood gained a new reputation, as serious and marketable designers.

Activities

- Think of the word 'romantic'. Design an outfit that you feel sums up this word. Think about who you are designing for, the purpose of the outfit, fabric type, colours and embellishments.
- Make an ideas board for a unisex outfit. Collect images from the exhibition, magazines and your own work.

Nostalgia of Mud

Westwood's horizon opened and expanded. With the help of McLaren, she devised new collections based on ethnic and primitive looks culled from National Geographic magazine. Their second collection was called Savage (Spring/Summer 1982). It combined Native American patterns with leather frock coats, Foreign Legion hats worn back-to-front, petti-drawers and shorts.

Then came Nostalgia of Mud (Autumn/Winter 1982), with its huge tattered skirts and sheepskin jackets in muddy colours. Punkature (Spring/Summer 1983) still had a raw feeling and an emphasis on pre-washed and over printed natural fabrics. It played on the words punk and couture, and carried images from Ridley Scott's film Blade Runner.

Witches

For their Witches collection McLaren and Westwood began to conjure up darker spirits. They found a magical, esoteric sign language in the work of the New York graffiti artist Keith Haring. This was printed in fluorescent colours on backgrounds that resembled firework paper.

Witches featured oversized jackets and coats, double-breasted jackets and huge cream cotton mackintoshes. These were worn with knitted jacquard bodies, tube skirts and pointed hats. The customised trainers had three tongues that emulated the freeze-frame effect of strobe lighting and the jerky sound of rap music: Like sequences of things, where people are dislocated somehow at the same time that they're moving.

The Witches collection was the final collaboration between McLaren and Westwood. Through their creative partnership, they introduced an entirely new fashion vocabulary which is still influential today.

Hypnos and Clint Eastwood

By 1984 Westwood had moved to Italy with her new business partner and present managing director, Carlo D'Amario. The Hypnos collection featured sleek garments made out of synthetic sports fabric in fluorescent pinks and greens. They were fastened with rubber phallus buttons. The collection was shown in Tokyo at Hanae Mori's Best of Five global fashion awards, along with work by Calvin Klein, Claude Montana and Gianfranco Ferré.

This was soon followed by Clint Eastwood, a collection that hankered after the wide open spaces seen in Western films. 'Sometimes,' she said, 'You need to transport your ideas to a world that doesn't exist and then populate it with fantastic looking people.' It included garments smothered in Italian company logos and Day-Glo patches inspired by Tokyo's neon signs.

Mini-Crini and Harris Tweed

The Mini-Crini collection saw an increasingly shaped look, the antithesis of the masculine shoulder pads and tight hip styles that were current in the 1980s. Westwood's historical research had led her to believe that clothes were about changing the shape of the body, about having a restriction. She now wanted to make things that fitted.

Inspired by the ballet *Petrushka*, Westwood devised a mini-crini that combined the tutu with an abbreviated form of the Victorian crinoline. Though sexy, the mini-crini was also childish. Its shape echoed the old-fashioned party frock, while the stars, polka dots and stripes came out of Disney cartoons.

The Harris tweed collection celebrated Westwood's love affair with traditional British clothing and also her growing obsession with royalty. It was named after the woollen fabric hand-woven in the Western Isles of Scotland. Many of the garments - the twinsets made by Smedley, the Stature of Liberty corsets, the tailored Savile jackets - became Westwood classics.

Activities

- Explore ways of embellishing fabric from experimenting with appliqué methods to adding adornments.
- Experiment with fabric dyes using tie-dye and Batik as a mean of decorating fabric. Try dyeing different kinds of fabric and note reactions to the dye and how well the colours take.
- Design and make a party outfit for a child. Explore fabrics that are easily wearable and washable. Collect fabric samples and test them for 'washability'.

Britain Must Go Pagan

The next few collections, which became known as Britain Must Go Pagan, were wildly eclectic. Westwood combined traditional British themes with classical and pagan elements. Classical drapery was paired with tweed, Smedley underwear was overprinted with pornographic images from ancient Greece. This strange mix reflected the inherent contradiction in her work, its respect for tradition and culture alongside a love of parody and sexual liberty.

In *Time Machine* (named after H. G. Wells's novel) Westwood made precise Miss Marple suits in Harris tweed and articulated jackets inspired by medieval armour. *Voyage to Cythera*, named after a Watteau painting, was another journey into the past. It was followed by *Pagan V*, in which Westwood turned again to 18th-century France. Printing Sèvres patterns onto classical togas, she created a collection that telescoped time. From this point in her career, references to literature and high art pervaded Westwood's work.

Maturity

This part of the exhibition is devoted to Vivienne Westwood's work from the *Portrait* collection of 1990, when her designs began to receive worldwide acclaim, to her most recent work. It includes ultra-feminine suits, complex day ensembles in tweed and tartan, extravagant knitwear and opulent evening gowns. Many of these were designed in collaboration with her second husband Andreas Kronthaler.

In a period of minimalism, Westwood's creations introduced an air of romance and aristocratic hauteur. This derives from the refinement that she found in French design, but also from the easy charm and impeccable tailoring of English dress. '*Fashion as we know it,*' she claimed, '*is the*

result of the exchange of ideas between France and England.'

Westwood sees fashion as personal propaganda, as an agent of arousal both physical and mental. The way clothes feel is as important as the way they look. To this end, she distorts, exaggerates and pares away the natural shape of the body, often using the constructions that she finds in historical costume.

The Art of Fashion

Westwood spent many hours in the Wallace Collection in London studying 18th-century French art. She found inspiration in the costume, and also in the harmonies of colour, design and movement that she saw in the paintings. In shows, she began to use statuesque models dressed in sumptuous costumes and poised on 10-inch platform shoes, as if on a pedestal. The idea was that they had just stepped out of a portrait.

Activities

- Find inspiration in art. Visit Graves Gallery to see the portraiture. Explore gallery collections and apply artists' techniques and ideas to your fabrics, or focus on a particular time period to inspire ideas for an outfit.
- Take ideas from the section 'Cut, Slash and Pull' and investigate ripping, slashing and fraying fabric as a form of embellishment.

Vivienne Westwood and the V&A

The historical costume collection at the V&A has been an inspiration to Westwood, but despite their exactitude, Westwood's creations are never historical facsimiles: *'I take something from the past that has sort of vitality that has never been exploited - like the crinoline - and get very intense. In the end you do something original because you overlay your own ideas.'*

Essentially, Westwood says, *'When you analyse where the glamour is in clothes, the romance, it is, I believe, in something that people have seen before. It's like perfume. You think, 'I know that smell. reminding me of something else as well.'*

Tailoring

Westwood's work is rooted in English tailoring, from the plain 18th-century frock coat to the Savile Row suit and pink hunting jacket. Her investigation of tailoring has continued from collection to collection. Using traditional techniques as a starting point, she has devised innovative solutions to the puzzle-like complexities of cutting and piecing fabric. Some of the suits are closely moulded the body, while others form dynamic structures with folding and pleating.

Countrywear

Westwood's interest in traditional British woollen fabrics inspired a series of ensembles characteristic by their textural and tactile qualities. She worked with long-established woollen mills and often commissioned fabrics from their archives. The outfits that she devised combined tweeds, pinstripes, check, baratheia and plain wool.

Tartan

Westwood's fascination with Scottish traditions, as source of inspiration and subject of parody, began with Punk and has reoccurred frequently in her collections. Using a mix of different tartans, her ensembles exploit the rich depth, colour and diversity of the traditional checked pattern. The tartans were made to order by Locharron of Scotland, who also created a special design for Westwood called the McAndreas, after Andreas Kronthaler.

Activities

- Experiment with weaving. Weave different materials such as plastic bags, wire or twigs.
- Learn how to knit. Try knitting simple pieces such as scarves. Move onto knitting hats, gloves or even jewellery! Visit 'Get Knitted' for inspiration.

Corsets

Westwood's reworking of the corset has become one of her most recognisable trademarks. Romantic and historically accurate, the corsets are also surprisingly practical. Stretch fabrics allow ease of movement, and removable sleeves convert a daytime garment to evening wear. Once a symbol of constraint, corsets are now an expression of female sexuality and empowerment.

Eveningwear

Throughout her career Westwood's clothes have often been about dressing up. In her eveningwear she has taken this idea to the very limit. Using gold Lurex, ribbons, feathers, taffeta and lace, she has recreated a belle époque of unrestrained grandeur. These are gowns of great presence, both physical and symbolic. It is Westwood's belief that you have a much better life if you wear impressive clothes.

Activities

- Read a classic novel or poem and sketch ideas for an outfit for an outfit that is inspired by that piece of literacy.
- Investigate the origins of both natural and synthetic fibres and fabrics.
- Explore how different fabric react to being left in the light, in hot water, in cold water etc.
- Test how tough fabrics are by carrying out abrasion tests. Which makes a fabric tougher? Its type of fibres or the construction of the fibres?

Dame Vivienne Westwood OBE

Vivienne Westwood's overriding gift to fashion is her conviction that clothing can change the way people think. She has always said, *'The real link that connects all my clothes is this idea of the heroic.'*

Her career has been a self education, and her collections have closely followed her own discovery of the past, through literature, music and the applied arts. The Vivienne Westwood company remains independent and Vivienne oversees every aspect of it. She has become the queen of British fashion and received many distinguished awards, including the OBE in 1991, and has been made a Dame in 2006, yet she still cycles everywhere.

Westwood has come a long way from Punk, but as she said at the time of the 1981 Pirate collection, *'I realised I could do anything I liked. It was only a question of how I did it that would make it original. I realised then that I could go on forever.'*



Exhibition organised by the V&A, London