

Unpicking Couture

Exhibition labels

Large print version

Please return after use



Manchester Art Gallery



Exhibition Introductory Panel

Here you can discover some of our fashion collection and engage with issues affecting contemporary culture. This is a space for storytelling, learning, conversations and wellbeing.

Unpicking Couture features many of our recent acquisitions and presents a contemporary interpretation of couture clothing. You can explore themes of design, sustainability, creativity, self-expression and making.

Couture Codes reveals the signature styles of famous couturiers and fashion houses through characteristic examples of their work

Couture Attributes focuses on distinctive aspects of top-end fashion design such as elegance, extravagance, historical inspiration, craft and making.

Dressing for Joy explores emotions inspired by clothes and how what we wear can have a positive effect on our wellbeing.

Slow Looking suggests we view clothing through an artist's eyes, using detailed examination and creative interpretation.

Wear and Care invites us to consider fashion and sustainability through how we wear and care for our clothes.

Throughout Unpicking Couture, you can see how the exhibition was created, revealing curatorial, exhibition-making and conservation processes.

Dress for Joy

Cristóbal Balenciaga (1895-1972)

Yellow silk satin evening dress, Spring/Summer 1968

Born in Spain in 1895, Cristóbal Balenciaga transformed fashion during the 1950s. He is renowned for inventing a modern silhouette through broadening the shoulders and removing the waistline, to create a stage for presenting colour and texture.

Balenciaga designed this dress for his very last collection before closing his fashion house in 1968 aged 74. Through this collection, Balenciaga revisited dramatic geometric shaping, disguising the figure and creating an architecture of fashion.

The expanse of silk satin and the volume within the silhouette of this garment celebrates the richness and joy of the colour yellow. The dress is finished with a generous trim of black net to accentuate the shape of the train and protect the hem from damage and discolouration from the floor beneath. The French designer, Emanuel Ungaro, summed up the remarkable legacy of Balenciaga: “he laid the foundations of modernity”.

Couture Attributes: Historical Inspiration

Charles Frederick Worth (1825-98)

Purple silk trimmed day or visiting dress, 1875-78

Born in Lincolnshire in 1825, Charles Frederick Worth is acknowledged as the originator of Haute Couture and the first designer to be called a couturier. He moved to Paris at the age of 20 where he worked at the textile firm of Gagelin before opening his own establishment in 1858. He secured the patronage of Empress Eugenie, wife of Emperor Napoleon III, during the 1860s and rapidly embedded his success as Paris's most fashionable dress maker. His work is typified by the lavish use of expensive and contrasting fabrics and trimmings, whilst also perfecting a skillful fit. By the 1880s he supplied whole wardrobes of clothes to wealthy American and British women as well as dominating the Paris fashionable market.

This outfit is typical of Worth's fashion in the mid-1870s when bustles were worn to create a silhouette with 'back interest'. A range of different fabrics and trimmings were used to produce an effect which can seem overloaded and heavy. The dress makes a striking pairing with the Yamamoto outfit opposite showing that recent couture often takes inspiration from historical garments.

Couture Attributes: Historical Inspiration

Yohji Yamamoto (born 1943)

Red tweed dress, Autumn/Winter 1995-6

Born in Tokyo in 1943, Yohji Yamamoto graduated with a fashion degree in 1969 and first showed a collection in Paris in 1981. Initially stating that he wanted to make men's clothes suited to women, his imagination has since ranged in many directions, sometimes, as here, referencing historic garments and styling. This outfit was acquired as a direct pairing for the Worth dress opposite, and seen alongside each other, the 19th century piece is perhaps made more relevant and accessible to a contemporary viewer.

Although Yamamoto frequently looks back to historical models of dress, he is also an advocate of a deconstructed approach, firmly embedded in contemporary techniques and approaches. This dress in red and blue flecked woollen tweed has exposed bound seams, fraying raw edges, external press stud fastenings and tapes. The black mesh lining peeps out provocatively at the bodice hem, whilst the black net bustle also shows below the skirt hem. The bustle is altogether softer and less rigid than the shelf like structure in the Worth dress, but the silhouettes mirror each other.

Couture Attributes: Extravagance

Paco Rabanne (1934-2023)

Gold jumpsuit and long cloak, Spring/Summer 1994

Born in Spain in 1934, Paco Rabanne was perhaps most celebrated for his Space Age tunic designs of the later 1960s incorporating metal or plastic discs and chains. This futurist approach never left Rabanne's creativity and even into the 1990s, he invented remarkably imaginative couture pieces.

This gold polyester jumpsuit is paired with a fantastical vast cloak of sheered and pleated gold polyester trimmed with swags of black net. The whole appearance seems to resemble the depictions of medieval-style angels with large folded wings, and the illusion prompts us to fantasise about the inspiration and vision behind its creation. The exuberance of this couture design is clearly intended to make a dramatic impact on the runway and exemplifies the theatrical possibilities of high fashion.

2016.24

Couture Attributes: Extravagance

Pierre Cardin (1922-2020)

White evening dress and coat, Summer 1994

Born in Italy in 1922, Pierre Cardin was celebrated in the 1960s for his futurist designs and for his use of modern, unusual and interesting fabrics. This continued through to the 1990s where he again experimented with new forms and shapes. From 1994 (with this collection) he chose only to show his couture collections to a small select group of trusted clients and journalists who he felt appreciated his work. He was made a Commander of the Légion d'honneur in 1997 in recognition of his contribution to French couture.

Underneath the spectacular floor-length coat swirling around the figure, is a sleeveless silk crepe full-length dress, fully trimmed with pale and transparent sequins or paillettes. Together the pieces seem to resemble a ceramic sculpture or a piece of polished mother-of-pearl. This architectural piece demonstrates the flamboyance and drama of runway couture.

Couture Attributes: Craft and Making

Cristobal Balenciaga (1895-1972)

Green evening coat, 1950-53

Born in Spain in 1895, Cristobal Balenciaga was most inspired and creative when experimenting with geometric shaping and cut, playing with the way that clothing interacted with the human form, often masking or camouflaging the figure.

This emerald-green silk satin reversible evening coat presents as an oversized garment with cape collar and half circle pockets. However, like the Grès garment it is paired with, it disguises its constructional ingenuity. It is cut as a large irregular oval, which is then carefully shaped to fall around the figure, with circular pockets to echo the theme of the shape. This type of exceptionally imaginative design separates 'couture' from other clothing.

2018.5

Couture Attributes: Craft and Making

Madame Grès (1903-93)

Cocktail dress in vertical stripes, 1950-52

Born in Paris in 1903, Germaine Émilie Krebs designed under the name of Alix until 1942 when she married and adopted her new professional name, Madame Grès. From this period, Grès moved on from her signature Grecian-style pleated gowns to experiment with a more fitted cut and drape. Carefully constructed, her signature couture is seemingly simple but actually extremely complex.

Although this princess-line dress (without a waist seam) looks to be made of a striped print, it has been meticulously constructed from individual precisely cut and fitted vertical panels, each one hand stitched. The colours pink, purple and green create a bold impression which seems to suggest the circus or stage. It exemplifies Madame Grès' obsessive attention to detail, creating a fitted garment which flatters and reveals the body below. This type of careful crafting distinguishes 'couture' from other fashion.

Couture Attributes: Elegance

Comme des Garçons

Black and white shift dress with dress-train,

Spring/Summer 2011

Born in Tokyo in 1942, Rei Kawakubo founded Comme des Garçons in 1969. In a rare interview for the Guardian in 2018, she spoke of casual, modern, 'easy' fashion, "When things are too easy, you don't think, and you don't make progress. Not just in fashion, in everything." Her legacy will be in her complex fashion constructions, challenging and provoking contemporary norms. She is renowned for experimenting with concepts of beauty by exploring organic forms, incorporating protrusions and lumps and playing with existing garment shapes.

This black and white two-tone runway dress incorporates two additional dresses, one black and one black/white check, attached to the back shoulders and forming a surreal train. The imagination of this creation exemplifies the work of Kawakubo. It suggests elegance with its clever elongation of the silhouette. Always challenging herself and the existing norms of fashion, she creates dramatic pieces which can, as Alexander McQueen has said, "seem kind of absurd" but also intensely provocative.

2015.25

Couture Attributes: Elegance

John Galliano (born 1960) for Givenchy

Midnight blue silk and lace evening dress,

Autumn/Winter 1996

Born in Gibraltar in 1960, John Galliano trained at Central St Martins before becoming Creative Head at Givenchy in 1995, the first British designer to head a French couture house. He titled his second collection for Givenchy Romantic fused with Rock and this particular piece was modelled on the catwalk by Naomi Campbell. Like many designers, Galliano often gained inspiration from the past. For this dress, he related that he was drawn to a court dress made in 1798 which he saw on show in Paris, and which had belonged to the Napoleonic Queen Hortense. He determined to produce his own homage to this elegant and sophisticated piece. The First Empire, neo-classical look is suggested by the high waistline, the long train and the lavish use of lace in the overdress. Fine French laces (point d'esprit and Chantilly) have been selected to emulate early 19th century historic lace and this outfit mirrors period dresses of this date existing in our collections. The celebrated fashion journalist, Suzy Menkes, stressed the elegance of the collection describing "exquisite Josephine dresses in lace and tulle".

Aspects of Couture: Creativity

Vivienne Westwood (1941-2022) and **Malcolm McLaren** (1946-2010)

Printed toga dress with train, Autumn/Winter 1982

Born in Tintwistle, Derbyshire in 1941, Vivienne Westwood formed a partnership with Malcolm McLaren in the mid-70s that helped to conceive the Punk fashion phenomenon. From the very early 1980s, they embraced the emerging New Romantic style with their celebrated first early collections, Pirate, Savages and Nostalgia of Mud. This model of toga dress labelled World's End was first shown in the Savages collection. Demonstrating Westwood's interest in art, the print design references the French artist Henri Matisse's Femmes et singes (Women and monkeys) series of lithographs. As shown in the adjacent film, the garment can be worn in many ways to be creatively interpreted by the individual. Expressing her unique approach to making clothes, Westwood compares searching for a new idea to be like finding "the primitive seed in the mud". Also in the film, artist Jackie Haynes reflects on writing a letter to Vivienne Westwood after watching a Sue Lawley interview on the BBC's Wogan programme in 1988 and speaks of her joy in receiving a handwritten letter of thanks. This act of support serves as a reminder to be courageous in creativity, especially when faced with hostility.

2016.26

Couture Codes: Material Experimentation

Elsa Schiaparelli (1890-1973)

Midnight-blue silk jersey evening dress and jacket, 1937

Born in Rome in 1890, Elsa Schiaparelli designed under her own name from 1927 through to the late 1950s. She dressed some of the most daring and fashionable women in society and was especially influential during the 1930s. Her clients included Wallis Simpson, the American socialite who married the former King Edward VIII, who chose a version of this design for her trousseau. Through collaboration with surrealist artists Salvador Dali and Jean Cocteau, Schiaparelli challenged many of the conventions of fashion.

The jacket of this ensemble is trimmed with cream patent leather accented with oil paint in a dramatic 'rococo scroll' decoration which contrasts with the elegant plain silk jersey dress. The experimental use of paint to create texture and decoration exemplifies Schiaparelli's ambition to merge art and fashion. She often used unusual and untested materials, such as plastics, cellophane and acrylic to develop unique textures and finishes. Current creative director of Schiaparelli, Daniel Roseberry, reimagined this striking design in his Autumn Winter 2022/23 ready to wear collection, using leather and cord embroidery to create the scroll embellishment.

Couture Attributes: Experimental construction and form Comme des Garçons

(founded in 1969 by Rei Kawakubo born 1942)

Black wool overcoat, Autumn/Winter 1996

Born in Tokyo in 1942, Rei Kawakubo studied Fine Arts and Aesthetics at Keio University in Tokyo. She founded her brand Comme des Garçons (Like the Boys) in 1969 creating clothing that was suited to movement and comfort, and designed to conceal the body, rather than to reveal or sexualise it. Kawakubo first showed in Paris in 1981, causing a sensation with the prominent use of black, unusual natural fabrics and avant-garde cutting. Determined not to be driven by trends, Kawakubo dismantles conventional and traditional ideas around fashion and the construction of clothing. She explores the infinite possibilities of what a garment can be and how it can interact with the body. This loosely cut coat features prominent, oversized shoulders to create a bold silhouette, giving the wearer a sense of presence. Kawakubo plays with the traditional rules of construction, moving the standard armhole position to exaggerate the shoulders. The garment resembles a blanket, without fastenings. Each seam is carefully finished with bias binding and is completely unlined, celebrating the fluidity and movement of the fabric.

Couture Codes: Embroidered Decoration

Couture Codes: Futurism

Pierre Cardin (1922-2020)

Black polyester evening dress, 1969

Born in Italy in 1922, Pierre Cardin showed his first Haute Couture collection in 1953 and became internationally famous in the mid-1960s as an innovative, forward-looking designer. He was quick to identify new commercial opportunities in countries such as Japan and China, which he visited in 1957 and 1972. Always ground-breaking, he designed with a modernity which he restlessly promoted. As he said, “The clothes I prefer are those I have created for a life that does not yet exist, the world of tomorrow.”

Cardin is renowned for his futurist designs, often dubbed the Space Age look. This ‘rocket’ dress is one of his most iconic creations, with white godets (flares) around the hem suggesting the flames before lift-off. Cardin himself was fascinated by space travel, designing spacesuits for NASA and even trying on the moon landing suit worn by Neil Armstrong. Typically for the late 1960s, the gown is made of Crimplene, reflecting the keenness of designers to experiment with newly created fabrics. Indeed, in 1968, Cardin marketed his own synthetic fabric, Cardine, an acrylic resin which he used to make a collection of heat-moulded dresses.

Couture Codes: The Unstructured Suit

Karl Lagerfeld (1933-2019) for Chanel

Black wool suit with gold lurex blouse, 1983

Born in Hamburg in 1933, Karl Lagerfeld worked first as assistant to Pierre Balmain and then as Artistic Director at Jean Patou, Chloe and Fendi. However, it was as Creative Director at the house of Chanel from 1983 that he became most celebrated.

Lagerfeld reinvented the classic Chanel tweed suit, the hallmark signature style for the design house. This style was pioneered during the 1920s by Gabrielle Chanel who became inspired by the ease of men's tailoring and the texture and versatility of tweed. This loosely tailored, modern and easy to wear garment enabled a freedom of movement and revolutionised womenswear.

This piece mirrors the boxy unstructured cut of the traditional Chanel suit with the classic 4 pocket design and gold buttons featuring the ornamental lion's head stamp. Interestingly, the chain length used to give weight to the jacket to maintain the perfect line and movement has been applied to the outside of the jacket lining. Lagerfeld has chosen to make this couture technique a visible feature.

2005.94

Couture Codes: Artist Collaborations

Stella McCartney (born 1971)

Black silk chiffon dress, orange screen printed illustrations, 2002

Born in London in 1971, Stella McCartney first experienced couture through an internship at Christian Lacroix and developed her cutting skills working for the Savile Row tailor Edward Sexton. Two years after graduating from Central St Martins in 1995, she was appointed Creative Director of Chloe in Paris and launched her own label in 2001.

McCartney is renowned for her commitment to climate conscious fashion, developing eco-friendly materials and supporting animal welfare. Through artist collaborations she has used fashion to bring attention to meaningful issues. In 2021, she devised the McCartney A-Z manifesto, partnering with 26 artists including Cindy Sherman and Rashid Johnson to create limited edition T-shirts exploring sustainability, diversity and inclusivity. The proceeds were donated to charities of the artists' choice. This dress is an example of McCartney's first ever collaboration with the artist Gary Hume (born 1962). The simple fluid cut complements Hume's continual linear illustrations depicting abstract faces in orange print. Limited edition T-shirts from this collection were sold at auction at the Thaddeus Ropac Gallery, Paris in aid of the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA).

2019.3

Couture Codes: Glamour

Bruce Oldfield (born 1950)

Floral printed silk cocktail dress, 1979

Born in London in 1950, Bruce Oldfield was brought up by the children's care charity Barnardo's, of which he is now Vice President. After studying at Central St Martins, he launched his first couture collection in 1978. He dressed Diana, Princess of Wales and for ten years from 1980, he remained her favourite designer. He helped to contribute glamour and elegance to her enduring reputation as a style icon and was awarded an OBE in 1990. More recent clients have included Rihanna, Taylor Swift, Kim Kardashian and (at the Coronation in 2023) Queen Camilla. However, his lasting legacy must also be the huge amounts of funding he has raised for Barnardo's.

This dramatically printed dress has a corseted strapless bodice, designed to look alluring but also to stay firmly in place, whilst the skirt is constructed to fall in drapes from the left hip. It featured in December 1979 Vogue worn by the supermodel Jerry Hall with a background of an impressive firework display. With dresses like this, Oldfield could supply glamour for specific occasions, as he himself said "My aim was, and is, to flatter. My clothes do well because they've got structure. They look soft on the outside but they're hard on the inside."

Couture Codes: Sensuality

Gianni Versace (1946-97)

Orange cotton harness dress, Autumn/Winter 1992

Born in Calabria, Italy in 1946, Gianni Versace opened his first boutique in Milan in 1978. He quickly acquired an international reputation for his bold colourful prints, his sexy revealing cuts, and his striking allusions to his Classical Italian heritage and to Greco-Roman art. He also drew inspiration from the bold graphic prints of American artists like Warhol and Lichtenstein and loved to design for the theatre, opera and ballet. He was patronised by a range of celebrity clients, including Elton John and Madonna, and he helped to create new highly paid supermodels, such as Linda Evangelista and Naomi Campbell.

Versace became famous for his sensuous and seductive approach to high fashion. He loved provocative design, often creating outfits with very short skirts, low necklines and exposed bare flesh. Known as the 'harness dress' from Versace's Bondage Collection, this revealing catwalk outfit formed of cotton webbing shows his fearless approach to high fashion, often empowering women in his fashion shows. Although accused of vulgarity and excess, Versace here creates a sensual minimalistic dress with supreme skill.

Couture Codes: Corset dress

Jean Paul Gaultier (born 1952)

Black and gold lace corset dress, Spring/Summer 1988

Born in France in 1952, Jean Paul Gaultier was offered an apprenticeship with Pierre Cardin in 1970 based on the strength of his fashion sketches. He worked for the house of Jean Patou from 1971 to 1973 and successfully released his first collection in 1976, founding his own fashion label in 1982.

Portrayed as a wildly provocative and playful designer, Gaultier was inspired by street wear and used fashion and styling to challenge gender stereotypes. In 1984 he created his signature piece, the exaggerated cone bra corset, famously worn by Madonna, as a symbol of power rather than objectification.

From the collection *La concierge est dans l'escalier* (The janitor is on the stairs), shown in Paris in 1988, this corset dress features figurative lace depicting Gaultier's enduring cowboy motifs. Exemplifying his passion for merging underwear and outerwear, the dress incorporates traditional features of boning and corsetry lacing with the playful ease of sportswear popper fastenings that run the full length of the front of the dress.

2018.6

Couture Codes: Sculpturism

Cristobal Balenciaga (1895-1972)

Black lace 'baby doll' cocktail dress, Autumn/Winter 1957

Born in Spain in 1895, Cristobal Balenciaga is celebrated as one of the most extraordinary couturiers of the 1950s and 60s. Christian Dior recognised him as "the master of us all". He was intensely proud of his Spanish heritage, often incorporating lace into outfits and favouring the use of a deep velvety black dye referencing Spanish portraits and traditional dress. Balenciaga's sense of proportion and architectural shaping were unique and pervaded his collections. He manipulated fabric through drape, cut and fit to interact with the body and to provide a stage for it to express itself. His use of fluid lines allowed him to alter the way an outfit related to a woman's body. In one collection the waistline was dropped, in another raised (as here), independent of the natural waistline. However, he often chose to disguise or hide the figure beneath his bold geometric shaping. In this design he has played with the use of layers of fine machine-made Chantilly bobbin lace in a trapeze-like or pyramid shape that suggests underwear but cleverly reveals the body beneath. When shown, this dress was seen as very provocative and was dubbed the 'baby doll' dress as it resembled the short lace nightdresses popular at the time.

2018.2

Couture Codes: Simplicity and Technique

Madeleine Vionnet (1876-1975)

Black silk evening dress, 1933-35

Born in Paris in 1876, Madeleine Vionnet trained in London before returning to Paris to establish her fashion house in 1912. Reopening after WW1, she became a leading couturier of the 1920s and 30s, celebrated for her bias-cutting and for her architectural approach to fashion design. She created elegant neo-classical, Grecian-style gowns, often with intricate pleating and draping. Vionnet's virtuosity has been acknowledged by many contemporary designers including Issey Miyake and John Galliano. Her dresses are now so fragile that examples of her work are exceptionally rare. This is the only Vionnet garment in Manchester Art Gallery's collection.

Though simple at first viewing, this elegant fine silk evening dress incorporates several technical elements including pleating, draping and skilled embellishment. The neckline is meticulously edged with silk appliqué V shaped motifs, echoed above the bustline and hem. The belt is created from woven silk velvet. A supremely subtle dress, it shows balance in design and the sophistication of 1930s French couture produced by an expert cutter such as Vionnet.

2018.83

Paul Poiret (1879-1944)

Black beaded silk evening dress, Autumn/Winter 1921-22

Born in Paris in 1879, Paul Poiret worked at House of Worth before establishing his own fashion house in 1903. He rapidly achieved fame as an innovative couturier dispensing with the tightly fitted, constricted silhouette in favour of a looser, unstructured look. After the disruption of the First World War, he resumed designing during the early 1920s visiting the USA where he dressed Broadway stars. He also launched his own named perfume which became extremely popular, heralding a modern approach to merchandising and publicity.

The simpler styles of 1920s fashion suited Poiret's inclination for dramatic decoration as it presented an uncluttered canvas for his creations. His work often included silhouettes and decorative designs that referenced styles from various cultures. We now acknowledge that this is cultural appropriation, the inappropriate or unacknowledged use of elements of a culture or identity that is different to one's own. The dress on display represents Poiret's creative use of more subtle decoration, concentrating on bands of intricate gold embroidery in small-scale, stylised, geometric designs.

2018.1

Couture Attributes: Sculptural form

Azzedine Alaïa (1935-2017)

Plum wool 2 piece double breasted suit, 1995

Born in Tunisia in 1935, Azzedine Alaïa studied sculpture at the Tunis Institute of Fine Arts. Upon graduation he worked as a dressmaker's assistant, moving to Paris during the 1950s where he worked for Christian Dior, Guy Laroche and Thierry Mugler. He opened his first atelier in the late 1970s and for 20 years he dressed private wealthy clients. He launched his ready-to-wear label Alaïa in 1980.

Renowned for his construction and cutting techniques to sculpt the silhouette, Alaïa created body conscious clothing to complement and accentuate curves. Greatly influenced by the work of French couturier Madame Grès, Alaïa collected over 900 examples of her work during his lifetime, contributing to the preservation of fashion history.

Alaïa's early collections often feature the colour black and muted, earthy shades with an emphasis on texture and form over pattern and embellishment. This suit resembles a softer version of the 1980s power suit. The sleeves are created in Three sections to form a sculptural, pronounced line across the shoulder and the shaped hips are accentuated with pockets and a nipped in waistline. This suit exemplifies Alaïa's timeless, elegant and empowering design.

2012.8

Couture Codes: Sophistication

Christian Dior (1905-57)

Black silk satin cocktail dress, Autumn/Winter 1950-51

Born in Granville, France in 1905, Christian Dior was one of the most influential and celebrated designers of the 1940s and 50s. Launching his fashion house with the renowned New Look of 1947, his couture became internationally known overnight. Subsequent high-profile collections maintained this global attention with easily publicised themes based on constructional, often geometric, influences. Examples include the Zigzag line of 1948, the Oblique line of 1950, the Tulipe line of 1953, the H-line of 1954 and the A- and Y-lines of 1955. In his short ten-year career, he also established a host of national franchises, especially in London and New York, creating a range of perfumes, accessories and costume jewellery in a profitable and international commercial empire. One particular code of the house of Dior was to reinvent, repeatedly, the chic and sophisticated black cocktail dress, the staple of its Parisienne clientele. This subtle example is constructed with an unusual, spiralling, tiered skirt made with diagonally slanted tucks, adding movement to the whole dress. Dior's sophisticated couture has provided inspiration for many of the subsequent Creative Heads of the house, in particular Marc Bohan and Raf Simons, who have designed collections often referencing outfits from Dior's 22 collections.

2012.16

Couture Codes: Flamboyance

Yves Saint Laurent (1936-2008)

Black silk crepe evening dress; feathered bolero jacket,
Autumn/Winter 1986

Born in Algeria in 1936, Yves Saint Laurent took over as Chief Designer at Dior in 1957 aged only 21. He set up his own label in 1962 and his collections helped to rejuvenate French couture. He made ready-to-wear respectable and popular through the launch of his Rive Gauche label. During his heyday in the 1960s and 70s he designed a range of innovative outfits, such as the Tuxedo suit (Le Smoking) and the Safari suit. His immediately recognisable collections (such as those inspired by the work of artists including Mondrian, Picasso and Van Gogh) ensured he had a substantial international presence.

Alongside his simply cut day dresses and practical suits, YSL loved theatrical decoration and flamboyance. This crepe evening dress with a short train has been infused with drama and stage-presence by its extravagant bolero jacket entirely covered in iridescent cockerel feathers.

2019.4

Couture Codes: Technology, Pleating and Movement Issey Miyake (1938-2022)

Black pleated polyester two-piece outfit, 1985-90

Born in Hiroshima in 1938, Issey Miyake studied graphic design in Tokyo. After graduating in 1964 he moved to Paris and enrolled in the Ecole de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture in 1965. He worked as an apprentice to Guy Laroche and with Hubert de Givenchy before establishing his Miyake Design Studio in Tokyo in 1970, making high-end women's fashion.

Known for his sensibility to movement and form, Miyake was influenced by sculptor Alberto Giacometti and traditional Japanese costume and couturier Mariano Fortuny. Inspired by his early passion for dance, Miyake experimented with material fibres and weaves to create a sense of movement.

He successfully developed new methods of permanent pleating and through studying dancers, he created his Pleats, Please line in 1993. This black jacket and skirt exemplify Miyake's complex cutting and construction techniques. When placed on the tailor's mannequin, the sculptural possibility of the garment becomes clear. The pleats change direction to encircle the body creating an exaggerated form. The buttons at the front of the top function as decoration only, but to be worn, it is pulled over the head like a jumper, demonstrating the ease and playfulness of his creations.

Couture Codes: History and Narrative

Alexander McQueen (1969-2010)

Black silk evening tunic, beaded, Autumn/Winter 1998

Born in Lewisham in 1969, Alexander McQueen is known as one of the most visionary couturiers of the recent past. He was appointed head designer at Givenchy from 1996-2001 and awarded British Designer of the Year four times.

McQueen trained as a tailor and worked as a theatrical pattern cutter before studying Fashion Design at Central St Martins. His entire graduate collection was purchased by the fashion stylist Isabella Blow, who became his close friend and mentor. Celebrated for his provocative, rebellious approach to fashion, McQueen re-imagined historic narratives to empower women and explore his artistry and unique perspective on beauty.

The 1998 collection titled Joan explores tragic historical figures and persecution. This statuesque tunic is embellished with printed sequins depicting a haunting photographic group portrait of three young Romanov princesses, daughters of Czar Nicholas II, who were murdered by the Bolsheviks in 1918. For the staging of this collection, McQueen instructed the models to project a strong and fearless presence on the runway.

2016.27

Slow Looking

Ossie Clark (1942-96)

Black and red crepe dress, 1970

British fashion designer Ossie Clark and fabric designer Celia Birtwell met whilst studying at Manchester College of Art. Their mutual friend and artist David Hockney created the double portrait Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy in 1970-71. Depicted in their London home, Birtwell's dress and presence features prominently as she stands powerfully by the window, whilst Clark slouches on a chair, his bare feet buried in the white shagpile rug. Their white cat, Blanche, was renamed Percy by Hockney as it had a "better ring". Black and scarlet softly textured moss-crepe combine in the construction of this cocktail dress which was dubbed 'heavenly twins', one of Ossie Clark's most celebrated designs. The dress is depicted through Hockney's eyes in the nearly life-size work. This portrait was challenging to realise due to the scale and the skill required to capture the quality of light. Many preliminary drawings, photographs and sketches were made with elements repainted several times until Hockney was satisfied. Staged as a life class, this is an invitation to explore the dress through slow looking, drawing and mark making. You are invited to be the artist and consider the materiality of the original dress worn by Hockney's muse Birtwell, captured in time within this portrait.

2015.23

Wear and Care

Desk case

Elsa Schiaparelli (1890-1973)

Purple silk velvet evening jacket, Spring/Summer 1938-9

This sumptuous silk velvet jacket is from Elsa Schiaparelli's Circus collection of 1938-9. The collection included pieces with theatrical figurative embellishments in the form of buttons, prints and embroideries featuring flying trapeze artists and circus horses.

Through support from National Heritage Lottery Fund (Collecting Cultures), this much-loved garment has been conserved.

Conservation by Ania Gołębiowska

2016.33

Stitched Up

Preloved denim Jacket

This jacket has been creatively repaired and given new life with visible mending and sewing techniques including hand embroidery and machine stitching.

Both garments are displayed with equal care to reflect on the idea of slow fashion and sustainable approaches. Here we can consider the lifecycle of a garment through the beauty of wear, the careful and accessible act of repair and the creativity and individuality of visible mending.

Mended by **Stitched Up**

Wear and Care

This wall is a selection of images that shows some of the documented evidence of wear and damage to the Schiaparelli jacket and the process of conservation. This includes dye samples, condition drawings, sections of the condition report and assessment notes.

Conservation by Ania Gołębiowska

Condition drawings by Jamie Robinson

With thanks to Zenzie Tinker Conservation

Wall to the right

Printed website text showing the Manifesto, mission and various workshops created and delivered by Stitched Up.

Stitched Up Community Benefit Society is a non-profit organisation that encourages and empowers local people to participate actively in community-based sustainable fashion solutions.

With thanks to Stitched Up

Making

Film of dress mounting process

This mediative film captures the time-consuming and skilled process of dress mounting, recorded over 3 days in Manchester Art Gallery's conservation studios.

The underpinnings and supports meticulously created for the display of dress are, by design, invisible. Through this film you are invited into the studio to notice the precise handwork, skill and patience needed to mount the garments now on display behind you.

This careful process requires an understanding of proportion, volume, drape, weight and material handling. These intuitive qualities mirror the skilled work of dressmakers, tailors and couturiers.

Dress mounted by Sarah Walton

Film created by Sarah Randles