

FASHION'S REBELLION

In fashion's current framework, are designers still given the freedom of artistic expression and provocation, or is there too much at stake to take the risk?

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Fashion has always been synonymous with controversy. From the moment Coco Chanel introduced the Little Black Dress and Christian Dior debuted his 1946 New Look collection, emphasising cinched waists and full skirts in a post-war climate, purveyors of culture have been shocked by the exploration of new ideas and taboo themes that were off-limits until they weren't.

Ever since fashion, and the industry surrounding it has existed, rebellion has followed. Back then, a centimetre raise in a hemline was cause for burning debate. Today, when it can feel as though boundaries have been wrung dry and public tolerance for missteps is waning, fashion seems to have entered a tricky era.

Culture has been fixated on the 1990s for many moons, and from a sartorial perspective, it's not hard to understand why. It was, notoriously, a time when ideas were freely explored, boundaries were pushed, designers gave interpreting art a real go – perhaps the last go we've seen since the recent rise of more rigorous censorship. It was the era that Lee Alexander McQueen's risks on the runway cemented him as a contemporary icon of provocation and imagination; it was the moment Tom Ford was awarded the title 'King of Sex' for the campaigns that repeatedly got banned from billboards, while Marc Jacobs was working on his reputation as the 'Prince of Grunge'. At the time, the public was outraged. Almost 30 years on, the same names will go down in history as the iconoclastic disruptors who drove fashion forward.

But it traces back to before the 90s, and rebellion would hardly have a name if not for Dame Vivienne Westwood's architecture of the punk wave in the 70s. Selling her designs out of her shop which she aptly named SEX, the young designer

began experimenting with fetish-wear and other aspects of BDSM, attracting both celebrities who were bucking against conformity, and backlash from the British press (which was not surprising since her efforts of revolt against the establishment grounded her designs).

McQueen was in a similar position. Originally looked down upon as a "hooligan" of English fashion" for his East London attitude and erratic way of working, he swiftly caught the attention of the fashion press with his debut 1995 collection, *Highland Rape*. Models emerged onto the runway spattered with blood, clothing ripped, breasts exposed, and his famed Bumsters on display. The collection intended to explore the brutal clearances of the Scottish Highlands by the British forces in the 18th and 19th centuries, but was misinterpreted by the media as a misogynistic and disturbing take on sexual assault. It wasn't until his Spring 1999 show, staged years after *Highland Rape*, closed with model Shalom Harlow's stark white dress being spray-painted onstage by robots, and his seminal spring 2001 collection, *Voss*, that McQueen's work went down as some of the most iconic moments in fashion history, heralding him as one of the greatest young designers of the 21st century.

For people like Tom Ford, whose 90s ad campaigns for Gucci stirred up an endless stream of outrage for his tendency to take things one step further, the American designer has been instrumental in recalibrating the role sex plays in fashion. He paid porn stars to have sex while they starred in an ad campaign, pinned himself as an "equal opportunity objectifier" in an interview with *The Guardian*, and shaved a 'G' into the pubic hair of a model. Both advertisements were called to be banned by the public for their vulgarity. Through it all, he breathed life back into the increasingly tired family-owned Italian House while marking his tenure at Gucci as one of the most consistently referenced eras of today.

Westwood, McQueen, Ford: pioneers of a rebellion that felt charged by curiosity and a frantic desire to communicate injustices and explore taboos. Amidst the outrage, each carried the torch for change. Voices loud enough to be heard, putting all on the line, their clothing the armour of bravery. Are today's designers given the same freedom? As online discourse reaches fever pitch and creative directors have to answer to the sales targets of luxury conglomerates, is rebellion and subversion still welcome in our current fashion landscape? Is it safer to play it safe, or is the ultimate sales pitch, still, provocation?

It's a nuanced conversation; one that can feel precarious, but necessary to explore. On one hand, it can be argued that many of the taboos that went down in history as controversial yet iconic moments, have already done just that, and where sex is concerned, most of the boundaries have already been crossed. Luxury brands are collaborating with Pornhub, sex workers are booking magazine editorials, people are wearing gimp masks on the red carpet – it's a fabulous time to be sex positive in fashion, and the shock value has decreased tenfold.

On the other, virality cannot be ignored. Sensationalised moments on the runway have never been new. They mark instances in time that felt particularly innovative, inspiring, outrage-inducing and emotional. But as we navigate the bumpy road of modern fashion, one that exists so deeply in the vacuum of

the internet, these moments can begin to feel more contrived. It becomes less about authentic artistic expression and more about the intention to create virality, each fashion House doing whatever it takes for their respective shows and marketing moments to flood our feeds. In more recent years, there have been few expressions of art and design that have felt truly authentic and of the moment.

When Maria Grazia Chiuri debuted her first ever ready-to-wear collection for Dior's Spring 17 show, a model walked onto the runway wearing a shirt that read "WE SHOULD ALL BE FEMINISTS". It was during the peak of the #MeToo movement, and was a poignant foreshadowing of the uprising that would follow in the years ahead. Since then, our demand that brands speak out on social justice movements has only been amplified. A simple slogan t-shirt no longer feels as monumental as it once did – but for Chiuri and those who were closely watching her debut, it made a statement that can never be erased from the moment it addressed. For her first season at a heritage brand, it was an act of bravery during a period where the culture was still very much divided.

Though acts of rebellion aren't always engaged strictly through spectacle. True genius has the ability to speak without words. Take Telfar Clemens, for example.

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King of the Bushwick Birkin AKA the Telfar Shopper, Clemens' career has hinged on him bucking against the idea that exclusivity equals unaffordability through his widely accessible, yet staggeringly hard to secure, vegan leather totes. He flips the blueprint for luxury fashion on itself, committing the ultimate act of rebellion.

Similarities can be drawn with Demna, too. The designer became known for his satirical-leaning work at Vetements before securing his creative directorship at Balenciaga, a move that has both landed the brand in increasingly controversial scandals and shot sales through the roof. As a long-time supporter of the kink community with an affinity for challenging

TREND



GUCCI SPRING 1997



VIVIENNE WESTWOOD S/S 1995



VIVIENNE WESTWOOD F/W 1994

our thoughts and perceptions of certain ideas, Demna has been one of the single most provocative designers of the era. Many perceive his work as an antagonistic plot of aggravation, but if you listen closely you recognise his intention to communicate deeper ideas. Even if it's to make a comment about the luxury consumer today.

Take the outrage of the Balenciaga Trash Bag, for example, that debuted at the brand's AW 22 show. The show took place within the same week that Russia waged war upon Ukraine, and as models struggled through a simulated blizzard in a snow-globe style enclosure designed to make a comment on the climate crisis, Demna paid homage to memories of his childhood, trekking through the mountains to flee war, belongings piled into whatever vessel could be found. Justification for a \$1700 leather bag? It's up to the consumer.

We will likely never know if Demna's provocation is a highly commercialised marketing strategy or if he does produce work from the heart. But one thing is clear: the catalysts of change – those aforementioned and others who pushed the industry forward with an anti-establishment mindset and sense of anarchy towards art – they were always the people on the fringes. Queer, Black, Female; the controversies they conjured were rooted in a desire for change, not for capitalism. They spoke to our desires, our fears, our deepest emotions that we thought nobody could see. They saw them. They raised them. They made fashion for them.

It can feel at times as though there's no room today for cancel culture in modern interpretations of resistance, but how quickly can the internet make things, and people, go away for isolated missteps? It should go without saying that we are far from condoning work that causes direct harm to any community, nor are we veering towards Red Scare-style rhetoric, but when rebellion is so tightly bound with outrage, and designers fumble with their communication just as anyone who is human is at risk of, where does censorship stand?

Rebellion is a vital ingredient for creativity. It can be inspiring, moving, and impactful. It can also be confronting, uncomfortable, and intensely debatable. To make room for rebellion is to make room for the foundations of institutions to be shaken; to make room for conversation; to make room for diverse perspectives; to make room for understanding and growth. As fashion becomes more homogenised, the need to make waves is more important than ever, yet the ability to do so has never felt further away. So in the words of poet Dylan Thomas: "Rage, rage against the dying of the light." 🐉

From top: BALENCIAGA SPRING 23, TELFAR SPRING 20, TELFAR SPRING 20.

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