

WHAT ARE WE FIGHTING FOR?

Through social and political upheaval, fashion is once again mirroring the sentiments of the day.

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Imagine it. Stepping out of your apartment on a brisk winter’s morning. The air whips at your exposed cheeks but not much else – you have a knit balaclava on and biker gloves that reach the elbows. Your coat is swallowing your frame and it is compressed to you with a thick cotton binder. Many of us couldn’t, despite designers like Raf Simons, Miuccia Prada, and Rick Owens predicting such in their FW18 collections.

Last season, the post-pandemic response designers across the globe opted for was body exposure. We lapped it up. Why wouldn’t we? It’s only natural that after almost two years of being inside, the moment we’d step out, we’d go feral for flesh. And after Spring Summer 22 cemented the phrase “bringing sexy back” into our fashion vernacular, predictability signals that after evolution comes revolution. For the Fall Winter 2022 shows, hip-high hemlines and sinewy straps gave way to protective headwear, durable gloves, and silhouettes and fabrications that are more synonymous with battle and tactility than with party dresses.

There’s a whole raft of reasons why this would be. The seemingly never-ending COVID-19 pandemic is at the front of the boat. Behind, in the passenger seats, is the burgeoning climate crisis and its slew of natural disasters. Next to them is the newly waged war in Ukraine, and the ongoing conflicts in Yemen, Syria, Palestine, Afghanistan, and more. The Metaverse is there too, in some capacity. As we face the dystopian storm that is currently pulling into port at our reality, fashion’s response was always going to be an apt one.

At Proenza Schouler – the first show of New York Fashion Week this season – head coverings, gloves, and swathes of cotton

bound around the torso were all offered up as a premonition of what would be to come. Dion Lee followed suit, where balaclavas – Ukrainian head and face coverings that date back to the Crimean war – were updated with mouth-covering jock straps alongside futuristic leather corsetry, reflective puffer jackets, and lug sole boots. In London, moonboots are the silhouette of the moment, while in Milan, Versace offered sexed up versions of the corset while Gucci opted for a sportier interpretation. At Matthieu Blazy’s Bottega Veneta debut, second-skin leather was the focal point.

Paris acted as a confluence for it all. At Dior, Maria Grazia Chiuri took on the idea of protective fashion in perhaps the most literal of ways with her offering of biker-esque evening gloves, padded corsetry, and a Bar Jacket that had been turned inside out to reveal temperature-regulating padding. Anthony Vaccarello at Saint Laurent had a more off-beat approach, with floor-sweeping silks and huge, cocoon-like oversized coats in wool, leather, and faux fur.

Even the shows that didn’t obviously nod to a theme of protection partook in it somehow. At Eckhaus Latta, the closing look was a restructured chainmail dress, an armour material with origins dating back to the third century BC. While at Jil Sander, buttery leather opera gloves reached up to armpits, a style with trend booms directly relating to pre-World

War I and post-World War II eras.

We are existing in a time of complete upheaval and disarray. Nothing was a better reminder of this than the extreme contrast we saw when Russia launched its attack on Ukraine just one week into the shows, leaving an industry that can be so good at turning its back on global issues on shaky ground, as it navigated a way forward. For some, like Giorgio Armani and Demna Gvasalia at Balenciaga, the path was forged for them as children who grew up in proximity to war. For Armani, WWII, for Gvasalia, his hometown in Georgia was bombed when he was a young teen, forcing him to become what he calls a “forever refugee”; a clear response to the conflict, more necessary and poignant than the shows themselves. For others, tributes were more subtle. But whether the fighting, taking place a mere hour’s flight from most European cities, was felt through written or spoken tributes, it’s as though the clothes knew what was coming.

It has always been the way of the world. When upheaval arrives, the commentary through clothing is never far behind. Just last year we witnessed the rise of fetish fashion back into our lexicon as a supplement to the body-exposure movement and a post-pandemic response (or what we thought would be one). With its roots in post-WWII queer circles, fetish fashion or leather subculture can be traced back to veterans who returned to America and congregated in major cities, using the leather from their uniforms to express themselves in subgroups of society. When we consider a response to never ending lockdowns and the necessary wearing of masks, it makes sense why “yassifying” our newfound anonymity would be appealing – especially if it involves feeling as though we are taking back control.

We saw hints of this at Hermès, the bastion of luxury, insinuating kink codes with sheer undershirts, thick leather belting and thigh high boots.



BALENCIAGA AW 22



PRADA AW 22

PROENZA SCHOUER AW 22

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At Dion Lee, his harnesses returned – but they weren’t the star of the show. Instead, subversion was switched out for armour. Collections carried a dystopian, doomsday-prepper feel about them, layered heavily with notes around workwear. Lee introduced butcher gloves and leather aprons, while elsewhere, we saw interpretations of classic working-class uniforms like blue jeans and white tank tops at Bottega Veneta, and boiler suits and hazmat-like silhouettes at Prada’s FW22 menswear show.


Essential workers, a paragon of hard work and dedication in a time where entire systems are on the brink of collapse if not for them, are increasingly serving as inspiration in more ways than one. This idea is not new (just look back to the ID badges at Prada, or the firefighter jackets at Calvin Klein), nor is it one that can be had without acknowledging the class appropriation at play since streetwear and workwear entered the trend cycle decades ago. For the past five years, our trends have been hinged on the silhouettes of the working class of the modern era. Some interpret this as a tribute to their propping-up of our society, others recognise the inherent faux-pas in repurposing the uniforms of the working poor to a luxury market.

In a landscape where fashion is never just about the clothes anymore, similar conversations have been brought up with the 2016-onwards obsession with the post-soviet aesthetic. This trend – the current events serving as bitter hindsight around calling it

this – was one that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union and has carried through to today with Cyrillic lettering, communist symbols, and sportswear silhouettes. For Russian designers like Gosha Rubchinsky – the patriarch of the luxury post-soviet aesthetic – and Georgian designer Gvasalia, it makes sense for them to unpick the complex identities of the emerging post-soviet generation through their work, regardless of the political baggage symbols such as the hammer and sickle carry with them.

But what about those who are partaking in trends that reference an experience they could not begin to imagine? Historical trauma is neatly packaged up alongside a \$700 Vetements hoodie, communist legacy reframed as a hope for a utopian future – one that is currently looking devastatingly far away.

Deep in its history, the hammer and sickle stand for industrial labour and peasantry, the same representation of the working class that the tracksuits they’ve been printed on over the years hold in our current vernacular. The tracksuits, the boiler suits, the firefighter jackets, and the combat boots. As these key elements of uniforms overlap with the luxury market and soak into our shoes steeped with symbolism, what of the uniforms of those who go to war for us?

When there is so much to fight for – climate action, gender and racial equity, public health, and actual real-life combat – what does it mean to see them reimagined on the runway? Is fashion joining the fight, or is it simply offering clothing that meets the moment? 



ECKHAUS LATTAW 21

From top: BOTTEGA VENETA AW 22, JIL SANDER AW 22, CHRISTIAN DIOR AW 22.