Education resource

Works by International and Australian fashion photographers and renowned couturiers are displayed in ‘Architects of Glamour + Masters of Style: Excerpts from a Century of Fashion Photography’.

Students can witness the changing icons, images and styles that make up the history of fashion, as captured by the great photographers of the day. Costume by the twentieth century couturiers Balenciaga, Dior, Dessès and Courrèges, are displayed alongside photographs that reflect the elegant, street-smart, or subversive contexts in which these gowns were worn.

Four discrete sections are explored: The emergence of fashion photography during the 1920s (Rampway); Pre-World War II and 1950s elegance (Corrs Chambers Westgarth gallery); 1960s – 80s emergence of street wear and youth culture (William Angliss gallery); and contemporary vision of the 1990s (hallway).

Areas of interest for students:
- Changing styles of photography + fashion;
- Portraiture + fashion;
- Lighting + design;
- The effect of location (eg. outdoors versus the studio);
- Photographic + artistic techniques;
- The impact of colour photography;
- Gender, sexuality and body image;
- Digital developments in contemporary photography.

Robyn Beeche  born 1945
Australia, lived and worked in Great Britain and India
Sonia 1983
Direct positive colour photograph, 51.3 x 50cm
Purchased 1984
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Architects of Glamour + Masters of Style’ explores how styles in clothing, beauty, the representation of women and techniques of photography have changed over a century. The two black and white photographs of women (above) show some similarities (eg. the women are both smoking, something that is banned in advertising today), but there are several differences that relate to the creation of ‘style’. The woman on the left is Coco Chanel who created the ‘little black dress’, the perfumes and the suits that bear her name. She was a maker of style, and her ‘look’ was copied for decades. On the right is a fashion model, Larissa, wearing clothes by Issey Miyake. Who would be the maker of style in this photograph? There seems to be a battle between the model, the gown’s designer and the photographer, whose unique photographic style captures the moment. Who do you think wins the battle?
While fashions have undoubtedly changed over the past hundred years, so have the body shapes on which those fashions are worn. Compare the image on the left of Doris Zinkeisen taken in the 1920s to that of Naomi Campbell in the 1980s.

Look at each model’s appearance – the looks on their faces, how they are facing the camera, the image they are trying to project, their jewellery and make-up – along with the clothes they wear. What differences can you notice? How would you describe each model?

Look at the techniques that the photographer has used to capture each model’s image: the quality of light and tone, the lighting and focus (e.g. soft focus or crisp edges). Look at the background, what is the photographer revealing to us by placing the model in these environments? How does this affect our impression of the models?
Immediately after the Second World War, women’s fashion lost its practical, austere look and became increasingly feminine. The female figure was emphasized and gowns used copious amounts of fabric – unheard of in the previous decade where many commodities were rationed.

In Cecil Beaton’s Charles James evening dresses, none of the austerity and privation associated with the war is evident. Models are posed in an exquisite eighteenth-century interior. The gowns are constructed from the most luxurious and beautiful fabrics and display slight variations in design. Each model likewise exhibits a slight variation from an ‘ideal’ construction, her ‘hourglass’ body shaped according to fixed criteria of beauty, gender and fashion, typical of the new femininity in the post-war 1940s.

Critical of fashion photography’s fabrication of ‘the cosmetic lie that masks the intractable inequalities of birth and class and physical appearance’ Susan Sontag suggested that, ‘[b]y setting his subjects . . . in fanciful, luxurious decors, Beaton turns them into overexplicit, unconvincing effigies’. ¹

Would you agree with Sontag’s comments?

‘Architects of Glamour + Masters of Style’ displays images of fashion icons – people who have influenced fashion – alongside the fashions that they wore.

Edward Steichen’s dramatic photograph of dancer Isadora Duncan (left), famed for revolutionising dance in the early twentieth century, directly refers to the dancer’s fascination with Greek antiquity, the architectural pinnacle of which is the Parthenon. Duncan often danced in bare feet and in loose clothing, which was extremely radical at the time. Her approach contributed to the emergence of unstructured and loose clothing of the 1920s.

Irving Penn intentionally placed his well-known model – the infamous but extremely fashionable Duchess of Windsor (right) – in a corner, without any decorative background. Penn’s photograph conveys not only the importance of women to fashion, but also that it is the photographer’s image that helps define their importance. Without the photograph, there would be no enduring icon.
During the 1970s gender – what makes us accepted as masculine or feminine – was investigated in music, art and fashion. Musicians David Bowie, Elton John and bands such as Kiss used make-up and costume to challenge gender stereotypes.

Many of the photographs taken at the time reflected society’s fascination with transvestism, homosexuality and sexual motifs.

The rise of feminism and women’s increasing role in public life raised lively discussions on gender and power. Men’s suits came to symbolise patriarchal power and, for a time, fashions focused on this idea. Alec Murray’s photographs of Veruschka played on the model’s chameleon-like ability to ‘lose’ herself in character, like an actress, yet remain recognizable even when dressed as a man.

Many contemporary artists, performers and musicians investigate ideas of gender in their work. Can you think of any? What kind of make-up, clothes or design would add to or detract from their image?

Alec Murray 1917-2002
Born Australia, lived and worked in Great Britain
Veruschka, Advertising campaign for ‘Dormeuil Freres’ c.1970
Type C colour photograph; 35.4 x 25.7cm
Gift of the photographer 1987
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra