

# VIVIENNE WESTWOOD, 1980–89

## Gallery Guide

Vivienne Westwood is one of the most well-known fashion designers working today. Her influential designs grace the covers of prominent magazines like *Vogue* and are worn by countless celebrities, but her beginnings were decidedly less glamorous. Westwood began her career in the 1970s, making subversive designs for the London punk scene. By the end of the 1980s, however, Westwood had broken into the world of high fashion. This exhibition aims to explore Westwood's remarkable transition from "street" fashion to high fashion during that decade.

This gallery guide will provide you with some useful background information on Vivienne Westwood, and will then lead you through the exhibition by focusing on a few highlights.

## Information

- **Who is Vivienne Westwood?** Vivienne Westwood (b. 1941) is an English fashion designer who is often hailed as one of the most influential figures in the industry. She has received many accolades, and is a three-time recipient of the British Designer of the Year award. Her work is often provocative and draws on many influences, including English tailoring traditions and the history of fashion.
- **How did she become a fashion designer?** Westwood's illustrious career had humble beginnings. A working class girl from Derbyshire, England, Westwood studied fashion at London's Harrow School of Art, but left after one semester. In the early 1970s, she began creating designs with partner Malcolm McLaren for the subcultures of the London punk scene.
- **Why is this exhibition looking at the 1980s?** Westwood's designs, and their reception by the mainstream fashion press, underwent a dramatic change in the 1980s. By focusing on this transitional decade, the exhibition will trace the maturation of Westwood's unique design philosophy. As the decade progressed, rather than continuing to focus primarily on non-Western cultures or subcultural groups for inspiration, Westwood also turned to the history of Western fashion—and English tradition in particular.
- **What is "street" fashion? What is high fashion?** This exhibition focuses on Westwood's transition from "street" fashion to high fashion in the 1980s. The exhibition defines "street" fashion as clothing that exists outside the well-known conventions, institutions and media coverage that constitute the high fashion world.

## Exhibition Highlights



- **Pirates Ensemble**

The *Pirates* collection represents Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren's first foray into the fashion world. In that presentation, the designers referenced and manipulated the history of dress, specifically eighteenth-century men's undergarments. Those influences are used, however, to make unconventional statements, as can be seen in the ensemble here. Contrary to the prevailing fashions of the time, the clothing is unisex. Although the ensemble is a clear example of the subcultural tendencies in their early work, their dabbling with historic references presages Westwood's future exploration and use of the history of fashion.

- **Time Machine Ensemble**

This ensemble from Vivienne Westwood's *Time Machine* collection, with its satirical take on conservative British culture, demonstrates Westwood's growing, yet irreverent, engagement with fashion history. Unlike the baggy fit of the *Pirates* ensemble, this ensemble features a more structured silhouette, with fabrics and precise cuts borrowed from British tailoring practices. Although Westwood pokes fun at British aristocracy by putting styles fit for the Royal Family on the runway, she nevertheless champions domestic institutions, industries and traditions.



- **“Statue of Liberty” Ensemble**

The “Statue of Liberty” ensemble further reflects Westwood's engagement with fashion history, as seen in the earlier *Time Machine* example. Here, that engagement is most interestingly, and perhaps most provocatively, focused on the underpinning of the fashionable female form for centuries: the corset. Though a student of fashion history, Westwood cannot help being its saboteur as well. Here, she references an eighteenth-century corset, yet at the same time turns underwear into outerwear, thereby subverting traditional fashion rules. This use and abuse of fashion history and conventions is now a hallmark of Westwood's design approach.

**Don't Forget!**

It's easy to overlook small objects. Take a look at Westwood's temporary tattoos, "Rocking Horse" boots, and Mini-Crini runway video before you leave.