

VIVIENNE WESTWOOD, 1980–89

From “Street” Fashion to High Fashion: Looking at Vivienne Westwood



World's End (Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood)
unisex ensemble
multicolor striped cotton
Pirates collection, Fall 1981, England
gift of Barbara Hrdac



Vivienne Westwood
“Statue of Liberty” corset and skirt
silver leather, silver metallic lamé and white silk tulle
Time Machine collection, fall 1988, England
museum purchase

Abstract: This lesson uses Vivienne Westwood’s 1980s fashion designs as a way to explore the differences and similarities between “street” fashion and high fashion. Students will visit a museum exhibition, think critically about the objects they see, and make their own collage to design an outfit that combines elements of “street” fashion and high fashion.

Grade/Level: High school seniors or college freshmen

Subject: Visual Arts

Time Required: 1 hour discussion in museum gallery, 40 minutes of discussion and activity in classroom

Materials Required: Magazines, catalogs, blank paper, scissors, glue

Educational Standards: New York State Educational Guideline for Lessons in the Visual Arts, Grade 12, Standard 3.4.3.

- “Students analyze and interpret the ways in which political, cultural, social, religious, and psychological concepts and themes have been explored in visual art.”

Lesson Overview: In the late 1970s, Vivienne Westwood was known as a punk fashion leader. In the 1980s, her fashion designs underwent a transformation. In the beginning of that decade, she designed oversized, streetwise clothing for an avant-garde set. By the middle of the decade, however, she had turned to designing structured clothing that referenced historical fashions. These structured designs were featured in mainstream magazines like *Vogue*, and were worn by a high fashion clientele. This transition, which is the focus of the exhibition, provides us with an opportunity to discuss the relationship between “street” (or subcultural) and high (or mainstream) fashion.

Lesson Objectives:

- Analyze and interpret “street” fashion and high fashion by comparing and contrasting two ensembles from the exhibition
- Learn about fashion history
- Think critically about fashion

Discussion Steps:

- At the entrance of the gallery, introduce the exhibition. Inform the students that they will see the entire exhibition, but will focus on two ensembles for this lesson.
- At the gallery, point out the *Pirates* ensemble. Ask the students to describe the outfit. Ask the students what the outfit reminds them of (e.g., does it look like a Pirate’s costume?).
- Does the outfit look unusual or different to them? What about this outfit looks unusual? Have the students list features of the outfit that they think are “street.” Point out the oversized silhouette, and unisex quality of the look, as indicators of its belonging to “street” fashion.
- Ask students who they imagine would wear this outfit. Where do they think it would be worn? Point out that the outfit could be worn by men and women. Point out that artists, musicians and club kids wore Westwood’s designs during this time.
- Next, point out the “Statue of Liberty” ensemble. This exhibition’s research team does not know why the ensemble is named “Statue of Liberty.” Ask the students why they think Vivienne Westwood gave it that name, and if they would give it a different name.
- Note that this outfit was shown in 1987, by which time Westwood was getting more attention in mainstream fashion magazines like *Vogue*.
- Ask the students to describe what they see. Ask the students if parts of the outfit seem familiar or old-fashioned. Point out that the top of the ensemble is based on an 18th century corset.
- Ask students who would have worn this? Where could this be worn? Point out that this is an evening dress, but also has a visible corset, traditionally worn as an undergarment.
- What are the differences between the *Pirates* ensemble and the “Statue of Liberty” ensemble? Note the differences in shape and materials used. The “Statue of Liberty” ensemble was shown on a Paris runway, but the *Pirates* ensemble was not. How does this make you think about these two outfits differently?
- Now focus on the similarities of the two ensembles. How is the “Statue of Liberty” outfit similar to the *Pirates* ensemble? Both incorporate elements of clothing history. Ask the students to point out these elements in each outfit. Note that both ensembles are appropriations of underwear as outerwear.

Activities/Projects: In the classroom, remind the students of what they saw in the gallery. Give the students twenty minutes to make a collage of an outfit that combines high fashion and “street” fashion elements. Images can come from magazines, catalogs, photographs or other sources. Ask students to think about the contrast between high and “street” fashion while they create their outfit. Will they create a high fashion outfit that incorporates “street” elements, a “street” fashion outfit that borrows ideas from high fashion, or a new combination of the two? Ask students to think about where they could wear this new outfit.

Assessment:

- Students will present and discuss their collages in class.
- Ask students to come up with definitions of “street” fashion and high fashion. What is the difference between the two? Is the only difference where the clothes are shown (i.e., on a runway or in a museum), and who wears them? Do they influence each other? Are the differences always clear? Ask the students to look at their own clothes. Do they think they are wearing high fashion, “street” fashion, or a combination of the two.
- In the second half of the 1980s, Vivienne Westwood made clothes that were more accepted by the mainstream fashion industry. Ask the students whether they think this compromised her vision. Can you still be unique if you are not considered to be outside of the mainstream?