

Black is the new Black

As the 2008 L'Oreal Melbourne Fashion Festival has shown, this city's relationship with the colour black is far from fading. The significance of this relationship, and indeed the strong presence of black in fashion design is now the subject of a major exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, *Black in Fashion: Mourning to Night*.
Kate McCurdy



ENGLAND, Dress (c. 1865), silk, glass, 155.0 cm (centre back); 35.0 (waist, flat), Gift of Miss Cawan, 1973

An NGV first: an exhibition across both venues

The exhibition which presents garments and portraits and other items are drawn from the NGV's extensive collection of fashion and textiles as well as a number of private and public loans. Notably this is the first time that an exhibition has been held across both NGV venues. NGV International on St Kilda Road will display the worldly history of how black came to be chosen to represent such themes as authority, self-denial, conspicuous consumption, mourning, as well as the empowerment of men and women alike; while the Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia at Federation Square takes on an Australian, and particularly Melbourne, focus.

Black's dark associations

Black has come to signify and be associated with many things in its history, including but not limited to death and mourning, power and authority, self denial and humility, wealth, urbanity, sex appeal and allure, as well as elegance, sophistication and glamour. Due to the diversity of its connotations, black can often be seen as a contradictory signifier; its meaning is dependent on a subjective view in relation to its social context and artistic and functional intention.

The origins of black in fashion

Historically, Phillip the Good, Duke of Burgundy in the fifteenth century was the first to use black as a colour for fashionable dress, which stemmed from his mourning throughout his reign for his murdered father. His way of dressing had a strong influence at his court and soon black became associated with authority and power. The trend, reflected in the many portraits on display in the exhibition, continued through the centuries to European courts and parliaments such as Spain, the Dutch Republic and Britain. In the nineteenth century black became the dominant and popular colour for mens and womenswear, particularly in Britain. Adopted by the dandies and poets of the time, such as Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, it became associated with the Romantic and immaculately tailored gentlemen of town. At the same time powerful men of industry and commerce came to wear black garments. Ironically, a uniform of black was also adopted by their servants at this time, although their clothing was of a lower quality and cut than their masters.



Mad Cortes

Sydney (fashion house), est. 2000
Mira Vukovic (designer)
born Yugoslavia 1973, arrived Australia 1996
Berlin dress 2003–04 autumn–winter Berlin collection 2003–04
rayon, acetate, polyester, metal, elastic
71.0 cm (centre back); 33.5 cm (waist, flat)
Purchased, 2005

Mourning wear

Synonymous with mourning wear in the Victorian era was Queen Victoria herself, who chose to dress in black in mourning for the death of her mother, and later most notably, of her husband Prince Albert. Her choices informed the codes of mourning dress for the whole of Britain, and indeed influenced other countries such as Australia's attitude to mourning attire. The mourning process became excessive in the nineteenth century, where period of deep mourning, ordinary mourning, and half mourning were observed, most often restricting the dress choices of widows, rather than widowers. For example, when a widow is in a period of deep mourning - for one year and one day following the death of her husband - she must dress in drab and dull fabrics in respect for his memory. This was typically a combination of woollen wear, or garments fashioned from bombazine, paramatta and serge, with a crape bonnet and thick crape veil, all black of course. As a widow progresses through the respective periods of mourning she may include other fabrics into her wardrobe such as silk and velvet, add embellishments and grey, white and purple fabrics could be introduced in the final six months of the last period of mourning.

Mourning to night

Women of the late nineteenth century must have welcomed the end of the burden of wearing black in mourning, and celebrated the new appearance of black in the form of evening gowns, most famously in John Singer Sargent's portrait *Madame X* (1883-84). The early twentieth century became an exciting time for fashionable women living in urban societies, as women embraced the glamour of wearing black at night. Coco Chanel's template for the iconic 'little black dress' is remarked upon as being one of the most adaptable, enduring, and also timeless classics of fashion design. Chanel's choice of black remained strongly associated with the dress style and continued in its further developments throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and grew in popularity in the time of cocktail parties in the 1950s. Some of the most authentic and recognised examples of this were designed by French couturiers Christian Dior and Cristobal Balenciaga.

Thomas de KEYSER (above right)

Dutch 1596/97-1667

Frederick van Velthuysen and his wife, Josina 1636

oil on wood panel

114.9 x 80.5 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia

Presented through The Art Foundation of Victoria by Lynton and Nigel Morgan, in memory of their parents, Eric and Marian Morgan, Founder Benefactors, 1987

REDFERN (right)

London (couture house), 1881-1929

John REDFERN (designer)

England 1853-1929

Jacket 1892

silk, glass

160.0 cm (centre back); 60.0 cm (sleeve length)

The Schofield Collection. Purchased with the assistance of a special grant from the Government of Victoria, 1974



The punk movement and postwar subcultures

Black was the popular colour for postwar subcultures and countercultures. The Beat Generation and bikers in the United States, the intellectuals of the Left Bank in France, and most outrageously by the punk movement of the punk movement in Britain and America, all used black predominantly in their wardrobes. The connotations in black of death fitted with the 'No Future' punk attitude and the combination of a black leather jacket, black skinny jeans, and black Doc Marten boots with safety pins, studs, spikes and chains gave a menacing and shocking appearance to those who wore them.

The use of the safety pin in punkwear stems from the poverty and want of simple commodities of that generation; punks paraded their lack of jewellery by adopting safety pins and chains instead. However, one aspect of their dress that was somewhat easier to come by was black clothing. Black material has only been possible to obtain cheaply and easily since the refinement of synthetic dyes in the last century. Before then, creating and processing a black dye was a difficult task, as unlike other colours, black dye is not found in a natural state. A black dye was created by a process of overdyeing which often resulted in a blue-black. These were also unstable dyes, and until the 1850s garments made from fabric dyed in this way would spoil in wet and also hot weather, often resulting in dyeing the wearer black and giving off unpleasant odours. The lengthy dyeing process required at this time to create the dark coloured clothing also caused attire made from black fabrics to be expensive to buy.



SEX. London (fashion house)
1974–76
Vivienne Westwood (designer)
born England 1941
Malcolm McLaren (designer)
born England 1946
Court shoes 1974–76
leather, metal, rubber
(a-b) 17.3 x 8.5 x 23.2 cm (each)
Purchased, 1985
© Courtesy of Vivienne Westwood

Black: the designers' choice

Black has been and will remain an iconic and classic colour in fashion design, as it is reflected by the choices made by the designers themselves. Christian Dior described his feelings about black as 'the most popular and the most convenient and the most elegant of all colours. And I say colour on purpose, because black may be sometimes just as striking as a colour'. Yohji Yamamoto, the Tokyo designer, has concentrated on the use of black in his collections because 'black is modest and arrogant at the same time. Black is lazy and easy - but mysterious. It means that many things go together, yet it takes different aspects in many fabrics...But above all black says this: "I don't bother you - don't bother me!"

Gianni Versace's evening dress evokes the character of the femme fatale, curiosity through mystery and deception, while Jean Paul Gaultier's military designs asserts black's authoritative power in fashion design.

However, it wasn't just the male designers who saw the value of black in their fashion design. At the time when Vivienne Westwood was introducing fetish wear into the mainstream in London, particular with her black, high-heeled and spiked *Court shoes* (1974-76), Jenny Bannister was making waves in Australia for her 'body sculpture' work. She embraced the punk style and their penchant for black clothing, which seems to be the point where black in fashion and the city of Melbourne fell in love. The 'black attack' of the 1980s has continued until the present, with Chanel's little black dress remaining a firm staple in womenswear worldwide. All of these designers and more are well represented as part of this significant exhibition at the NGV.

Far from being a drab, monotone or even morbid experience, the NGV's exhibition shows that the history of black in fashion is a very colourful one, and one that will continue to dominant contemporary design.

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COMME DES GARÇONS

Tokyo (fashion house), est. 1969

Junya WATANABE (designer)

born Japan 1961

Dress and trousers 2005 spring-summer (detail)

cotton, polyester, metal

(a) 80.0 cm (centre back); 40.0 cm (waist, flat) (dress);

(b) 99.0 cm (outer leg);

35.0 cm (waist, flat) (trousers)

Collection of Anna Schwartz, Melbourne

Black in Fashion: Mourning to Night
NGV Australia at Federation Square
from 8 February - 24 August 2008
NGV International on St Kilda Road
from 29 February - 31 August 2008
Entry is free