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Why Fashion's Stuck in the 20th Century

As fashion week approaches, the industry prepares to do what it does best—or at least what it does most: recycle the past. But is that such a bad thing?



MERLE GINSBERG 09.07.16 10:00 PM ET



Contrary to the kickoff of most fashion weeks, we know *exactly* what this one, spring 2017, will parade down New York and European runways: Midi skirts. Florals. Animal prints. Long. Short. Lace. Embellishment. Mismatched prints. Denim. Mini's. Tight. Flou. Structure. Chiffon. Ruffles. Pants. Dresses. Leather. Cashmere. Boxy. Sleek. Fairytale. Tailored. Simple. Complicated. Girls dressed like boys. Boys dressed like girls.

In other words: *Everything*.

Whether we have Gucci's Allesandro Michele—fashion's current man of the hour and one of the few current big-brand creative directors still standing/thriving—to thank for this is debatable. But one truth does emerge from the style hodgepodge of this seemingly stuck moment: There are no single overwhelming trends anymore. There's just overwhelming. Something for everybody: femmy, sporty, bi, straight, young, old, thin, heavy, rich, not.

Now that's the good *and* the bad news. For many seasons past, every silhouette, fabric, shape, and idea from the 20th century—the New Look, The Hippie, The Flapper, The Chanel Woman, The Audrey, The Jackie—has marched and re-marched down those runways, ad nauseum, looking like they've been tossed into the cultural washing machine and come out a slightly different way. And yes, perhaps a little faded. After all, they've been reloaded so many times. How much longer can the silhouettes of the last hundred years be recycled?

So why can't fashion escape the last century? Why can't the great designers working today—Karl Lagerfeld, Riccardo Tisci, Phoebe Phylo, Stella McCartney, Roland Mouret, Tom Ford, Michael Kors, Marc Jacobs, Proenza Schouler, even John Galliano, and certainly Gucci's Michele—let go of the hallmarks of the last 10 decades or so? Think about it: When was the last time you saw fringe? Dropped waists? Babydoll high waists? Wide leg, high-waisted trousers? Oh, yeah—last season! While he was lauded for whimsical accessories and '70s L.A. boho hotties, Saint Laurent's Hedi Slimane was not the hit with retail the way he was with fashion insiders. Nor was he particularly inventive. Slimane might have taken the "Y" out of "YSL," but he didn't add anything new.

Not that long ago, the designer was God. Armani, Lagerfeld, Galliano, Jacobs, Albaz—even Raf Simons—were the creative masters of their universe, and they dictated trends. So what happened?

"There are just too many clothes now," sighs Neiman Marcus Fashion Director Ken Downing. "Crazy fashion fatigue is happening for so many reasons. Europeans afraid of terrorism. Americans not wanting to go to Europe because of terrorism—therefore, less consumption of luxury goods. Russians aren't traveling as much. There's a whole malaise."



He's not done: "People are seeing stuff far too soon that isn't available to them—in magazines, on actresses, online. Digital is very positive for fashion—it makes it far more inclusive and less exclusive. But no one thought about the ramifications of showing the buying public everything six months in advance. Bloggers and social media—there are so many images online of clothes that we all put out from fashion shows—the stuff that makes the best picture gets tweeted too much. So *then* when it *does* come into this store, you get sick of looking at it! That means retail is struggling, which we all know."

Translation: The big store buyers are now forced to flood the floors with the things they *know* will sell. Translation: *predictable*. And now they've got online resellers like The Real Real and Ebay to contend with.

And on top of retail confusion, shoppers have Instagram to overwhelm them more. "Young women really don't study runway photos like they used to," says fashion historian Bronwyn Cosgrave. "They are watching Instagram to see how Gigi Hadid is mixing Topshop with Michael Kors or how Kendal Jenner is wearing Versace. Then they remix what they have in new ways." This pretty much insures no one needs to buy anything new.

Meanwhile, luxury brands don't move forward easily, if at all. "Modern fashion is powered by age-old brands," says Cosgrave. "Lanvin was founded in 1889, Chanel in 1909. Gucci

came along in 1920, Balmain in 1945, and then the House of Dior launched two years later. And the method of keeping these brands going is instilling their classic house signatures into the modern repertoire. This practice ensures that the brand remains authentic to its roots. So this does not make for an industry that is wildly innovative, but it does keep alive some of the greatest ever designs from the Chanel 2.55 handbag to Dior's Bar Jacket. In fact, often when designers do try to break new ground, they are most often shot down by critics. And it is all the more difficult today, when anyone with a social media account considers themselves to be a bona fide critic."

Even the most innovative designers/brands keep recycling not just their house's identity but their designer's singular bag of tricks: Marc Jacobs with goth, Riccardo Tisci and Tom Ford with sex, Calvin Klein (no matter who the designer) with minimalism, Ralph Lauren with Americana, Valentino with embellishment and femininity, Chanel with tweed and pearls.

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Thank you for subscribing to the Daily Digest and Cheat Sheet. We will not share your email with anyone outside of The Daily Beast. Of course, the fact that Zara and H & M knock off these trends faster than the Kardashians change their faces means that locking down one overriding look is practically impossible. So how can even a genuinely new look get any real attention?



Author Valerie Steele, director and chief curator at the Museum of the Fashion Institute of Technology, credits the everything-at-once movement to the hippie revolution of the '70s: "In the past, there was always one dominant look—the New Look of '47, the mini skirt. That all broke down in the '70s. The Empire of Fashion broke into lots of little fashion tribes. That's when skirts could be short *or* long. It was all about expressing yourself, personal priorities, and imagination took over from fashion-dictated priorities. And it's interesting that it's the '70s that have pervaded in high fashion for the last few years. But then again, there's also a big interest in collage and pastiche and retro in all areas of art and music now. Are humans out of ideas? Maybe it's a moment that's more about questions than answers."

The only real originality now seems to be happening in street style. "The *way* you wear it is more important now than what you wear," says Downing. "The idea of stylist has caught on at the street level. You're revered now because you know how to put clothes together. Which means clothes from the past look cool."

The green fashion environmental movement, too, spearheaded by actor Colin Firth's wife, Livia Furst, also makes shopping your closet, well, cool. If a movie star's wife can do it, so can those of us with much lower budgets. And identifying with your tribe, be it boho, geek,

finance, or artsy, is maybe a more important message in fast-moving society these days than “I-read-*Vogue*-and-go-to-Barneys.”

Simon Collins, the former dean of Parsons School of Design and now head of Fashion Culture Design conferences, sees the democratization of fashion this way:

“There used to be a relatively small number of editors and buyers making big decisions that everyone had to listen to. They were the only game in town, and they focused on runway trends as they saw them. That is why magazines like *The Face* and *i-D* were so revolutionary in the '90s. They didn't care what the establishment thought, and they weren't slaves to advertisers. Fast-forward to now and many new designers couldn't care less what the establishment thinks. That's not to say the establishment doesn't matter. There are plenty of magazines and buyers who don't look much beyond the runways, and they're relevant to their own market. But crucially they're no longer the only game in town. For example, the 2015 Designer of the Year at Parsons, Lucy Jones, designed a collection for people in wheelchairs. I doubt she was relying on being picked up for a September issue. These days if you can create it, and it's good, then you can sell it and you don't need the usual suspects to help. Take a look at NineteenthAmendment.com (an online market for undiscovered designers) for a new way to find talent. There's no shortage of new ideas or design talent. There is actually a wealth of innovative ideas. All that's missing is an easy tag for lazy journalists and buyers. And I think that's a good thing.”

Steele, like Downing, goes back to the idea that there are just too many damn clothes up for grabs these days: “There's just too much stuff out there! Too many options. That obliterates brand commitment, because there are too many brands! Maybe people have come to realize that clothes haven't changed their lives that much. Maybe they want to spend more time and money on travel.”

Then Steele poses the most relevant question: “What new looks are really possible? Silver futuristic jumpsuits aren't that practical. We only have two legs and two arms. Our shapes are our shapes. Maybe there's only so much you can do with them!”

So perhaps the only original thing to do that hasn't been done in fashion until now is ... everything. All at once.

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