

Kristin Knox

McQUEEN Alexander

GENIUS OF A GENERATION

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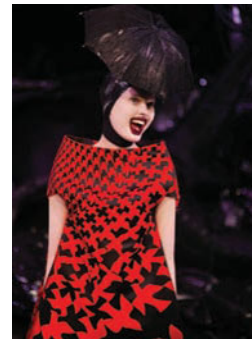
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Pictured here in 2006

INTRODUCTION

HIS was the kind of genius that only comes around once in a generation. Much more than just a fashion designer, Lee Alexander McQueen sought not only to dress the women of the world as the preceding titans of ready-to-wear such as Christian Dior or Yves Saint Laurent had, but to inspire them to epic artistic proportions, to bust fashion out of its commercial confines and reinvent its role in contemporary society. McQueen was often accused of misogyny for designs which objectified his models in a dark, twisted sexual manner (bondage, chainmail and even girls fainting upon being cinched into the most minute of corsets) or, even more frequently, attacked for producing fashions unwearable and inaccessible beyond the voyeuristic spectacles of his lavish, unorthodox runway shows with elaborate props and presentations which blurred the boundary between runway show and a new kind of installation art.

But therein lies the genius of Alexander McQueen, who in 2003 was appointed CBE as well as being named International Designer of the Year at the Council of Fashion Designer Awards, and who was named British Designer of the Year four times. For McQueen, fashion was not necessarily a means for self-expression, but a force to facilitate the opposite, much more akin to the role of 19th- and 20th-century painting and sculpture: to compel the wearer or beholder to surrender to the fantastical and sinister world of which McQueen was the sole artificer. These often surreal ‘worlds’ saw McQueen’s aggressive aesthetic plunge into the darkest recesses of the soul, where themes such as witchcraft, rape and capital punishment were unearthed and then recast into things of sartorial beauty. He was the industry’s aptly named *enfant terrible*, a visionary who never lost his sense of child-like wonder and curiosity, whose appetite remained unchecked by commercial ambitions – an artist in every sense of the word.

Beyond just vision, McQueen was a figure of extraordinary sartorial prowess. And without his exceptional tailoring skills – a ripe combination of both

training and talent – his visions would have remained just that: dreams unable to be realized in three-dimensional form on the runway, or in stores, or eventually on the streets, illustrations forever confined to the pages of the designer’s sketchbook. Trained on London’s legendary Savile Row, the home of bespoke tailoring, McQueen’s masterful wielding of needle and thread allowed him to execute his *avant-garde* designs with such exceptional craftsmanship that his ready-to-wear collections often exuded *haute couture* sensibility.

He was born on March 17, 1969, in Stepney in London’s East End – the youngest of six children born to a taxi driver and social science teacher – and he grew up in a council flat. Because of his brash personality and humble upbringing, McQueen’s identity in the fashion world was in part that of ‘the outsider’ who had accidentally wrangled his way into the innermost fold. The young McQueen, a creative with a flair for fashion and a penchant for the eccentric from the age of three (when he drew pictures of Cinderella in elaborate ballgowns on his sister’s bedroom wall), was always an outsider at home as well. Openly gay from a young age, he was spurned by his father, bullied and teased at school. But encouraged by his mother Joyce, to whom he was very close until her death a few days before his own, the young Lee McQueen spent his time escaping into his own world, daydreaming and drawing women’s clothes.

In 1985, aged 16, McQueen left school with just a single O-level and one A-level, both in Art. The next year, after seeing a television advertisement highlighting the shortage of apprentices in the tailoring business, McQueen walked into Anderson & Sheppard on Savile Row, tailor to the Prince of Wales, and was hired on the spot.

Here McQueen’s aesthetic truly began to develop as his natural capacity for the chalk and scissors allowed him to quickly conquer classic cuts and shapes, like the gentleman’s suit. He moved on to greater challenges such as reconstructing period tailoring, reaching back even to 16th-century pattern cutting, influences which have

remained consistent throughout his body of design work. Despite having taken up residence in one of the world's most conservative sartorial outposts, McQueen still found a space to express, explore and experiment with the boundaries of his rebellious nature. For example, while still at Anderson & Sheppard, he infamously sewed a particularly offensive affront into the lining of a jacket that he had tailored for Prince Charles. As fate would have it, ten years later in 2001, the Prince of Wales returned McQueen's lewd gesture with a more gracious one of his own; he presented the designer with his third British Designer of the Year Award.

McQueen then left Anderson & Sheppard to work down the street at Gieves & Hawkes and thence to theatrical costumiers Angels and Bermans, whose influence continued to make itself felt in his creation of over-the-top, almost operatically grand, costume pieces. These were enormously popular with pop artists and musicians right from the commencement of his career – Icelandic singer Björk wore an early design for the cover of her album *Homogenic* and David Bowie sported McQueen's distressed Union Jack coat on the cover of his 1997 album *Earthling* – right up to the end when Lady Gaga stomped around in a pair of the gold Armadillo 12-inch platforms from McQueen's Spring/Summer 2010 collection in her video for the smash hit *Bad Romance*.

After departing Angels and Bermans at the tender age of 20, McQueen spent a period of time working for the Japanese designer Koji Tatsuno before traveling to Milan to work for Italian designer Romeo Gigli as a pattern cutter. In 1992, the young but now seasoned tailor returned to London at last ready to launch his own label. He completed a postgraduate course at Central St. Martin's College of Art and Design at the behest of the Head of Masters who caught a glimpse of McQueen's exceptional portfolio when he arrived at the college to tutor in pattern cutting. This was a most serendipitous encounter – it led to McQueen's discovery by (and subsequent friendship with and high-profile mentorship by) aristocratic style guru and former Fashion Editor of *Vogue*, Isabella Blow.

While McQueen always had the raw talent, the roughness of his gap-toothed East London character and often abrasive rudeness of his vision necessitated a go-between, a fashion industry veteran to reign him back where necessary and help round off the edges. Essentially, Blow assisted the young genius in finding



Fit for a McQueen: HRH Prince Charles and Alexander McQueen at the British Fashion Awards at London's Somerset House in 2001.

his footing commercially while ensuring that he stayed true to his original vision. She eventually purchased the whole of McQueen's graduate collection, buying just one item a month and paying the young designer £100 per week. 'He'd bring an outfit in a bin liner,' Blow explained to *Time Out* in 2005, 'I'd look at it and then he'd come to the cash-point with me.' She convinced him to adopt his middle name, Alexander, as the forename for his label instead of his given name of Lee, and she introduced him to key industry players. Suddenly, the Alexander McQueen brand was born.

In May 2007, Isabella Blow tragically took her own life. This was a devastating loss for the designer, who told *W Magazine* in 2008 that her death 'left a big void in my life.' In memoriam, McQueen dedicated his Spring/Summer 2008 show at Paris Fashion Week to her, sending out enormous poster-sized invitations depicting the late Blow riding to heaven in a chariot pulled by two Pegasi and integrating the theme of birds (symbolizing Blow) into his designs.



Björk flashes a smile almost as brilliant as the crystals adorning her face at the Fashion Rocks event in 2003.



Lady Gaga dedicated to McQueen her performance at the 2010 Brit Awards, which took place in London just five days after he passed away. Lady Gaga is pictured here wearing a black letter-jacket embossed with an 'M' and two crosses in tribute to his memory.



Isabella Blow champions her young *protégé* from the front row of his Fall/Winter 2004 show in Paris. 'My relationship with McQueen began in 1994,' she told *Time Out* in 2005, 'when I went to a Saint Martin's graduate show. I couldn't get a seat, so I sat on the stairs and I was just watching, when I suddenly thought: I really like those clothes, they are amazing. It was his first collection. It was the tailoring and the movement which initially drew me to them.'

RIGHT McQueen's 'bumsters' are an example of the influence of his runway collection on street style. The low-slung pants as shown here on the catwalk launched the controversial trend of low-rise jeans which became an integral part of the youth street culture for the duration of the nineties and into the noughties. Pictured here is a manifestation of the bumster from the Spring/Summer 2001 show in Paris.

McQueen exploded onto the international fashion scene with subversive designs such as the controversial 'Highland Rape' collection of 1995, which was stitched together from left-over scraps of fabric. He designed the aptly-named low-slung craze-igniting 'bumster' trousers. The great spectacle of his Fall/Winter 1998 show in London was a woman in a red rubber hooded catsuit standing at the center of a burning ring of fire. Just two years after meeting Isabella Blow, he was named British Designer of the Year (the first of four times this honour would be bestowed on him) and was headhunted by Bernard Arnault, chairman of LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton, to follow in the footsteps of fellow Englishman (and son of a London plumber) John Galiano and head up creative direction at the flagging French fashion house of Givenchy. He was just 27 years old at the time.

Though initially unenthused at the prospect of streamlining his own vision to sync with the French brand's heritage, McQueen eventually accepted the position as an opportunity to further establish his design

expertise and cultivate his profile on the international scene. But the partnership was tumultuous from the start as Givenchy's brand, the ultimate in understated Parisian elegance whose founder was couturier to Audrey Hepburn, was just so radically different from the agenda of the young Alexander McQueen who sent space aliens down the Parisian runways to the great distaste of the press and buyers. In the end, he refused to compromise his creative vision to suit the French house and spoke unfavorably of the brand and its founder, Hubert de Givenchy, to the press.

'It was just money to me,' McQueen, always frank, reflected to the *Guardian* in 2005. 'But there was nothing I could do: the only way it would have worked would have been if they had allowed me to change the whole concept of the house, to give it a new identity, and they never wanted me to do that.'

After five years, McQueen and Givenchy parted ways because the headstrong designer complained that his contract with the French label and its parent conglomerate was 'constraining his creativity' and that their demand





Carla Bruni, when she was commanding catwalks instead of affairs of state as France's fashionable first lady, walks the runway in a traditional evening gown at Givenchy Haute Couture Fall/Winter 1997. The gown's long, sweeping lines reference founder Hubert de Givenchy's designs for Audrey Hepburn in the film *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, but the crystal-encrusted, somewhat futuristic, star adorning the shoulder, and the sweeping Swarovski milky-way across the body of the dress, are very much McQueen's aesthetic.

for the production of six collections per year simply did not allow for any creative innovation or evolution to occur within the brand. 'Give me time and I'll give you revolutionary,' he told the *New York Times* in 2001.

If time was what McQueen needed to instigate revolution, after leaving Givenchy and returning to his own eponymous label with the help of the Gucci group, LVMH's rival (which acquired a 51% stake in the business), he finally got what he wanted. He was at last able to come into his own, to embark upon a quest for the truly revolutionary.

In a few short seasons, McQueen succeeded in building a global fashion empire according to his own vision, and became a red-carpet favorite amongst Hollywood and international A-listers – Sarah Jessica Parker, Naomi Campbell, Lady Gaga and Kate Moss are counted amongst his friends and biggest fans. He opened five stand-alone stores in London, New York, Los Angeles, Milan and Las Vegas, launched a secondary diffusion label – McQ – and pioneered a now-iconic skull print motif which became an instant must-have accessory in every form, from chiffon scarves and jewellery to bags. He even collaborated with major American retail chain Target in February 2009, to resounding fiscal success.

At last McQueen was in his element and had an adequate financial structure in place to realize his dreams – his imagination was finally truly unleashed. And nowhere did it run riot more than on his catwalks, which have been one of the main highlights of Paris Fashion Week since he began showing there in 2000 (he had previously shown in London and New York). These shows drew on a cabinet of inspirations ranging from the macabre to the bizarre: Hitchcock heroines, mental asylums, *Lord Of The Flies*, dark and twisty carnivals, and evolution in a post-Apocalyptic landscape among them. '[They're] my own living nightmares,' he quipped to the *Guardian* in 2005. For his Spring 2003 collection McQueen recreated a shipwreck; in Spring 2005 he made a human chess game; and for Autumn 2006, Kate Moss (immediately following the disgrace of her 2005 drugs scandal) was beamed onto the runway as a life-sized holograph, a vulnerable apparition, eerily clad in ghostly rippling masses of gauzy white fabric.

One show (Spring/Summer 1999) famously saw model Shalom Harlow clad all in white and turned into