

# THE FUNDAMENTALS OF FASHION DESIGN

THIRD EDITION

RICHARD SORGER  
& JENNY UDALE



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# Preface

The very essence of fashion lies within its relationship to time and the constant search for the new. How do we respond to the time that we live in when we are designing for the future? What are we trying to capture or communicate?

Political, social, and economic changes are in constant flux and have a huge influence on our thought process and the design language we develop both as human beings and designers. The complexity of the fashion system is constantly shifting. With the impact of social media, along with the growing importance of sustainability, production, labor, and globalization issues, the business of fashion has become more complex. There are more questions than answers, but today, the globalization of the industry impacts education, and the landscape has shifted and is not the same as it once was. New ideas are required to deal with the intricacy of the global fashion system. But what is the impact on a new generation of designers?

Within my own design and teaching career, which has spanned twenty years, the internationalism within education has grown significantly. In my experience, cross-cultural exchange of students makes for a more dynamic and valuable learning experience for both the students and their mentors.

Personal identity is often an intangible process that can be difficult to articulate because there is no right or wrong way of designing and the process is different for each designer; it is their personal vision and their take on the world, yet personal identity and its relationship to the fashion designer is fundamental in both how it develops as a process and how it presents itself through the act of designing.

*The Fundamentals of Fashion Design* brings together key designers, their methodology, and point of view to show how they have developed their own personal identities through their work. Through interviews, the reader gains a larger understanding of how designers work, and these interviews enable us to get to the core of why, and how, they do what they do. The interviews give a great insight into a breadth of roles, working relationships and processes within companies, and real-life experiences,

and this book helps to unravel the complexity of these systems. The interviews share invaluable information, and these conversations are underpinned throughout the book with solid and fundamental information on principles such as fabrication and techniques, construction, portfolio building, and an introduction to types of machinery and tools, which are vital to anyone new to fashion design.

The appetite and commitment for your subject—fashion—is central to being able to develop the life skills needed as a young designer. The question is not how do you become a designer, but why? What do you care about? What do you want to contribute? What is your process and intervention? What is it you need to create? What are you intervening into? Where is the gap that your work seeks to fill? This book will help readers begin the journey to find their own answers to these questions.

The fundamentals are listen, be open, learn your craft, invest your time, be curious, ask questions of others so that you can ask them of yourself. Learn through doing; you are working with a real, moving body so you need to understand it. Fabrication is the identity of the hand; touch and feel the fabrics and understand them. Techniques and skills need to be learned and then interpreted through your own hand. Take the initiative and be prepared to work from the bottom up. Do not assume anything because history will inform you about change and why things happened the way they did.

To reference the Eames designers, they loved their work, which was a combination of art and science, design and architecture, process and product, style and function. Now in its third edition, this book has inspired generations of young designers to love their work, too, and find the combination that is right for them to develop their own identities as designers within the ever-changing, intricate, and globalized fashion system.

## Shelley Fox

*Donna Karan Professor of Fashion  
Director, MFA Fashion Design & Society  
Parsons The New School of Design, New York, USA*

"The details are not details. They make the product."

**Charles Eames**



# Contents

## Introduction

—○ 008 Introduction

## 1 Research

- 012 What kind of designer are you?
- 014 Know your subject
- 016 Starting your research
- 018 Sources of research
- 020 The research book
- 024 Mood-, theme- and storyboards
- 026 **In fashion: Louise Gray**
- 030 **In fashion: Gahee Lim**
- 032 Research exercises

## 2 Design

- 038 Design identity
- 040 Ideal bodies
- 044 Silhouette
- 050 Proportion and line
- 052 Detail
- 056 Fabric, color and texture
- 060 Rendering your ideas
- 066 Portfolios
- 068 **In fashion: Peter Jensen**
- 070 **In fashion: Winni Lok**
- 074 Design exercises

### 3 Fabrics and techniques

- 078 Fabric
- 080 Natural fibers
- 084 Man-made fibers
- 086 Synthetic fibers
- 088 Developments in fabric
- 090 Fabric construction
- 098 Surface treatments
- 108 Fabric and yarn trade shows
- 110 **In fashion: Kristin Forss, Marni**
- 112 **In fashion: Michele Manz, Current/Elliott**
- 116 Fabric exercises

### 4 Construction

- 122 Tools and machinery
- 126 Construction techniques
- 140 Draping on the mannequin
- 144 **In fashion: Mårten Andreasson, & Other Stories**
- 146 **In fashion: Chantal Williams, Old Navy**
- 150 Construction exercises

### 5 Developing a collection

- 156 Who are you designing for?
- 162 Genre
- 164 Types of garment
- 170 Putting together a collection
- 176 Showing a collection
- 182 Branding
- 186 **In fashion: Barry Grainger, Timberland**
- 188 **In fashion: Alan Humphrey Bennett, Paul Smith**
- 192 Developing a collection exercises

- 195 **Appendix**
- 196 **Glossary**
- 198 **Online resources**
- 201 **Student resources**
- 204 **Bibliography**
- 205 **Index**
- 212 **Picture credits**
- 212 **Acknowledgments and credits**

# Introduction

Oscar Wilde, in his famously satirical style, once claimed that: "Fashion is merely a form of ugliness so unbearable that we are compelled to alter it every six months." Oscar Wilde was passionate about his appearance and his clothes, so there's little doubt that he made this remark with his tongue planted firmly in his cheek. Wilde's statement does make a useful point, however, about how we are all drawn to fashion—not only as a means to individually express ourselves through the way in which we choose to dress, but also as a means of creative expression through design.

Fashion is a constant search for the new. It is hungry and ruthless. To be able to create clothes is also very exciting and very rewarding. But designers do not just sit at a desk and design pretty frocks. They need to research and develop a theme, source fabrics, and develop a cohesive range with them. A good designer understands the differing properties of fabric and what is achievable with them, so an understanding of the techniques of garment construction is essential to fashion design.

When developing a collection, a designer needs to think about who they are designing for, what type of garments they are developing, and for what season.

The process of design can be simplified into three stages: research, initial design ideas, and the development of the best ideas. Good research underpins good design. It inspires and informs the design work, and if the research is coherent, it will help with the cohesion of the designs. Initial design ideas can employ a range of ideas and can pursue different directions. Then, in review, the best ideas are taken forward and developed into other designs, and these are the designs that begin to form a cohesive collection of clothes. These ideas are then further developed into 3D, exploring the use of fabric, techniques, and construction.

In this revised and updated third edition, we will introduce you to the fundamental principles of fashion design so that you can begin thinking about these things in relation to your own design work. There are new interviews with Mårten Andreasson, Barry Grainger, Chantal Williams, and Gahee Lim, as well as updated interviews with Louise Gray, Peter Jensen, Michele Manz, Alan Humphrey Bennett, and Winni Lok, which will provide you with insights into what it really means to have a career in fashion. In Chapter 2, there are new design exercises and an expanded section on design details such as fastenings, pockets, and collars. *The Fundamentals of Fashion Design* now includes up-to-date

information about new design and construction techniques, such as 3D printing, CAD pattern cutting, 3D body scanning, and details about the influence of the growth of digital platforms on fashion show schedules. The glossary and list of further resources have been updated and expanded, and the fantastic images throughout the book have been refreshed and updated.

We hope *The Fundamentals of Fashion Design* will motivate you in your design work and inspire you as you embark on your own career within the industry. We hope that you enjoy it ...







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# 1 **Oscar Wilde**

Wilde was passionate about his appearance and his clothes.

## 2-4 **Bronwen Marshall**

Menswear outfits from Bronwen Marshall's graduation collection, which formed part of her MA Fashion course at the Royal College of Art, London.







# 1 Research

Good design cannot happen without some form of research taking place. In terms of design, "research" means the creative investigation of visual or literary references that will inspire and inform your designs. The first thing any designer will do is undertake some form of research, but all designers will have their own particular approach to how they carry this out. Research should be in-depth and thorough. It is like detective work—hunting out obscure references that will help and inspire the design process and make your work stand out from your competitors. In this chapter, we discuss the development of a theme or a concept to inspire the design work, and it is important to stress that in terms of a theme or a concept, we are talking about a cohesive body of research; good research is not a collection of random images and references but a coherent investigation into a subject or subjects.

As a fledgling designer, clothes cannot be designed without researching and understanding clothes that already exist. A designer needs to be aware of the different types of garments, as well as the details and the techniques used to create those garments, in order to create their own designs. (For example, there are many different types of pockets, collars, and stitches used to make and decorate clothes, and the use of these details within a design will make a huge difference to the overall look of a garment.) As a designer, you also need to be informed about the work of other designers, past and present.

But as well as knowing about and understanding clothes and being aware of the work of other fashion designers, a designer also needs to create something new—so they will often research a "theme" or "concept" as a way of keeping the work original.

# What kind of designer are you?

There is no point in trying to be fashionable. This book cannot tell you how to design fashion; it can only tell you what the ingredients are, ways to put them together, and many of the important things that you will need to consider when designing clothes. Clothing is only "fashionable" when your peers or the industry deem a design to be of the zeitgeist. It either is or it isn't.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines fashion as "a popular or the latest style of clothing, hair, decoration or behaviour." Essentially, it means a style that is up-to-date, and how this is agreed upon is subjective and relies on a number of factors. For instance, the punk movement was a reflection of how many young people were feeling in the late 1970s—disenchanted with the politics and culture of the time—and was somewhat engineered by Malcolm McLaren and designer Vivienne Westwood. Not that the punk movement set out to be "fashionable"—anything but! Its aim was to be peripheral, subversive. But this reinforces the idea that trying too hard should not be a factor.

Exhibitions, films, and music can have a huge influence on what is deemed fashionable at a given time.

For fashion design, it is important to develop an awareness of your own taste and style (not how you dress because designers are not always concerned with dressing in the latest trends; as a designer, you almost have permission not to worry about how you dress because you are doing such a good job of dressing others in your day job!).

Not everyone has an aptitude or desire to design "unconventional" clothes. Some designers focus on the understatement or detail of garments. Other designers may design "conventional" garments, but it is the way that they are put together, or styled, that ultimately makes an outfit original and modern. Knowing what you are best at is essential, but this doesn't mean that you shouldn't experiment. It can take a while to "know yourself"—and this period of discovery is usually spent at college. There has to be a certain amount of soul-searching involved; it's not so much about becoming the designer that you want to be, but rather about discovering the designer that you are.

You must be true to your own vision of how you want to dress someone. Beyond that, the rest is in the hands of the industry and the fashion-buying public to decide, and for every person who likes your work, there will always be someone who simply doesn't. This is to be expected, and working in such a subjective field can sometimes be confusing; eventually, though, you will learn to navigate your way through criticism and either develop a steely exterior or recognize which opinions you really respect and which you ought to simply disregard. Once you accept this situation, you will be free to get on with what you are best at—designing clothes.

## 1 Vivienne Westwood

Vivienne Westwood wearing her "God Save the Queen" t-shirt, 1977.

"You have a vocabulary of ideas which you have to add and subtract in order to come up with an equation right for the times."

**Vivienne Westwood**







# Know your subject

Finding out about designers, past and present, is the first essential bit of research that you will undertake. If a career in fashion is what you want, then you really need to know your subject. This might appear to be an obvious statement, but it needs to be said. You may protest, "but I don't want to be influenced by other designers' work." Of course not, but unless you know what has preceded you, how do you know that you aren't naively reproducing someone else's work? Most designers get into fashion because they are passionate about clothes—fanatical even. This hunger and excitement for clothes doesn't disappear when you become an established designer either; a career in fashion is also about a certain level of curiosity and competitiveness with your peers.

Making yourself "fashion aware" doesn't happen overnight—but if you're genuinely passionate about the subject, it is natural to want to find out about it (that's why you've picked up this book, after all). If you're applying to a university or college to study fashion, your interview panel will want you to demonstrate that you have a rudimentary knowledge of designers and their styles. You may even be asked which designers you like and dislike in order to give you an opportunity to display your knowledge and justify your answer.

Magazines are a good place to start, but don't just automatically reach for the big players like *Elle* and *Vogue*. There are many more magazines out there, each appealing to a different niche market and style subculture, and you should gain knowledge of as many as possible; they are all part of the fashion machine. Think about who the magazine's target audience is because this is an important factor when deciding if it is relevant to you, your lifestyle, or your potential clients (for example, is it aspirational?).

Magazines will not only make you aware of different designers, but so-called lifestyle magazines will also make you aware of other design industries and cultural events that often influence (or will be influenced by) fashion. By regularly reading magazines, you will also become aware of stylists, journalists, fashion photographers and hair and make-up artists, models, muses, brands, and shops that are all important to the success of a fashion designer.

There are some great websites that show images of the catwalk collections almost as soon as the show has taken place, such as [www.vogue.com](http://www.vogue.com).

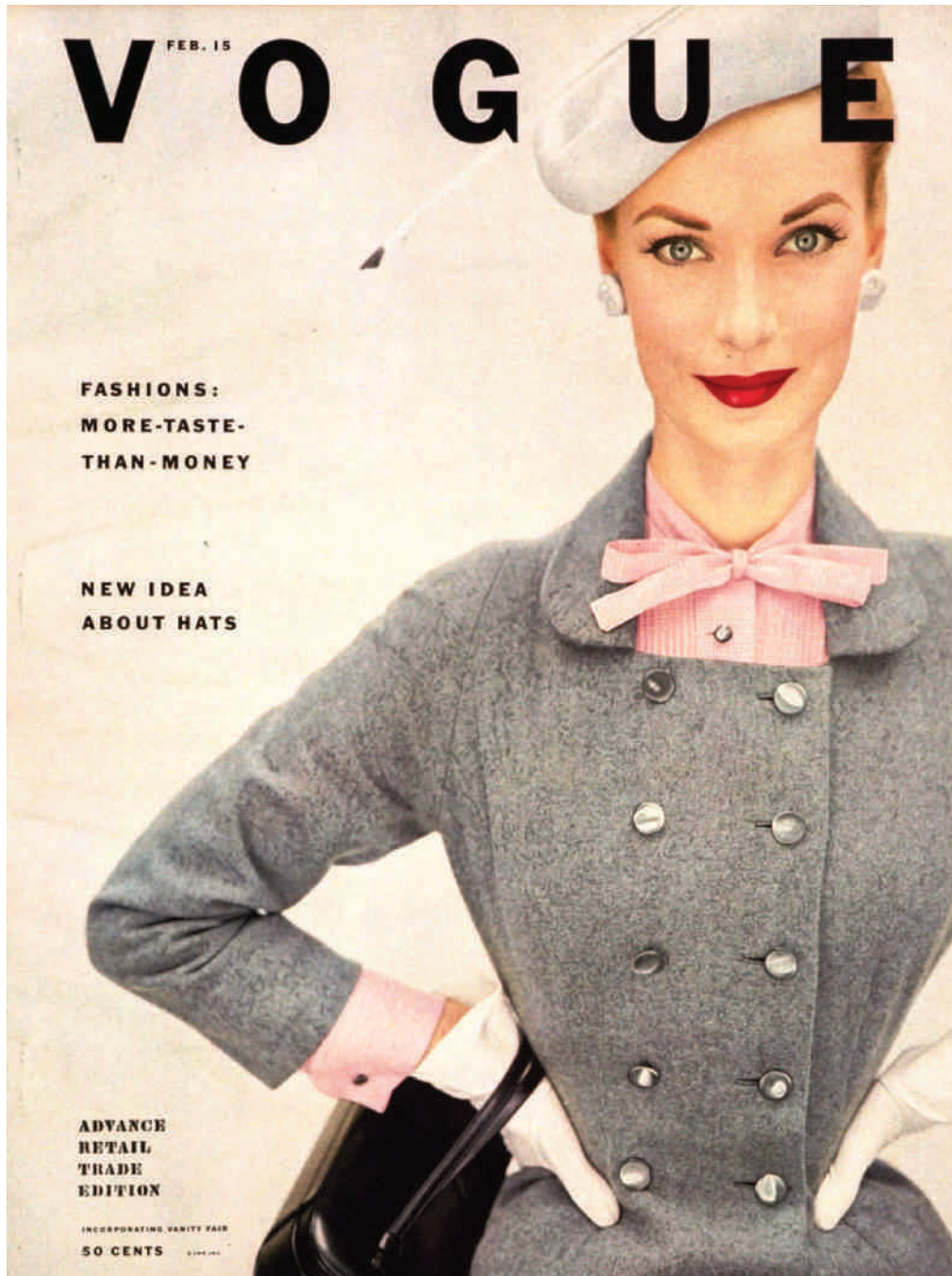
There are also many independent blogs on the Internet posted up by amateurs writing passionately about fashion, free of the constraints of advertisers. You might find it interesting to follow some of the blogs you discover because it's always worth hearing another opinion.

## 1–2 *Vogue* magazine covers from 1948 and 1952

Refer to fashion and lifestyle magazines such as *Vogue* to inform and inspire your own work.



2



# Starting your research

Designers are like magpies, always on the lookout for something to use or steal (!) in their designs. Fashion moves incredibly fast compared to the other creative industries, and it can feel like there is constant pressure to reinvent the wheel each season. Designers need to be continually seeking new inspiration in order to keep their work fresh and contemporary and, above all, to keep themselves stimulated. In this sense, research means creative investigation, and good design cannot happen without some form of research. It feeds the imagination and inspires the creative mind.

There are different forms of research. One kind is sourcing material and practical elements. Many fledgling designers forget that finding fabrics and other ingredients—rivets, fastenings, or fabric treatments, for example—must make up part of the process of research. Having an appreciation of what is available, from where, and for how much, is essential.

Other forms of research are the kind you do once you've decided on a theme or concept for use in your designs. Primary research is research that you see first-hand, for example, by visiting a museum. Secondary research is research already compiled by a third party that you can then gather, for example, from books, magazines, or the Internet.

Themes can be personal, abstract, or more literal. For example, McQueen's Spring/Summer 2010 collection "Plato's Atlantis" (his last), displayed a strong reptilian influence in both the digital prints featured in his designs and the appearance of the models.

The concept behind the collection was that just as humankind evolved from the sea, so might we be heading back to an underwater world in the future as a consequence of the ice cap dissolving.

Westwood has drawn on themes such as pirates, the paintings of Fragonard, and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century decorative arts in the Wallace Collection for inspiration in different collections. Galliano has been influenced by the circus, ancient Egypt, punk singer Siouxsie Sioux, and the French Revolution.

Rick Owens' Autumn/Winter 2016–17 Menswear collection titled "Mastodon" was a response to "the ecological anxiety we are all feeling" and obliquely made reference to dinosaurs, tar pits, evolution, and art nouveau.

Designers may also convey a mood or use a muse for inspiration. Both McQueen and John Galliano have based collections on the Marchesa Luisa Casati, for instance. Another of McQueen's muses was the late magazine editor, Isabella Blow. He dedicated two shows to her, the first when she was alive (Autumn/Winter 2006–07's "The Widows of Culloden") and the Spring/Summer 2008 show "La Dame Bleue" after her death in 2007.

Using a theme or concept makes sense because it will hold together the body of work, giving it continuity and coherence. It also sets certain boundaries—which, of course, the designer is free to break—but having a theme initially gives the designer focus.

## Choosing a theme or concept

When choosing a theme or concept, be honest. It needs to be something that you can work and live with for the duration of the collection. This means that it should be a subject that you are interested in, that stimulates you, and that you understand.

A theme can loosely be defined as a visual or literary reference that will directly influence the look of the clothes. The references made to the theme in the clothes can sometimes be very literal if, for example, your designs are based on Russian constructivism, or the references could be more obscure and only make sense to you as the designer.

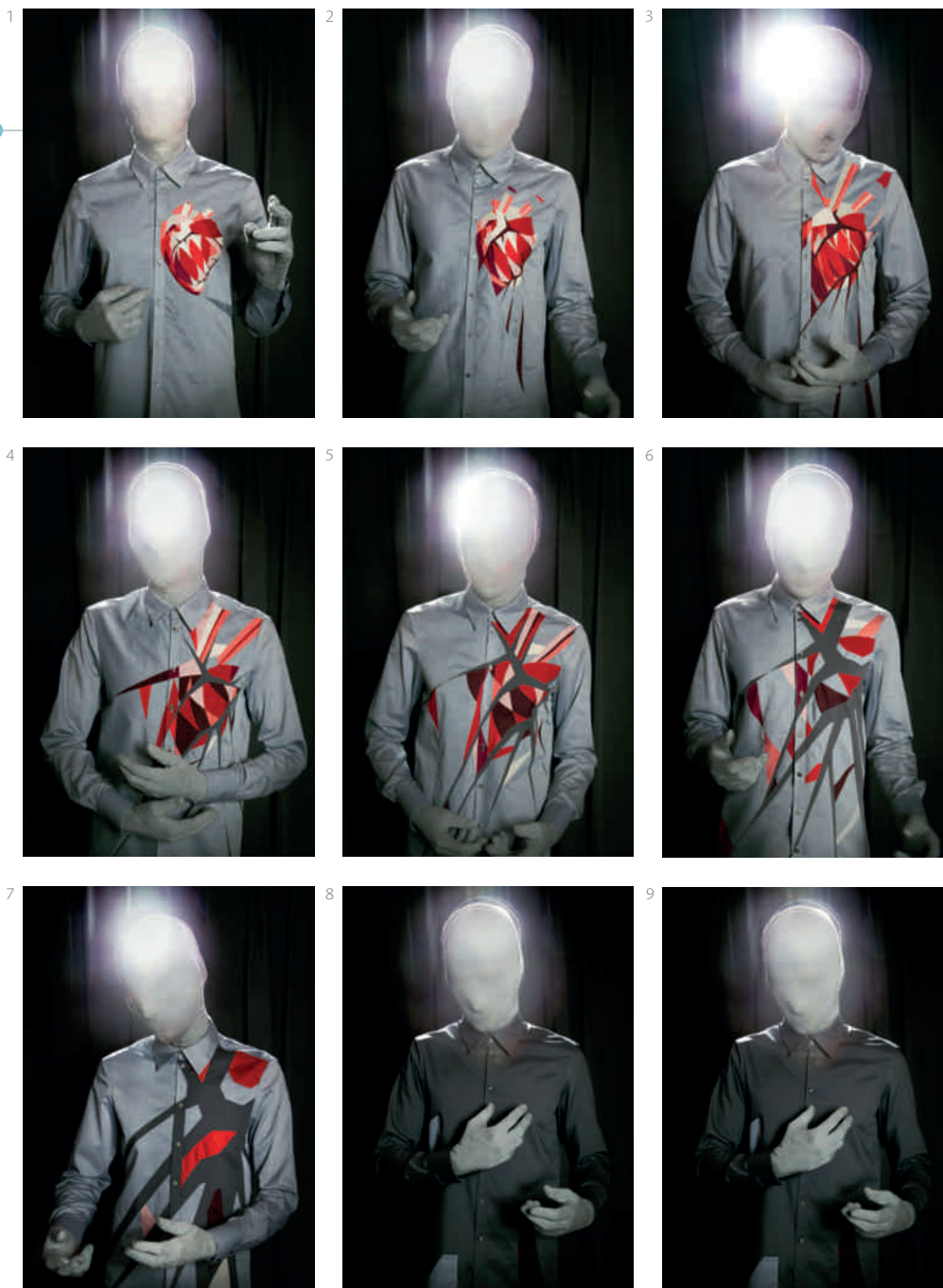
A concept is a methodology that informs how clothes are designed. For example, you could aim to express a sense of isolation through the clothing and in terms of how the user will feel when wearing the clothes. Working with a conceptual theme can be problematic, so make sure that you define the terms of your concept and how it will directly affect the design of the clothes.

Either of these approaches is appropriate and it is about choosing which method works best for you. But it does need to work for you; it is pointless choosing a theme or concept that doesn't inspire you. If the ideas are still struggling to come after a certain amount of time, a clever designer will be honest and seriously question their choice of theme/concept.

Remember: Press and buyers are generally only interested in the outcome. Do the clothes look good? Do they flatter? Do they excite? Will they sell? They are not necessarily interested in how well you've managed to express quantum physics through a jacket. But if this is what you want to express, then do it. Other people, such as stylists and art directors, however, will be very interested in the story behind your designs, and your theme/concept can thus also work as a way of reeling in interested parties.

## 1–9 Heart shirts

These shirts by Bronwen Marshall were inspired by a Paul Simon lyric from his song "Graceland" ("...losing love / Is like a window in your heart / And everybody sees you're blown apart"). The heart shape fragments and disperses across the nine shirts.





## Sources of research

Where you go to begin your research depends on your theme or concept. For an enquiring designer, the act of researching is like detective work, hunting down elusive information and subject material that will ignite a spark.

The easiest place to start your research is on the Internet. The World Wide Web is a fantastic source of images and information. However, the Internet tends to have a little information about a lot of subjects, so it should never be relied upon as the only resource for information. The Internet is also useful for sourcing manufacturers, fabrics, or companies that produce specialist materials or that perform specific services.

A good library is a treasure. Local libraries are geared to provide books to a broad cross-section of the community, and so tend to have a few books about many subjects. Specialist libraries are the most rewarding, and the older the library the better—books that are long out of print will (hopefully) still be on the shelves or at least viewable upon request. Colleges and universities should have a library geared toward the courses that are being taught, though access may be restricted if you are not actually studying there. Start collecting your own books to form your own library. You don't need to spend a fortune on lots of books; some books will be invaluable and you will return to use them again and again. Art galleries often have excellent bookshops too.



1 **Givenchy**

A military-inspired outfit by Givenchy Autumn/Winter 2016–17.



Flea markets and antique fairs are useful sources of inspirational objects and materials for designers. It goes without saying that clothing of any kind, be it antique or contemporary, can inspire more clothes. Historic, ethnic, or specialist clothing—military garments, for example—offer insight into details, methods of manufacture, and construction that you may not have encountered before.

Like flea markets, charity shops are great places to find clothes, books, records, and bric-a-brac that, in the right hands and with a little imagination, could prove inspirational. Everyday objects that are no longer popular or are perceived as kitsch can be appropriated, rediscovered, and used ironically to design clothes.

National museums, such as London's Victoria and Albert Museum or New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, not only collect and showcase interesting objects from around the world, both historical and contemporary, but also have an excellent collection of costumes that can be viewed upon request.

Large companies with available budgets send their designers on research trips, often abroad, to search for inspiration. Designers are armed with a research budget and a camera and are instructed to record and buy anything that might prove useful for the coming (or future) season.

Some sources of research images are photocopies, postcards, photographs, tear sheets from magazines (where a page is literally torn out), and drawings. But anything can be used for research: images, fabrics, details such as buttons or an antique collar—anything that inspires you qualifies as research. Whatever you collect as part of your research needs to be within easy reach (and view) so that you have your references constantly around you; the more you see a reference, the more it will make you think. Look often at your research, and analyze what you like and why you collected it.



## 2 Vivienne Westwood

Vivienne Westwood researched the cut of pirate clothing for her Pirate Collection Autumn/Winter 1981–82.

## 3 Pirates

Pirates could prove a good starting point for your research.

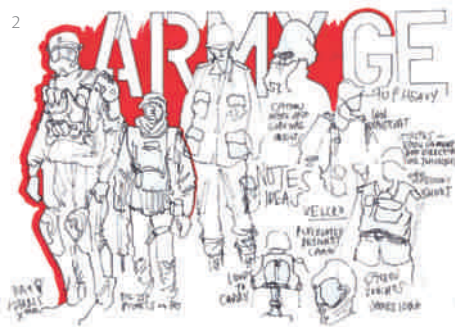
## 4 Military clothing

Some examples of military costume—a potential source of inspiration.





1–4 **Research**  
Pages from research sketchbooks.



## The research book

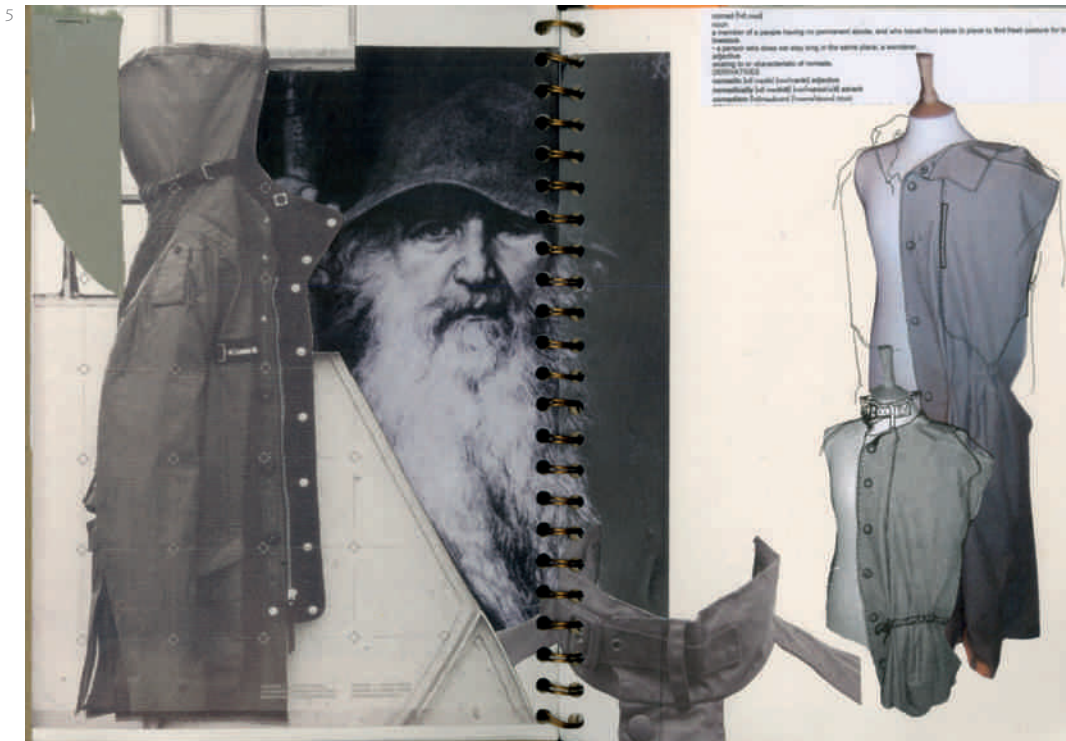
As a designer, you will eventually develop an individual approach to “processing” your research. Some designers collect piles of photocopies and fabrics that find their way onto a wall in the studio. Others compile research books or sketchbooks where images, fabrics, and trimmings are collected and collated, recording the origin and evolution of a collection. Still others take the essence of the research and produce what are called mood-, theme-, or storyboards.

A research book is not necessarily solely for the designer’s use. Showing research to other people is useful when trying to convey the themes or concepts of a collection. It might be used to communicate your theme or concept to your tutor, your employers, employees, or a stylist.

Research books are not just scrapbooks. A scrapbook implies that the information is collected, but unprocessed. There is nothing duller than looking through pages of lifeless, rectangular images that have been (too) carefully cut out. It is also debatable how much a designer gleans from creating pages like this. A research book should instead reflect the thought processes and personal approach taken to a project. It becomes more personal when it is drawn on and written in and when the images and materials that have been collected are manipulated or collaged.

### Collage

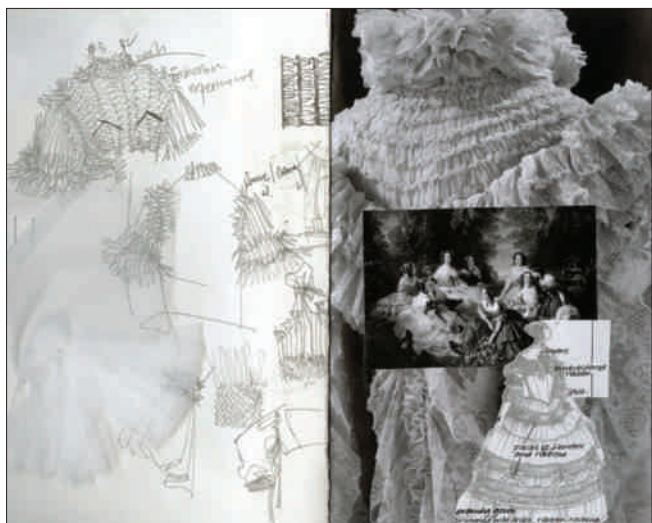
The word collage is derived from the French word *colle*, meaning “glue.” A good collage is created when the separate elements (images) work on different levels, forming both a whole and the individual component parts of the image at the same time. Successful collages usually include a bricolage of different-sized, differently sourced images that provide a stimulating visual rhythm.



## 5 Collage

An example of a collage and drawings from a research sketchbook.





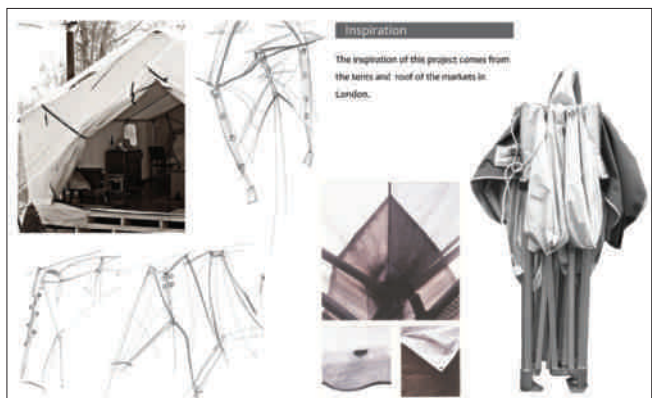
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## ~~~~~ Drawing

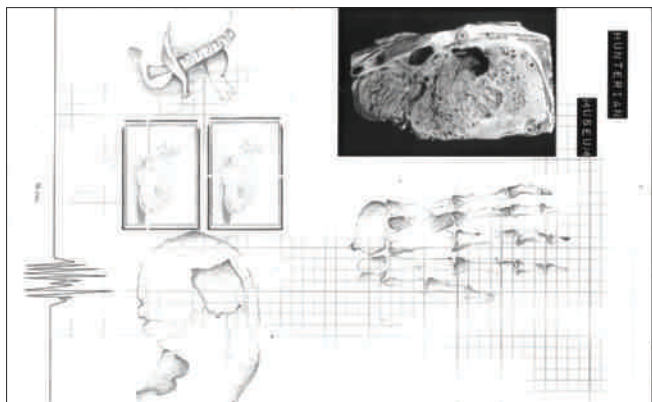
Drawing a part or the whole of a picture you have collected as research helps you to understand the shapes and forms that make up the image, which in turn enables you to appreciate and utilize the same curve in a design or when cutting a pattern. Drawing helps with the analysis of an image; you literally have to “think” the pencil across the paper to represent what you are drawing.

Using collage and making your own drawings allows you to deconstruct an image, such as a photograph, photocopy, drawing, or postcard. This is necessary because it may not be the whole image that will ultimately be useful to your designs; a picture may have been chosen for its “whole,” but it is only when it has been examined in more depth that other useful elements may be discovered. For example, a photograph of a gothic cathedral is rich in decorative flourishes, but you almost need a magnifying glass to be able to appreciate the intricate detail it contains.

By cutting up an image or using a “viewfinder”—a rectangle paper “frame” that enables you to focus on part of an image, much like the viewfinder on a camera—smaller elements or details can become more apparent, and therefore, they can be more easily examined.



7



8

## 6-8 Analytical drawing

Examples of analytical drawings in research sketchbooks.