

Kylie — all glitter

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Macdonald's glittering gowns. Macdonald admits in the accompanying catalogue that he stayed up all night sewing on multiple sequins until Kylie dubbed him "Mr. Crystal." Kylie describes her style trajectory as "from cobbled together to couture." That should have been a cue for a curator's exploration of the grease paint and sparkle of showbiz compared with a close up and personal fashion wardrobe.

There is a re-creation of Kylie's dressing room — a predictable jumble of makeup, costumes and a mirror framed by light bulbs.

But as in so many celebrity fashion exhibitions, the curators have just lain down and died in the face of stardom.

The result is a lively show, but a missed opportunity to put Kylie's clothes in any sort of context.

Surely a room, a wall or even a few explanatory lines could have been devoted to the myth and the style of 20th century showgirls from Josephine Baker and the Paris Lido, through the Ziegfeld Follies and Las Vegas performers?

William Baker, Kylie's creative director for a decade, expresses amazement that the clothes are being given the



Kylie Minogue's gold lamé hot pants, designed by Stella McCartney.

same reverence "as a Rembrandt or a Van Gogh." But surely those classical artists would have had a catalogue that placed them in history among their peers, and not a breathless fanzine.

The exhibition, which continues its traveling circus in Manchester and Glasgow, will give pleasure and entertainment to a lot of people, but no information that they could not otherwise glean from a celebrity magazine.

— Suzy Menkes



GIANNI VERSACE

Christopher Moore/Karl Prouse

Versace: luxe with dash

MILAN Motion was high backstage at the Versace show, which closed the Italian season last week.

There was Elizabeth Hurley, pretty in pink, in Milan for the final fittings of the two wedding dresses that Donatella Versace is making for her — for an English country wedding next weekend and for the desert nuptials March 9 in the Indian state of Rajasthan.

As she sat front row with her fiancé, Arun Nayar, Hurley and Trudie Styler, the wife of Sting, both had eagle eyes on the same dress: a sober black number that turned to reveal a bared back.

Styler was remembering her own wedding ball gown, in cream, with a boat neck and gilded shell decoration, made in 1992 by Gianni Versace.

"I loved Gianni very dearly — he sat on my left and Sting on my right," Styler said. "Donatella has had to come into her own for

the most tragic of reasons."

For Versace herself, it was a time of reflection, a decade after her brother's death, as she sent out a clean, clear collection that was about making luxurious clothes with dash, rather than trading in flash, brash and cash.

"It was a homage to Gianni," Versace said about the metal mesh cocktail dresses with graphic squares — part of a geometric theme played out in the vertical symbols on the back-drop. They picked up the colors of the clothes, which were white, black and silver, with flashes of lagoon blue, red and green.

The show was drawn with compass and square, but Versace made those shapes seem womanly, even when a coat was cut wide, with fur on the lower part of the skirt, or when a ball of fur made a blouson, topping off skinny pants. There were no Medusa symbols, rock-the-baroque prints or sexed-up dresses.

The only vestige of Versace

creations of the wild Madonna days was a beret pulled down over long, straight hair. It emphasized how many strong daytime clothes there were — from the swing coats and slim dresses to a red sweater dress with enveloping batwing sleeves. A touch of the 1980s? Not really. This was a show grounded in the here and now (if you have the panache to wear a shiny black alligator coat).

And since the red carpet has always been a Versace thing, there were glamorous gowns in chiffon softening up the sexpot quotient. It was a strong show, but notable for its rigorous calm.

Hurley, whose career was jump-started by Gianni Versace's infamous punk-revival, safety-pin dress, praised this 10th anniversary show.

"I think Gianni would be so proud of Donatella," Hurley said.

— Suzy Menkes

Museum integrity vs. designer control

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Picasso" in London at the Tate Modern in 2002 or "Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1988. Yet a Giorgio Armani exhibition that showed him sparring first with Gianni Versace and then with Tom Ford's Gucci would be a fascinating subject.

Poiret and Chanel were also arch-rivals, with the former, already in eclipse, asking Coco in her little black dress: "For whom do you mourn, Madame?" To which Chanel replied: "For you, Monsieur."

The wall separating art and fashion was breached almost 25 years ago when the iconic editor Diana Vreeland directed an Yves Saint Laurent show at the Met.

The Costume Institute, where it was shown, is now offering a witty and interesting display of the wardrobe of the socialite Nan Kempner, which will travel to the Pierre Bergé Yves Saint Laurent Foundation in Paris in May.

Although the Met has more fashion-themed shows than other museums, it takes the moral high road and makes a major effort to retain curatorial responsibility. "I think we are as strong as it gets, and we have a director who draws a line in the sand," said Harold Koda, curator in charge of the Costume



Courtesy of Giorgio Armani

Giorgio Armani designs and striking lighting effects at the Triennale exhibition in Milan.

Institute. He and Andrew Bolton are co-curators of the Poiret show.

"The problem has been one of perception," Koda said. "Unfortunately, institutions are always looking for sponsors and need to find one that is one step removed from self-interest. It's always going to be a problem, unless you have the ability to fund raise from outside."

The aim of the new show, with the help of a cache of clothing auctioned in 2005, is to prove that Poiret was the true

instigator of 20th-century modernity. Even if half the society crowd at the May gala evening will not actually see the exhibit, the Met will keep its integrity as a guardian of fashion's history.

But was it like that with "Chanel," which was criticized, even by a bewildered public, for not doing justice to one of fashion's greatest figures?

"Andrew and I cultivated Karl's cooperation because Chanel, for all its modernity, would have become an inert

exhibition, with technical virtuosity but very plain dresses," Koda said. "What happened was that in spite of the fact that we curated it, the perception was that it was a commercial franchise."

But the problem was not about the outfits from Lagerfeld, a designer who deplores looking back at his own history. It was the lack of context to explain why Coco was a revolutionary. And why not a reference to her famous spats with her fellow designer Elsa Schiaparelli? Surely the point of Chanel, and now Poiret, is where they stood in relation to fashion's fussy, fancy restraining past and how their powerful statements ultimately configured the future?

To look at almost any designer exhibition of recent years — Yohji Yamamoto's "Just Clothes" exhibit in Paris in 2005, for example — no one who did not know about the dramatic and enduring influence of the Japanese aesthetic on European fashion would ever have sensed that from the show, fascinating and visually striking as it was.

Maybe it is time to go back to the historical approach and dare to be didactic, so that museum fashion is less of a designer love fest and more of a learning curve.

Suzy Menkes is the fashion editor at the International Herald Tribune.



Photographs by Maisie Wilhelm

Colorful sneakers add pizzazz to Italy's jeans and T-shirt look. Below, the soft punk style.

If the jeans fit: Italy's youth play safe

By Maisie Wilhelm

MILAN The glittering gumdrop dresses of the transvestites, the patterned pants worn by wacky club kids and the lopsided haircuts on party revelers at Boombox in via Tortona were the height of fashion, but not sported by the Italians.

Boombox, the hip London club, was invited to Milan by the Pitti Imagine Group, which was staging a fashion exhibition in Milan. And they knew they needed the eccentric Brits (plus some edgy Americans and chic French magazine editors) to make the end-of-the-week party swing. The Italians, in contrast, were playing it sartorially safe, which seems to be the rule of thumb among the 20-something set here these days.

"Diesel jeans, Dolce & Gabbana belts and sneakers by Nike or Puma," said Giulia Crivelli, a fashion journalist in Milan. "They all want the same thing."

This unofficial uniform of T-shirt and jeans, with colorful athletic shoes thrown in for good measure, and perhaps an It bag too, can be spotted on streets from Milan to Palermo. The look is spruced up with loud accessories by Italian name brands — Fendi, Gucci, D&G, Prada and Armani — whose logos often appear conspicuously on leather tennis shoes, belt buckles or the frames of oversized sunglasses.

"Everyone is wearing the same thing," Crivelli said. "They all want to be alla moda." Wearing trendy clothes to fit in — rather than risking an unconventional outfit — is a common goal reiterated among Italians.

"Wearing expensive jeans gives you a sense of belonging," said Giovanni Gastel, a young designer about to start a brand of graphic T-shirts. "Wearing labels provides a sense of belonging to a group. It's a way of identifying yourself, showing off and how others perceive you." In this way, fashion becomes aspirational, with the ordinary Tom, Dick or Giovanni scoring points among friends by wearing a recognizable label.

But in a country so full of creative



fashion powerhouses, why is the desire to fit the fashion mold so prevalent?

"It's not even the specific trend that is the important part," said Cristina Marasti, 32, who monitors the image of Italian society abroad for a communications agency in Milan. "It's following the trend that's important. Perhaps in cities like Berlin, with no big fashion brands, people are more free and inspired to create an individual style."

One explanation might be the cultural obsession with the bella figura — what you wear, how you wear it and the impression you make, which everyone keenly observes. The possibility of being ridiculed outweighs the desire to take a risk. "You know that if you wear Gucci or D&G, you will be fine," Marasti said.

Fast-fashion chains like Zara and H&M are extremely popular for their affordable versions of runway looks, which arrive frequently on the shelves at their stores on the busy shopping street Corso Vittorio Emanuele. "Teenagers shop every weekend," Crivelli said. "And a month later, they don't want to wear the same thing."

But not everyone aims to conform. One highly visible Italian who prefers taking his time to build a unique sense of style is Lapo Elkann, grandson of the Fiat founder Gianni Agnelli, who has just started Italia Independent, a line of personal items. Elkann is known for his eccentric lifestyle and fashion sense — an informal survey turned up two young men in the Piazza del Duomo who separately mentioned the eye-popping Keith Haring-printed Adidas pants that he has worn. But as Francesco, a 31-year-old shoe salesman, pointed out, it is not a look copied on the streets.

Elkann did have a great response from the public when he started a line of T-shirts and sweatshirts printed with the Fiat label in 2004, and he continues to be someone the Italians watch for fashion clues. "He definitely has a recognizable style," said Paolo, 36, a taxi driver.

"It's good to build your own taste," Elkann said. "Mixing different elements makes it fashionable: a cashmere suit with linen shirt and Converse shoes. This is fashion. Well put together, it can be very elegant. Badly put together, it can be cheap and tacky."

Other styles taking hold on Milan's streets — although in small numbers — include a kind of toned-down goth look: black jeans and printed T-shirts; heavy eyeliner for women, and, for men, the "cresta" coiffure, or faux hawk — shorter hair gelled toward the center.

In some cities like Bologna, which has a large population of university students, the grunge look is gaining a foothold: body piercings, baggy camouflage pants and oversize hooded sweatshirts, accessorized with studded collars. A pet dog completes this "punkabestia" look.

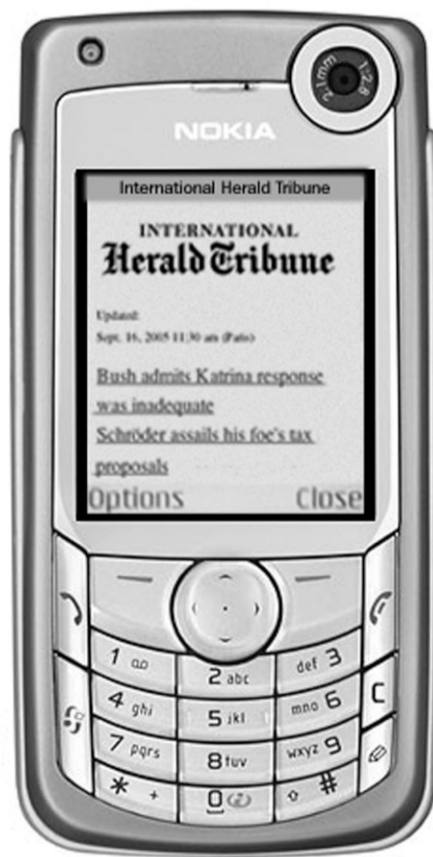
Gastel says some Italians are starting to take more style risks. "Ten years ago, the street style was more classical. Men wore suit jackets, slacks and moccasins. Now things are mixing. You see T-shirts under suit jackets, which never would have happened 30 years ago." But if the biggest fashion change to hit the streets is slipping a T-shirt under a suit jacket, Italy has a long way to go.

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