

ALEXANDER MCQUEEN: SAVAGE BEAUTY TEACHERS' RESOURCE

Learn more about the exhibition at the home of creativity
14 March – 2 August 2015
Key Stage 4&5: Art & Design and Design & Technology

V&A

Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty

In partnership with Swarovski
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Teachers' Resource

Key Stage 4&5: Art & Design and Design & Technology

Introduction

'I always, always wanted to be a fashion designer.'

Alexander McQueen

Lee Alexander McQueen was born in 1969. He grew up in London's East End and left school at 15 to become a tailor's apprentice on Savile Row.

In 1990 he gained a place on the MA Fashion course at Central St Martins where he developed his skills and presented a successful graduate collection. A series of enthralling and provocative shows followed which made his name in fashion. At the age of 26, he became chief designer at Givenchy in Paris, while also showing under his own London label, Alexander McQueen.

He was awarded British Designer of the Year four times, and a CBE for services to the fashion industry. He died in 2010.

Pre-visit Activities

Alexander McQueen's brand continues under Creative Director Sarah Burton, who started working with McQueen in 1996.

Visit the Alexander McQueen website: www.alexander-mcqueen.com. In the 'Experience' section, explore the label's past collections. Create a mood board that documents some of the stand-out pieces and research some of the influences.

The Museum Visit

Use this resource to introduce key ideas for students to discuss in the exhibition. Download the accompanying activity sheets to explore these ideas further. Sketching is not allowed in the exhibition, but bring sketchbooks, tracing paper and pencils for the follow-up activities in the permanent galleries.

Master Tailor

Investigate McQueen's graduate collection at the beginning of the exhibition. What makes McQueen's approach to tailoring so innovative? McQueen blended his interest in historical silhouettes and traditional craftsmanship with innovative cutting techniques. Examine the **Jack the Ripper Stalks his Victims** jacket. The black silk jacket is based on

the cut of a 19th-century riding jacket. McQueen gives it a modern twist with elongated, dagger-shaped lapels. It has red fabric to evoke human flesh, creating a theatrical quality.

Magpie

Explore the **Cabinet of Curiosities**. Find a piece which shows how different designers collaborate to create something unusual. Alexander McQueen was a collector of ideas and skills. He worked in collaboration with various accessory designers and craftspeople. He commissioned skilled wood carvers, leather workers, prosthetists, glass specialists and embroiderers to help realise his vision. Find the **Bird's Nest Headdress**, from **The Widows of Culloden** collection. This incredible headpiece was designed by milliner Philip Treacy and jeweller Shaun Leane for Alexander McQueen.

Visionary

Visit **Pepper's Ghost** in the exhibition. How does the use of film, set design and new technology demonstrate how fashion can be presented in a different way? Alexander McQueen presented his ideas through spectacular catwalk shows. The apparition of Kate Moss appearing inside a glass pyramid was one of the most memorable finales of any McQueen show.

Storyteller

Examine McQueen's final collection, **Plato's Atlantis**. How does the textile design and choice of materials reflect the concept of the collection? McQueen's collections were fashioned around elaborate narratives. He told stories that transcended the garments themselves and incorporated wide-ranging subjects. This is his last fully realised collection. It offers McQueen's vision for the future: the ice caps have melted and mankind has devolved into an amphibious species in order to survive.

Follow-up Activities/Find Out More

- In his early career, McQueen gained experience at the theatrical costumier Berman's & Nathan's. Visit the Theatre & Performance galleries (Rooms 103–106). Explore the costume design on display.
- Visit the Fashion gallery (Room 40). This shows European fashion, fabrics and accessories from 1750 to the present day. Download the accompanying resource. <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/teachers-resource-fashion/>
- Study garments by Alexander McQueen in the V&A collections by visiting Search the Collections and typing his name. <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/>

MASTER TAILOR

'I spent a lot of time learning how to construct clothes, which is important to do before you deconstruct them'

Alexander McQueen

In the Exhibition

Work with a partner to discuss and explore McQueen's graduate collection at the beginning of the exhibition.

What makes his approach to tailoring so innovative?

What other techniques and processes does he employ within his collections?

At the Museum

Visit Fashion (Room 40). Find the 'Tailored to Fit' case. Choose a heavily tailored piece to focus on.

Imagine simplifying the garment into a series of separate shapes. Make a sketch of all the individual shapes you can pick out. Use a piece of tracing paper to trace the first shape. Repeat this by tracing each shape on a separate piece of tracing paper. Play with the shapes by assembling them in new arrangements. Can you create a new silhouette inspired by the original?

Go One Step Further

Find an old unwanted jacket at home or from a charity shop. Unpick and deconstruct all the parts of the jacket to reveal its original pattern. Have a go at manipulating the garment. Use additional fabric to create a new pattern.

MAGPIE

'The Victorian era greatly influenced me: the austerity, the severity, the melancholy'

Alexander McQueen

In the Exhibition

*Work with a partner to discuss and explore the **Cabinet of Curiosities**.*

Find a piece which shows how different designers collaborate to create something unusual.

How many different skills and techniques do you think were used to create the piece you have chosen?

At the Museum

Visit Fashion (Room 40). Find the Victorian crinoline, bustle and corset on display in the 'Fashion and Industry' and 'Couture and Commerce' cases. Think about how these articles of dress transformed the shape of the body and the clothes they supported.

Find a completely different garment from an alternative era. Imagine what would happen if you combined the structure of the Victorian underwear with a contrasting style to create a hybrid garment. Use this process to sketch out a series of designs, creating a new collection inspired by the silhouette of the Victorian period.

Go One Step Further

Visit another gallery, such as Japan (Room 45) or China (Room 44). Examine fashion from another culture. Take the hybrid you have created and bring it together with a third influence in one of these galleries. This could be a surface pattern, texture, sleeve, cuff or collar, or an accessory, such as a shoe or a piece of jewellery.

VISIONARY

'I am going to take you on journeys you've never dreamed possible'

Alexander McQueen

In the Exhibition

*Work with a partner to discuss and explore **Pepper's Ghost**.*

How does the use of film, set design and new technology show how fashion can be presented in a different way?

At the Museum

Visit one of the following rooms in the Museum and consider this as a site for a catwalk show. Visualise how you could use the space to create a spectacle worthy of a McQueen performance. How would you plan the layout, seat the audience, light the space and use sound to maximise impact?

- Music Room from Norfolk House (Britain 1500–1760, Room 52)*
- Panelled Room from a house at Bromley-by-Bow (Britain 1500–1760, Room 58)*
- Cast Courts (Rooms 46a, 46b)*
- Tapestries (Room 94)*

Go One Step Further

Use one of the spaces as the inspiration for a capsule collection. Take photographs of the room you have chosen. Capture aspects of the interior and architecture to inspire the garments. Imagine that this is the space where the collection will ultimately be presented.

STORYTELLER

'Life to me is a bit of a [Brothers] Grimm fairy tale'

Alexander McQueen

In the Exhibition

*Work with a partner to discuss and explore McQueen's final collection, **Plato's Atlantis**.*

How does the textile design and choice of materials reflect the concept of the collection?

*Compare and contrast McQueen's graduate collection to **Plato's Atlantis**.*

At the Museum

Explore the Sculpture galleries (Rooms 111 and 117). Delve into the ancient and classical mythology that features in the sculptures. Tell the story of Neptune's Triton, Narcissus or Samson through fashion. Take key elements of the sculptures and use them in the design of a garment.

Go One Step Further

Find a sculpture that you find particularly ugly or grotesque. Pick a feature from it, such as the surface texture, pose, facial expression or gesture. Make sketches of this to take back to school. How could you use this to inspire a print or pattern for a textile design that could be made into a beautiful garment?