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2021

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Lucas Stowe Spring 2021

Shivani Persad explores the relevance of labelling designs “masculine” or “feminine” in these changing times.

Last November, musician Harry Styles became the first male-identifying person to land on Lyst’s Power Dressers list, thanks in part to his penchant for flouting gendered-dressing stereotypes by wearing pearl necklaces, transparent fabrics and garments with feminine details like puffed sleeves. Shortly after, he also became the first solo man to appear on the cover of American *Vogue*, donning a lace Gucci dress and double-breasted tuxedo jacket for its December issue.



Dior Menswear Spring 2021

PHOTOGRAPHY: (OPPOSITE PAGE) LUCAS STOWE BY DOMINIC LACHANCE; (THIS PAGE) DIOR VIA MAXTREE.COM; ANDREW COIMBRA, BOWIE BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY; MONAÉ BY JEAN-BAPTISTE LACROIX/AFP VIA GETTY; STYLES BY THEO WARGO/WIREIMAGE VIA GETTY; DIETRICH BY EUGENE ROBERT RICHE/JOHN KOBAL FOUNDATION/GETTY.

While Styles’s feature garnered a wave of support, there were also critical comments, including one from conservative political activist Candace Owens, who claimed that society needs to “bring back manly men.” Apparently unbeknownst to Owens, gender nonconformity in fashion isn’t a new concept, and designers and consumers alike are expressing themselves beyond the arbitrary lines of gender more and more every day. For example, Dior’s Spring 2021 menswear collection included dainty floral prints, high-waisted shorts and neckline details like pussy bows; Loewe’s Fall 2020 menswear collection featured brightly coloured gathered dresses attached like aprons to the front of suiting; and Gucci’s creative director, Alessandro Michele, has been rewriting gendered-fashion rules since taking the helm at the brand in 2015.

Closer to home, brands like L’Uomo Strano and Andrew Coimbra are employing design elements to explore a multi-faceted idea of gender identity. “I’ve never felt restricted by the gender binary in fashion,” says Coimbra. “When I’m dressing myself, I choose clothing based on what looks good, not on whether the piece was made for a man or for a woman.” Talking about his own collections, Coimbra explains: “My pieces are less in your face about being genderless. It’s more about exploring the details of feminine fabrics like silk on men or a strong tailored coat on a woman.” He cites brands such as Palomo Spain as inspiration to continue crossing the lines of which elements are supposedly masculine or feminine.

The exploration of gender in fashion has been an empowering though not easy journey for those discovering their gender identity. “I always knew I didn’t fully identify with being male or female,” says digital creator Omar Ahmed. “I just identified with being me. It really was only this year that I realized I have a term for who I am—gender fluid—and the pronouns that fit me,” they say. When describing the use of the term “gender fluid,” Ahmed explains that it’s connected to how they feel about clothing. “Clothing is a piece of fabric; it doesn’t matter if it’s labelled for a man or for a woman. I dress how I feel day to day. That’s the fluidity aspect of it.” Ahmed doesn’t associate conventional norms with design elements. “The patriarchy has demonized femininity to a form of weakness,” they say. “In fact, I feel the strongest when I’m wearing a skirt or heels.”

Sara Armstrong, associate design director of the Fashion Design department at the Blanche MacDonald Centre in Vancouver, instructs her students with a lens similar to Ahmed’s. “Your clothes are just a series of tubes that your body fills,” she says. “We’ve never given students limitations on the clothes they want to make and who they want to have wearing them.” Armstrong, who also has an eponymous fashion brand, thinks that fashion needs to circle back to being more about expression. “Some students will come in and be like, ‘This is a women’s collection’ or ‘These pieces are for men’ because that’s what they’re used to seeing,” she says. “Why would you put limitations on who can wear your clothes?” »



Andrew Coimbra Spring 2021

THEY COULD BE HEROES

Look to these pop culture icons for style leadership.



DAVID BOWIE

The British music legend made gendered-detail experimentation part of his evolving looks, with adventurous clothing and makeup moments.



JANELLE MONÁE

A singer-songwriter, producer and actress, Monáe is equally diverse with her dressing, often sporting suiting with extravagant silhouettes.



HARRY STYLES

Since his boy-band days, Styles has become more style-savvy, often wearing embellishments like lace and pearls.



MARLENE DIETRICH

Dietrich caused a stir during Hollywood’s “golden age”—a time when gender constructs were especially rigid—with her penchant for tailoring.

Removing such limitations is an idea that Montreal-based designer Lucas Stowe fully embraces. His current collection embodies the tag line “My signature colour is glitter” to a T, with neon-hued gloves, rhinestone-covered mesh blouses, sequined animal-print jumpsuits, a six-layered sparkling fringe skirt and rhinestone bras included in the mix. “I try to design for a particular vibe,” he says. “And I don’t use the term ‘genderless’ because it insinuates a lack of gender. I prefer ‘gender full.’ Sometimes ‘genderless’ has a connotation of being neutral and plain. Being gender full is about exploring details; it’s about expressing what you feel inside and having fun with clothing and being authentic to who you are.”

As creatives change the lens through which they design, it’s only a matter of time before fashion retailers evolve the way clothing is displayed. Lee Dekel, owner of the popular Toronto indie boutique 100% Silk, doesn’t separate her in-store and e-commerce wares based on gender. “When I was organizing the store, I observed the way people shop, and this just didn’t make sense to me,” she explains. “Our customers have such a strong sense of personal style; they don’t need me to limit their options by cutting an arbitrary line across brands. Of course, tailoring for men’s bodies is different from tailoring for women’s, but if you know how to recommend the correct size and the garment is well made, it’s so easy to mix it up.”

When pondering this new era of fashion, Dekel considers her six-month-old baby boy and the way he will grow up experiencing design given the sliver of narrow-mindedness that still exists today. “Whenever we dress him in pink, it’s like it breaks people’s brains,” she says. And in thinking about the Generation Z cohort and its approach to inclusivity, both Stowe and Ahmed lament that they wish they had grown up in a more accepting society, referring to how much more open the current culture is to people of different genders expressing themselves through clothing. Imagining her son’s future, Dekel says: “I hope he sees clothes as a tool to learn more about himself as a person—to reflect how he’s feeling that day or help shake him out of it. I honestly can’t wait to find out what his personal style is.” ■



(From left) **L’Uomo Strano** Spring 2021; **Loewe** Menswear Fall 2020; **Gucci** Fall 2020



GRACE JONES

With a unique aesthetic marked by suiting and strict contours, Jones has long been a champion of rule-breaking “androgynous” dressing.



JAY SOM

Singer, multi-instrumentalist and producer Melina Duterte, whose stage name is Jay Som, is known for her laid-back grooves and fluid wardrobe choices.



LITTLE RICHARD

Inspiring performers including Prince and Elton John, Richard Wayne Penniman was influenced by the elaborate aesthetic of queer performers like Esquerita.



STEVE LACY

The emerging R&B sensation wore a Comme des Garçons dress suit to last year’s Grammys, cementing his style icon status.



TILDA SWINTON

Whether spotted in a sweeping Chanel gown or a more casual Haider Ackermann suit, Swinton defies sartorial gender and genre boundaries.

PHOTOGRAPHY: (THIS PAGE) L’UOMO STRANO BY TYLER RIBCHESTER; GUCCI AND LOEWE VIA MAXTREE.COM; JONES BY ANGELO DELIGIOMONDADORI PORTFOLIO VIA GETTY; JAY SOM BY LINDSEY BYRNES; LITTLE RICHARD BY CBS VIA GETTY; LACY VIA INSTAGRAM.COM/STEVELACYARCHIVE; SWINTON BY STEPHANE CARDINALE/CORBIS VIA GETTY; (OPPOSITE PAGE) JACKET COURTESY OF BROWNS FASHION; ESA BY DE MONTFORT UNIVERSITY; LEICESTER JACKET, \$1946. EXCLUSIVELY AT BROWNS.