Exploring the Mind of Alexander McQueen

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Abstract

My thesis project is a journalism profile on the late British fashion designer Alexander McQueen. The project describes how I was introduced into McQueen’s work, followed by a biography on the designer. A number of McQueen’s popular collections will also be described and shown with pictures, as well as, discussing the meanings behind them. The ending will then include my experience of attending McQueen’s exhibit in 2011.
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Introduction

Doing my research on British designer Alexander McQueen was a non-stop journey. As people dream of a world beyond their existence, McQueen made his dreams a reality through his collections of work. One designer who McQueen worked with and admired was Japanese designer Koji Tatsuno. Tatsuno’s thoughts on the designer were,

“I guess I did influence his work, particularly in making fabrics three-dimensional, but also in not accepting the limitations of conventional ‘fashion.’”

My discovery on McQueen started when I attended his 2011 memorial exhibit called “Savage Beauty” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The person who encouraged me to go to the exhibit was my cousin, Richard Monroy. Monroy, a freshman in Parsons The New School for Design in New York, had this to say about McQueen:

“Time and time again, I always hear other students list Alexander McQueen as one of their favorite designers. McQueen has had a powerful impact on young designers because his work is transcendent. He is able to draw inspiration from a rich and creative source and unleash it upon the mundane world.”

In the exhibit, McQueen’s collections brought out many emotions within me. Whether it was shocking, sad, exciting, or feeling beautiful, McQueen successfully brought out these emotions towards clothing. It was something I never knew could happen; to have clothing affect people’s thoughts. His collections were truly a work of art.
Who is Alexander McQueen?

To look deep within a creation and understand the concept, one must explore the mind of the designer.

Some people might recognize the images above by a glimpse in a magazine or a five second spot in a music video, but the person responsible for these artistic visions was a man named Alexander McQueen. And yes, he is the man above wearing the Mickey Mouse sweatshirt.

Born in Lewisham, South London on March 17, 1969, Lee Alexander McQueen was the youngest of six children. When he was less than a year old, the McQueen family moved farther east on Biggerstaff Road in Stratford, moving from one apartment building to another. McQueen’s mother was a teacher and a florist and his father, like other members of his family, was a “black cab driver.” A “black cab driver” is the best choice of transportation in London, as the driver is required to know the capital’s historic cityscape.

McQueen remembers when he was 3-years-old, drawing a picture of a dress on one of the bare walls in their home. McQueen jokingly called it his first design sketch. As
a teen, he tried to teach himself how to sew and would create dresses for his three sisters, knowing he wanted to become a fashion designer. He’d call himself “the pink sheep of the family,” as he openly came out to his parents at the age of 18.

By the time McQueen turned 16, he dropped out of school to concentrate on being a designer. He took an apprenticeship at the Savile Row tailors, Anderson & Sheppard in 1985 to mid-1987. Anderson & Sheppard, located in Mayfair, Savile Row, is a famous firm for tailoring men suits for the aristocracy. One of McQueen’s clients was Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales, and rumor has it he once sewed vulgar words into his suit.

After Anderson & Sheppard, he transferred to Gieves & Hawkes in 1988, another well-known tailoring company in Savile Row, and later did theater costume work for Berman and Nathans in 1989.

From these experiences, McQueen mastered many different tailoring and pattern cutting techniques. At the age of 20, he left Berman and Nathans to work for the Japanese designer Koji Tatsuno. In 1982, Tatsuno traveled to London wanting to sell antiques but was rather inspired to turn clothing into art. Tatsuno’s thoughts toward McQueen were:

“Alexander was very absorbing, and he had a very strong personality. When he came to me in 1989, he didn’t have any experience of fashion on his CV (curriculum vitae), but he was such an interesting and somewhat twisted character that I was intrigued
by him and let him work with me. I tend to always choose interesting and original people to work with me, as they inspire the most.”

A year later, McQueen traveled to Milan and received a temporary job as a design assistant for Romeo Gigli.

His career started after traveling back to London and applying for a job in Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design. As he was interested in teaching pattern cutting, the director thought he was too young and that the students wouldn’t have taken him seriously. Instead she became impressed with his portfolio and offered him a spot as a student in the school’s master’s program.
In 1992, at the age of 23, McQueen presented his graduation collection in London’s Kensington Olympia exhibition center, it was titled “Jack the Ripper Stalks His Victims.” Jack the Ripper is known as one of the most infamous killers, who murdered five prostitutes in Whitechapel, London in 1888. Reasons as to what inspired McQueen for this collection was his fascination with the Victorian culture and the fact that McQueen’s relatives owned an inn that housed a victim of Jack the Ripper. Each piece in this collection was signed with a stitched-in lock of McQueen’s hair.
One person who became intrigued with his collection was London stylist and fashion editor of Totler magazine, Isabella Blow. A few days after the show, Blow repeatedly called McQueen’s home.

“I wondered who this nutty lady was, who kept ringing my mum. So she came and saw me and asked how much this jacket was and I just thought I’d try on, didn’t I? So I said 450 quid and she bought it!” McQueen said in 1996.

He charged Blow £5,000 for the whole collection. Soon Blow would support McQueen by wearing his outfits, as well as, introducing him to other artists, aristocrats, and actors. Blow once told the press, “He’s a wild bird and I think he makes clothes fly.”

Blow was also responsible for discovering hat designer Philip Treacy and fashion designer Hussein Chalayan.

Overall, McQueen’s presentation for the degree received media attention and firmly established him as a promising young fashion designer.

McQueen’s next step was buying his first studio, which was in a once derelict district called Hoxton Square in London. The studio was McQueen’s home as he had a bed behind the curtain of the studio. He also started to gather up a small team and at the age of 24 he staged his first few fashion shows. He booked the only venues he could afford, dragging his small fashion audience to backstreet warehouses and using models that were cheap but full of attitude.
History in McQueen’s Collections

Throughout every collection, McQueen wanted to create a new world of fashion, and by doing so he’d break the rules. He once stated, “You’ve got to know the rules to break them. That’s what I’m here for, to demolish the rules but to keep the tradition.”

One of the topics that inspired McQueen was a mixture of history. His fifth collection in 1995 was called, “Highland Rape.” This collection symbolized the Battle of Culloden (1746) in which the England invaded and defeated Scotland. Dedicated to his Scottish roots, McQueen incorporated plaid prints and showed the violence of the invasion by having holes ripped in the clothing, revealing some of the models breast and crotches.
The ending result of the show had led some people to call McQueen a misogynist.

In an episode of *Masters of Style* aired in 2001, McQueen defended his collections by saying,

“*You got to understand, I grew up with three sisters. I had this real problem when I started off with people calling me misogynist. I was very close to my oldest sister who was badly beaten up by her husband and when you’re eight-years-old and you’re seeing your sister strangled by her husband (whose now dead, thank god) all you want to is make women look stronger. You know, I don’t want to see my sister being beaten up by her husband. You have to understand I come from the alley, I don’t come from some bourgeois Left Bank of Paris. This bullshit of being misogynist, they don’t know me, they haven’t seen my life, they haven’t seen what I’ve seen. They haven’t been brought up like I have been brought up. So if people see misogyny in my work it’s because I want to portray women in the way society still sees women in some ways- not the way I see women. *”*

*The "bumster" skirt from the collection of "Highland Rape"*
One of his popular designs in the collection is the “bumster” skirt. The idea behind the piece came from McQueen’s favorite part of the human body. McQueen felt that the bottom of the spine was the most erotic part of the body.

Model Debra Shaw wearing a manacle. The audience referred to it as slavery, when it really symbolized the artist Hans Bellmer’s dolls.

After a few more controversial shows like “Bellmer la Poupée” (97), McQueen started to gain respect by those who previously saw his work as misogynist. In his next collection called “Joan” in 1998, the inspiration was dedicated to women from history like Catherine the Great, Marie Antoinette, and in this case Joan of Arc. He admired women who he called “doomed women.”
Most of the ensembles consisted the colors of burgundy, black, gray, and red. One of the materials McQueen used from the inspiration of Joan was chain mail. The model that opened the show wore a short cowl-necked dress in silver chain mail, accessorized with a veil. Another interesting material used was burgundy leather armor (seen above). The model is seen wearing a piece of armor from her head to shoulders, as well as, wearing gauntlets that appeared to look like claws. The finishing approach to every character’s design consisted of the models wearing red contacts to add a more dramatic look.
At the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards, pop artist Lady Gaga was seen wearing one of the outfits from the collection. The revealing red silk dress covered the model’s face and included a trail from the back.

Another celebrity to wear McQueen’s design was actress Kristen Dunst. Although this dress wasn’t originally a part of the Joan collection, it was inspired by Dunst’s role as Marie Antoinette in 2006.
As McQueen wanted to create a memorable finale, the last model was seen walking down the runway styled like molten ash that had solidified. She was then trapped in the center stage by a ring of fire, which symbolized the death scene of Joan who was burned at the stake.
McQueen’s Artistic Vision

On September 27, 1998, McQueen presented his thirteenth show called “No.13,” which was inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement (mid-1880s) and new technology. The Arts and Crafts was a movement in architecture and decorative arts thriving in England and the United States. The movement was about appreciating the work through simple items like floral fabrics, jewelry, metalwork, and pottery.

Aimee Mullins and the prosthetic leg made of carved elm wood.

For this specific show McQueen wanted to use several disabled models, which included American athlete Aimee Mullins. Due to a medical condition, Mullins had her legs amputated below the knee when she was a year old. Her ensemble consisted of a
brown leather corset, a cream silk lace skirt, and prosthetic legs made of carved elm wood. The prosthetic legs were designed by McQueen and made by craftsman Bob Watts.

Mullins reaction towards the outfit was,

“The fact is, nobody knew that they were prosthetic legs. They were the star of the show-these wooden boots peeking out from under this raffia dress-but in fact, they were actually legs made for me.”

She continued by saying,

“His clothes have always been very sensuous and I mean the full gamut of that. So hard and strict and unrelenting, as life can be sometimes.”

*Shalom Harlow in McQueen's "No.13."*
The ending of the show would remain one of McQueen’s memorable moments of runway history. The last model in the show walked up to a circular platform, wearing a plain white dress and near her were two robots that spray painted the dress black and yellow.

The same year, McQueen told the *Guardian*,

“The idea is to show that beauty comes within. You look at all the mainstream magazines and it’s all about the beautiful people. I know that I’m provocative. You don’t have to like it, but you have to acknowledge it.”

*McQueen’s collection called “The Overlook” in 2000*

The next approach to a new collection that McQueen took was to incorporate his favorite film within his designs. The collection was called “The Overlook” and it was completely entertaining in 2000. “The Overlook” made reference to the name of the hotel in the psychological horror film, “The Shining.” The story revolves around Jack Torrance, an aspiring writer, accepting a job as a winter caretaker at the isolated Overlook Hotel. Before taking the job, he is warned about the story towards the previous
caretaker who developed cabin fever and killed his family and himself. Bringing his wife and five-year-old son along, a presence of supernatural activity starts to occur in the hotel.

Plexiglass walls surrounded the runway and the models were seen walking on a snowy path and eventually ice-skating. It was like watching a snow globe come to life. McQueen wanted a playful scene of ice-skaters to refer to Jack’s famous quote in the movie, “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.” The designs included fur coats of different lengths, giant wool knitted coats, pantsuits, and different patchwork of leather and plaid.

A unique piece was a top that consisted of crystals sticking out, especially from the shoulders. It almost appeared as if McQueen’s purpose was to create an armor of protection. Another design McQueen thought of was the “coiled” corset that was inspired
by the coiled necklaces of the Ndebele people of southern Africa. The creator of the corset was jeweler Shaun Leane, who said,

“The coiled corset was a particularly amazing piece because I had to cast the model’s torso in concrete to get an exact form of her, and then I had to literally form every coil, one by one, front and back, and work all the way up, so that it was a perfect fit. And she’s actually placed into the corset, and then it’s screwed all along the side, and up the arms, and beside the neck. There are tiny, little bolts, so the model’s actually screwed into the piece. It’s not heavy. It’s made from aluminum, and even though it looks quite restrictive, the model actually said the piece was actually very, very comfortable.”
Two models that were seen holding hands symbolized the twin ghost sisters (the previous caretaker’s daughters) of “The Shining.” Both of the girls wore red wigs, wool tunic dresses, and gray shirts underneath.

*The twin ghost sisters in the 1980 film "The Shining."*
As McQueen supported the arts and appreciated different kinds of films, his collection in 2001 showed a mixture between the two. The collection was called “What a Merry-Go-Round” and was presented on an eight-horse carousel, outside a Victorian toyshop in London.

The idea of the show was to capture the dark side of a fair. The models that walked around the carousel wore colorful three-pointed wigs and makeup that made them appear as creepy and sad clowns. The stage included antique toys as props and balloons. The music was referenced by the character voice of “Child Catcher” from the 1968 musical film, “Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.”
In the collection, McQueen had a number of light to heavy theatrical gowns. One specific gown was a purple (see-through) tulle dress embroidered with flowers. The outfit included a black helmet with a sword going through a skull and purple ostrich feathers. A small military theme of clothing was also shown in the collection with khaki colored tops, skirts, and dresses inspired by the military and civic uniforms of the French Revolution.

Some of McQueen’s designs incorporated the skull print, as it soon became his trademark. The skull prints can be seen on bags, scarves, and dresses. Celebrities like Johnny Depp, Pink, and the Kardashians have been seen wearing the design.
(To the left) A model is wearing a black knitted dress and (To the right) a model is seen dragging a plastic skeleton.

In the finale, a model was seen dragging a gold plastic skeleton on the runway, the song “A Spoonful of Sugar” began to play and McQueen came out for his bow.
On May 7, 2007, Isabella Blow committed suicide from depression. Her depression grew by her own bad press and her distant relationship with McQueen. The friendship between the two went downhill after McQueen was appointed Chief Designer at the French Haute Couture House Givenchy in 1996-2001. Thinking that McQueen would hire her, she was left with nothing. All of the people she discovered became well known, as she was slowly forgotten.

The collection “La Dame Bleue,” meaning “The Lady Blue,” was dedicated to Blow and presented on October 6, 2007.
The stage was provided with huge mechanical wings of a phoenix that changed colors. Also, the audience heard the sound effects of wings flapping as each model started walking on the runway. The first outfit was a tailored (short length) blazer with a skirt that made the models hips appear to pop out. Since both of the pieces were loose, it made the models body look odd, as she also wore a wide leathered red belt around her waist.
Inspired by birds and nature, one of McQueen’s rainbow colored dresses included a winged feather collar. The piece is set to give the allusion of a phoenix rising with its short length trail flowing in the air.

As a mood ring indicates the mood a person is in with colors, Blow showed her emotions through hats. Many different hats, created by Philip Treacy, included a model’s head covered in red butterflies, feathered hats, and a silver synthetic net with a dragonfly.

Blow once told British Vogue magazine,

“Fashion is a vampiric thing, it’s the hoover on your brain. That’s why I wear the hats, to keep everyone away from me. They say, ‘Oh, can I kiss you?’ I say, ‘No, thank you very much. That’s why I’ve worn the hat. Goodbye.’ I don’t want to be kissed by all and sundry. I want to be kissed by the people I love.”
McQueen’s very last collection was shown on October 6, 2009, called “Plato’s Atlantis.” For the first time, McQueen’s show was streamed live on the Internet and received so many hits that it collapsed.

On the runway, two huge machines ran on tracks and filmed the audience. The story McQueen created with this collection involved a shipwreck, as models walked on the runway looking like mysterious sea creatures. Each model had a different and unique sense of hairstyle, almost appearing like aliens. The eyebrows on model’s faces were blended in with makeup and were given extra bone structure to add to the creature look.
The first few dresses had a theme of a snake pattern. One of the reptile dresses was made out of silk jacquard fabric in a snake pattern, embroidered with yellow enamel paillettes in a honeycomb pattern.

Sarah Jane Burton, the creative director of McQueen’s brand, mentioned about the design,

“It was the idea of sort of the reversal of evolution, how life would evolve back into the water if the ice caps melted and we were being reclaimed by nature. We had all these engineered prints that he’d developed, sort of looking at the morphing of species, natural camouflages, and aerial views of the land.”
The “Jellyfish” ensemble and “Armadillo” boots.

The colors went from dark land creatures to bright blue sea creatures. After the reptile dresses came the “Jellyfish” ensemble. The dress included leggings that were embroidered with iridescent enamel paillettes.

In this collection, McQueen wasn’t just critiqued on clothes but the shoes as well. Models were seen wearing the 10-inch boots called the “Armadillo.” During the show, a model named Marike Le Roux commented on the boots by saying,

“I thought kinda like a robot (the style of her walk) and I was thinking about not falling also, I have to admit. I asked him if I can have the shoes and he’s like, yeah take the shoes! I’m not going to sell them. I’m going to rock out those shoes to castings.”

Due to his mother dying of cancer on February 2, 2010 and the pressure he had by the media to overtop each collection was stressful for McQueen. McQueen’s private funeral was held in St. Paul’s Church, Knightsbridge, on February 25. Family and friends, like actress Sarah Jessica Parker and model Naomie Campbell attended McQueen’s funeral. Most of them honored McQueen by wearing his ensembles.

In the 2011 documentary film, McQueen and I, Eric Lanuit who was the former press officer of Givenchy, stated, “When I heard of his death…I immediately burst into tears. I was also shocked by the violence of it. There are thousands of ways to kill yourself and he chose a very violent, very theatrical way in keeping with his public image.”

Daphne Guinness attending her friend’s funeral and honoring him by wearing his designs.
My Experience of Savage Beauty

In 2011, I attended fashion designer Alexander McQueen’s exhibit called “Savage Beauty” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. From what I saw McQueen was a genius designer who brought out different emotions to his clothing. Some of the themes that inspired McQueen throughout his designs were approaches to Goth, feminine sexuality, and nature.

The exhibit contained seven different rooms of themes. An example of the Goth and sexuality look is the corset (pictured above) that he designed for his collection, “Dante” in 1997. Some of McQueen’s dark clothing was inspired by the Victorian era (1837-1901) and their traditions of mourning. The curator of the exhibition, Andrew
Bolton, stated, “In the Victorian era, each stage of mourning demanded a different color, one of which was lilac. This corset’s jet beading is also associated with mourning. Here, we see McQueen finding poetry and beauty in death.” This specific corset was in the second room of the exhibition called “Romantic Gothic.”

![Raven dress in McQueen’s collection called “The Horn of Plenty” in 2009.](image)

The “Romantic Gothic” room appeared dark, only giving a spotlight on the mannequins that were on display. As I walked through the room I heard the sounds of howling wolves in the background. One of the ensembles was made of black duck
feathers that looked like a raven. As a writer, I connected to the poetic side of McQueen, as he called himself the Edgar Allen Poe of fashion.

Another room called “Romantic Exoticism” was a different atmosphere. While walking through the hallway of mirrors, I felt like I had stepped into a music box. The music in the background resembled the soft tone of a ballerina in her box as the mannequins twirled around in their outfits. This collection was called “It’s Only a Game” and was completed in 2004.

The collection was inspired by the culture of Japan and America. In this specific room, I believe McQueen wanted to contrast the cultures. One of the mannequins wore the top football gear that represents the most favored sport of America. Although this might seem masculine, the helmet and shoulder pads made of fiberglass was placed over
a romper suit of feminine colors. Another mannequin wore a short lilac dress that was wide at the hips. The ensemble also included a silk jacket and tattooed sleeves that symbolized the Japanese koi fish and flower design.

Pop artist Lady Gaga in “Bad Romance.”

Beyond McQueen’s beautiful clothing and accessories, he was also responsible for the “Jellyfish” outfit Lady Gaga wore in her music video “Bad Romance.” McQueen also raised the bar in fashion by designing the ten-inch stiletto shoes that the pop artist is famously known for wearing. This specific outfit, among similar ones, was presented as McQueen’s last collection in the exhibit and his career called “Plato’s Atlantis” (2010).

Richard Monroy, a freshman in Parsons The New School for Design in New York, says, “I think the world viewed fashion differently when they received a glimpse at McQueen’s work, which evoked a sense of otherworldly glamour. McQueen demonstrated he understood luxury, glamour and fine tailoring in his body of work, but there is still something morbid, disturbing and often poetic that looms behind the surface of his collections which I find completely fascinating.”
Learning about McQueen’s work has made me realize how far people can let their creativity flow into an actual visual for people to judge and relate to. McQueen never failed in creating controversial fashion shows that left the audience falling off their seats.
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