

# **Beyond the Little Black Dress at the museum**

**The new flagship exhibition at the National Museum of Scotland will open on Saturday and will run until October.**

**This is a fashion exhibit exploring the many facets of the colour black and the little black dress – at one end of the scale a pious symbol and at the other the most decadent of cocktail wear.**

At the start of the display is a solo Coco Chanel dress – simple, short and black. This was considered very modern and removed the mourning tag from wearing black. It was US Vogue who proclaimed that this was the “frock that all the world will wear”. Maybe not of course, as it was clearly an expensive item, but it certainly led the way to a little black dress becoming a staple of anyone’s wardrobe at every level, and the most chic.

One of the dresses included is an ensemble designed for Wallis Simpson by Christian Dior in 1949. The tiny waistline itself is worth seeing, but so too is the evening dress created by Norman Hartnell a favoured Royal designer, for HRH Princess Margaret in the early 1950s. This has diamanté straps but is

created from silk and horsehair.

The museum commissioned a dress from designers VIN + OMI which was probably never on anyone's spectrum. The design team are all about sustainability – telling us they were called hippies when the term sustainability had not yet come into common parlance.

The dress they created is named RESIST and was made for one of their twice yearly fashion shows before lockdown, made from horsehair and nettles – hardly silky evening attire.

VIN explained the dress was inspired by the student assistants who worked with them, and who at the time were resisting things such as Trump being in power, and they were “very politically fired up”. But it was the resistance that the design duo felt was important and needed to be reflected in their work.

He continued: “So the word resist came down the catwalk in that particular collection. That was a time when the National Museums of Scotland commissioned this piece, which was the finale piece for our RESIST show. We always work with waste materials or sustainable materials, and new innovative ways of actually doing things. So when we were working with Prince Charles, he was letting us go round his estate in Highgrove and take anything that was waste and anything that they were cutting or strimming or throwing away, so we took nettles, and horsehair clippings, and we were using some flax, and we've made this dress from that really.”

The brand is not sold at retail for profit saying “we were never fashion designers to start with”. Their identity is that they are “ideologists”. OMI took up the chat and said: “For us, it was really important for us that all of our work in the last 25 years was based around social, environmental and educational impact first, so they always supersede design.” Their bread and butter work is in consultation with businesses

and big industry about sustainability and how the organisations can move forward. VIN said: "Our less glamorous work is really working with industry and seeing how they can improve what they do, and seeing how they can do social projects or sustainable projects to actually make their businesses better. "

VIN explained that they are "all over the place" anyway saying that he has ADHD and OMI is autistic. He said: "We were never going to be those designers that stick to one thing, and churn out hundreds and hundreds of one thing. It's just not in our personalities, we kind of come up with 10 different things every day."

OMI said this is one of their most important works to date.

He explained: "The exhibition being commissioned here, and housing one of our most important works to date, in the museum really shows the idea of turning a simple thing, like for example, the little black dress, on its head.

"For a little black dress to be a staple in the collection in your wardrobe seems a bit archaic. And so I think working, working with the National Museum of Scotland and being commissioned to do this dress really was something really important for us, because it was really celebrating what popular culture is today – and design."

Their dress will now stay in Scotland. VIN said: "I think after all the work that we've done with all the students, educating them about how to use sort of plant materials and waste materials and stuff, it's great that we that this will now be in the permanent collection of the Museum for generations to see in the future. We're very proud of that."

Georgina Ripley, Principal Curator, Modern and Contemporary Design at National Museums Scotland, said: "Few garments are as iconic as the little black dress, which has often been held up by the fashion industry as the one piece every woman should

have in her wardrobe. It has evolved dramatically in the century since its creation. From a simple shift dress which helped democratise women's fashion to a bold political statement, it has moved through various iterations which reflect changing ideals of beauty and body image. Displaying classic couture, avant-garde pieces and garments that make a political statement, this exhibition will explore its enduring success, and ask why, in the fickle and fast-paced fashion world, the little black dress has achieved that rare status of being truly above the fray."

National Museums Scotland's internationally significant fashion and textiles collection comprises around 50,000 objects and is one of the largest in the UK. The collection includes textiles dating back to the 14th century and clothing and accessories dating from the 16th century to the present day. *Beyond the Little Black Dress* follows the acclaimed exhibition *Body Beautiful: Diversity on the Catwalk*.

The exhibition is curated by Georgina Ripley, Principal Curator, Modern and Contemporary Design, National Museums Scotland, Dr Sequoia Barnes, Guest Curator and Carys Wilkins, Assistant Curator Modern and Contemporary Design, National Museums Scotland. It will be accompanied by a programme of events.

The accompanying book *Little Black Dress: A Radical Fashion* edited by Georgina Ripley, £30.00, is published by NMS Enterprises Ltd – Publishing.



PHOTO Duncan McGlynn



Joshua Cairns, Grace Dempsey and Shannon Summers outside the National Museum of Scotland PHOTO Duncan McGlynn





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