



'T-Shirt: Cult — Culture — Subversion'

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Exhibition Reviews

‘T-SHIRT: CULT — CULTURE — SUBVERSION’.
FASHION AND TEXTILE MUSEUM, LONDON,
UK, 9 FEBRUARY–6 MAY 2018

The Fashion and Textile Museum’s recent exhibition celebrated the T-shirt as a blank canvas — carrying texts, logos and protestations of all kinds — to communicate to the world at large (Figs 1–2). ‘T-Shirt: Cult — Culture — Subversion’ was far from an exhaustive history of this ubiquitous mode of casual clothing turned luxury fashion item, nor did it claim to be. Co-curators Jenna Rossi-Camus and Dennis Nothdruff sought to showcase the cultural and historical significance of ‘this humble garment ... how it has been a means to broadcast personal affinities and affiliations, while also reflecting creative and technical innovation’, as the exhibition leaflet explained. They concentrated on the evolution and proliferation, since the early 1970s, of the T-shirt as both site and vehicle to convey expressive statements through word and image. Viewers could examine over 100 examples of graphic designs, novelty patterns and pithy statements that have capitalised on the pervasive potential of this inexpensive and rapidly produced blank canvas. Examples included within the show expressed personal sentiments, supported socio-political causes, demonstrated allegiance to rock ‘n’ roll bands, and promoted products and places. Largely unconcerned by the style, fit or type of fabric used in the construction of each T-shirt, the curators drew attention to the power of fashion as a potent communicative tool, not simply a passing fad.

The exhibition opened with a brief introduction to the history of the T-shirt.

It traced, somewhat perplexingly, the first T-shaped tunic to the fifth century AD (although the geographical location of this garment remained undisclosed), before jumping to the introduction of screen printing in the Song Dynasty of China, AD 960–1279. The popularisation of the T-shirt in early twentieth-century North America — as cheap, mass-produced underwear — was unpacked in more detail, as well as its development into standard US Army and Navy regulation outerwear during the Second World War. The curators briefly explored the post-war American associations embedded within this iconic consumer item — of masculinity, toughness and youthful rebellion to conservative society — that were embodied in on-screen appearances by Marlon Brando in *The Wild Ones* (1953) and James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955).

Progressing beyond this potted history, the central installation focused on the technological processes — screen printing, flocking, transfer and digital printing — that have enabled textual and pictorial messages to be communicated via the T-shirt. The minimalist, pseudo-industrial display of dark grey walls and metal scaffolding foregrounded the visual potential of the T-shirt as a means of protest, from Vivienne Westwood’s customised designs sold on the Kings Road in the 1970s to Katherine Hamnett’s ‘Cancel Brexit’ T-shirt conceived last year (Fig. 3). Viewers were invited to focus on the objects, which had minimal accompanying materials, and to interpret them afresh. It all felt rather timely, given the current climate of protest surrounding the EU referendum, Donald Trump, racial injustice, gender pay inequality and



FIG. 1. 'T-Shirt: Cult — Culture — Subversion', Main Gallery.
© *Fashion and Textile Museum*.



FIG. 2. 'T-Shirt: Cult — Culture — Subversion', Main Gallery and Mezzanine.
© *Fashion and Textile Museum*.



FIG. 3. 'T-Shirt: Cult — Culture — Subversion', 'Climate Revolution' by Vivienne Westwood.
© Fashion and Textile Museum.



FIG. 4. 'T-Shirt: Cult — Culture — Subversion', 'We Should All Be Feminists' by Dior.
© Fashion and Textile Museum.

claims of sexual harassment. Yet by moving the recent flurry of excitement for slogan T-shirts from the catwalk and high street — quite literally, in the case of Maria Grazia Chiuri's omnipresent 'This is what a feminist looks like' — into the museum space, a more measured and contemplative response to these cultural artefacts was encouraged (Fig. 4).

Upstairs in the Fashion Studio, viewers could also observe 'T: The Typology of the T-Shirt', an insightful photographic display by American photographer Susan A. Barnett. Since 2009, Barnett has documented the various slogan T-shirts sported by diverse individuals across the United States. It is a remarkable collection, which ruminates on the powerful role of dress as a visual communicator of identity. By documenting her sitters from behind, isolated in a shallow and evenly lit frame, Barnett subverts the traditional protocols of portraiture, which, in capturing an individual's facial features, largely serve to form judgements about his or her character. Instead, the subjects are identified entirely by their clothing — specifically, the slogan of their T-shirt — which silently projects passionate messages to the viewer. Their faces remain hidden. Additional clues can be gleaned, however, from glimpses of a watch, hairstyle, brand of jeans, body type or fleeting details of the setting in which subjects were photographed. The use of the body surface as a potent political tool was powerfully underlined. Dress provides wearers with agency, a medium through which to shape their responses to the surrounding world, and fashion how they are viewed within it. Identity is presented by Barnett as a performative and fluid process, which can be changed according to the wearer's whims. By presenting her subjects uniformly in minimalist white frames upon the gallery wall, she invited viewers to discern similarities and differences between them based entirely upon their T-shirts, from 'I Heart Bernie' and

'Hillary is a Crook' to 'Money Over Everything' and 'This Means War'.

While the curators explored the T-shirt as a protagonist intervening in contemporary cultural, social and political contexts, the exhibition itself needs to be understood as an intervention in museum curation. Exhibitions still favour grand retrospectives of key figures commended for design excellence, as the V&A and Design Museum's recent explorations of Cristòbal Balenciaga and Azzedine Alaïa attest. It is refreshing to see the utilitarian T-shirt, in its numerous manifestations as underwear, symbol of youthful rebellion, political placard and luxury fashion item, taken so seriously. Seen alongside 'Super Sharp' at the Fashion Space Gallery (1 February–21 April 2018), which explored the appropriation of Italian designer labels in underground music scenes such as UK Garage and Jungle, 'T-Shirt: Cult — Culture — Subversion' suggests that the tide in blockbuster fashion exhibitions showcasing high-end design excellence, and ignoring more low-end and localised fashion systems, may well be changing. That the next stop of the exhibition is Barnsley Civic will help to move these discussions beyond London, and speak to a wider audience with an interest in the T-shirt as a powerful interface between the wearer and the world.

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'HANNAH RYGGEN: WOVEN HISTORIES'.
MODERN ART OXFORD, OXFORD, UK, 11
NOVEMBER 2017–18 FEBRUARY 2018

As a 'leading UK contemporary art space', according to its website, Modern Art Oxford seemed an unlikely venue for an exhibition of the pictorial tapestries created