

SAVAGE BEAUTY

By Caroline Phillips



Butterfly headdress of hand-painted turkey feathers from La Dame Bleue, SS08 by Philip Treacy for Alexander McQueen, modelled by Alana Zimmer (Image courtesy of Anthea Simms and the V&A)

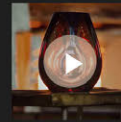
Savage Beauty, a major retrospective of the work of visionary fashion designer Lee Alexander McQueen, is a cut above the rest. The exhibition – which originated at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York – has been edited and expanded, with 244 items on display. Clothes will always look dull after these.

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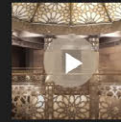
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Installation view of "Romantic Exoticism" 2015 – Alexander McQueen Savage Beauty at the V&A (Image courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

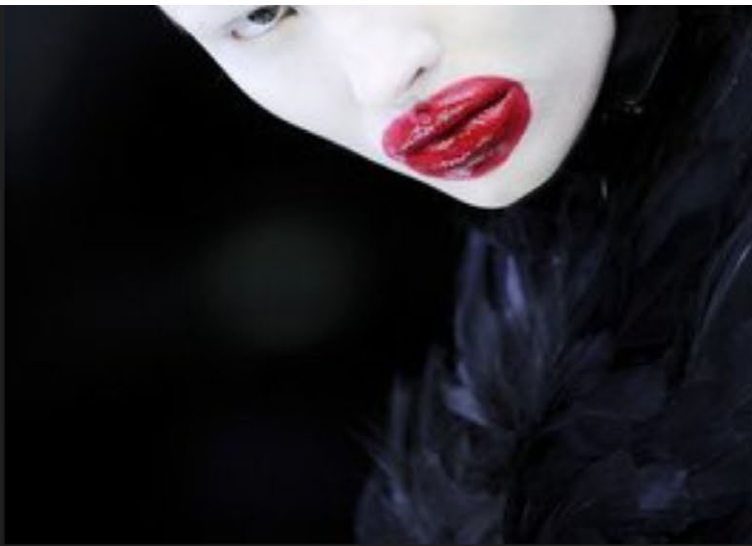
There are 10 sections from McQueen's MA graduate collection to his final 2010 unfinished one. Each showcases dominant themes and concepts of McQueen's extraordinary work – from London (which focuses on the designer's early roots) to Romantic Gothic (which references the Victorian Gothic tradition) and Romantic Primitivism (think atavistic and tribal in a room of bones and skulls).



Jellyfish ensemble and Armadillo shoes from Plato's Atlantis, SS10 by Alexander McQueen, modelled by Polina Kasina (Image courtesy of Lauren Greenfield, INSTITUTE and the V&A)

There's Kate Moss in a diaphanous dress stuck in a glass pyramid – a holographic 3D image that is shown near life size. At the heart of the exhibition is the magnificent Cabinet of Curiosities – a double-height room with a ceiling-high montage of Philip Treacy hats, revolving mannequins, those famous towering armadillo shoes and screens showing snatches of his highly conceptual, provocative catwalk shows (the church converted into a runway, women walking on water). This is pure theatre.





Duck feather dress from The Horn of Plenty, AW09 by Alexander McQueen, modelled by Magdalena Frackowiak (image courtesy of firstVIEW and the V&A)

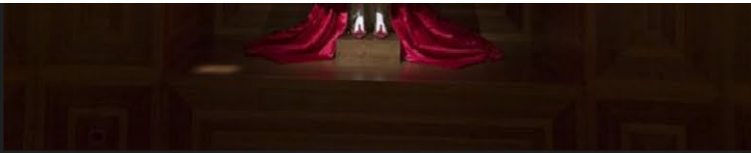
McQueen's technical accomplishment is awesome – from the dress of razor clams or feathers to the skirt from plywood and garment of synthetic hair or leather. The accessories – the extravagant bone headpieces, armadillo shoes and Swarovski mesh chain-mail are like sculptures. This is more than fashion. These pieces reach the realm of art – in addition to being a collection of innovative tailoring, eclectic influences and blend of technology with craftsmanship.



Installation view of "Voss" 2015 – Alexander McQueen Savage Beauty at the V&A (image courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

Are there any downsides? There's a lack of context or explanation in Savage Beauty. I don't learn much about the designer's life – especially about what might have driven him to suicide or the impact of his depression on his work. Nor do I find out about his psyche and what demons drove him to cover women's faces in leather gimp masks. Was he a misogynist? Plus my understanding of the social milieu that existed when, say, he created his bumster trousers is not furthered.





Installation view of "Romantic Nationalism" 2015 – Alexander McQueen Savage Beauty at the V&A (image courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

But this matters hardly one jot: the overall experience is a triumph. Savage Beauty is like being immersed in the world of fairy story, with darker hints of gothic sensibilities. It's a magical experience. A spiritual one.



Tulle and lace dress with veil and antlers from Widows of Culloden, AW06 by Alexander McQueen, modelled by Raquel Zimmermann (image courtesy of firstVIEW and the V&A)

Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty (in partnership with Swarovski, supported by American Express, with thanks to M-A-C Cosmetics, technology partner Samsung and made possible with the co-operation of Alexander McQueen), the retrospective of the work of fashion designer Alexander McQueen, is to date the most popular show ever staged at the V&A, according to the museum's deputy director Tim Reeve. More than 480,000 tickets were sold for this theatrical, romantic and sometimes eerie exhibition. For further information, go to www.vam.ac.uk/savagebeauty





Installation view of "Platos Atlantis" 2015 – Alexander McQueen Savage Beauty at the V&A
(Image courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist who contributes to publications from Sunday and daily newspapers to glossy magazines and various luxury websites. To see more of her work, go to www.carolinephillips.net.

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