



**MARY JUST
WANNA HAVE
FUN**

Dior treasures and wonders may be just metres away, but there is another exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum which is not to be missed: the retrospective dedicated to Mary Quant. It immerses us right back into the fun and light-hearted mood of swinging London and takes us behind the scenes of Mary Quant's style, philosophy of life, and vision of women.

"I feel fashion is about life," said Mary Quant in an interview in 1985. And life, energy, and freedom are the accurate words to depict the atmosphere of this exhibition. From minis to colour-block stockings and flashy makeup, you can feel her vibrant and airy personality bubbling constantly. It's no wonder, though, since her inspirations included jazz, the flappers of the 1920's, tap dancers and schoolgirls. Yes, Mary Quant just wanted to have fun!

One would naturally expect that she is only about the light jersey and easy-to-move-around-in minis and hot pants. Guided through the evolution of her style and designs, one becomes aware that these fashion breakthroughs, for which she has been credited, are not what came first. Like good wine, they took a few years in the making.



Indeed, you'd be surprised (spoiler alert!) to discover that the clothes she initially produced and sold, albeit very feminine, were rather conservative, pretty demure and very well-behaved: classic wrap-around silhouettes, traditional cocktail below-the-knee tulip-dresses, massive use of large flat pleats. The fabrics she worked with in her early days were heavier and more rigid. She also drew inspiration from the Victorian era, not exactly a symbol when it comes to freedom and liberation of women, although, with time, she came to translate this inspiration less and less literally

and even scoffed at it.

Despite the apparent conservatism of her first creations, her light and funny spirits were already transpiring full blast. It is obvious that she was, since the very beginning, driven by a subtle sense of humour and, above all, a fondness for breaking long-established rules. Her designs were given statement and amusing names, definitely aimed at taking a stance, sneering at some realities of the time. One cannot help but smile at the irony of her Bank of England dress (1962), when you think that, back then, women could not open a bank account without the approval of a male chaperone. The Rex Harrison dress (1962), which is branded after the famous actor who played Professor Higgins in *My Fair Lady* and was renowned for wearing cardigans, is an absolute joke: a knee-length cardigan with side pockets so low and shallow they are impossible for the wearer to reach, let alone to use. The butcher striped dress (1961), designed like an apron and made of a heavy cotton white and blue striped fabric, is also quite a statement in itself, including that fashion should not be taken too seriously.



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Breaking the rules was an art she mastered to perfection early on, notably when she borrowed from the masculine wardrobe as a source of inspiration for her outfits. Amongst the most memorable ones are a pair of trousers (at a time when it was frowned upon for women to wear them) made from the same cloth as men's tailoring, especially for their morning suits, as well as an outfit constituted of separates: a waistcoat and a tie dress. Her fashion shows were also very relaxed with bands playing live music and models having fun on the catwalks. In a nutshell, they were a far cry from the fashion shows of the day, strictly choreographed and emerging straight from a cloud of hairspray.

"I think fashion anticipates," she once said. And, at anticipating, she did excel indeed. She constantly put into practice her sharp eye for distorting fabrics and clothes from their original purpose, altering and enriching their function in a playful way.

The bestselling items at Bazaar, the shop she founded in Chelsea in 1955 with her husband, Alexander

Plunkett-Greene and their friend, Archie Mac Nair, were whiteplastic Peter Pan collars.

She also designed, in 1964, an evening gown made of wool, not exactly the designated fabric to attend social dos! The PVC raincoats, to which she dedicated an entire collection in 1963, the Wet Collection, are probably some of her most revolutionary creations, not only with regards to the technology and craftsmanship they required but also for their style. With her, raincoats became colourful and sexy, turning this somewhat overlooked wardrobe piece, synonym for bad weather, into an alluring, sophisticated and feminine item. They make you feel like humming "I'm singing in the rain" rather than wailing a downcast "It's raining again". Finally, one must not forget her famous colour block stockings, propelling hosiery from a mere humble functional destiny to an integral part of a woman's look. With this explosion of colours, she could easily be dubbed the "Pop Art" designer.

Humour, breaking rules and playful innovations were therefore the

pillars which shaped her style and her perspective of woman and femininity. Her vision of a woman is that of independence, a woman who works, is constantly on the move and juggles between various activities in her everyday life. She believed in a fashion for "real people" and, to her, the point of short skirts was that "so you could move and dance and run and catch the bus (...)". But it's not just the mini which gives freedom of movement. Quant made sure her designs were functional, comfortable and could transition well from daytime to evening. Always with a zest of fun and lots of colours, she adopted very simple and refined cuts, incorporated zippers and delicate stitching and popularised sweatpants as a must have in a wardrobe. She went on to encompass every aspect of a woman's look when she created her lingerie line, especially made to complement her clothes, her footwear, and, of course, her makeup range.

"The point of clothes for women should be, one, that you're noticed, two, that you look sexy, and three, that you feel good." If those words



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sound universal when it comes to femininity and what every woman actually wants to achieve with her looks, Mary Quant's vision of woman, however, appears to be rather ambivalent: she's self-confident, not afraid to show her legs and be sexy, but she still has a foot (or a heel...) in childhood. Spontaneity is the essence of her style and, akin to the name of one of her dresses, the Mary Quant woman would be more accurately described as a "daddy's girl" rather than a femme fatale. Indeed, no curves nor cleavages in sight, as if showcasing them, the very attributes of women, were far too serious and would strip them of their innocence. Instead, she chose legs and a childlike attitude. Her style is forever associated with playfulness, as her numerous pinafore dresses and peter-pan collars show. The apotheosis of this playfulness lies probably in her "OBE outfit" in which she purposefully looked more like a grown-up schoolgirl with her beret than like a proper "Dame" which she was officially made that day.

If, sadly, the designs she's renowned for may not be the best fit for the short and curvy ones of us, unlike her early creations which would have suited a wider range of silhouettes, the fact remains that Mary Quant's influence on fashion is tremendous.

We will not dive (but rather tip a toe) into the debate over whether the mini is her original creation or that of French designer André



Courrèges. Apart from the fact that there is no point in putting a dent into our not so old *Entente Cordiale*, Quant famously credited her customers for actually inventing the mini skirt, recounting that they wanted their hemlines shorter and shorter. She therefore pioneered street fashion (trends are not dictated by designers anymore but by the "real" people) and mass-market production, especially with her lower-price range, the Ginger Group. She contributed to making London a fashion centre, which it is

still nowadays. Everyone wanted a piece of the London Look of the 60's, the USA and Tokyo couldn't just get enough of Mary. She popularised the mini worldwide and, in the present day, there is not a fashion show without one. Mary Quant proved that fun and style were not incompatible. It is that playful and childlike attitude, both in life and aesthetically, that crafted her iconic style, a philosophy of life to which the miniskirt happened to be the epitome.

See more from Marie at [instagram.com/marie_fourmeaux_tips_and_style/](https://www.instagram.com/marie_fourmeaux_tips_and_style/)
Mary Quant is at the Victoria and Albert Museum until 16 February 2020.
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