



## News Release

### Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty

In partnership with Swarovski

Supported by American Express

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### Timeline

**1969** – Born Lee Alexander McQueen on 17 March in Lewisham, South London, growing up in Stratford as the youngest of six children, with his mother and father.

**1984** – Becomes tailor's apprentice at Anderson & Sheppard in Savile Row, tailor to HRH Prince of Wales.

**1987** – Moves to Gieves & Hawkes, also on Savile Row.

**1988** – Works at Berman's and Nathan's, cutting clothes for major London theatre shows including *Les Misérables* and *Miss Saigon*.

**1989** – Employed as a pattern cutter with the London-based Japanese designer Koji Tatsuno, where he is responsible for all made-to-measure commissions.

**1990** – Moves to Milan to work as a pattern cutter for Italian designer Romeo Gigli before returning to London to begin a master's degree in Fashion Design from Central Saint Martins.

**1992** – His ten-piece graduate collection, *Jack the Ripper Stalks His Victims*, is inspired by Victorian London and demonstrates a strong emphasis on tailoring. The collection, which features locks of hair stitched and bonded under linings, is later purchased in its entirety by stylist / *Vogue* editor Isabella Blow, who models it for British *Vogue*.

**1993** – Presents his first collection *Taxi Driver* (A/W 1993-4) in a room at the Ritz Hotel as part of a British Fashion Council initiative. Inspired by the Martin Scorsese film, the collection demonstrates McQueen's interest in experimenting with the female silhouette and marks the debut of the infamous 'bumster' low cut trousers. Later that year, *Nihilism* (S/S 1994) becomes his first professional catwalk show. A statement of anti-romanticism with textiles distressed by chemicals, the collection is also inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement and features William Morris prints.

**1994** – *Banshee* (A/W 1994-5), named after a mythological Gaelic spirit, draws on themes of romance and tragedy, presented within a post-shipwreck scene. Moves his studio to Hoxton and starts working with Katy England, who becomes his Creative Director. Presents *The Birds* (S/S 1995), which reflects his passions for birds and cinematography.

**1995** – *Highland Rape* (A/W 1995-6) makes reference to McQueen's Scottish ancestry. Subverting romanticism about Scotland's past, it utilises the McQueen tartan for the first time and features clothes ripped and torn to expose flesh. Sam Gainsbury, later of Gainsbury & Whiting, produces *The Hunger* (S/S 1996) and will subsequently help to realise all of McQueen's collections for the runway. Set to a soundtrack by Bjork, the show includes collaborations with jewellery designer Shaun Leane and draws on themes of sexuality, mortality and decay.

**1996** – Stages *Dante* (A/W 1996-7) in a church in Spitalfields, in reference to his maternal ancestors, immigrant Huguenots who had moved to East London several centuries before. The collection comments on religion, war and innocence. *La Poupée* (S/S 1997) is inspired by German Surrealist artist Hans Bellmer and includes a model shackled to a silver frame walking through the water that covers the catwalk. Succeeds John Galiano to become Head Designer at French haute couture house Givenchy for luxury brand LVMH. Continues to show collections under the McQueen label and is awarded British Designer of the Year by the British Fashion Council, which he will also win in 1997, 2001 and 2003.

**1997** – Designs the Union Jack coat which David Bowie wears on the cover of his 1997 album *Earthling*. Explores the relationship of victim and aggressor in the natural world in *It's a Jungle Out There* (A/W 1997-8). The vulnerability of the beautifully-marked Thomson's gazelle becomes a central focus with some designs crafted from skin and horn as well as an emphasis on denim. *Untitled* (S/S 1998) sees McQueen receive support for the first time from American Express. Models walk onto a raised Perspex catwalk filled with pools of black ink and are showered with golden rain. McQueen's pink jumpsuit from *La Poupée* is displayed in the V&A exhibition *The Cutting Edge of Fashion 1947-1997* and is later acquired for the Museum.

**1998** – Violence, martyrdom and persecution in medieval times are referenced in *Joan* (A/W 1998-9). The dramatic climax features a satanic ring of flames encircling a masked model. McQueen appears on the cover for *The Face* magazine, shot by photographer Nick Knight, as part of a special art project inspired by the collection. Guest edits the September issue of *Dazed & Confused* magazine, making double amputee Paralympics champion Aimee Mullins the subject of a cover feature. Mullins later models on the catwalk wearing intricately carved wooden prosthetic legs for *No 13* (S/S 1999). This show sees McQueen challenge conventional perceptions of beauty and is supported by Swarovski, marking the beginning of their long-term collaboration. The finale features former ballerina Shalom Harlow slowly revolving on a section of the catwalk while robots spray-paint her white strapless gown yellow and black.

**1999** – Based on the isolated, snowy landscape of Stanley Kubrick’s film *The Shining*, *The Overlook* (A/W 1999-2000) is staged inside a huge snow-filled Plexiglas box with models appearing in luxurious furs, opulent jacquards and soft knits. *The Eye* (S/S 2000) is shown in New York and the collection references Islamic and Middle Eastern cultures. In the finale, models are suspended from ropes over a spiked runway. The V&A stages its first *Fashion in Motion* event with Alexander McQueen, showcasing a selection of pieces from *No 13*. McQueen is represented in the V&A’s permanent Fashion Gallery for the first time, where examples of his work have featured since.

**2000** – Gucci purchases a controlling interest in the McQueen line, allowing McQueen greater creative licence. He remains Creative Director and leaves Givenchy the following year. *Eshu* (A/W 2000-1) is inspired by the Yoruba people in West Africa and traditional tribal motifs are combined with western elements. Presents his celebrated collection *Voss* (S/S 2001), which features an elaborate set in which a giant mirrored cube eventually reveals a padded cell with models including Erin O’Connor trapped inside. The collection contains bodices, skirts and dresses created from unlikely materials including razor clam shells and microscope slides. The finale recreates a photograph by Joel-Peter Witkin, *Sanitarium* (1983), with the glass walls smashing to reveal the voluptuous naked figure of fetish writer Michelle Olley reclining on a chaise longue breathing through a tube and surrounded by moths.

**2001** – A macabre circus set on a roundabout carousel, *What A Merry Go Round* (A/W 2001-2) features models in clowns’ make-up wearing flapper dresses and delicate evening gowns with accessories of pearls and pheasant claws. McQueen debuts his own label at Paris Fashion Week with a Spanish-themed show *The Dance of the Twisted Bull* (S/S 2002). As part of the V&A’s major *Radical Fashion* exhibition, shows a number of pieces from *Voss* and replicates the glass cube from the set design.

**2002** – *Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious* (A/W 2002-3) is set in the medieval palace where Marie Antoinette was incarcerated with a catwalk lit by Tim Burton. The collection revisits earlier themes of children’s literature, cinematography and dark, Gothic fantasy as well as finding new inspiration in Germanic Puritanism evident in neutral suits with fetishistic harnesses. *Irere* (S/S 2003) opens with an underwater film by John Maybury of a drowning girl in a torn chiffon dress, who metamorphoses from shipwreck survivor to Amazonian princess. Thermal images of the models, dressed in rainbow bright tropical colours, are projected onto the screen.

**2003** – An interest in Eurasian culture is apparent in *Scanners* (A/W 2003-4) which traces a journey from West to East and references Russia, Tibet and Siberia. Traditional outfits including kimono style capes depict the red and white colours of the Japanese flag. Collaborates with the dancer and choreographer Michael Clark for *Deliverance* (S/S 2004), based on the Sydney Pollack movie *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?*. The models dance, run, then stagger around the stage to the quickening marathon pace, their extravagant eveningwear replaced by sportswear and finally denims and utilitarian workwear. The finale sees model Karen Elson dancing to the death before

being carried off the stage. Receives the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) Award for Best International Designer and is honoured with a CBE for his services to the fashion industry.

**2004** – *Pantheon Ad Lecum* (A/W 2004-5) centres on a futuristic narrative, with models emerging from a spaceship onto the runway. *It's Only A Game* (S/S 2005) pits East against West, with models enacting a game of chess, inspired by a scene in the film *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. McQueen returns to the London catwalk for the first time in three years, in association with long-term sponsor American Express for *Black*. A one-off performance, it opens with Kate Moss and Michael Clark dancing and ambitiously restages many defining moments from McQueen's collections and catwalk shows. Launches a menswear line.

**2005** – Inspired by Hitchcock films, *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (A/W 2005-6) references the vintage silhouettes of the film director's heroines. A more pared back runway presentation *Neptune* (S/S 2006) features an abundance of designs in black offset with the occasional gown in silver and a Grecian-style robe in white.

**2006** – Revisits his interest in Scottish heritage and the subjection of the Scots by the English in the collection *Widows of Culloden* (A/W 2006-7), inspired by the final battle of the Jacobite risings. The show features McQueen tartan dresses as well as tweed suits and a headdress by Philip Treacy and Shaun Leane, which comprises a bird's nest filled with blue, speckled eggs encrusted with Swarovski gemstones and flanked by mallard's wings. A haunting evocation of Kate Moss within an empty glass pyramid utilises 19th-century stage technology and becomes a memorable finale. Romantic but also referencing death and decay, *Sarabande* (S/S 2007) includes a gown constructed from real and artificial flowers, the petals falling as the model walks. Launches McQ, a diffusion line which encompasses menswear, womenswear and accessories.

**2007** – *In Memory of Elizabeth How, Salem 1692* (A/W 2007-8) is inspired by a victim of the Salem witch hunts, who McQueen's mother traced back in their family tree. Warrior-like moulded bustiers and symbols of pagan worship are worn such as crescent moon and star headpieces. In a tribute to the late Isabella Blow, McQueen, along with long-term collaborator Philip Treacy, creates *La Dame Bleue* (S/S 2008) inspired by her personal wardrobe. By the end of the year, McQueen has flagship stores in London, New York, Los Angeles, Milan, and Las Vegas and is awarded GQ Menswear Designer of the Year.

**2008** – *The Girl Who Lived in the Tree* (A/W 2008-9) is based on a fictitious story about a girl who descends from a 600-year-old elm tree in McQueen's garden to meet a prince and become a queen. The collection's sumptuous materials and regal colours are inspired by a trip to India with Shaun Leane. *Natural Dis-tinction, Un-Natural Selection* (S/S 2009) comments on global issues of climate change and man's impact on the natural environment with a catwalk filled with a 'Noah's Ark' of taxidermy animals. Collaborates with prima ballerina Sylvie Guillem on the stage costumes for *Eonnagata* at Sadler's Wells.

**2009** – Extravagant and theatrical, *The Horn of Plenty* (A/W 2009-10) is presented on a scrapheap-style runway featuring props from McQueen’s previous collections, in what is seen as a comment on the excesses of the fashion industry. The collection references landmark looks in fashion history and combines a strong Gothic aesthetic with gowns of duck feathers that envelop the wearer, exaggerated prints and striking make-up. *Plato’s Atlantis* (S/S 2010) is lauded as McQueen’s greatest collection and becomes the first ever fashion show to be live streamed on the internet - by fashion website SHOWstudio. The collection follows the apocalyptic, futuristic narrative of a world where the ice caps have melted and humans have learned to survive underwater. An army of models wear digitally-printed dresses inspired by amphibious and oceanic creatures and towering 30.5cm high ‘Armadillo’ shoes, with plaited hair and prosthetically-enhanced faces.

**2010** – Dies, aged 40 on 11 February 2010. McQueen’s last, unfinished, collection (A/W 2010-11) is completed by Sarah Burton, McQueen’s Head of Womenswear since 2000 and now Creative Director. Referencing Old Master paintings, woodcarvings and Byzantium art, it is presented to private groups in a Parisian mansion.

**2011** – *Savage Beauty* opens at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and becomes one of the most popular exhibitions in the Museum’s history.

– ENDS –

For further PRESS information about the exhibition, please contact Zoë Franklin or Lily Booth in the V&A press office on 020 7942 2497 / 2500 or email [z.franklin@vam.ac.uk](mailto:z.franklin@vam.ac.uk) / [l.booth@vam.ac.uk](mailto:l.booth@vam.ac.uk) (not for publication).

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