

IT'S GOOD TO HAVE THE FEELING YOU'RE THE BEST

Cocktail Dress

Birmingham, 1950s

This beautiful chiffon cocktail dress was worn by Jamaican-born Sister Williams. It has no label and was probably home-made or sewn by a local dressmaker.

Garments such as this counteract inaccurate statements such as those made by former Conservative MP Jeffrey Archer in 1999: 'Afro-Caribbeans 30 years ago, they had the worst jobs and were not well dressed... Your head did not turn in the road if a black woman passed, because they were badly dressed, probably overweight'.

Lent by Vanley Burke Archive,
Birmingham Central Library

Patti Flynn

Cardiff, about 1961

Photographer unknown

This glamorous evening dress was owned by the singer Shirley Bassey. Bassey, who was born in Cardiff, donated the dress to raise money for the Rainbow Club, an organisation run for children in Cardiff. In this photograph the dress is modelled by Cardiff jazz singer Patti Flynn.

With permission of Butetown History and Arts Centre

Hardy Amies for Hepworth Dinner Suit

London, about 1964

A keen eye for fashion led builder Julian Bridgeman to purchase this dinner suit. It was designed by royal dressmaker Hardy Amies for the high-street tailor Epworths. Bridgeman has a collection of around 35 suits he bought between 1961 and his retirement in 1978.

Lent by Julian Bridgeman

Birmingham, 1960s

Photograph by Vanley Burke

These men were photographed by Vanley Burke outside the New Testament Church of God in Handsworth. Like the peers who arrived in England from the late 1940s, the men demonstrate the continued importance of attention to detail in the presentation of the self.

Ozward Boateng Suit

London, 2004

One of Ozward Boateng's professional trademarks is the use of traditional and non-conventional methods to create a vibrant yet formal look. Andrew Larbi had this suit made for his wedding in 2003. He chose an Ozward Boateng suit because 'it reflected my character, it was a little bit different. Stylish without being too forward or ostentatious'.

Lent by Andrew Larbi

Andrew and Theresa Larbi

Photograph by Martin Daly

Derek Lilliard Suit, Shirt and Cufflinks, and Jeffrey West Shoes

London, 2000

This suit was bought by Desmond Bennett for his wedding in 2000. He travelled from Doncaster to London especially to buy the whole outfit from tailor Derek Lilliard. Bennett had previously been introduced to Lilliard's design and tailoring skills for a suit he purchased as a wedding guest. What attracted Bennett was Lilliard's fine attention to detail, seen here on the collar of the shirt and the lining of the jacket.

Lent by Desmond Bennett

Wedding Headdress

London, 1977

When Jamaican-born model, Monica René got married in 1977 she chose an outfit which reflected African traditions as well as personal glamour. Her hair was braided by an African friend in a traditional bridal style. Over this she wore a hand-made headdress created from red, black, white and green beads, colours which reflected her African heritage.

Lent by Mrs. Monica René

Blouse, Wrapper, Skirt, Headdress, Pretty Fit Shoes and Pretty Fit Handbag

London, 2004

This outfit would be worn to a wedding, christening or other important social gathering. The style is one traditionally worn in Nigeria, particularly by the Igbo tribe. Here it is made from a Thai-influenced fabric known as 'george' rather than an African print. It is worn with a pre-made headdress called a 'gele'.

Supplied by Obys Fashion, London

Yoruba Students in Aso-Oke Cloth, Popoola Wedding

London, 1968

Photograph by Val Wilmer

'Aso oke' (literally 'top cloth') is worn by Yoruba men and women throughout south-western Nigeria on special occasions such as weddings and naming ceremonies. Students Mr and Mrs O. Popoola dressed in matching aso oke outfits to celebrate their wedding as a means of continuing their Yoruba traditions in their new country.

Blouse, Wrapper and Headwrap

Nigeria, 1990s

This outfit was sent from Lagos as a gift from Maria Amidu's grandmother. The same outfit was also sent to Maria's sisters, as it is traditional for family or peer groups to wear the same print for special occasions. Maria has only worn it once, to her graduation from the Royal College of Art in 1992. She wore it not only because it was a special occasion, but because she wanted to make a positive cultural statement after two years of being one of only a few black students at the RCA.

Lent by Maria Amidu

Pretty Me Party Dress, Hip-Hop Socks and EG Eliza Shoes

London, 2004

Birmingham, 1950s

Photograph by Ernest Dyche

Children's clothes often reflect the style ideals of their parents. In some cases, as with this outfit, they may project family values, such as a conservative attitude to gender divisions. There is a long tradition of dressing girls in pretty frilly dresses with matching socks and shoes, as can be seen in the photograph.

Supplied by Eliza George, London

Retro Active Pleated Top and Retro Active Embroidered Jeans

London, 2004

In direct contrast to the frilly party dress, this outfit is much more contemporary. Its style is based on the clothes worn by music stars such as Mis-Teeq and Beyoncé Knowles. Suzan Whyte at Eliza George feels that this outfit reflects today's culture. It indicates an interest in the latest fashion by children as young as three years of age.

Supplied by Eliza George, London

Boyd Tops, Jacket and Trousers

London, 2003

Mis-Teeq, Scandalous

London, 2003

Photograph by Matthew Donaldson

These clothes, selected by stylist Cynthia Lawrence-John for British R&B act Mis-Teeq, appeared on the cover of their single 'Scandalous'. Lawrence-John had seen the clothes at British designer Boyd's catwalk show. She felt that they combined high fashion with a 'street edge' and that the cheesecloth fabric feminised the clothes based on combat trousers and tracksuits.

Lent by Mis-Teeq and Cynthia Lawrence-John

Suit

London, 2002

Nike Dynamite Shox Trainers

London, 2002

This leather suit was designed for British hip-hop/R&B singer Ms Dynamite (Niomi McLean-Daley). She wore it to the MOBO awards (Music of Black Origin) in 2002, at which she won three awards. It combines a smart elegance with sports styling. The suit is based on the style of the tracksuit, but has a more 'dressed up' feel because it is made from soft leather.

Suit lent by Ms Dynamite

Trainers lent by Nike

D&G T-shirt, D&G Trousers and Nicole Farhi Shoes

London, 2004

Designer labels are an important component of young men's leisure clothing. Here a T-shirt and trousers by Italian designers Dolce and Gabbana are combined with shoes by British designer Nicole Farhi. 'This is smart enough to wear to a bar and onto a club and be allowed in. It's the sort of thing I would wear if I could afford it' (Jermaine Adutwim, 2004).

Compiled by Jermaine Adutwim

Supplied by Zee and Co., London

C'N'C Costume National Dress, Sexie Booda Stole, Noel Stewart Trilby Hat, Rickard Shah Handbag, Mui Mui Shoes, John Lewis Gloves, Aristoc Tights

London, 2004

Stylist Bernice Brobbey compiled this outfit. She wanted to show what a fashion-conscious black woman might wear for an evening. Brobbey sees the blend of high-fashion labels and high-street clothes as key to individualised looks today.

Compiled by Bernice Brobbey

Stole lent by Sexie Booda

Boater

Aruba, 1950s

Knitted 'Trilby'

London, 1960s

Jacques de Boe Trilby

London, 1960s

Until about the 1960s it was considered proper for a gentleman to wear a hat. These three examples show the range of hats available to men to finish off an outfit. Julian Bridgeman bought the straw boater in the Caribbean in the 1950s before he moved to London. He recalled that he wore it with both formal suits and more casual outfits at the weekends.

Lent by Julian Bridgeman