



What's relevant now?

PARIS

BY VANESSA FRIEDMAN

Paris Fashion Week opened with a Saint Laurent show held on the plaza between the shadow of the Trocadero and the twinkling lights of the Eiffel Tower.

A garden had been constructed for the occasion on a raised platform filled with thousands of white hydrangeas in full bloom arranged in the shape of the YSL logo (best viewed by livestream via a drone). Around the place were scattered faux-stone garden benches and more greenery, so it felt as though you were in one of the many other manicured gardens around the city — the Tuileries, say, or the Luxembourg — except this one had been manicured to order, for one night only.

Guests had been told doors would close 10 minutes before the show's scheduled start, and they flowed in obediently early, seizing the extra moments to snap selfies against the scenery until darkness fell. Then they sat, and looked around. Then they started to jiggle their legs. Then Madonna arrived 40 minutes after the appointed hour with her daughter Lourdes and a blockbuster pussy-bow blouse, black leather motorcycle jacket and black leather pencil skirt appeared between the hydrangeas. It was YSL, circa the 1970s and early '80s, when it straddled the fine line between fetishwear and elegance.

Five or 10 years ago, that was the formula for magic. Create a fantasy setting where none had existed, add some superstars, plumb the archives. But as more leather began to trickle out with exaggerated shoulders, exaggerated white blouses, spiky stilettos and shades, followed by slithery nylon raincoats of the haute bourgeois Saint Laurent era, it mostly just seemed archaic. At least the finale of voluminous ruffled evening gowns, with giant puffed sleeves, empire waists and billowing trains updated in parachute nylon, had an appealing energy, like a crowd of angry infantas run amok.

But all that fabric, all that fussiness? Who is that woman?

Fashion is teetering on a relevancy

brink, at risk of toppling off. It's not enough to tinker with once-shocking looks of the past; history has rendered them mainstream. Going through the same motions again and again, and taking refuge in nostalgia at this moment of high anxiety — of government shutdowns and strikes and conflicts — may be tempting, but it is making the whole proposition seem increasingly disconnected and static. To a certain extent, luxury has always existed in its own reality. That's why executives and designers are endlessly talking about "the dream." But in the current climate, that seems less influential and aspirational than insubstantial.

It's telling that Nicolas Ghesquière, the artistic director of Louis Vuitton women's wear, chose to set his show in the section of the Louvre that had been the private apartments of Anne of Austria, queen of France from 1615-1643. And then offered a deeply plush vision of what to wear in the gorgeousness of one's home when hiding away from the horrors of the world.

Ultrasoft bathrobes coats were layered over matching soft suiting (even the corsetry was made from soft knits). Draped onesies came with matching turbans that suggested hair twisted up in a towel after the bath. Crystal-speckled wraps looked as though they were made from snugly shearling, but turned out to be silk brushed so thoroughly it had taken on the texture of fur. Even the shoes were soft: tapestry slippers and lace-ups.

Forget sweatsuits; this was loungewear for the .0001 percent. The fact it was shown in the museum was perhaps more symbolic than it was meant to be. The takeaway presumably is that such clothes equal high art — or at least a decorative art (and often, like those brushed silk pieces, they do). But the unintended implication is that they have become relics of another age.

How to connect fashion to the urgency of the moment, and thus get distracted, jaded, fearful people excited about the transformative potential of clothes is one of the questions hanging over every

collection.

The irony is that an answer of sorts may lie in a different kind of show: the new "Virgil Abloh: The Codes" exhibition in the Grand Palais. An immersive look at the former Vuitton men's wear designer and founder of Off-White who died in 2021, it is the first formal initiative from Virgil Abloh Securities, the organization created by Mr. Abloh's wife, Shannon, to manage his legacy.

That it opened at the same time as Fashion Week was a coincidence, Ms. Abloh said (it happened to be the dates the gallery was free), but a fortuitous one. "It just felt like he was up there being like, 'Of course, I'm going to do Fashion Week this week,'" she said.

Curated by Mr. Abloh's longtime collaborators Chloé and Mahfuz Sultan, the show essentially invites visitors into Mr. Abloh's world and mind, starting by recreating his office at Louis Vuitton, complete with its enormous table full of DJ gear. It showcases his hundreds of Nike sneakers, the graffiti art created when Playboi Carti stopped by and they decided to mess around, and the belief system that said whatever you were doing, and whatever you were doing it with, you just kept trying new stuff. The atmosphere is almost electrically alive.

Which may be why on the opening day the small pop-up created in collaboration with Sarah Andelman (the woman behind the former concept store Colette) and situated just at the entrance to the show was heaving with people. Whether propelled by a desire to carry off a souvenir of the experience or a bet on its future resale value, they were snatching up Abloh-related merch, like the elaborate Assouline tome of his work with Louis Vuitton, and reissues from one of his many collabs, including a mini-alarm clock with Braun. Within the first few hours of the boutique opening, the clocks were practically sold out.

"I keep hearing about the death of retail," Ms. Andelman said, looking at the scrum in front of the cash register. "But this doesn't look that dead to me."





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LOUIS VUITTON

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