

Punk Chaos to Couture Exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art



BY TAMMY DUFFY

May 11 2013

Since its origins in the 1970's Punk has had an incendiary influence on fashion. As a style, Punk was about chaos, anarchy, rebellion, as reflected in the anthem, "no future", taken from the lyrics of "God Save the Queen", by the Sex Pistols. Drawing upon a corpus of sexual and political behavior the imagery was intended to shock, provoke and confront. Punk made fashion overtly hostile and threatening. Punk evolved into the iconic uniform, t-shirts, black leather studded jackets, skinny jeans and leather pants or bondage trousers. The visual history of punk reveals a striking diverse range of styles and identities. What these desperate fashions did was to bring a fiercely independent spirit of customization. Armed with youthful rebellion, punks took cultural production into their own hands, fashioning looks that were distinctive, innovative and revolutionary.

Punk originated in NYC in 1974 and in London in 1975. Punks in both countries shared a frustration and dissatisfaction with the state of hegemonic mainstream rock and roll. Punk was a middle class phenomenon in the United States. With artistic and intellectual underpinnings made it qualitatively differentiative than punk in England, which was a working class phenomenon.



CBCG bands and audiences were not style conscious in the way the English punks were later on. The only style at CBCG was torn t-shirts and torn jeans. Whenever one thinks of the colorful hair of punk, that trend started in London. Even though CBCG was referred to as a punk club, there was never much fashion there.



More than anyone associated with punk, Malcolm McLaren and his partner Vivienne Westwood were instrumental in crystallizing the commercializing of what became known as the classic punk style. Punk never would have happened without Vivienne and Malcolm. They marketed under a slogan, “Clothes for Hero’s”, as bondage suits, parachute skirts, string mohair sweaters and perhaps most famously t-shirts and muslin shirts with offensive slogans and graphics came into play. It was imagery that hopefully would not appear polite, because the last thing you wanted to do was be polite.

A vivid memory of the punk years is when Sid Vicious was wearing a condom outside his trousers, a padlock around his neck which he lost the key to and could not get off.



The ethos of do it yourself is punks greatest and most enduring influences on haut couture and ready to wear. Punks made use of a wide range of objects. Collaging them together into entirely original creations. Punk style was defined principally through the violence of its “cut ups.” Like Duchamp’s ready-mades- the most remarkable, inappropriate items could be brought within the province of punk fashion. Punks appropriated objects from the items such as tampons and laboratory chains, but they favored articles associated with consumer culture, often as an ironic statement of the political and economic conditions of the times.

The images and slogans punks wore, painted, stenciled into their clothes were perhaps the most self-evident expression of the types and styles of graffiti, they tended to favor flicker or splatter painting which gave rise to comparisons with Jackson Pollock’s’ drip paintings. When quoting punk graffiti design one tends to prefer fluid like paintings. Punks had much to say about the socioeconomic conditions under which they were living. Their thoughts were most effectively communicated through agitation propaganda or agitprop for short.



The primary vehicle was the t-shirt. They brought about social revolution by questioning and threatening the status quo. More than any other aspect of punk, the practice to destroy or deconstruction has had the greatest and most enduring influence on fashion. For Punks, this practice expressed itself in turn, ripped and slashed clothes which either intentionally or unintentionally came to be interpreted politically as symbols of government stagnation and economic deterioration. The themes of urban decay and poverty that torn, ripped and slashed clothing implied have been taken up by several socially aware, politically active designers. Effectively, punk democratized creativity and invention. It broke all the rules and allowed anything to be possible.

One would be amiss if the topic of punk music was not mentioned in this article as well. Punk Rock music was an anti-establishment music movement that began around 1974-1975. Any band with "attitude" or "youthful aggression" was punk." Punk Rock is "do it yourself" attitude music.



Bands that helped make the genre of punk rock what it is today are The Ramones, The Saints, The Sex Pistols, The Damned, and The Clash. The "punk" title was applied to

these groups by early 1976, when Punk Magazine first appeared in print and on newspaper stands across America.

The United States saw the emergence of hardcore punk. Some early hardcore punk bands included Minor Threat, The Dead Kennedy's, and Black Flag. While punk rock music had a decline in the 1980's, many bands branched off playing their own interpretation of "punk rock." Many of the punk rock bands of today were influenced by rock 'n roll. There is still a thriving punk scene in North America, Japan and Europe. What and when will the next wave of punk look like? Only time will tell.



Photos Courtesy of Getty, AP, Punk Teens