

Seditionaires: The Unconventional Designs of Dame Vivienne Westwood

As one of the most influential designers of her time, Vivienne Westwood defied the laws of fashion through various aspects, most notably her collection titled 'Seditionaires.' In collaboration with Malcolm McLaren, the two opened up shop on 430 Kings Road in Chelsea, supplying garments to punks throughout the country. Her work with 'Seditionaires' offered a safe haven to the Punk community of London while promoting political beliefs surrounding social sustainability, gender norms and culture. This essay will explore the unforgettable and appalling attire presented by Westwood and her attempts to change traditional values of fashion and aesthetics.

The icon herself was born in the quaint county of Glossop, Derbyshire, in April of 1941. Prior to entering the fashion realm, Westwood had a successful career as a primary school teacher and was married to Derrek Westwood. Later, in 1965, the self-taught fashion designer met and began working alongside Malcolm McLaren (Britannica, 2023). Westwood and McLaren opened their first boutique together under the name 'Let It Rock,' where they sold a variety of McLaren's record collection and second-hand 1950s clothing. The boutique had undergone several name changes over the years, such as 'Too Fast to Live Too Young to Die', 'SEX' and 'World's End' (Hawkins, 2022). The label under 'Seditionaires' opened in 1976, housing garments meant for the punk anarchist culture of Britain in the mid-1970s. Vivienne Westwood's clothes offered outlets for the unusual and contemporary lovers of fashion while enraging the right-wing patrons of England.

Conflict surrounding Britain during the 1970s was derivative of issues prominent in the 1960s. Economic uncertainty alluded to the demise of several working-class civilians, with fear of recession and international conflicts (Worley, 2016). The worldwide oil crisis of 1973 sent this

ideology into a spiral. The effect left on youth culture throughout Britain promoted the exploration of individuality through music and fashion. Similar to the clothing put forth by Vivienne Westwood, punk music's opposition to societal norms allowed for increased visibility of subcultures affected by the political scrutiny of the times (Guerra & Figueredo, 2018). Enraged by tensions with the unemployment crisis, many young people turned to Punk as a culture and outlet for expression surrounding the inequality amongst the working class (Worley, 2016). The result: complete and utter anarchy in the UK.

Westwood's role in shaping the anarchist ethos of London can be highlighted through her work alongside partner and band manager of the Sex Pistols, Malcolm McLaren. The Sex Pistols were the epitome of punk rock during their time, with pessimistic, rebellious band members such as Johnny Rotten and Sid Vicious. Her designs were worn by the Pistols frequently while the shop was under the label 'SEX' in 1974, promoting defiance and aligning with the band's vulgar song lyrics. Shortly after their song "God Save The Queen" faced consequential criticism from British radio, Westwood renamed her boutique Seditious. Sedition entails the promotion of inciting people to rebel against government authority and/or monarchy (Merriam-Webster).

Her clothing during this era was intentionally abrasive and unconventional, meant to make a mockery of the conservative ideals and standstill of social progress (Andrew, 2022). One of the most famous iterations from this era was a distressed muslin top featuring the portrait of Queen Elizabeth II, adorned with a safety pin on her face. This article of clothing featured the lyrics of the Sex Pistols' "God Save The Queen" in addition to the band's logo (Figure 1). Westwood and McLaren released the design the same year as the Queen's Silver Jubilee, which would mark 25 years as reigning monarch (Wolf, 2022). The band took drastic measures when promoting their record, appearing on a boat down the River Thames during the Jubilee

celebrations, which later resulted in their arrest (Savage, 2012). The perspectives of Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren influenced the lyrics to this song, such as “no future and England is dreaming” and “She ain't no human being.” These lines were deliberately calling out the monarchy’s use of alienation against the people of England, specifically those affected by economic inequality and atypical subcultures (Whatley, 2020).

Another garment featured in the Seditinaires collection was the infamous ‘Destroy’ T-shirt from 1977. The design included blasphemous symbols such as a pink swastika and an upside-down crucified Jesus Christ (Figure 2). Similar to the ‘God Save The Queen’ top, the ‘Destroy’ T-shirt highlighted the lines from the Sex Pistols’ “Anarchy In The UK” with lyrics such as “I am an antichrist, I am an anarchist.” This article of clothing created an outburst of controversy throughout London; however, that is precisely why she produced such a graphic. Westwood intended to call attention to the horrific actions of dictators, such as Chile’s Augusto Pinochet, for his malpractice as President of the country and General of the military regime (Packenham & Ratliff, 2007). The underlying message amongst the profane imagery was simple: “We don't accept your values or taboos, and you’re all fascists” (Waters, 2022).

Vivienne Westwood’s work dismantled the social compliance of fashion, offering a chance for people to express themselves in a way they thought was not yet possible. Her work, in collaboration with McLaren, provided an avenue for social outcasts and supported the views of Punk culture in London (Olive, 2023). Before Seditinaires was the main title of the Kings Road boutique, the shop was named ‘SEX,’ featuring an unavoidable sign with large pink bubble letters (Figure 3). The shop housed peculiar items, including a variety of fetish and bondage wear meant to imply sex as a weapon of culture and to use it as a platform for socioeconomic and political change (Worley, 2022).

Westwood's motifs within the SEX shop paralleled similar values of Seditinaires, focusing more on the expression of sexuality rather than anarchy and anti-fascism. In an interview, McLaren stated that the clothing sold at the SEX shop signified greater importance than simply aesthetic appeal. Taking inspiration from Pin-Up girls of the 50s and 60s, it hypothesized sadomasochism, revealing underlying emotions of sexual repression and fiscal instability within the differing social classes (Worley, 2022).

A design featured in the SEX shop highlights both the promotion of sexuality and confronts social issues rarely discussed in mainstream media. The garment in question features two cowboys facing each other, presented without pants, exposing their genitalia. The 'Two Cowboys' T-shirt, released in 1975, caused exponential controversy, eventually leading to one of Westwood's employees being arrested for crimes of "indecent exhibition" just by wearing the graphic in public (Hess, 2018). The lack of change portrayed by the British government, even after the Sexual Offences Act of 1967, sent Westwood into a rage and yearned for political progression. This frustration with parliament and political capability could be seen as Westwood's inspiration for the use of heinous symbols in order to assimilate and deconstruct the power of said imagery.

More apparent in Seditinaires, Westwood aimed to decimate traditional clothing practices with visual design aspects and the construction of the garments presented. She deliberately left sleeves with unfinished hems, connected parts with safety pins, and used sheer/holed fabrics, leaving the wearer's body exposed to the world (Olive, 2022). These challenged the notion of what fashion was meant to be, not only in the physical sense, but also through visual attributes used on articles such as the 'God Save The Queen' and 'Destroy' t-shirts.

Despite being the head creative and designer of the majority of clothing produced, Westwood's work was heavily influenced by partner Malcolm McLaren. McLaren's fascination with the Situationist movement at the time encouraged Westwood's exploration of design methods and differing artistic elements (Clarke & Holt, 2015). Vivienne Westwood's initial desire to become "a princess of another planet" was skewed by McLaren's views. He planned to change that "princess" into the personification of grunge and androgyny adorned with torn fabrics with unusual messages (Clarke & Holt, 2015). McLaren's use of brand promotion with Vivienne Westwood's designs, through the use of the Sex Pistols, created a catalyst for youth culture. It allowed them to freely express their identity through Westwood's clothes and the Sex Pistols' music, signifying comfort and stability at the King's Road boutique.

The punk movement during the 1970s served its purpose as an outlet for the unorthodox subcultures of London. Fighting alongside the punk rockers was the heroine, Dame Vivienne Westwood. Westwood's audacious pieces were manifestations of her political beliefs, and she continued to use her platform to speak about social issues til the day she passed. Through her boutique with Malcolm McLaren, she provided a means of expression for those affected and exacerbated by the wrongdoings of the British parliament. Creating nonconformist designs such as the 'God Save The Queen,' 'Two Cowboys,' and 'Destroy' t-shirts, she dismantled traditional values and notions of fashion design as a whole. Her legacy will forever be remembered and honoured as the Queen and Mother of Punk Fashion.

Appendix

Figure 1: *'God Save The Queen' t-shirt*, Vivienne Westwood & Malcolm McLaren, 1977



<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/185220>

Figure 2: *'Destroy' t-shirt*, Vivienne Westwood & Malcolm McLaren, 1977



<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/789272>

Figure 3: *SEX Shop 430 Kings Road, Chelsea, London*



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