

THE ART OF THE DRESS

Having a gown made especially for you is the pinnacle of fashion. But, as Kathryn Conway learns, the process of couture at Vivienne Westwood is about so much more than just the dress



Say the word 'punk' and it is likely that one of the first names that springs to mind is Vivienne Westwood. As an architect of the look of the punk movement in the Seventies, Westwood has called punk "her call to arms" and it's a spirit that still pervades the fashion house that Westwood launched in 1971. With her designs often featuring political slogans and her shows referencing environmental plight, fashion has always been a platform for Westwood to express her views. And rather surprisingly for an area so wrapped up in tradition, the couture arm of Westwood's business also adheres to her staunch principles. While it might appear to be the very antithesis of punk anarchy, couture is actually about individualism and perfectly embodies what has become Westwood's personal manifesto: buy well, choose less, make it last.

Couture is an investment on every level; commissioned by an individual keen to purchase something unique, often for the most special of occasions, the end result is loved, treasured and, in some cases, passed down the generations. For the sheer longevity of a bespoke piece alone, couture has to be one of the most sustainable arms of the fashion business. "We recycle, we drive electric cars and Vivienne always comes and switches off the light at lunchtime," says Brigitte Stepputtis, head of couture at Vivienne Westwood, who celebrated her 25th anniversary with the company last year. "It starts with the little things," she adds, "but we also use techniques such as no-waste pattern cutting in the studio." Stepputtis goes on to reveal that the use of organically produced silk has been another key development, but points out that Westwood has always favoured the use of heritage fabrics – Harris tweed being an obvious example. And with initiatives such as Suzi Cameron's Red Carpet Green Dress, for which Westwood created a delicate Bird of Paradise corseted gown made out of melted-down recycled plastic bottles for Lily Cole to wear to this year's Oscars, it is clear that sustainability is at the very heart of Westwood's couture creations.

A HIDDEN SECRET

Despite such exposure, it's fair to say that thanks to the perceived dominance of our French cousins, British couture has been rather under a bushel. For Stepputtis, however, it is precisely because it is out of the spotlight that British-made couture garners appeal. "It's almost like a hidden secret and people love that," says Stepputtis. For those who love Westwood's design cues, her blend of traditional tailoring and use of both historical and experimental pattern cutting ensures her gowns are unmistakable. Take the wedding dress designed for Dita Von Teese. The core was once again the famous Bird of Paradise design, but supercharged – resplendent in all its purple changeant silk grosgrain glory. "For some people the colour was the most striking aspect of the dress," reveals Stepputtis. "But for me, it was more about the proportions. It was one of the biggest dresses we've ever created in terms of the volume of the skirt, and the waist was a tiny 16 inches. It was exciting to witness those extreme proportions come to life."

The corset has become synonymous with Westwood over the decades, but it is the figure-changing genius of her 17th-century-style flat corsetry that is so inspired. "It's really special, because not a lot of designers offer it and Vivienne Westwood has been using the techniques for a very long time," says Stepputtis. The Cocotte dress, which was originally seen in Westwood's 1995 Vive La Cocotte collection, is a perfect example of the atelier's flatwork corsetry skills and is very much a feature of the brand's



current demi-couture collection (which features 10 dress designs that can be made to order in your choice of colour) and ready-to-wear bridal designs that are available at Westwood's Davies Street boutique.

The store is also the home of Westwood's bespoke service and it is here that the skills of Westwood and the couture team really shine. Taking into account individual taste, style and the occasion for which a gown is being designed, it is always the tiniest of details that sets great couture apart. "Some brides will have an animal or flower they love, whether it be a butterfly or a dove. We take this and incorporate the symbolism or motif into the embroidery of the design or into the veil," says Stepputtis. "Or perhaps it's the other way round. A client might come in with the veil their mother wore and we use it as inspiration for the overall design. Making a couture dress is more than simply making a dress," she adds. Indeed, Stepputtis is highly in tune with the sentiments involved when creating a piece of couture; she understands the importance of both the dress and the occasion to the client – it's all part of the service. And perhaps it's because Stepputtis has been at what she terms this "family company" for 26 years, one would wager that there isn't any project that the Westwood team couldn't undertake.