

## **'Mary Quant' Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK**

**6 April 2019-16 February 2020**

2019 has unquestionably been a year to celebrate the work of British designer Mary Quant, and has demonstrated the lasting appeal of the designer who brought the mini to the masses. The Fashion and Textile Museum displayed examples of Quant's work as part of its 'Swinging London: A Lifestyle Revolution' exhibition whilst the Victoria and Albert Museum has dedicated an entire exhibition to her work.

For 'Mary Quant' the Victoria and Albert Museum's Gallery 40 has been transformed into a brightly coloured space that reflects the iconic British designers' aesthetic. Downstairs the display focuses upon Quant's 1950s and 1960s fashion designs. Garments, magazines, photographs and even bills, order letters, fashion drawings and fabric samples are displayed in bold block coloured cases. Downstairs the exhibition also exploits audio-visuals with screens playing clips of Quant's pioneering fashion shows that saw models dance up and down the catwalk to modern pop music. On the other hand, upstairs the space is more open and pared back. Here, alongside Quant's garments from the 1960s and 1970s, a wide variety of accessories, lingerie, make-up and even dolls are seen (figure 1).



Figure 1: Installation view of 'Mary Quant',  
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London

An unusual element of the display was the exhibition panels, which were all written in the present tense. This was a very effective curatorial decision and added to the sense of excitement of the exhibition, giving the audience the feeling that they were really part of this movement. There was something quite playful

about this choice, and it perfectly complimented the playful nature of Quant's designs.

Whilst this celebration of the innovative nature of Quant's designs is very clear throughout the exhibition many of the garments also demonstrate Quant's retrospective glance and how particularly in the 1960s she drew inspiration from Victorian underwear and 1920s flapper dresses. Quant's childhood nostalgia was also clear. With garments taking inspiration from school pinafores and the boxy silhouettes typically associated with childrenswear.

The exhibition follows the trajectory of Quant's career (including Quant's childhood sketchbook from 1944). It traces her business from its establishment in 1955 right through to her commercial successes in the 1960s and 1970s. However the display is not entirely chronological, each display case reflecting a different significant moment for Quant. Notably the exhibition demonstrates Quant's flair for export. Whilst Quant was unquestionably a British designer the exhibition demonstrates the international craving for this look- particularly the American desire. The exhibition showcases a number of garments produced for JC Penney from 1962 onwards (figure 2). These pieces are particularly interesting, whilst designed by Quant and often made in British fabrics they were manufactured in America.



Figure 2: Installation view of 'Mary Quant',  
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London

In 1966 Quant stated "the whole point of fashion is to make fashionable clothes available to everyone."<sup>1</sup> However, many of the early garments Quant produced and sold through her boutique Bazaar were unquestionably relatively expensive

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Quant, *Quant by Quant* (London: Pan, 1972), 122.

(in line with the prices of much wholesale couture at the time). The exhibition demonstrates Quant's increasing diversification and catering to wider markets. Quant's Ginger Group (established in 1963) offered garments at far more affordable prices. The exhibition text suggested that Quant's aim for this line '[was] to change the course of fashion by producing fun, edgy clothing for a wider clientele.'<sup>2</sup>

This exhibition did not simply portray the vision of the lone 'creative genius' rather it gave credit for many of those figures who worked closely with Quant. The significant role played by Alexander Plunkett Greene (Quant's husband) and Archie McNair (Quant's business partner) is noted throughout the exhibition. The exhibition also includes garments that belonged to Pamela Howard, Quant's personal assistant and later design director and Annabel Taylor who ran Quant's wholesale showroom.

One of the most striking elements of the exhibition was the personal stories that were interwoven through it. Many of the pieces on display had been donated or lent to the exhibition in response to the V&A's #wewantquant call-out for garments and memories. Unquestionably these stories added an extra layer that can sometimes be missing from such designer focused exhibitions. This meant that many garments were accompanied by original photographs of the owner and also snippets of their Quant memories. One such example stated:

Research scientist Caroline Hopper lived in a Kensington basement flat in the 1950s and bought this blouse straight out of Bazaar's window to impress her geologist boyfriend returning from Antarctica. 'The staff were rather cross because they had only just finished dressing the window. [The blouse] never had a label so might have been one of those pieces that Mary Quant sewed in the evening to replenish her stock.'<sup>3</sup>

It was also interesting to see a number of homemade garments that had been created using Butterick Mary Quant patterns. These allowed women to stitch or knit their own versions of Quant pieces at a fraction of the price. In many ways this stepped away from the standard garments one might expect to see displayed in the V&A fashion galleries but certainly added an extra layer to the exhibition.

Typically Quant has been heavily associated with the mini skirt. Whilst the origins of the mini skirt have often been disputed (as the exhibition highlights) Quant's short length garments were certainly seen in the press from 1960 onwards. Whilst there were a significant number of knee-skimming garments on display one of the key takeaways from this exhibition was that Quant was more than just the mini. She was a (rightfully) celebrated British designer who broke America and sat at the forefront of British ready-to-wear for nearly twenty years.

Liz Tregenza, Independent Researcher.

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<sup>2</sup> *Mary Quant*, 6 April 2019- 16 February 2020, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK.

<sup>3</sup> *Mary Quant*, 6 April 2019- 16 February 2020, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK.