V&A Object Discussion Cards:
Fashioning Masculinities



V&A Object Discussion Cards

The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London is the world's leading museum of art, design and performance. Its collection of 2.7 million objects spans over 5,000 years of human creativity. Each object in the museum has a different story to tell and can spark different questions about our connection to design.

The V&A Object Discussion Cards in this pack showcase objects from the V&A *Fashioning Masculinities: The Art of Menswear* exhibition. Each Object Discussion Card aims to encourage object-based learning and allow students to develop critical, creative and collaborative thinking skills with the support of teachers and educators.

Guidance for teachers and educators

These cards can be used while visiting the V&A or to support object-based learning in the classroom. You can use the cards as posters in your classroom after the activity.

Before starting, please check the suitability of the content of the cards and questions for your students. Some of the object descriptions include sensitive language and/or topics and may require a more tailored approach.

Students can use the cards for individual work however, we recommend students refer to them in small groups to encourage peer-to-peer discussion. Or in some cases, you may wish to facilitate the discussion.

Each card includes an object image, short object description and discussion questions. Encourage your students to take time looking at or drawing the object before taking it in turn to read aloud the description and questions to their group. Some cards include more than one object to prompt students to make interesting links and connections between objects. We suggest giving students about 5–10 minutes to work through the questions on each card.

Managing student discussion

We recommend voicing the following discussion guidelines before students start:

- Allow everyone in the group to voice their opinion. Be kind, patient and respectful of other people's views and ideas.
- Don't worry if you don't know what your opinion is yet. Ask further questions to your group or do more research to help you decide.
- Remember that everyone's opinion is valid. If someone has a different opinion to you, listen to them and ask them to explain their reasoning – it might change your own viewpoint.

Further questions:

As well as the discussion points on the cards, use the questions below to encourage further object-based discussion with your students:

AESTHETIC What does it look like?

TECHNICAL What is it made from? How does it work?

INDUSTRIAL How and in what volume is it manufactured?

CULTURAL What or who is it responding to?

BEHAVIOURAL How do you interact with it?

ECONOMIC How does it financially impact the consumer and/or manufacturer?

ENVIRONMENTAL Is it sustainable? What is its lifespan?

Find out more:

Encourage your students to find out more about the objects by visiting **vam.ac.uk/collections**

V&A Object Discussion Cards: *Fashioning Masculinities*

About the exhibition

About the exhibition

At a moment of unprecedented creativity in men's fashion and reflection on gender, this exhibition explores how designers, tailors and artists – and their clients and sitters – have constructed and performed masculinity, and unpickedit at the seams.

The exhibition showcases the variety of possible masculinities across the centuries, from the Renaissance to today, and includes looks by Gucci, Harris Reed, Grace Wales Bonner and Raf Simons, paintings by Sofonisba Anguissola and Joshua Reynolds, contemporary artworks by David Hockney and Omar Victor Diop, and an extract from an all-male dance performance by Matthew Bourne's dance-theatre company New Adventures.

The exhibition is divided into three main sections: **UNDRESSED**, **OVERDRESSED** and **REDRESSED**.

UNDRESSED

UNDRESSED explores the male body and underwear, looking at how classical European ideals of masculinity have been perpetuated and challenged over the centuries. On Grand Tours during the 18th Century, wealthy young European men visited archaeological sites in Italy and admired statues of ancient Greek and Roman gods, heroes and athletes, including Apollo Belvedere and the Farnese Hermes. These sculptures – which highlight a tradition of depicting idealised male bodies draped in textiles that reveal more than they conceal – have influenced European fashions for the masculine body ever since.

OVERDRESSED

OVERDRESSED explores the elite masculine wardrobe, epitomised by oversized silhouettes, lavish materials like silks and velvet in daring colours, and symbolic patterns expressing status, wealth and individuality. Global trade enriched European taste with the importation of patterned and richly coloured textiles from China, Japan and India.

After a period of restraint in 19th- and early 20th-century menswear, countercultures of the 1960's reinvigorated exuberant dressing. From the 'Peacock' styles of Swinging London to contemporary designers reclaiming bright colours and patterns to express a broader spectrum of identities, Overdressed shows how historic ideas shifted into a full rainbow of masculine outfits.

REDRESSED

Following the French Revolution (1789–99), fashion rapidly changed, as practicality and rationality became favoured over lavish ornamentation. From body-sculpting construction to a more sombre colour palette (highlighting the influence of military attire and 'Anglomania'), menswear reformed and the suit emerged as a status symbol. Industrial mills and mass-production in 19th Century made the suit, 'the uniform of modernity', available to all.

Redressed explores this transition of tailoring up to the present day. Today, the suit has 'dissolved', as a new wave of fashion designers and their muses, are slashing away at conventions, both for menswear and masculinity.

V&A Fashioning Masculinities: The Art of Menswear exhibition

In partnership with **GUCCI**
With support from **American Express**



UNDRESSED

Shirt, unknown, Britain, 1740–80 (made)

©Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Shirt, unknown, Britain, 1740–80 (made)

Until the early 20th Century, shirts were regarded as underwear. Worn to protect the body and provide modesty, they also served as an indicator of wealth and social status.

This is an example of the typical underwear of an 18th-century fashionable gentleman. It is made up of breaches and a shirt. The shirt would be worn under outer clothing, but may have been provocatively glimpsed at through the layers of heavier dress – an early example of the fine line between underwear and outerwear, and ideas of the private and public body.

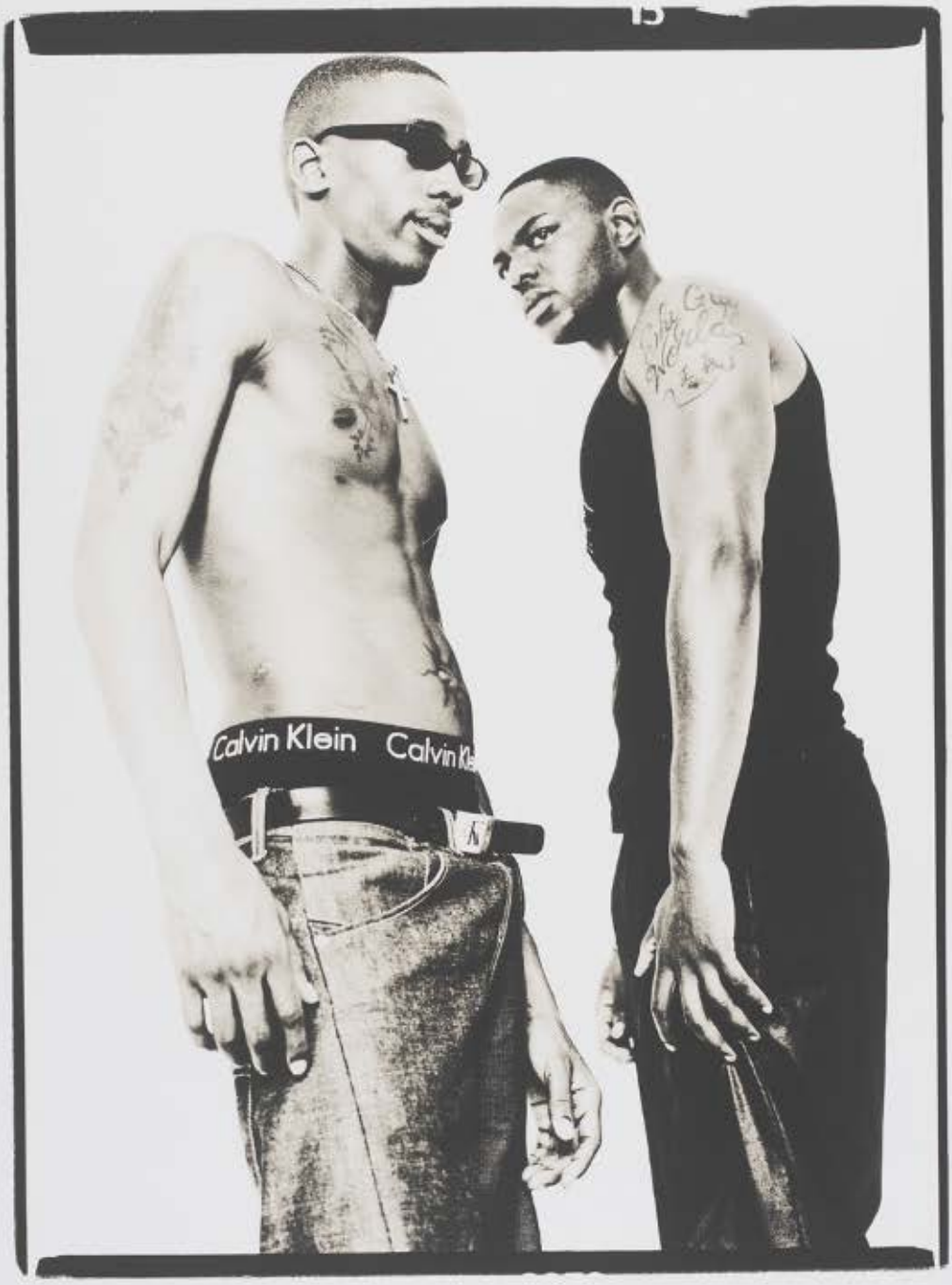
Discuss

- 'To conceal is also to highlight.' Do you agree with this statement in relation to the display of underwear in the world of fashion today?
- Do you think there is a connection between this 18th-century historical shirt and the t-shirt?
- What material choices do you need to consider when designing underwear, since it is worn so close to the skin?

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UNDRESSED

Photograph by Jennie Baptiste, 'Brixton Boyz', lith-print, London, 2001

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Photograph by Jennie Baptiste, 'Brixton Boyz', lith-print, London, 2001

Baptiste's photographs explore fashion and style as expressions of Black British identity. In her studio in Brixton, London, Jennie Baptiste shot this black-and-white photograph of two young Black men standing facing each other. One stands topless with low-slung jeans, in the style popularised by American rap-stars, and Calvin Klein boxers visible.

The trend of low-slung, loose jeans is thought to be traced back to jails, where prisoner's belts were removed for safety reasons. The style spread outside prisons and became an international urban trend.

Discuss

- How do popular cultural icons and their fashions influence our ideas of gender? Can you think of any examples relevant to you?
- Visible branded waistbands had a marked impact on designs for men's underpants. Do you think this is a form of advertising, worn on the body? Can you think of any other examples like this?
- The camera angle for this image seems to be from a lower vantage point, meaning the viewer looks up to the faces of the two figures. Do you think this was intentional? Does it add anything to the overall composition in relation to the 'masculinity' of the subjects?

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UNDRESSED

Left: Plaster cast of Michelangelo's *David* (1501–04), cast by Clemente Papi, 1856
Right: Men's 'Zoned Performance' V-neck t-shirt, designed by Spanx, 2010

©Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Plaster cast of Michelangelo's *David* (1501–04), cast by Clemente Papi, 1856

Michelangelo's *David* is one of the most famous sculptures in the world. David, a young shepherd from the Bible, is best known for defeating the giant Goliath. Measuring almost 5.5 metres tall, Michelangelo depicted the youthful hero on a colossal scale and used perspective to enhance his size further when viewed from below. The statue has often been referred to as an ideal image of a young man.

See this object on display in the V&A Cast Court. Find the fig leaf, commissioned in the Victorian period for the sculpture, on display in the Fashioning Masculinities exhibition.

Men's 'Zoned Performance' V-neck t-shirt, designed by Spanx, 2010

Recognising a demand for male body-shaping, this t-shirt was designed to aesthetically improve the physique of the male silhouette. It compresses the wearer's abdominals and torso to create the look of a firm body.

Discuss

- What do you think about Michelangelo's *David* being an ideal image of a young man? Do you think having an ideal image of a person is a good thing?
- Would you wear something to 'enhance' or change the shape of your body? Can you think of any other types of clothing which are intended to 'enhance' or change your appearance? What is your opinion of clothing that is designed for this purpose?

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OVERDRESSED

Top: **The Almain Armourer's Album, Jacob Halder, Greenwich, 1557–87 (made)**
Below: **Breastplate, unknown, France, about 1565 (made)**

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Breastplate, unknown, France, about 1565 (made)

The 'Peascod' style of armoured breastplate – elongated and pointed downward at the waist – was a stylistic choice, rather than to aid protection of the vital organs in battle. From the 1560s, armour front plates mirrored Spanish fashion and were made to look like the coats of noblemen. This decorative example, with etched and gilt ornamentation, highlights the crossover between men's fashion and armour.

The Almain Armourer's Album, Jacob Halder, Greenwich, 1557–87 (made)

This pen, ink and watercolour page is one of many from an album of designs known as the Almain Armourers Album, or Jacob Album. The album, compiled between 1557 and 1587, is one of the V&A's most famous objects from the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. It was made by Master Armourer Jacob Halder to record the commissions of the English Royal Armoury in Greenwich. Through its coloured pages, the album showcases the level of technical skill and artistry involved in making armour for noblemen of the period.

Discuss

- The production of armour was a highly sophisticated process. The pages in the Almain Armourers Album record a complex design and manufacturing process. The design team would have included an artist, tailor, blacksmith, goldsmith, engineer and locksmith. Do you think the makers of the armour used any techniques borrowed from tailors and clothes makers in crafting silhouettes?
- Do you think there is a similarity between armour and fashion design today? Watch this short film with Dr Samuel Ross, founder of men's fashion brand A-COLD-WALL* who describes his clothing as "armour for the now"

https://youtu.be/P5cVVwDXsYU

- From the 'Bomber jacket' to Burberry Trench Coat designed for officers in the First World War, armour and military uniform have been long-lasting trends in men's fashion and streetwear. What could this say about mainstream ideas of 'masculinity'?

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OVERDRESSED

Cravat, Grinling Gibbons, England, carved limewood, about 1690

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Cravat, Grinling Gibbons, England, carved limewood, about 1690

A cravat is a length of soft textiles like lace, linen and silk worn around the neck like a modern tie. This intricate cravat is very unusual as, despite the illusion of fine Venetian needlepoint lace, it is actually made from limewood. The object was delicately carved by master woodcarver Grinling Gibbons (1648 – 1721) to showcase his technical skill.

Despite the modern association of delicate ornamentation with femininity, until late 18th Century, men wore lace and ribbons as much as women, and embellishment was seen as a symbol of power and wealth.

Discuss

- This limewood cravat is one of the museum's most celebrated pieces, inspiring awe for its display of expert craftmanship. Watch this video to understand more about how the object was made.

https://youtu.be/FWDj4ze_nok

- Why do you think this object was made? Who do you think it was originally intended for?
- Why do certain fabrics relate to ideas of 'femininity' and 'masculinity'? Aside from lace, can you think of any other materials that contemporary society can sometimes 'gender'?

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OVERDRESSED

Oil painting of Dudley, the 3rd Baron North, unknown, Britain, about 1615 (made)

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Oil painting of Dudley, the 3rd Baron North, unknown, Britain, about 1615 (made)

From flamboyant white ruff to ornately embroidered doublet and voluminous breeches with silver embellished shoes, this oil painting proclaims that Dudley, the 3rd Baron North (1582–1666) was a man who took his fashion seriously! Posing before a theatrical curtain, Dudley stands proudly in his finery to confirm his high social standing in the Jacobean court.

Historical menswear has influenced contemporary womenswear. For example, the silhouette of the 1992 Versace black panelled coat (pictured below) has remarkable parallels with the fashion of Dudley, the 3rd Baron North shown in the painting of 1615, blurring time and gender.

Discuss

- Oil painted portraits of noble or wealthy men and women in extravagant fashions became increasingly popular in the 17th Century. From social media to advertising, discuss contemporary examples of how fashion can help form a narrative of someone's social status.
- How has the historical example of Dudley, the 3rd Baron of North been reinvented in Gianni Versace's 1992 womenswear example? Think about shape, material, function and wearer, and modern techniques of production.
- Do you think performance is a part of portraiture?



Coat, Gianni Versace, 1992

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OVERDRESSED

Ensemble, Harris Reed, London, polyester, 2017

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Ensemble, Harris Reed, London, polyester, 2017

Few colours are as politically charged as pink. Despite present preconceptions of pink and femininity, historically, the colour was associated with power and wealth, and was deemed masculine or genderless. It was not until the 20th Century that pink became the 'go-to' colour for new-born baby girls. Contemporary designers are playing with pink's evolution and its associations with perceived identities.

As a recent Central Saint Martins' graduate, Harris Reed's imaginative vision was informed by looking to the past. This ensemble from Reed's first collection pays homage to 1970s glam rock, while puffed sleeves and a lace evoke historical portraiture. Reed describes their work as fighting for the 'beauty of fluidity'.

Discuss

- From Millennial Pink to the pastel shade in the Transflag, what do you think the associations of the colour pink are today?
- How do you think the political or cultural contexts of colour can shape a designer's message?
- Harris Reed designs around a vision of genderfluidity and inclusivity, with what they describe as 'Romanticism Gone Nonbinary'. Do you think the fashion industry should stop using labels like 'menswear' and 'womenswear'?



Ensemble, Harris Reed, London, polyester, 2017 (detail)

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OVERDRESSED

Left: 'Young Man among Roses' portrait miniature, Nicholas Hilliard, England, about 1587 (painted)
Right: Autumn / Winter 2020 Flower Boy two-piece set, by Orange Culture,
photographed by Mikey Oshai, image courtesy of Adebayo Oke-Lawal © Orange Culture

©Victoria and Albert Museum, London

‘Young Man Among Roses’ portrait miniature, Nicholas Hilliard, England, about 1587 (painted)

Barely larger than a £5 note, this famous portrait miniature overflows with florals and foliage. Miniature paintings were very popular in the Elizabethan England (1558 – 1603), where they were tokens of respect or forbidden passion in courtly games of love. Often miniatures contained visual riddles for the recipient to solve. Nicholas Hilliard was a master of the portrait miniature craft and its complex symbolism.

The young man, shown with his hand on his heart and surrounded by roses, has become an emblem of Elizabethan romance and male beauty.

Autumn / Winter 2020 Flower Boy two-piece set, by Orange Culture, photographed by Mikey Oshai

Designer Adebayo Oke-Lawal started design collective, Orange Culture, in 2011. Orange Culture pushes against the boundaries of traditional masculinity in Nigeria and their designs aim to create a fashion ‘movement’, not just a label. Their signature style includes vibrant colours, florals and plunging silhouettes – usually associated with womenswear.

Across the world, young, contemporary designers are using botanical prints in their designs, often drawing on cultural traditions of fabric pattern and motif. The hibiscus flower motif is used by Orange Culture to express a softer masculinity.

Discuss

- Both of these examples feature florals. Do you think there is a gendered expectation of florals in today’s society?
- Like colourful natural dyes, the flowers that we see in 18th century clothing are rarely from Europe. Is there a link between floral prints and the global textiles trade?
- Why do you think floral prints remain a source of inspiration of contemporary fashion designers?

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'Diary of a Victorian Dandy: 17.00 hours' photograph, Yinka Shonibare, Hertfordshire, 2012 (printed), 1998 (photographed)

©Victoria & Albert Museum, London

‘Diary of a Victorian Dandy: 17.00 hours’ photograph, Yinka Shonibare, Hertfordshire, 2012 (printed), 1998 (photographed)

A ‘dandy’ can be described as a man who utilises groomed appearance, refined taste and smart dress to move upwards in social circles, not necessarily accessible to him otherwise. In the late 18th and early 19th Centuries in Britain, dandies were often self-made men seeking acceptance from the powerful aristocracy.

In this photographic series, Yinka Shonibare, who identifies as a Black, disabled artist, plays the role of a dandy, wearing the flamboyant fashions of the day. Shonibare frequently uses his work to explore themes of ‘outsider’ status, identity, ‘Britishness’ and postcolonialism.

Discuss

- Shonibare has described his attraction to the dandy as an ‘outsider [who] upsets the social order of things’. Discuss this statement in relation to the work.
- What is meant by the term ‘postcolonialism’? Can you describe any contemporary artists and designers who also explore this theme in their work?
- Shonibare often works with bright batik fabric prints. These textiles were manufactured in Holland for export to West Africa, and still construct an idea of ‘African’ dress today. Looking at this photograph and Shonibare’s other works, why do you think the artist uses textiles and fashion to convey themes of post-colonialism and globalisation?

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REDRESSED

Suit, unknown, Britain, 1750–59 (made)

©Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Suit, unknown, Britain, 1750–59 (made)

English country tailoring played an important role in the evolution of tailoring and menswear. The coat forms part of a suit with a waistcoat and breeches (short trousers worn just below the knee). The silver-gilt buttons stand out against the deep terracotta fabric. Designed to allow more flexibility – especially useful when riding a horse around a country estate – the side and back seams of this 18th-century coat are left open.

'Anglomania' described the fascination of all things English by the upper sections of European society. Originating in the 1750s, it peaked after the French Revolution (1789–99).

Discuss

- Why do you think European taste turned towards a more 'toned down' tailoring approach after the French Revolution? Think about colour palettes, silhouettes, shapes, embellishment and fabric choices.
- Why do you think there are so many buttons on this outfit? Do you think they can all be used?
- How do examples of historical tailoring allow contemporary designers to 're-invent'? Discuss this item in relation to the concepts of 'tradition' and 'transgression'. You may want to explore Vivienne Westwood's Anglomania collection alongside this coat.

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REDRESSED

Frock coat, unknown, about 1890 (made)

©Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Frock coat, unknown, about 1890 (made)

Although it may not seem like it today, the movement towards the formal frock coat was a revolution! Top frock coats came into fashion during the 1830s. They acted and looked like an overcoat, but were intended to be worn without an undercoat beneath.

As clerical workers teemed into cities, the formal black overcoat, made of heavy cloth for warmth in the hustle-and-bustle, became a 'civilian uniform'.

Discuss

- At the end of the 19th Century, both men's and women's clothes were changing shape to create a new, slimmer line. Discuss why you think this might have occurred.
- Why do you think black became such a popular colour for menswear?
- With movement to the cities and new businessmen emerging in the late Victorian period, do you think there was a tension between blending in and standing out from the crowd?

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REDRESSED

Portrait of Vesta Tilley (H Beard Print Collection), published in The Sketch, London, 1895 (published)

©Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Portrait of Vesta Tilley (H Beard Print Collection), published in The Sketch, London, 1895 (published)

Vesta Tilley was the stage name of Matilda Alice Powles (1864 – 1952). Vesta Tilley was hugely popular as a music hall performer who impersonated men. Her most popular character was the dapper-dressed 'man-about-town' called Burlington Bertie.

Vesta Tilley was performing her acts at a time when women were not seen wearing trousers. The popular 'uniform' of the black frock coat in cities meant women too could blend into this crowd. Vesta Tilley pushed this even further with her comedy, using ideas of men's fashion as the basis of a male caricature.

Discuss

- Vesta Tilley's act was popular with both men and women. Why do you think seeing a female dress in masculine clothing in a public setting appealed to women at this time?
- What do you think is meant by the term 'power-dressing'?
- The suit has been redefined and reshaped through time. Has the suit lost its associations of power and uniformity today? How would you 'redefine' the suit?

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REDRESSED

Alessandro Michele for Gucci, dress worn by Harry Styles, styled by Camilla Nickerson, 2020 on display in *Fashioning Masculinities: The Art of Menswear* V&A exhibition (March 2022)

©Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Alessandro Michele for Gucci, dress worn by Harry Styles, styled by Camilla Nickerson, 2020 on display in *Fashioning Masculinities: The Art of Menswear* V&A exhibition (March 2022)

The singer, songwriter and all-round fashion muse Harry Styles became Vogue's first solo male cover in its 108-year history. Styles was photographed for the magazine wearing this frothy, light blue, lace-trimmed dress and tailored blazer jacket on a sunny morning on the Seven Sisters cliffs in London.

The dress was designed by Alessandro Michele, the Italian fashion designer and creative director of Gucci. Alessandro Michele said about Harry Styles, 'He is the image of a new era, of the way that a man can look.'

Discuss

- Why do you think Vogue chose this outfit for its front cover issue in December 2020?
- What is meant by the term 'muse'?
- What does this outfit say about the future of menswear?
- How do historical menswear fashions and traditions resurface in this look?



Vogue, December 2020, Photography Tyler Mitchell, © Tyler Mitchell

REDRESSED

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