

DRIES VAN NOTEN:
ONE HUNDRED COLLECTIONS,
A STYLE EVOLVES

Susannah Frankel



Show 69: Men Spring/Summer 2010

In November 2013, Dries Van Noten and I met in London to discuss his forthcoming *Inspirations* exhibition, which opened at the Musée de La Mode et Les Arts Décoratifs in Paris to great critical acclaim in March the following year. Over a lovely autumn evening, and characteristically copious amounts of fine food and wine, Dries talked to me about his career to date, at one point going right back to the start. The designer famously graduated from the fashion school at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp in 1980. His degree collection was notable, in the first instance, for the fact that while the majority of his contemporaries focused on either men's or women's wear, Dries couldn't decide between the two, so he did both. 'I just liked it that way,' he said, with typical modesty. While today that may be commonplace, and more than a few designers chose to follow that same path in the 1990s, in this, as in so many other things, Dries was ahead of his time.

There's more. 'My show was, in fact, based on religious apparel,' Dries remembered. 'So of course it was an extravaganza.' He uses that word often, although then, as now, there is nothing ostentatious about his work: however rich in texture, fabrication, colour and concept, it is anything but that. 'It was four collections in one, and quite expanded. There was a lot of linen, an evening section with snakeskin coats, silks and Fortuny pleats. There were sari silks too, a lot of embroideries, hand-painting...'

And so it began. Dries was already working as a commercial designer to cover costs, and that went some way towards funding the presentation. More importantly, while so many fledgling designers struggle to find their identity, for Dries, the seeds that would germinate and grow to make Dries Van Noten far and away Belgium's most successful independent fashion house had been sown even before his company was founded. That's not to say the clothes resembled his later work in any literal sense. He doesn't have them any more, he says, although he believes the sketches must be 'somewhere.' Still, the overriding of boundaries between gender in the fashion system and the relevance of that to contemporary culture — men and women don't walk separately in life, so why should they on the catwalk? — and the blurring of those same lines in clothing — women in oversized men's coats ('we come back to that again and again'), or men in fuchsia pink chiffon (show 61, Men Spring/Summer 2008) were all present and correct. So too was the fruitful tension between maximalism and the Baroque, between minimalism and restraint, the juxtaposition of unlikely fabrics — the high and the low, the impeccably finished and the worn — and an obsession with print and surface embellishment that is second to none.

Central to Dries' handwriting, also, is the relationship between tradition and formality and outright rebellion. That too started here, and even before. Both

his father and grandfather changed the face of retail fashion in their home country. His father, especially, introduced the concept of shopping for fashion as a lifestyle to the inhabitants of Flanders. Dries worked and travelled with him as a youngster, learned both buying expertise and the importance of beautiful clothes in the process. Later, his own stores would reflect a total environment, even a 'world,' again long before other fashion designers spoke in such terms. This was as much a part of his story as the clothes. His mother collected antique Belgian lace and table linen sewn in the cloisters of the Low Countries, and painstakingly described their provenance to her son, who was, by his own admission, more interested in David Bowie. By the time Dries was a teenager, Bowie was whipping up a not-so-quiet storm, and Dries was watching him on TV. Inevitably, the observant and sensitive young man absorbed several sides of that story as well.

Dries Van Noten entered the Antwerp Academy in 1976. Punk was taking London and New York by storm, but his fashion education could not have been more steeped in bourgeois tradition. Overseen by the legendary Mme Prigot, students were not allowed to wear jeans. Fashion folklore has it that if their hair was unruly, she would march them straight to the hairdressers, insisting on a well-mannered chignon. Prigot was interested solely, Dries explained, in Coco Chanel. 'It was the late 1970s. It was punk. Of course, when you have that many restrictions, you rebel against them. And that makes things quite interesting.' It does indeed. References to both punk and Chanel would find their way into more than a few of his men's and women's collections in the years that followed, with a barbed-wire print here (show 86, Men Spring/Summer 2014), a bi-coloured pump there (show 70, Women Spring/Summer 2010), and so on.

Dries' time at the Academy was especially significant. 'I think I went through a lot of different things. I had had a traditional education,' he says. (He was taught by Jesuit priests until the age of 16.) 'Being thrown into a fashion school in 1976 wasn't like one new world opening up. It was like ten new worlds opening up for me at the same time. For me that was all new. It was like a crash course in fashion, as well as in modern times.'

Dries Van Noten was not alone in wanting to break the mould. On the contrary. He and his peers — principally Ann Demeulemeester, Dirk Van Saene, Dirk Bikkembergs, Marina Yee, Walter Van Beirendonck and Martin Margiela — marked the beginning of the establishment of Belgian fashion on the international stage. It is widely reported that Amy Spindler, then fashion editor of *The New York Times*, coined the moniker 'The Antwerp Six,' but it was in fact the designers themselves who did that. They believed they would have more impact as a collective, and, more pragmatically, no one outside of their circles could

#03 MEN'S SPRING/SUMMER 1993

For his first outdoor show, Dries Van Noten commandeered the cobbled courtyard of the Café de la Gare, a café-theatre in the Marais, and turned it into a flower market. All the props were brought from Belgium, the blooms imported from Holland. In this pre-EU era, French customs officers were particularly vigilant, so everything had to be smuggled in from the Low Countries on back roads. To make the situation even trickier, France was on strike.

Dries and his team were understandably elated that the show even came off. Their joy was palpable on the runway, where everyone looked gorgeous and happy. (This was well before it was mandated that models never smile as they parade back and forth.) The music was a happy mash-up too, with 'Juanita Banana,' and 'Zorba's Dance'...

This was technically also a menswear presentation, but there were also looks from his women's collection. He'd done the same thing with his two previous shows. This time it made particular sense, especially at the finale, when couples stepped out dressed in white and ecru jackets and waistcoats decorated with roses. It was like being at a country wedding. And everyone went home with a bunch of flowers.

For the first time, Dries here featured custom-made fabrics — striped and checked poplins, prints hand-blocked in India — alongside his textured, patterned knitwear. And, given that this was his first outdoor show, it was also the first time his curious relationship with the elements came into play. The weather forecast was awful, but it was not until the show ended that the sky turned black. Twenty minutes later, the rains came, making the cobblestones so slippery that the models would never have been able to walk in their espadrilles. Divine intervention? Perhaps.

Theme: Flower Market

Date: Friday 3 July 1992, Time: 5:30 pm

Location: Café de la Gare, Paris

Music: Henri Salvador, 'Juanita Banana'













#11 MEN'S AUTUMN/WINTER 1995-96

Show 11 had a very to-the-point title: Sports. It took place in Le Stade Geo-Andre, a futuristic stadium, and in keeping with the novelty of the venue, the traditional division between runway and backstage was dispensed with. The show space was divided by metal racks on which the clothes were hung, and behind which the models changed and had their hair and faces done, all within view of the audience.

The idea of division seemed to determine the nature of the collection too. The tailoring was the height of military-influenced English tradition: high-buttoning suits and substantial double-breasted coats. Counterpointing that were the sporting elements. Bold football scarves, letter sweaters, and t-shirts and knits bearing large numbers had an almost nostalgic edge. But the bright colour palette injected a surreal edge, with pinks, oranges and yellows hotting up classic checks and tweeds. The footwear — brogues in orange and red — compounded the effect.

At this point, most of the prominent models were still out of reach, but some chose to walk for Dries for free. For the rest, he still called on staff and friends to man the runway. Here, it left the audience with the impressive spectacle of fellow designer Walter Van Beirendonck striding along in a scarlet coat that would have done justice to a Royal Guardsmen.

Theme: Sports

Date: Friday 27 January 1995, Time: 5:30 pm

Location: Stade Géo-André, Paris

Music: Edwyn Collins, 'A Girl Like You'









#14







#16

#20 WOMEN'S AUTUMN/WINTER 1997-98

Afghan culture was the principle source of inspiration for this collection, mixed with the richness of an Indian aesthetic. It was shown at L'École des Beaux-Arts on the Left Bank of the Seine. This was the first time he presented womenswear in this space, which went on to become his favoured venue. Dries installed a catwalk covered entirely in copper leaf, hidden under thick brown carpet, which was only lifted after the guests had arrived.

Brilliantly conceived make-up, courtesy of the designer's long-term collaborator, Inge Grogard, transformed models into modern-day warrior queens. Their clothes — a feminine take on the horsemen of Afghanistan, fused with the opulence of the Maharaji — only added to that affect. Oversized padded coats were printed with stripes. Felted wools were embroidered with gold thread, and silk velvets were stamped with Topkapi motifs originally hailing from the eponymous palace in Istanbul. Dries overlaid humble knitwear with metallic foil prints.

Jewellery here included delicate caps that were hand-knitted in more gold thread and 'necklaces made of "found" antique pearls and semi-precious stones,' Dries says. Passementerie belts, meanwhile, were made by the legendary Madame Pouzieux, who since 1947 had been famously responsible for the braiding at the edges of the Chanel boucle wool suit. This collection also marked the hugely successful opening of the Dries Van Noten flagship store in Hong Kong, the first outside Antwerp.

Theme: Afghanistan

Date: Tuesday 11 March 1997, Time: 11:30 pm

Location: École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris

Music: Wim Mertens, 'Blue Drift'

Make-up: Inge Grogard, Hair: Yannick D'Is

Jewelry: Vicky Sarge for Erickson Beamon

Invitation: Philip Aguirre y Otegui









