



McQueen, Alexander (1969-2010)

by Shaun Cole

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Alexander McQueen, the youngest designer to achieve the coveted award "British Designer of the Year," was a fashion innovator and provocateur. His clothes were noted for being sensationally erotic, fantastical, often androgynous creations that were skilfully and precisely tailored.

McQueen understood the importance of sensuality and eroticism in designing clothes. "Sex is a big part of what I do," he told *i-D* magazine in October 1993, "A male designer can't give a woman what a female designer can--they know where all the bits and bobs are. But you just try your best; it's about making the most of a person."

Born on March 17, 1969 in London's East End, Lee Alexander McQueen was the youngest of six children of a taxi driver. He left school at sixteen and, after seeing a television program about the lack of apprentices in traditional tailoring, went to work at Savile Row's Anderson & Sheppard (where he--now infamously--wrote "I am a cunt" on the lining of a jacket being made for the Prince of Wales) .

From there McQueen moved on to Gieves and Hawks and then to the famous theatrical costumiers Berman and Nathan. The traditional training he received at these posts enabled the designer to bring a classic structure and feel to his innovative womenswear.

At the age of twenty McQueen read an article about Japanese designer Koji Tatsuno, who was constructing clothes from antique cloth. Fascinated by this approach to fashion, McQueen applied for and received a job from Tatsuno. From there he moved on to work for Italian designer Romeo Gigli, who was impressed by the extremity of McQueen's design and by his (increasingly rare) tailoring skills.

McQueen returned to London to study for an M.A. at Central St. Martin's School of Art, where his final collection gained him extensive press coverage. After graduating he set up his own label based in the East End of London. With the launch of his "bumsters," trousers with a waistband so low that the buttocks are revealed, McQueen made his label famous through tabloid headlines.

McQueen, who described himself as the "pink sheep of the family," realized he was gay when he was six years old. However it was not until he was eighteen that he came out to his family. Having grown up in an often homophobic working class environment, he feared how his family, especially his father and older brother, would react.

McQueen was extremely open about his homosexuality. He discusses his private life freely and humorously in interviews, as in the following comments: "[M]y boyfriend's always with me. After work we just go home and relax . . . We don't even go to clubs--we're too tired. We just want to go home and chill out; it's nice" (*The Guardian Weekend*, January 1997); "Just because I'm a faggot, I can still give someone a whack if I want to" (*i-D*, September 1998).



Alexander McQueen in 2009. Photograph by Ed Kavishe/
fashionwirepress.com.

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In summer 2000 McQueen married his twenty-four-year-old lover George Forsyth, a documentary filmmaker. The ceremony, which took place in Ibiza on a yacht owned by a friend of supermodel Kate Moss (who was also bridesmaid), was covered by the press in much the same way as any other celebrity wedding.

The couple broke up in 2007.

McQueen always attracted (if not courted) controversy. His theatrical fashion shows gained him as much of a reputation as his stylish clothes. Some fashion experts deplore his "shock tactics" and publicity seeking, while others defend his exploration of radical ideas. The latter see his shows as questioning accepted notions of fashion and beauty.

For his March 1995 "Highland Rape" show, McQueen sent his models down the catwalk in ripped lace dresses and skirts with what appeared to be tampon strings attached. The 1996 "Hunger" show featured clothing and jewelry that evoked bondage and decay, while the "Untitled" show of 1998 (originally named "The Golden Shower" but changed because the sponsor, American Express, felt it was too risqué) highlighted a model with what looked like a bit between her teeth, walking through water lit with yellow light.

The outrageousness of McQueen's shows has led to accusations of misogyny (an accusation often leveled at gay designers for the supposed fantasy women they try to create) and exploitation, but the "bad boy of fashion" is quick to counter these accusations. "Highland Rape," he explained, was about the "rape" of Scotland by the British, a subject that had a personal resonance as his family is of Scottish descent.

Moreover, he insisted that his attitude towards women is informed by his having witnessed as a child scenes of violence involving his sister: "Everything I've done since then was for the purpose of making women look stronger, not naïve," he was quoted in *The Independent Fashion Magazine* in 2000, "models are there to showcase what I'm about, nothing else. It's nothing to do with misogyny."

One of McQueen's most controversial shows grew from his art direction of an issue of the alternative fashion magazine *Dazed & Confused* about models with severe physical disabilities. The subsequent catwalk show inspired by the issue featured model Aimee Mullins, whose legs had been amputated from the knees down, walking down the catwalk on hand carved wooden legs. The show was presented in a spirit of empowerment and inclusivity.

At the age of 26 McQueen became the chief designer at the French couture house Givenchy, taking over from fellow Englishman John Galliano. McQueen's appointment caused a stir in Paris (as did the appointment of Galliano at Dior), where the fashion press considered Hubert de Givenchy royalty in French design and McQueen a "commoner."

Questions about McQueen's talent and ability were quickly silenced, however, after he dazzled Paris with his first show, which combined exquisite tailoring skills with a hard-edged street style. McQueen was asked to prepare ten collections a year for Givenchy, while continuing to release his own collections under his own name.

Despite McQueen's success at Givenchy, the alliance was never a happy marriage. The young designer's hard-edged chic was at odds with the restrained French elegance of Hubert de Givenchy. To compound the difficulties, McQueen refused to learn French or to immerse himself into French life.

By October 2000 rumors began to spread that McQueen was planning to defect from Givenchy and its parent company LVMH (Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton) and that the other major player in the fashion world, Gucci Group (whose creative director Tom Ford had shown much interest in McQueen and his work), was on the verge of offering McQueen a deal.

In October 2001 McQueen's relationship with LVMH finally ended. Gucci Group bought a 51 per cent share in

McQueen's company for a reputed £54,000,000. The deal also included ten new McQueen stores and the establishment of McQueen's own "house" in Paris in 2002. This move shows great faith both in McQueen's talent as a designer and as a businessman.

The McQueen mix of outrageous theater, stunning and provocative design, and precise tailoring led to continued success in the fashion world.

In 2003, he was named Commander of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II.

McQueen gained new fame among younger fashion devotees when celebrities such as Madonna and Lady Gaga wore his designs.

On February 11, 2010, he was found dead at his London home, apparently a suicide. His mother had died days earlier and it is believed that his death occurred in a period of despondency over her loss.

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About the Author

Shaun Cole is curator of Designs at the Victoria and Albert Museum. He is author of *"Don We Now Our Gay Apparel": Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century* and has curated numerous exhibitions, including "Graphic Responses to AIDS" (1996), "Fashion on Paper" (1997), and "Dressing the Male" (1999), as well as two innovative "Days of Record" to document Tattooing (2000) and Black British Hairstyles and Nail Art (2001).