

# A New Maximalism

by Silvia Bombardini



Pierpaolo Piccioli X Moncler Genius, FW19

Once upon a time, when cloth was scarce and precious, any style of dress that made a point to use it in excess of what was necessary or useful was using excessive cloth as an expression of disposable income, as a sign of status and wealth. This applied to lapels and cuffs, collars and ruffs, all manner of folds and of course, trains – as Thorstein Veblen writes in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, first published in 1899, “*in order to be reputable it must be wasteful*”. And all the more reputable it was, if on top of superfluous one’s clothing was impractical. “*If, in addition to showing that the wearer can afford to consume freely and uneconomically, it can also be shown in the same stroke that he or she is not under the necessity of earning a livelihood*” which is to say in need of doing any manual labour, Veblen believes that “*the evidence of social worth is enhanced in a very considerable degree*”. 120 years later, what today we call couture still largely agrees with Veblen’s maxims. If no longer restrictive on purpose

of the wearer's mobility, practicality still doesn't concern it. Present-day couture is rather a meticulous exercise in extreme adornment and artisanal flair – a spectacle for the many, but a pleasure intended for only the very few to partake.

However, in the age of mass production and global supply chains, cloth is not anymore as much of a luxury per se as it once was. And whilst the pleasures of couture still elude most of us, the maximalism at its core, if not always the elegance and fastidiousness of its execution, trickles down to many a ready-to-wear collection, and to the high street too. As a signifier it evolves accordingly: a surplus of fabric and embellishment is no more nor less a marker of status in the contemporary wardrobe than a pared-down look can be, for both can now easily be found in more or less expensive variations. But neither being any more nor less a marker of status than the other may be all these two styles have in common – and if one wants to understand what maximalism does stand for in fashion today, it's not wrong to think of it, to begin with, as the antithesis of minimalism at its polar opposite. *Minimalism/Maximalism*, the current exhibition at The Museum at FIT, the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, is doing just that. On until November 16, it traces through fashion history the ebbs and flows of exuberance and restraint. From the monochrome mini-dresses of the 60s to the psychedelic maxi-dresses of the 70s, from Gianni Versace in the 80s to Helmut Lang in the 90s. More recently, the departure of Phoebe Philo from Céline metaphorically marks once more that of minimalism from the runway.

Where minimalism is reason, maximalism is drama – the perpetual struggle of Apollonian and Dionysian forces. But more than just kneejerk reactions against one another, these extreme poles and the oscillation of fashion between them is just as much, as clothing always is, a product of its time, and of whether that time calls for reason or drama. Not only in clothing, but across the creative fields maximalism is on the rise today. Although the exhibition at FIT remains impartial, another show which runs till the 22nd of September at The Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, titled *Less Is a Bore: Maximalist Art & Design*, gives voice within its headline to what's becoming once again a popular sentiment. *Rocketman*, a musical biopic starring Taron Egerton as Elton John, set in the 1970s, delights movie-goers meanwhile as a fantasy feast of indulgence and extravagance. But fashion more than any other art is oracular by nature, and those who follow it enough will know that this shift – from simplicity to ostentation – has been a long time coming. It's a shift of lexicon too: *basic* became insulting as *chunky* emerged as a qualifier of desirable things. If minimalism left with Philo's departure right after her pre-fall 2018 collection, maximalism already had been up-and-coming at the very least since Alessandro Michele's appointment at Gucci and his debut fall 2015 show. For all the intervening seasons and fall 2019 is no exception, Gucci's looks have come layered with references and textures,

chock-full of details, at once the outcome of a newfound desire for excess, and its promotion and validation in the eyes of many. And whilst Michele might now be something of the patron saint for a new wave of maximalism in fashion, he is by no means its only proponent. Nicolas Ghesquière, whose first collection as Louis Vuitton's creative director dates back to fall 2014, justified a fall 2019 show replete with embellishments by telling Nicole Phelps that *"When I arrived, the question was: 'Is Louis Vuitton only about basics?'"*. Now five years later, he knows the answer is no.

But how is contemporary maximalism a product of our time? The reasons for it surely are plenty, but one might guess that the appreciation of clean lines and essentials requires a patience that we have outgrown. Maximalism appeals to a sense of urgency and uncertainty. When the future is unclear, we hoard. The Marie Kondonians joys of stripping down to the bare minimum are not quite as comforting as chaos these days. Think of Britain in the throes of Brexit, for instance, and of British brands' response to their country's troubles. Burberry titled their fall 2019 collection, rich and riddled with contrasts and clashes, *Tempest*. Molly Goddard's show as well, featuring the young designer's signature supersize party frocks, was described in her press release as women walking *"through the storm"*, wind machines all around them blowing up their skirts. For all of the fun that comes with excess, for all the hedonism it suggests, there's often a foreboding feeling at the root of our choice when we opt for maximalist clothing. Almost as if we were swaddling ourselves with fabric to face the prospect of impending doom – as if all of those ornaments were lucky charms to keep us safe on a journey through uncharted lands. And even if it usually comes across as carefree and cheerful, there's a frustration to maximalism too, especially when it's younger generations who embrace it, of designers and consumers alike. Full-skirted gowns are a way to take up space, and neon or primary colours draw attention toward the one who wears them. When our voices go unheard, we stomp our feet in chunky Balenciaga Triple S sneakers. Or better yet, we'll stomp in Prada's oversized 'Monolith' combat boots from the brand's fall 2019 show, thick-soled and accessorised with their own nylon pouches. Its fighting spirit shouldn't be underestimated: maximalism protects and provokes at once. Tomo Koizumi, whose debut presentation at New York Fashion Week some may consider the maximalist apex of the fall 2019 season, for example described his towering creations to *Vogue* as *"ruffle armor"*. And the inspiration behind them, among other things, came from the work of Leigh Bowery, the late performance artist and provocateur extraordinaire. The future is stormy and beyond our control: why be sensible, asks the maximalist, when you could be theatrical? Bowery, who never wasn't, of course then becomes a perfect icon for the trend. The floor-sweeping, broad-shouldered eveningwear layered over latex bodysuits in Richard Quinn's fall 2019 collection, had many of the journalists who wrote about it calling up Bowery's unconventional getups too.

But as much as it intends to shock and occupy, as much as it can come from a less than peaceful mindset, we can't forget that maximalist in colour and scope is also the rainbow that comes after that storm. That what minimalism gets rid of, maximalism absorbs: in its fullness it welcomes all sorts. It's in this sense that in an increasingly polarised world, to dress maximally can be a statement in favour of heterogeneity, a statement in favour of a beauty found there were nothing is left out, in the coming together of differences. Take Pierpaolo Piccioli's upcoming collection for Moncler Genius, a collaboration with Liya Kebede's sustainable label Lemlem. It mixes Piccioli's monumental and sumptuous, couture-led volumes that fans of his oeuvre at Valentino will be well familiar with, together with traditional Ethiopian patterns and Moncler's trademark, high-performance lacquered nylons as well. Nothing is too much when too much is glorious: the capsule collection is a crowning achievement of new maximalism. What's new about it is that even if it's still only intended for the few – the prices aren't out yet as the gowns will only go on sale in January, but it's fair to assume they'll be steep – as a spectacle at least, it's one that stands as proof of the harmony of contrasts, the wonders of joined forces in fashion and beyond. Of all the reasons and all the things that it can stand for today, as varied and contradictory as the style itself, this is perhaps the one that best explains the urgent need for maximalism we're all feeling now.