



Alice in Couture Land

How L. Carroll's Alice has stood the test of time and sells a dream as luxurious as Haute Couture

In June 2020, the Victoria & Albert Museum will invite its visitors to go down the rabbit hole as it plots a show to explore the origins, adaptations and reinventions of Lewis Carroll's 1865 children's novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* over the last century and a half. Throughout recent years the V&A has held a number of exhibitions that draw upon some of the prevailing themes in Carroll's book, including escapism and surrealism, along with the notion of one's creativity and imagination.

FASHION

With the current state of global affairs and the ever-increasing media bombardment, there is a growing desire to switch one's mind off — and take a trip to the Wonderland — so it is really no coincidence that Alice is coming to London next summer.

In 2015, after months of anticipation, Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty exhibition opened in London's most prestigious decorative arts and design museum, as the first and largest retrospective of McQueen's work in presented Europe. A roaring success, the exhibition had a surreal ambiance — the evolution of McQueen's brilliance was seen through a series of rooms until the visitors entered the centrepiece: his Cabinet of Curiosities. The room felt as though you were taking a step into Alice's eerie yet enchanted forest as visitors were faced with the concept of nature and decay: trophies of the dead, the ghosts of armours, corsets and feathers, extravagant platform shoes, coiled corsets and other bizarre objects. McQueen fiercely challenged the notions of fashion through the means of fantasy and escapism, bringing his ideas to life in a signature enchanted way.



Last year, the V&A opened Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams exhibition, which traces the 71-year history of Dior via the display of over 500 objects, looking at the house's relationship with travel, flowers and the world of fantasy that Christian Dior brought to his women. It was Dior who dared to bring fantasy back into fashion with the 'New Look', which featured a full-skirted feminine silhouette. The name

of the exhibition alone can perpetuate thoughts of Alice in her dream world — and stepping inside the gown-filled rooms makes one feel that they are literally stepping into it.



This September, the museum will open its doors to Tim Walker: Wonderful Things, inviting one to experience the fantasy world of the famous photographer and his contribution to the world of fashion. “To me, the V&A has always been a palace of dreams – it’s the most inspiring place in the world,” noted the man himself. Walker’s dreamlike universe, in which he blends fashion photography and fairy tales, shone bright in his reimagined version of Alice in Wonderland-themed shoot for the 45th edition of The Pirelli Calendar, which resulted in 28 shots consisting of different and extraordinary sets for a new unique Wonderland. “Alice has been told so many times”, Tim Walker said, “and I think I wanted to go back to the genesis of the imagination behind Lewis Carroll so that you could tell it from the very beginning again. I wanted to find a different and original angle”.

So why have Alice and her magical adventures in Wonderland become such a source of constant joy to us as a modern society, and how has she managed to stand the test of time? Initially introduced to us 157 years ago through Carroll’s children’s tale, Alice has undergone a series of immense changes. In 1951, we saw Walt Disney bring the character to life on screen and became known as a young doe-eyed girl, sporting silk ribbons and a traditional Victorian sky-blue voluminous skirt. In 2010, Tim Burton re-imagined the conforming angel in his film adaptation into a fiercely independent adolescent on the edge of discovering herself, which appealed to a multitude of different audiences.



The iconic Victorian sweetheart is one of the more ambiguous fictional characters we have to date; her age is unknown, and, with the array of different adaptations co-existing so seamlessly with one another, she becomes a timeless entity. From Carroll’s original illustrations to the Alice of John Tenniel (who was given endless instructions by the fussy Carroll and originally refused to illustrate the second book) to Disney’s beloved character to Burton’s latest portrayal, the beauty of Alice lies in her ability to become so many different personas. She emphasises the very notion of the story that nothing is as it seems, and that change — something that generally terrifies us — is a positive and enabling concept. Alice started life as a traditional Victorian girl, who was arguably enslaved to the expectations of others, but has come out on top, marching to the beat of her own mature drum. Yet, she still manages to remain as enchanting as she once was.



The story of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland sells a dream that we, the audience, envy. She has the ability to temporarily forget the strifes of everyday life and enter an alternative universe, one filled with magic and excitement, yet she still has enough power and control in her life to return to the world as she knows it — a familiar and ordinary one — at the drop of a hat. She is versatile and effortless, and that is aspirational to us: an ordinary young girl one moment, the invincible heroine the next. Alice sells an exclusive dream coveted by many.

Over the years Alice in Wonderland has provided the fashion industry with an obscure source of inspiration. In 2010, prior to Tim Burton's modern film adaptation of the dark fantasy tale, Stella McCartney and Disney collaborated to design a limited edition jewellery collection. During the same year the French department store Printemps enlisted the help of designers such as Christopher Kane, Nicholas Kirkwood and Manish Arora to create bespoke outfits for Alice, which were then displayed in the store windows during Paris Fashion Week. As well as being the muse to many of the 21st century's most influential designers and at the centre of a number avant-garde collections, Alice and her Wonderland have also been the creative vision behind a number of editorial shoots. Perhaps the most well known, and notably taken in 2003 — before Burton's remake was a twinkle in his eye — was Annie Leibovitz's haunting yet magical Christmas shoot for American Vogue featuring Drew Barrymore in an haute couture Christian Lacroix gown for Autumn/Winter 2004.



Farfetched though it may seem, but the fantasy sold by Alice's Adventures in Wonderland is parallel to the exclusive world of haute couture. What a dream it is to be invited to enter the world of Haute Couture — and how similar it feels to Alice entering Wonderland through her tiny door. Paris' haute couture is regarded as the very top of fashion: to be recognised as an official Haute Couture house, members must design garments from scratch for private clients, using an atelier that employs at least fifteen members of staff. The level of craft is unparalleled and is presented twice a year (with no less than 50 original designs) to the public. Despite the high costs — haute couture garments start anywhere from £8,000 and go up to hundreds of thousands — the opportunity to live through the fantasy of couture brings loyal clients from around the globe to Paris every season (it is estimated that there are around 4,000 people buying

haute couture globally). The designers push their boundaries to create fashion that is regarded as art, and haute couture is one of fashion's true creative forces.

Yet some say that the era of true couture is over as fashion becomes more democratic and streetwear brands enter previously untouched territories (think Abloh ruling Louis Vuitton). Still, LVMH highlighted Dior's acclaimed Spring/Summer 2018 haute couture show, an ode to surrealism, claiming it was central to the brand's "remarkable performance." The hand-sewn garments are still as desired today as they were at the height of Parisian couture — they still sell the fantasy world, the Wonderland. And just like Alice, haute couture manages to constantly reinvent itself.

