



# TO BE ADORNED

In an era of uniform dressing, accessories provide the ultimate in sartorial self-expression.

WORDS Rosie Dalton

“I slid on my boots, fed the cats, grabbed my watch cap and old black coat,” writes Patti Smith in *M Train* – a nonchalant reference to those defining icons of a personal style that has inspired countless others. *Just Kids*, her work charting a life-changing creative relationship with the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, is also littered with notes on the makings of that signature self-expression. Indeed, Smith and Mapplethorpe’s collaborations often revolved around the use of talismans. In her musings on those early days, Smith recalls ‘casing the joint’ at the restaurant of the Chelsea Hotel, for example, seeking to swipe lobster and crab claws from the tables. With these dinnertime relics, she and Mapplethorpe would later fashion necklaces, to be used in one of their many spontaneous photo sessions. Other such accoutrements were adorned with feathers,

and stones and skulls.

Then there was the cover of her 1975 album *Horses*, photographed by Robert, that saw Patti posed in a simple white shirt. The black tie looped casually, provocatively, around her shoulders made the image iconic.

Sometimes it is the smallest of details that communicate who we are.

It’s a notion that was recognised on the runways of SS 18 where – against the backdrop of a streamlined personal uniform – shoes and bags, hats and jewellery asserted their dominance as a creative outlet. Take Phoebe Philo’s final runway collection at the helm of Céline, for example, which was celebrated with oversized accessories adorning the lapels of greige skirt suits. These silver and gold ornaments evoked the metallic, orb-like sculptures of Constantin Brancusi and proved that – although utilitarian

Robert Mapplethorpe and Patti Smith, New York 1969, “Robert & Patti II” by Norman Seeff, courtesy of Blender Gallery.



“If there is one art history reference to define the accessory trends of now, Vermeer’s Girl with a Pearl Earring is it.”

– a reference to de Saint Phalle’s multi-coloured sculptures.

When it comes to the concept of wearable art, accessories just may be the ultimate way to get there; a handbag or a heel is as much an object as it is a fashion item with a utilitarian purpose. A continuation, or perhaps a reversal, of this notion can be found in Australian jewellery designer Holly Ryan’s recent expansion into the world of abstract sculpture – an artistic process that is somewhat akin to jewellery making, just on a much larger scale.

Sydney-based curator Jerico Tracy – who exhibited Ryan’s most recent collection of works, titled *A Carved Revelation*, at her gallery Jerico Contemporary – agrees there are many parallels to be drawn between art and accessories. “There is such an intrinsic relationship between the two,” explains Tracy. “A subject’s accessories give clues as to their status, personal style and character. These signs and symbols have been used throughout the canon of art history, with allegorical references symbolising deeper moral or spiritual meanings.” Here she uses the example of Danish artist Christiane Spangsborg, also represented by the gallery. “In Spangsborg’s one-line work, the jewellery becomes an extension of the face, connected by the continuous line,” the curator elaborates. “She breathes personality into her portrayals by featuring a single earring as part of an otherwise masculine portrait.”

This is not a new phenomenon in the art world, either. Austrian painter Gustav Klimt adorned his subjects with highly embellished elaborate jewellery including chokers, bracelets and earrings in the late 19th century. Frida Kahlo counted ornamentation as an important part of her creative expression, from the paintings on her full body cast to the motif jewellery that conveyed her Mexican pride. Her low-heeled boots belied the importance of comfort for this artist – whose life was plagued by freak accidents and a case of childhood polio, which left one of her legs slightly malformed. Nevertheless they were vivid in colour and embellished with beads and peacock feather embroidery.

But if there is one art history reference to define the accessory trends of now, Johannes Vermeer’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is it, making a case for the heightened power of a bold adornment when worn as the outfit’s focal point. The gem itself is a particularly interesting one, given that it has been imbued with significant meaning over time. Steeped in traditionalism, pearls are now proving ripe for experimentation.

For SS 18, brands like Simone Rocha sought to reimagine the stately pearl in



*The talismans we collect along our travels, or those passed down through generations, often carry meaning far beyond their physical presence.*

asymmetric and oversized forms, adorning earrings and barrettes reinterpreted for the modern woman. Meanwhile, the glint of a pearlescent button added character to Ellery's tailored pieces. In the face of excess and mass consumption, these fine details – alongside an otherwise simplified wardrobe – have become critical in carving out personal style.

It is for this reason that accessories which speak to the wearer's individuality – think Céline's long leather tasselled loafers of SS 18, or Dolce & Gabbana's heels bejewelled with accessories of their own – have become runway stalwarts in recent years. And why brands like Jacquemus, Mansur Gavriel and Martiniano have emerged as leaders in the leather accessory space of late. My Chameleon founder Giselle Farhat Kalkandis counts all three as some of the e-commerce platform's top sellers and chalks this up to their effortless blend of wearability and statement-making appeal. "Accessories are an extension of our personality and quite an expressive element of an overall ensemble," explains Kalkandis of the trend. "By adding an interesting shoe or bag to, say, a uniform of white shirts and black trousers, you can really elevate the outfit." Importantly, she points out, accessories are also among the most democratic of wardrobe items. There is less to worry about with these pieces in terms of fit or shape, Kalkandis says – and thus more to explore when it comes to unadulterated personal expression. Whether found or acquired through our

favourite designers, then, the accessories we wear speak volumes about who we are.

Such is the appeal of Catbird, a jewellery haven in the heart of Williamsburg, NY. Introducing delicate gold rings and chains, the brand has transformed precious metals like yellow and rose gold into more accessible additions to the modern woman's wardrobe. Importantly, each of these pieces is designed to be stacked together with other jewellery and thus made one's own. "We produce everything ourselves, in our Brooklyn studio," explains Catbird's co-creative director Leigh Batnick Plessner. "This naturally slows down the process and forces us to be so thoughtful about what we add to our line." Ultimately, this pays off tenfold when the individual is given free reign to customise the pieces or build upon them in creative ways. "There is nothing more exciting than seeing our jewellery out and about in the world," Plessner says. "What was once Catbird jewellery is now their own."

So why is it, then, that accessories are quite so powerful in terms of communicating our personal values and attitudes?

According to Plessner, when it comes to jewellery at least, it is because these pieces "[have] a life longer than us. [Jewellery] is an ancient art that can be made modern, and it is something we wear on our bodies, then leave behind for those we love." Tracy agrees these pieces have the power to carry sentimental value, which cannot be replaced. It's why she has worn her mother's engagement ring every

day for the past 10 years. It is also the reason Kalkandis personally punctuates a uniform of tailored trousers, collared shirts and blazers with "gallery pieces" like eclectic footwear in the manner of leopard print platforms, red cage heels or studded pumps.

Each of us tends to gravitate towards the accessories that feel most intuitive – from the jewellery we never take off, to the shoes that makes us feel dressed. Importantly, though, these accessories needn't be outlandish in order to function as a means of creative expression.

Designers are now under more pressure to create than ever before and it is to the realm of accessories that many have turned, as a successful medium for experimentation. And as life imitates art, individuals have both the power and the inspiration to go their own way, whether it's with an intricate statement earring, or the sculptural proportion of a bold Perspex heel against the backdrop of an otherwise streamlined personal uniform.

Ultimately, we all tell stories through our adornments. This process may not always be a conscious one, but the talismans we collect along our travels, or those passed down through generations, often carry meaning far beyond their physical presence. It is perhaps for this reason that so many artists have incorporated accessories into their work throughout the centuries – and why designers of now have, in turn, drawn inspiration from their creations. As Patti Smith asks in song: "Can't you see the glitter in their eyes?" 