

Azzedine Alaïa: The Couturier Teacher Notes

The Tunisian-born couturier Azzedine Alaïa enjoyed his role as an outsider in the world of fashion. Always dressed in a uniform of black, he ignored the collection calendar while tirelessly upholding the traditions of haute couture. From his first show in the late 1970s to his final one just before his death in 2017, Alaïa's work has generated excitement and respect.

Sensuous, body-hugging forms, described as 'second-skin dressing', are Alaïa's enduring influence. Experimenting with the latest stretch materials and precisely tailored leathers, he worked in the tradition of the great couturiers he admired and studied, Madeleine Vionnet, Cristóbal Balenciaga and Charles James.

Alaïa thought with his hands. He gave his ideas form by draping, cutting and pinning fabric directly on to the statuesque models with whom he loved to work. He combined his rigorous technical skills with an understanding of how women want to feel. He once remarked, 'I make clothes, women make fashion'. And many women have made fashion in his elegant and sensual creations, from Greta Garbo, Grace Jones, Lady Gaga, and Tina Turner to Scarlett Johansson, Naomi Campbell and Rihanna.

Reflecting a consistency of approach and the timelessness of his creations, Alaïa's most significant works are grouped here to reveal ideas he perfected and remastered over many years. This includes Alaïa's use of black, his favourite and most widely used colour. Restricting the colour palette left Alaïa nowhere to hide and enabled him to develop the purist expression of his ideals of form. As Alaïa's explorations in shape and volume deepened, he remained focused solely on the demands of perfecting his vision, not on market demands.

This exhibition and installation, conceived with Alaïa, includes architectural elements by artists who Alaïa admired and befriended, as well as photographs of Maison Alaïa by the artist Richard Wentworth, who documented the fashion house over the past few years. It has been a turbulent decade. The financial crash of 2008, global protest movements and divisive leaders have made people more politically engaged than they have been for a generation. Graphic design, from election campaign posters to protest badges, has had a prominent role to play in much of this. It is often through graphics that our political hopes and fears are expressed.

This was also a decade that saw the rise of social media. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have made it easier than ever to spread political graphics. Entirely new forms of

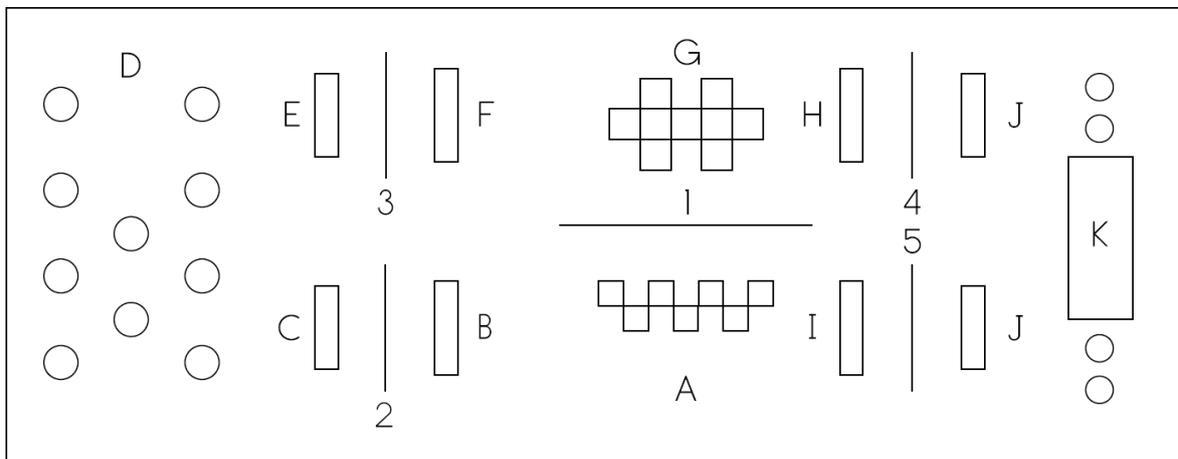
visual communication have emerged, such as the internet meme, which can be viewed by millions of people if they go viral. Today, anyone can make political graphics and reach a global audience. This makes grassroots activists more of a challenge to the political establishment.

Organised in three sections – ‘Power’, ‘Protest’ and ‘Personality’ – Hope to Nope explores the different roles of graphic design in political discourse. It begins with the Hope poster designed by Shepard Fairey for Barack Obama’s presidential campaign in 2008, which inspired countless imitations, including the Donald Trump Nope meme. The exhibition includes significant graphic stories from across the political spectrum, but endorses no particular political point of view. Rather, it examines how graphics give both the powerful and the marginalised a voice.

What to expect?

The works in the exhibition are broken into different styles, some of which span decades of work. A booklet with all exhibition text will be provided when you enter the exhibition. This allows the exhibition space to be uncluttered but this may create an obstacle when it comes to contextualising the works.

On entering the gallery the opening text (featured on page one of these notes) can be read. Turning left into the exhibition will reveal the timeline of Alaïa’s career. From here the gallery is split up into the sections below;



The themes

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|---|------------------------------|---|-------------------------|
| A | Sculptural Tension | G | Black Silhouettes |
| B | Decoration and Structure | H | Renaissance Perspective |
| C | Revolutionary Skins | I | Fragility and Strength |
| D | Exploring Volume | J | Timelessness |
| E | Other Places, Other Cultures | K | Wrapped Forms |
| F | Spanish Accent | | |

The screens

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| 1 | Marc Newson |
| 2 | Kris Ruhs |
| 3 | Konstantin Grcic |
| 4 | Christoph von Weyhe |
| 5 | Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec |

Sculptural tension

Azzedine Alaïa originally trained as a sculptor at the School of Fine Art in Tunis, and the couturier always considered his clothing in sculptural terms. Uniquely in the world of fashion, he used his own hands to give his creations form, shaping and moulding fabric as others would use marble or clay. In turn, Alaïa's garments sculpted and reshaped the female body, consistently deploying unexpected materials to achieve their goals.

At Alaïa, metal is transformed into a textile both magical and mercurial, a theme that runs from his earliest collections to his final haute couture show in July 2017. Metal is used to blur boundaries: steel eyelets lend an airy lightness to leather, or a strength and weight to chiffon, and zips replace decoration. Here, metal is pushed even further. Nailhead studs invent animal patterns on leather and python skin, while chainmail links become more transparent than chiffon in a piece devised in the last months of Alaïa's life. A constant theme of Alaïa's work is challenge – he challenged himself, the craftspeople who worked with him and the materiality of the world around him.



Left; Sculptural tension. Right Decoration and structure

Decoration and structure

A trademark of Azzedine Alaïa's work was to avoid surface embellishment such as embroidery or applied decoration – symbolic elements of haute couture over the past half century. Instead, Alaïa keyed pattern into the very fabric of his garments, making it an integral part of their structure. These decorations alter the form of a garment and change its weight.

His use of lace and perforated fabrics, especially broderie anglaise and punched or laser-cut leather, recall the mashrabiya (porous screens) of Arab architecture, reflecting Alaïa's love of ancient culture and his Northern African childhood.

They are also reminiscent of the chiaroscuro (light and shade) effects explored in 1930s and 1940s films, of which Alaïa was an ardent fan. His lace garments are frequently lined in painstakingly dyed, flesh-coloured fabrics to add to an illusion of idealised stage nudity.

Revolutionary Skills

Azzedine Alaïa's use of leather was revolutionary. He translated it from a fabric of rebellion, of sexual and societal transgression, into one of utmost elegance. The first garment that garnered Alaïa international attention was a leather coat. Studded with eyelets and presented in 1981, this coat foreshadowed the hard-edged style that defined the coming decade.

Alaïa returned to leather constantly throughout his career – he challenged the boundaries of the material, imbuing it with the fluidity of chiffon and cutting it into garments for which it had not previously been used, such as flounced skirts and bras. His use of leather, combined with utilitarian metal detailing as the sole means of decoration, evokes industrial design, of which Alaïa was a passionate admirer. He elevated leather the way the designer and engineer Jean Prouvé elevated raw sheet metal – transforming the simple into the sublime.



Left; Revolutionary skills. Right; Exploring volume

Exploring volume

The mastery with which Azzedine Alaïa invented and deployed stretch fabrics earned him the nickname the 'King of Cling' in the 1980s. But Alaïa's interest in the hyper-fitted form was by no means single-minded – it expressed a fascination with exploring volume, creating sculptural shapes that could redefine a woman's body. This idea is pushed to the extreme in these voluminous ballgowns.

These styles also underline Alaïa's life-long fascination with fashion history and his respect for the past. These pieces re-examine the grandeur of costume in the 17th and 18th

centuries, re-imagining their shapes and effects through contemporary technologies and attitudes to the body. They are not a revival, but a re-evaluation. Alaïa's volume is achieved through intricate technique.

Echoing the work of Cristóbal Balenciaga, he seldom used internal structures such as boning or petticoats, instead exploring the qualities of the fabrics themselves to achieve deceptively complex shapes that float weightlessly around the body.

Other places, other cultures

At the start of the 20th century, the influence of Africa redefined the way artists represented the human form. Its power also turned Azzedine Alaïa to the continent for inspiration. This was both a celebration of his own Tunisian culture, and an idea of Africa, evoked by colour or textile. For Alaïa, Africa was about life, not aesthetics, and he avoided obvious cultural references in his work. However, his interest in animal patterns, a Saharan palette of dusty hues and a use of unusual materials such as flax rope, raffia, shells or Nile crocodile skin, is intimately tied to both the reality and the fantasy of Africa.

When working late into the night, Alaïa's favoured viewing was the National Geographic channel. 'I travel only in my chair,' he used to say. Nevertheless, his childhood in Tunis influenced his work on a fundamental level: Alaïa knew first-hand the experience of dressing in extreme heat. He often incorporated patterned perforations or openwork seams (such as faggoting) into his garments, to encourage air to circulate and cool the body.



Left; Other places, other cultures. Right; Spanish accent

Spanish accent

Azzedine Alaïa's work is marked by fervent curiosity about other places, cultures and customs. The influence of Spain, just across the Mediterranean from his native North Africa, emerges again and again. Alaïa's earliest fashion memories were of the girls in Diego

Velázquez's 1656 painting *Las Meninas*. The volume of Alaïa's ballgowns evoke the formality of the *guardainfante* – the hooped gowns of the 17th-century Spanish royal court. He also cited the influence of Francisco de Zurbarán, an artist who inspired the great Spanish-born couturier Cristóbal Balenciaga, to whom Alaïa is considered the natural successor.

Alongside such solemn courtly portraits, Alaïa was also inspired by the vibrancy of Spanish folk costume. This trio of dresses is based on a style originally used in his 2011 haute couture collection, but reinvented here in dynamic shades of emerald, cerise and cyclamen. In his trademark knit jacquard fabric (here embroidered with micro sequins), Alaïa's flamenco-inspired ruffles, explored since the 1980s in various fabrics, are given energy and movement.

Black silhouettes

Azzedine Alaïa's sense of colour was highly refined, yet often overlooked. Others often reduced his output to the little black dress, of which he was, admittedly, the master. Alaïa favoured camels, soft greys and browns that resemble animal hide, alongside more occasional shades such as olive or khaki, magenta, teal and burgundy. But black was the Alaïa's favourite colour. He would use it on its own, combining multiple fabrics in a single garment to explore their different textual qualities. He would also panel bright colours with veils of black chiffon, to achieve a subtler colouring that varied according to the movement of a dress.

Black often reduced Alaïa's complex, painstaking work to a graphic silhouette, disguising the extent of his labour – you had to look closer at a black dress to appreciate its workmanship. But Alaïa himself said, 'I prefer people to notice the woman and not her clothes'. The anonymity of black focused attention not on Alaïa as a creator but on the women wearing his creations. It allowed his dresses to 'disappear', reduced to an idealised, perfectly crafted form.



Left; Black silhouettes. Right; Renaissance perspective

Renaissance perspective

Combining sensuality with nobility, Azzedine Alaïa prized velvet for its lustrous surface and tactility, for its innate ability to hide a complex web of seams in its pile, and for its connections to the richness of the past. Alaïa often used velvet in black, but also jewel-like tones of ruby red or deep blue reminiscent of Renaissance dresses. Alaïa succeeded in modernising velvet and lightening the fabric. He created featherweight stretch velour knits that mimicked the nap of velvet, and a semi-transparent velvet that seemed like a hybrid with chiffon.

These garments are presented on a series of dress forms designed by Alaïa himself. Originally based on the proportions of the supermodel Naomi Campbell, over the years Alaïa transformed these mannequins, turning them into sculptural objects in their own right. Every tweak in proportion required the garments to be entirely reconstructed, their patterns redrafted. In their final incarnation, these figures are elongated to resemble both the sculpture of Alberto Giacometti and the exaggerated proportions of fashion illustrations.

Fragility and strength

Testing the inherent properties of materials was an obsession for Azzedine Alaïa. At times, he so wilfully went against the conventional use of a specific textile, it became a game. Just as he gave fluidity to leather, velvet and metal, Alaïa gave chiffon strength – cutting it with razor sharpness to dissect the body. Used in his collections since the 1980s, when Alaïa laid translucent chiffon against naked skin with startling erotic effect, he also looked for contrast and contradiction in his use of this soft, delicate fabric.

His most compelling work turns chiffon into a fabric with a hard, predatory sex appeal – even when softly draped, the flourishes of Alaïa's cut strip the chiffon of any innocence. An Alaïa chiffon dress is as powerful as a tailored suit. These garments also express Alaïa's technical prowess – a delicate fabric with specific demands, chiffon must be finely handled and specially seamed, but there is nothing tentative in Alaïa's use of chiffon as a material for seduction.



Left; Fragility and strength. Right; Timelessness.

Timelessness

Azzedine Alaïa was always interested in the intemporelle (timeless). He constantly quoted from ancient cultures, updating these ideas with modern techniques and fabrics, re-engineering them for today's women. Alaïa sometimes described himself as a *bâtitseur* (builder), stating, 'If anything, my work comes closest to architecture'. There is a kinship between Alaïa's inspiration from the ancient world and architecture's use of neoclassical style, reinventing the ideal proportions of Greek and Roman villas for modern life.

Alaïa believed in eternal beauty, not fashion's constant fluctuations. His work was also influenced by earlier Parisian couturiers, such as Madeleine Vionnet (1876–1975) and Alix Grès (1903–93), who also drew on ancient civilisations. Alaïa collected their work to use as reference points for his own explorations. Other creations reference armour – his moulded shapes, which Alaïa himself compared to bas-relief sculpture, recall cuirass (joined breastplate and backplate) armour and idealise the form of the body without nudity.

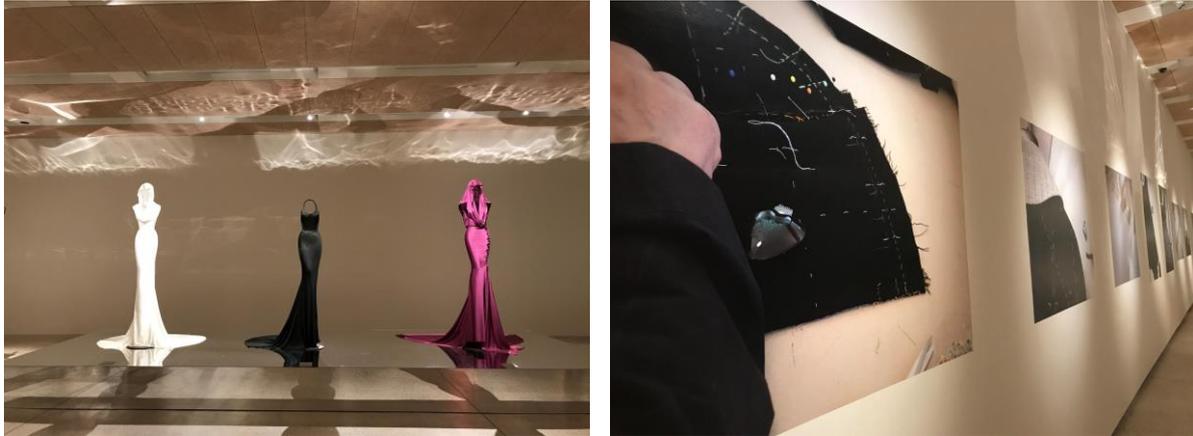
Wrapped forms

Azzedine Alaïa's innovations in stretch fabrics were at least as important as his elevation of leather. In his hands, these transformed the silhouette of the wearer.

Rather than creating clothes anchored at strategic points – conventionally, the waist and the shoulders – Alaïa's bandage dresses cling to the wearer's form, conscious of the entire body. The stretch fabric allows these minimal silhouettes to move freely.

Debuted in 1986, these variations on the 'Bandelette' (bandage) dress are clearly inspired by ancient Egyptian mummification, but also perhaps by the swaddling of infants. The garments join Western and Eastern traditions – highly fitted and precision-cut, with a body simply and sensually wrapped in cloth.

The dresses seem simple, but each band of fabric is precisely engineered and cut to specific dimensions, according to its place on the figure. These creations ushered in the notion of physique-delineating 'bodycon' dressing, the defining aesthetic of the early 1990s.



Left; Wrapped forms. Right; The back wall of the exhibition features the pictures Alaïa.

TASK FOR YOUR STUDENTS

Alaïa's work showcases unusual ways of using different materials. Ask your class to select a piece of clothing either online or in a magazine and get them to reimagine the same piece of clothing in different materials. Could they use techniques usually reserved for one textile to great effect on a different material all together?

EXHIBITION GUIDANCE

Objects in the exhibition are often on open display rather than in cases. Care should be taken when moving around the exhibition and most objects should not be touched. Any objects that can be touched will be clearly signed. We would be grateful if you could brief your students accordingly.

Depending on your group and your itinerary for the visit, we would recommend that you set aside approximately 40 minutes to explore this exhibition.

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