

Outrageous fashion in the elegant period rooms of New York's Metropolitan Museum. This clever juxtaposition is making a bold statement about the inspiration behind the last 30 years of British fashion.

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“Punk clobber in 17th-century designer rooms.” That is how former Sex Pistols’ Johnny Rotten describes this season’s most extravagant exhibition in New York. *AngloMania*, which began on May 3 and will run till September 4, gives New Yorkers an opportunity to see England from a very different perspective. Elegant history is juxtaposed with British fashion in all its quaint anarchic glory to demonstrate how the past continues to shape the future, and Manhattan is experiencing first-hand just what makes British fashion diverse, distinctive and desirable.

Not that this is a new phenomenon. Love of all things English began as an intellectual movement in Continental Europe in the mid-18th century, when the term ‘Anglomania’ was first coined. Fashionable Europeans, such as Voltaire, saw England as a land of reason, freedom, and tolerance. Today Anglophiles still have a certain style. British fashion continues to be at the vanguard even though (or is it because?) many of the nation’s designers aim to shock.

FASHIONABLY BRITISH

The heightened atmosphere and scale of the exhibition was cemented at the gala opening party (hosted by Anna Wintour, editor-in-chief of American *Vogue*) with designers and A-list celebrities arriving in various degrees of outrageous outfits. Both sides of the Atlantic were well-represented with the likes of Sarah Jessica Parker and Stella McCartney, all of whom came to celebrate the styles that make Britain great.

The domed great hall of the Met (as the Metropolitan Museum is known) was transformed into an evocative English garden of fruit trees and flowers. English fare — complete with strawberry tarts and cream — was accompanied not just by champagne, but also by British beer (what else?).



Burgundy silk rose hat with green silk stem and leaves by Philip Treacy, spring/summer 2000

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ANGLOMANIA: CHINTZ AND CHIPS



Ensemble from Alexander McQueen, spring/summer 2005. Crown hat by Philip Treacy



Lavender silk taffeta ensemble by Alexander McQueen, spring/summer 2005. Chinese Garden cork hat by Philip Treacy

It is this heady mish-mash of English culture — such as class, sport, royalty, eccentricity, the English gentleman and English country garden — that has fuelled European and American imagination. The exhibition aims to capture this sense of eclectic influences by juxtaposing 21st-century fashion from designers such as Hussein Chalayan, John Galliano, Stella McCartney and Alexander McQueen with historical costumes, alongside treasured oil paintings, Persian carpets and 18th-century furniture.

The exhibition focuses on British fashion from 1976 to 2006 — a period of astounding creativity and experimentation. Some have described those 30 years of British fashion as a knowing and self-conscious plundering of history. Certainly during this time, designers, in their search for novelty, looked to past styles with an audacious and rapacious appetite. Punk was born around the start of this period, representing not just a paradigm shift in style but a breakdown of all that was formal in British dressing.

The grand dame of British fashion, Vivienne Westwood, is a notorious example of the mix of tradition and transgression. She parodies British style by taking elements of historic designs, such as corsets and crinoline, and combining them with traditional British fabrics such as tartans and Harris Tweed, thus adding a twist of modern punk style. This trend continues to be favoured by younger designers today. Burberry designer Christopher Bailey, for example, looked to the 1960s and 1970s for inspiration when designing his latest Prorsum collection, and brought the look right into the 21st century.

Add the work of milliners Stephen Jones and Philip Treacy; shoe designs from Manolo Blahnik, jewellery from the likes of Simon Costin and Shaun Leane, and classic British tailoring from names like Richard Anderson and Oswald Boateng, and you can see why the manicured Manhattan set might be in awe. The opportunity to create effortless chic by drawing on British provenance appears infinite.

BRITAIN CALLING

AngloMania aims to capture this breadth of inspiration for British fashion through a series of thematic vignettes that reflect the history, function and decoration of the Met's English period rooms. The first theme a visitor encounters is the classic English garden scene, laid out in the Kirtlington Park salon. Flowers — a significant part of British designs that lends its form to almost everything from chintz curtains to floral frocks — are represented in the room's exuberant plasterwork, designed by Lancelot "Capability" Brown to capture the essence of the

FRANCOMANIA

When Anglomania swept through France in the mid-to-late 18th century, England was in the grips of 'Francomania', a theme that is the inspiration for the vignette staged in the Croome Court Room from Worcestershire (circa 1771). The room was originally owned by George William, sixth earl of Coventry, whose love of all things French can be seen in the room's tapestries. The room now showcases a magnificent ball gown by John Galliano for Christian Dior. Like Charles Frederick Worth, whose designs are also displayed in this exhibition, Galliano is an avid Francophile who combines French fashion history with early Dior designs to create his stunning pieces.

AngloMania:

Tradition and Transgression in British Fashion

May 3 – September 4, 2006

Annie Laurie Aitken Galleries

New York Metropolitan Museum



Silk taffeta with self-fabric ruched ribbon appliqué "Maria Luisa", by John Galliano for Christian Dior Haute Couture

house's garden. The floral theme is mirrored in a series of 18th-century silk dresses, continues through to a group of modern orchid hats by Philip Treacy, and is completed by a Hussein Chalayan dress made from hundreds of nylon rosettes and cleverly clipped to resemble topiary.

Class and domestic service are the themes of the museum's Cassiobury Park staircase from Hertfordshire (1677-1680), which contrasts a 1880s' court gown with tattered, ragged dresses by Hussein Chalayan. The gown was worn to the court of Queen Victoria and comprises an elaborate 11-ft train with floral motifs that reflect the foliate carving of the staircase. Recalling the 18th- and 19th-century practice of servants wearing their employers' hand-me-downs, Chalayan's dresses are made up of several layers of second-hand garments and elements from his own repertoire, such as long, hidden and distressed garments.

The Lansdowne Room (circa 1766) pitches the gentleman against punks and dandies as an expression of England's urge toward sartorial rebellion. In the exhibition, bespoke suits by Savile Row tailors such as Richard Anderson

and Henry Poole & Co are placed alongside bondage suits by Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood, whose subversive designs of the 1970s retain their power to shock even today. Punk introduced the language of post-modernism, as dandyism had introduced the language of modernism. With its eclectic mix of styles from different periods and cultures, punk broke down all rules of dressing, paving the way for many of the poetical, historical and theatrical designs included in *AngloMania*.

Post-modernism is the thread that weaves together the themes in the exhibition and is celebrated in the last vignette entitled *The Hunt Ball*. Through the work of Manolo Blahnik, John Galliano, Stephen Jones, Alexander McQueen, Philip Treacy and Vivienne Westwood, it explores the sardonic and romantic historicism that has come to define British fashion. Eccentricity and theatricality have long been associated with England and these designs certainly reveal the origins of these associations. New Yorkers will enjoy this amusing exhibition, while Londoners can continue to keep a look out for the serious influence of history on British fashion. ▲