

## Bloomsbury Publishing | Bloomsbury Fashion Central Willie Walters interview

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[MELLOW MUSIC]

My name is Willie Walters, and during the 1990s, I worked at central Saint Martins first in charge of womenswear, and then towards the end of the '90s, I became the course director for BA Fashion. Recently, I've been working on identifying images for Bloomsbury's fashion archive of photos of fashion shows from Central Saint Martins students, mainly during the 1990s.

The 1990s was a really pivotal time in fashion, both in fashion in general and particularly in fashion for students who were studying at Central Saint Martins at that time. And I think if we're thinking about the 1990s, we have to first think about the 1980s.

So I think most people know the 1980s was a time of superfluity, excess, riches. Designers, you think of people like Versace with all that exuberance, beautiful fabric, lames, jewels, and then you think of the huge shoulder pads. You think of Margaret Thatcher.

And it was a time of great excitement and a lot of confidence, financial confidence. Also, there was the innovations of sportswear, not just people doing workouts but people using fabrics, designers using fabrics containing spandex and Lycra.

Then, of course, that goes into the experts like Azzedine Alaïa, who would take that wonderful stretchy fabric but then tailor it as well. And you have Calvin Klein, Donna Karan, nice capsule daywear. You have Calvin Klein jeans, a lot of sex, a lot of sensuality.

But by the time the decade came to the end of the 1990s, it was all a bit too much. That amazing energy had become a bit of a pastiche, and a lot of the-- even the great works you see on the catwalk had become sort of tired and vulgar. It was a bit like eating too many pastries.

So when the 1990s came along, it was a bit like a palate cleanser, and suddenly out went the big shoulders. Out walked the upright stance, and in came what later on became called "heroin chic" and "grunge." But that's just a trope.

Really, it was students and designers embracing what might be called fashion povera. So people were starting to appreciate old fabrics, distressed fabrics, boiled wool, linens, cottons, denims which were broken down with cheese graters. We went from luxury to discretion.

The biggest influence for graduate designers at the time were designers like the Antwerp Six, Martin Margiela, Ann Demeulemeester, and possibly the Japanese designers, like Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto. These were the designers who used austere silhouettes. This was not the woman responding to the male gaze. They were covered. They were quite monastic. I often think of some of the Antwerp designers as having a sort of almost a Van Dyck colour palette, with black and charcoal and beautifully defined lace collars.

People like Martin Margiela were having fashion shows in the Paris streets. It was the whole point of getting back down to a street level, which enthused the students. And so the students-- they took this and ran with it. And I started work at Central Saint Martins in a permanent basis in 1992, and I was just-- I was blown away by their inventiveness.

Students were using every material you could imagine to create their silhouettes, experimenting with wood, metal, narrow scaffolding, poles to hold shapes out. Students would buy jumpers and boil them to make them become a minute little shape and then cut them up again to create something else.

I think this was quite good, actually, for students because students, certainly then, were poor, and you have to make do and mend. You have to somehow create beauty out of something that's like the ashes of the gutter. And this inspired-- the work of these designers I mentioned inspired the students because they felt a sort of togetherness with these-- they could really identify with these designers.

One important feature of the early '90s was the employment by both John Galiano and Alexander McQueen in top Paris fashion houses. It was suddenly recognised that these young men from humble backgrounds were talented geniuses, and they could take Paris by storm.

This gave a lot of confidence to the student body, who started to think, OK, right, they can do it, I can do it. And this was something that really brought a lot of generosity of spirits to within the student body. However, this sort of discreet, broken-down image of fashion which had come through in the early '90s wasn't the vision and the direction followed by all the students in the BA course.

There were as many student ideas as there are many designers in the firmament. For all the students following Martin Margiela and being inspired by him, there were many others who wanted to design, for example, beautiful couture eveningwear, capsule daywear, the kind of clothes women wear from morning to night and enjoy their busy lives.

There were students designing clothes in ecru calico for being inspired by a new spirit of sustainability, which was very much in early stages then. There were students who used also their grandmother's closet as an inspiration. So they were going back to vintage of maybe the '50s or the even the '40s.

There were students coming to Saint Martins from all over the world, even in the early '90s, and they all brought their vision and their energy to the department. At the beginning of the 1990s, fashion at Saint Martins was called fashion design, and it encompassed everything, menswear, womenswear, students who wanted to do screen printing or knit, specialise, or even fashion communication in those days.

But as the student body started to grow in really the beginning of the '90s, it was decided that the whole department should be split up into what they call different pathways. So you had womenswear, and a new one was menswear. And fashion knit as a discrete pathway was new, and fashion print as a discrete pathway was new.

And there was also a new one injected called fashion design with marketing, which didn't mean it was purely a marketing course. It was a course in which the students had to fundamentally think about a market and analyse the market and then design leading up to their final collection.

Now there were people coming from a much bigger catchment area. This was so refreshing to students coming from all over the world, but they brought their culture with them. So you started to have a student from Thailand being best friends with a student from France. And they would go off to holidays to their own countries, and they would bring back their materials. They would bring back their fabrics, their way of constructing things. And it was actually really fruitful. It was wonderful.

The students studying fashion print used, as you would imagine, screen printing, but they took this much further, using embellishments, passementerie, beadwork, whilst you had names that came out of Saint Martins. And the more names you had, the more talent we accrued. It was a wonderful, virtuous circle.

But when you look within those images, you're going to see beautiful daywear, maybe daywear not even annotated, but clothes that nowadays look completely contemporary, beautiful eveningwear, clothes that are actually very discreet, a little bit sensual but anybody would be happy to buy in a shop now.

And we're talking about 30 years ago. They're always the ones who you notice for the dramatic silhouettes, the unusual use of fabric. But that was the great thing was they felt no limits. Nobody ever said no. Nobody ever said, you can't do that. And that is what appealed to those students coming to the course.

Having said that, I love to think of the students who designed a gentle collection for themselves and their sister. Still, looking amongst these images, you will see all life is there. The Saint Martins Graduate Fashion Show was always an eagerly awaited event in the calendar. There was so much excitement involved with that show.

And in fact, until 1997, every single student who studied on that course took part in that show. We decided, well, really due to the reception from the press that a show of 80-plus students was just too long. So we decided, quite sadly really because it was such an important thing for all the students, that although we would have an assessment show within the college with all the same backup that we would give to any other show with hair, makeup, our own models-- we would really support them-- we would have to choose 40 graduates to go into what we call the press show, which was shown to the press.

The students fashion show at the end of their degree was an amazing culmination of their work during the time they'd been at the college. I would say the few weeks before the clothes were finally handed in, it was an amazing atmosphere in the studio. Every student was focusing on that day, on that presentation.

Students who had done no work for two years were suddenly fired up with incredible enthusiasm and worked day and night to demonstrate, after all, what was their love, their vision. And then the students who had worked every day for every year [CHUCKLES] really were perfecting their beautiful shapes, their cuts, their innovative fabrics.

The 1990s was a great time in fashion and wonderful to be there at Central Saint Martins. Names which have gone on to be really significant within the fashion world, like Hussein Chalayan, Riccardo Tisci, Stella McCartney, Phoebe Philo-- they were all there and moving through at different times during that decade.

But for me, I think the point of looking at these images here is much more than that. It's to do with the student body as a whole, which moved from maybe what we could call loosely the grunge era of the beginning of the decade into something much more pin-sharp during the central era, and then moving into something maybe more glamorous towards the end of the era.

When I think of all those students whose designs can be seen in this collection, there were so many who had brilliant and diverse talents. The fashion world is huge, and the fashion body at Central Saint Martins, partly because it's a large course and it's also a course very widely represented from people throughout the whole world-- it's extremely diverse.

I think the images that you see here can help students in their current studies because we are talking about 30 years ago, so we are already talking about history. And it could be fascinating for students to look back at what was being created in this course 30-plus years ago. You have so many diverse silhouettes, so much use of different fabrics that still looks fresh today.

And although back in those days sustainability wasn't really considered, I was interested in looking at the work to see there are students who have used particularly vintage clothes to rework, to refashion, to use the shapes, or to use the fabrics. This was something the students back in, say, 1994 did because it had an aesthetic appeal.

They loved these ancient fabrics, and they wanted to work into them. They wanted to-- maybe they had holes, or they were laddered. But they embellished them. They used this-- and this is something that's so applicable today. It's totally current.