

The fashion design process - Royal College of Art

London's Royal College of Art started its fashion programme in 1948, the same year that Christian Dior launched his New Look in Paris. It welcomes aspiring designers with undergraduate degrees and prepares them for fashion careers through technical workshops, specialist lectures, project critiques and work experience.

Every year, approximately 3000 new designers enter the London fashion scene. Working against the odds, they join a competitive world where skills and ideas are essential to success.

The RCA's rigorous education has enabled graduates to work in fashion houses such as Galliano, Vivienne Westwood, Chloé, Dior and Burberry. Other graduates such as Ossie Clark, Boudicca, Julien Macdonald and, more recently, Erdem Moralioglu and Carolyn Massey have developed their own labels.



Photograph: Royal College of Art / Dominic Tschudin

This display shows work by the 2008 fashion graduates, many of whom already work for well known fashion houses. It reveals aspects of the students' design process: the research, the development and the technical skill.

Concept

A cohesive and exciting catwalk collection needs a strong central idea. This will influence the colour, cut, decoration, materials and function of the designer's work.

The RCA fashion department encourages students to develop their own design identities. Central to this aspect of their education are seminars in research and innovation, portfolio presentation and critical analysis, in which students must reflect on their practice.

The Royal College of Art's 2008 graduate collections take inspiration from many sources - the Ballets Russes, the London skyline, building sites and V&A exhibitions. Students research and develop their collections in their own individual ways. Some collect images and other source material. Others cultivate a core idea through drawing, making toiles (patterns in calico) or draping fabric directly onto a mannequin or stand.



Form

In transforming their designs into 3-D garments, fashion designers enter a problem-solving stage. Traditional methods of making, as well as innovation and experimentation with materials, cut and construction, are vital to this process.

The 2008 fashion graduates use a vast range of techniques to create and control the shape of their garments. They tailor, stitch, mould and build supports for rigid leather, soft fur, thick wool and fluid textiles. Some of them experiment with mock-ups in inexpensive materials such as calico or paper.

Instruction in pattern-cutting, tailoring, fibre identification and the sourcing of materials provides a good foundation for this work. The RCA also encourages corporate sponsorships, which can ease the financial burden of acquiring costly materials such as crystal, leather, lace and fur.



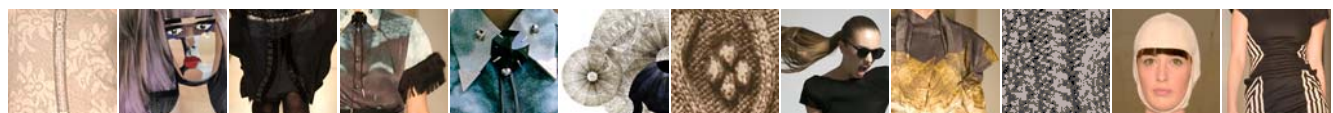
Technique

In creating their collections RCA fashion students have to develop their skills. They attend lectures and workshops in subjects such as dyeing, sewing, computer-aided design, knitwear construction and tailoring.

Aside from their tutors' knowledge and guidance, they have access to different types of technical equipment: laser cutters, digital printers, computerised knitting machines and sophisticated prototype systems.

Some students expand their options further through collaborations with colleagues from other disciplines, such as textiles, ceramics and glass, product design, jewellery and vehicle design.

This enormous wealth of resources allows students to experiment with many techniques. Several garments and accessories show a high-tech approach. Others are entirely handmade.



Detail

Detail, whether hidden, decorative or functional is an essential aspect of fashion design. Customised fastenings, decorative stitching, jewelled embellishment or a delicate print can make a garment truly unique.

As RCA fashion students develop their final collections, they use the many skills they have learned to define their work. Adding these often imaginative and subtle details involves rigorous experimentation. Collaboration with other students, institutions and industry partners helps where more specialist expertise is needed. Companies might donate expensive materials such as fur, crystal, lace and leather.

Close inspection of these garments reveals hand-dyed buttons, laser-cut acrylic, a bespoke zip-pull, crystal-embellished leather and delicate hand-stitching. These details improve the students' catwalk collections so discretely they must be seen up close to be appreciated.

