

The Look of Love

Four FASHIONABLE women reflect on the pieces that WON their partners' affection. By SARAH BANCROFT



VANESSA PARADIS, 2016



ISABEL MARANT, Spring 2017



VICTORIA BECKHAM, CIRCA 2000



PHOTOGRAPHY: MAIN BY ANDREAS ORTNER/TRUNK ARCHIVE; RUNWAY BY MAXTREE

After seeing his future wife, Victoria Beckham, wearing a catsuit in a Spice Girls video, David Beckham reportedly declared, “That one there—that’s the girl I’m going to marry.” It’s no surprise that Ms. Beckham’s eponymous fashion line is now known for its sexy silhouettes. In a similar vein, French fashion muse Vanessa Paradis is said to have caught fallen heartthrob Johnny Depp’s eye when he saw her from behind in a backless dress. Would that romance have happened if she had been wearing drop-crotch jeans and a deconstructed sweatshirt? In a fashion season that is rich in oversized shoulders, conservative hemlines and bat-wing tops, how does one feel, well, sexy?

Call it the Leandra Medine effect (of the fashion website Man Repeller). She single-handedly lent cachet to dressing in a distinctly unfeminine way, just as the Olsen twins made it cool to dress like a bag lady with their line The Row. When I walk down rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré in Paris, where I currently live, I see a Saint Laurent store selling metallic-pink stilettos and gold-lamé minidresses on the same block as Comme des Garçons’ severe architectural garments.

Vancouver-based style expert Susie Wall can wear a charcoal-grey pencil skirt and a ruffled collar blouse just as easily as MC Hammer-style gold Isabel Marant pants. But she describes wearing a strapless, sun-faded red cotton dress with white eyelet-lace trim by Vancouver designer Isabelle Dunlop as life-altering. She was in Santorini with her now-husband Chris. “It wasn’t just that Chris loved that dress on me,” she says. “It was that it felt like the perfect outfit to wear for the most perfect of moments of my life. I will forever call it my game changer.”

Yeny Oh, a womenswear buyer for Paris department store Printemps, is convinced that she won her boyfriend Pierre’s affection by wearing a rock-n-roll-inspired metallic-purple dress by April 77 to a party. (She was also the DJ.) “We chatted, and maybe 15 minutes later, he said, ‘Do you want to go to my house and listen to music?’” says Oh. Fast-forward a year and they’re still going strong. “It is very sexy,” she says of the dress. “I love the mix of the ’70s, with the flared sleeves and Lurex, and the ’90s, with the mock turtleneck.”

For her first date with now-husband George, Shannon Heth, president of Milk Creative Communications, remembers playing pool in a vintage cream dress from the ’50s at a dive bar in Vancouver’s Gastown. “It was knee-length with black polka dots,” says Heth. “It had a bit of a pouf to it—not overly flouncy but just enough to stand out. I remember thinking how out of place I probably looked, but clearly it did the trick.... I’ve always thought of polka dots as my secret weapon.”

After speaking with these women, I had to ask my husband, Murray, what outfit of mine he especially likes. I thought it might be one of my Paradis-inspired backless numbers, but, to my surprise, it was a red fit-and-flare bandana-print Kookaï dress from our early 20s. When we were backpacking across France on a motorbike, I would unroll it and slip it on whenever we got into town and went to a café. “That dress will always be a memory trigger for that perfect time in the south of France,” he said, adding that what he loves so much about fashion is that “it’s fluid and it’s about time and place more than anything else.”

Red is the most sexual colour for men, writes Paris-based author Jean-Gabriel Causse in his 2014 book *L’étonnant pouvoir des couleurs*. “Your sex appeal increases dramatically,” he says, citing a study out of New York’s University of Rochester. “You feel more confident and less shy. Red gives you courage; you are more funny and strong.” For the record, Spring 2017 is full of the hue: There were red rompers and floor-length ruffled dresses at Vanessa Bruno, red hoop earrings and a standout metallic minidress at Isabel Marant and red flamenco-style dresses at Rodarte and Oscar de la Renta.

I had forgotten about my Kookaï dress. Perhaps it’s because the pieces that capture our partner’s attention represent us so intimately that we don’t remember them. The French have an expression for that type of effortless elegance: *Elle est bien dans sa peau* meaning “She’s comfortable in her own skin.” And that, it seems, is the essence of what dressing for love is. □