

Protest the Met Gala, Keep loving clothes:
Fashion, Art, and Consumerism Reach a Penultimate State of Irony
By Anna Nelson

Fashion exists at a unique intersection of function and artistic expression. The consumption of clothing is a form of art that just about every human participates in. While people vary in levels of access and interest, everyone from basic-tee-buyers to trend-setters and followers make choices about clothing. Over the past few centuries of American fashion, our relationship to clothing has quickly evolved, and our relationship to the *art* of clothing is more fragile than ever.

The spring of 2026 witnessed major political upsets around the annual Met Gala. Bolstered by Jeff Bezo's looming presence, the massive marketing campaign for Devil Wears Prada 2, and the growing debate around AI use, it's safe to say: tensions are high. These tensions and the overwhelming misinterpretation of the gala's theme, *Fashion is Art*, provides a remarkable reflection of how current American culture values art and consumption. A notable number of celebrities and the general public alike ridiculed Jeff Bezos's involvement in the Met Gala. Participants and viewers boycotted the Gala, organized protests, and sparked a deluge of discourse online. But a month later, I'm left to wonder whether these ridicules and boycotts solved any of the issues their instigators raised.

Instead of just boycotting the red carpet, I suggest we encourage viewers to *engage* with art, not avoid consumerism. Understanding the practice of art, tastemaking and its relationship to capital helps us understand exactly where the fashion industry of 2026 sits and how to combat its faults.

Our Ever Evolving Relationship to Clothes and Clothesmaking

Cloth and fabric used to hold much more value to the everyday buyer than they do today. Before ready-to-wear clothing, the middle-class-everyday-wearer made clothes built to last. Capsule wardrobes were the it-thing long before 21st century white women coined the term. These wardrobes often included one set of Sunday clothes for weddings, funerals, church, and anything necessitating "nice." Everyday clothes were made for function and labor. They were constructed to wear in certain ways and places, allowing for mending to prolong a piece's life. Underclothes took the brunt of the damage and wearers limited their washing. Not only did people have a higher rate of wear per piece, but the pieces were tailored to each individual's body and often homemade. For laborers, the clothes were built to fit, built to be maintained, and built to last.

Beginning in the 1840s, slave owners began buying mass produced clothing. This new approach to clothes provided owners with cheap clothes and newfound time and labor freed up from sewing. During the civil war, militaries required mass uniform production and created standardized sizing methods, improving the approach's efficacy. Soon after, America began to use standardized sizes to create "ready-to-wear" garments available for general buyers. As

technologies rapidly evolved across the industrial revolution, mass produced clothing increased in popularity, and people began to grow distant from the making of their clothing. No longer were clothes regularly designed for and by the wearer. The fashion industry began to scale like never before.

Along with the rise of ready-to-wear garments, the early 20th century also witnessed the rise of new advertising markets. These markets promised elite styles and clothing to lower classes who previously never had access. Even so, the lower class purchasing these new garments and ideals still seemed to sit above another: factory workers.

[Helen Woodward](#) noted this distinction early on, instructing her peers in advertising to “Never see the factory in which [the product] was made... don’t watch the people at work... Because, you see, when you know the truth about anything, the real, inner truth—it is very hard to write the surface fluff that sells it.” With the rise of department stores, marketing, and purposeful hiding of this “inner truth,” the divide between consumers and clothing production continued to stretch.

Our contemporary landscape of fashion is built on this foundation. Today, the divide between maker and consumer is virtually blocked by a Big Black Curtain. Buying and discarding fast fashion like Shein, Zara, Amazon Basics, and Old Navy on a whim is a middle class norm. Cheap fabrics are sold cheaply, worn quickly, and thrown away within years. Now, custom clothes are a luxury and often created for elite style, not comfort and durability.

Consumption as a Conflated Sense of “Choice”

So what lies behind the Big Black Curtain? This new distance between the consumer and clothing production is filled by the fashion industry machine. Haute Couture brands like Gucci and Dior create extravagant, custom pieces that influence the pieces of luxury ready-to-wear brands, creating trends which eventually catch on in mass markets. The industry trickles down colors, cuts, textures, and materials from the runway to department stores to fast fashion and more. Everyday consumers are no longer making stylistic or functional decisions about how their clothes are made or fit. Instead, they are deciding from a narrowed and controlled set of options placed in front of them by venture capitalists, giant fashion houses, and millionaire CEOs ([the cerulean sweater of it all](#)). While one could argue ready-to-wear garments have increased access for lower classes, affording them opportunities to explore new styles at low cost, the broadening of options actually creates an *illusion* of choice and control.¹

The distance between consumer and creation has diluted the art of fashion. Choosing from a buffet is not the same as cooking, and shopping is not the same as making art. The core principle of modern art is participation in the process of creating.

Across industries, artists understand that improvement of craft and taste requires experimentation. If you listen to [Prince’s 1984 demo of *Manic Monday*](#), it may sound much

¹ Now, before this sounds too doomsday, let’s pause and recenter. This article is not a moral dissection or takedown of the rich for their capitalist-motivated behaviors of control and expansion (we can leave that for another time). What’s more important to discuss is the effect of their actions and the industry’s expansion—however they/it are motivated.

different than the [Manic Monday released and performed by the Bangles in 1986](#). If you go to the fifth floor of the Museum of Modern Art and look at Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, what you won't see are the [hundreds of sketches and preliminary paintings](#) he went through to arrive at the final piece. Final works take on a completely different sound, look, and feel than the ideas they began as. They've been reworked and redone over and over again. Musicians rework their sound balancing and instruments, visual artists re-blend pigments and try new color palettes, and chefs switch ingredients and cooking temperatures all to perfect a balance that is just right for their song, painting, or recipe.

In the world of fashion, understanding, predicting, and purchasing trends has overtaken many social media algorithms. You can find instructions on how to replicate runways and lookbooks, haute couture pieces, and celebrity outfits. But following the trends and eating from a diluted haute couture buffet is not art. To create art and build personal taste requires involvement not only in the production of the art, but a reflection on your own preferences. What you like or don't like and find pleasing, disgusting, or something in between. To make art, in any medium, is to create something that is, while influenced surely by its context, unique to you, your feelings, and your preferences.

Under this definition, much of what we currently label fashion is not art, but passive consumption. And now, in 2026, even the rich, the artists, and the designers have lost sight of what art is.

A Penultimate Performance of Taste and Masquerade of Art

While the first Monday in May has long been the biggest night in fashion, this year's 2026 Met Gala was a showtopping, penultimate irony. In theory, the Met gala is a hub for art, serving as both a fundraiser for the museum's costume department and, since Anna Wintour's takeover, an explosion of red carpet fashion appreciation and experimental designs. The event has become accessible to all, allowing fans to stream, judge, comment on, and ultimately participate in the celebrity fashion on display. This year's theme, however, *Fashion is Art*, fell from meta in theory to horribly flat in execution.

Although the Met advertised the theme "fashion is art," many designers seemed to confuse the direction for "fashion as art." Instead of creating art of their own, an astounding number of celebrities simply wore clothing based on existing pieces of fine art.

See Kendall Jenner as *Winged Victory of Samothrace*

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DX9hxV0kbRW/>

Madonna as *The Temptation of St. Anthony*

https://www.instagram.com/p/DX9kHGijmNP/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFiZA==

Angela Bassett as *Girl in a Pink Dress*

https://www.instagram.com/p/DX7IzSCNS18/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFiZA==

Gracie Abrams as *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer*

https://www.instagram.com/p/DYTnl9dm7-z/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=NTc4MTIwNjQ2YQ==

The list goes on and on...

While every one of these designs is beautiful and well crafted, I was disappointed to see artists create imitations of art, turning art *into* fashion, instead of recognizing the inherent art of fashion itself. **Designers put art on the body, ignoring [the exhibition's call to analyze the relationship of fashion to the body and the wearer.](#)**

As always, though, many designers presented engaging interpretations, creating something new that felt personal and individual.

1. [Gigi Hadid in Miu Miu](#)

When I first saw Gigi Hadid's look on the carpet, I barely noticed. It was pleasing—just fine—but nothing exciting and nothing more than expected. In a slick, sparkling, sheer floor length dress, she looked nice (when does she not?). If I hadn't listened to her [Vogue interview](#), I would have agreed with all the other critics complaining about yet another underwhelming show. But when asked about her dress and its creation, she displayed a deep grasp of the theme. She quickly noted that the Met is special because, for once, fashion is not about making a garment to sell, but having fun with an assignment and making something wonderful (art!). The sheer fabric was chosen to "let the body and the skin speak through." After the base was made, she chose where the patches would go *while it was on her body*, placing them where it felt best and fit her sense of style. When she talked, you could tell how comfortable she felt *being in the dress*. Throughout the process, the piece was built to her both as a body and a being.

2. Jordan Roth by Robert Wun

We saw many extra arms on the carpet this year, but Jordan Roth's "living sculpture" went unmatched. [Cherry Miu for Vogue](#), unpacks it best:

"For Jordan Roth, 'Fashion Is Art' is not merely a theme but an exploration of 'the body as both subject and object, both viewer and viewed, both artist and art.' He sees the body as both a canvas for art and a manifestation that each of us is, in our own right, a work of art. This interpretation is reflected in the language of the entire look: it resembles a living stage installation. As Roth ascends the Met

Gala steps, his body becomes not just the wearer, but an extension of the artwork itself.”

In a similar standpoint to Hadid, Miu describes the nature of the Met:

“When ‘Fashion Is Art’ lands at the heart of both creation and viewing, the red carpet stops being merely ‘a runway for clothes’ and starts to resemble a kind of experimental arena that pushes people toward the centre of art.”

3. Hudson Williams in Balenciaga

While tiktok went mad over Williams’s Black Swan makeup, his suit’s subtle play on costume art went overlooked. In a [Balenciaga powder blue suit](#), Williams made a nod towards the Matadors of Spain (the birthplace of Balenciaga). [Bull fighting is a deeply traditional performance art](#) that uses a human body as spectacle. The intricate clothes they adorn their bodies with are an integral part of this performance. The clothing they wear must allow their limbs to move with agility, while maintaining an aesthetic of status and style.

Because the Toreros are judged as much (if not more) by their style and flair in performing their various duties as they are by their effectiveness, the ensemble needs to allow them the balance between a warrior and an artist. ([Masculine Style](#))

Taking inspiration from an art already making integral connections between art, clothing, and the body adds a depth and complexity to William’s Met look and his interpretation of the theme.

Protest the Met Gala, Keep Loving Clothes

The irony of the theme and its at-large execution failure goes deeper when we understand the political and cultural context of the Spring of 2026. These Met Gala looks were not the only dilution of taste that were witnessed with concern. The Devil Wears Prada 2 premiered just three days before the gala, and was met with a wash of criticism for its commercialization. While the original film explored a snarky yet sympathetic criticism of the industry machine, the sequel failed to add any new commentary on the industry’s shortcomings, resulting in a flat self-awareness without any action or response. The movie press tour featured a number of sponsorships and collabs from L’Oreal to Walmart to Lulus and Tresemmé. But when a movie sells out to so many sponsorships, how could it ever maintain the cheeky criticism of capitalism it once championed?

The shadow of capitalism continued to overshadow art as Lauren Sanchez-Bezos, a co-chair of the 2026 Met Gala, took to the red carpet in a Schiaparelli replica of *Madame X*. The original painting by Sargent is displayed in the Met Museum and depicts Madame Pierre

Gautreau in a fitted, black gown with the strap originally sitting off of her shoulder. [According to the Met website](#), “young Sargent had boldly portrayed a new brazen ‘type’ in Parisian society: the so-called professional beauty, a woman who audaciously used her appearance to gain celebrity and advance her social standing.” After Sanchez Bezos took to the carpet, [Truss Archive](#) labeled her reference as “tonedeaf.”

Schiaparelli look uses the same logic [as the painting], with the body styled as spectacle...Sanchez Bezos borrowed the drama of female scandal while brushing past the actual issue: billionaire patronage, extreme wealth, and the cultural laundering that comes with sponsoring the room you are being judged in...She often seems to answer criticism by leaning further into spectacle, as though visibility itself proves the point.

While the reference was self aware of the scandal surrounding her and Jeff Bezos’s sponsorship of the Gala, her participation didn’t add any response to her own scandal. She did not defy public claims that her and her husband were buying taste or operating an inhumane global operation for insane financial gain. Her and her team didn’t even add their own take on the dress itself.

So what do these ironies show us? For one, if a seat at fashion’s biggest night can’t buy you taste, I promise that buying the next version of black heels won’t either. In order to have taste or to be of artistic value, one must insert themselves, their individuality, and their opinions/interpretations into their creations. Second, art and consumerism are always in interplay, and fashion can become either. Art is the antithesis of consumerism: it cannot scale, and its skill cannot be bought. While I understand and side with many protests of Anna Wintour welcoming the oligarchs and of Bezos’s empire and facade of taste, I fear that many criticisms will throw out the baby with the bath water—similarly failing to engage with the art of fashion. Many criticisms seem to conflate the problematic organization of the fashion industry with fashion being problematic inherently.

When we avoid the art of fashion *while we* avoid the consumerism of fashion, we actually do *more* harm to everyday wearers of the lower class and increase the distance between consumers, creation, and the practice of art. Protesting the Met Gala or boycotting Amazon purchases won’t take down an oligarchy alone. But by taking back some creative engagement and reclaiming agency in our own participation in fashion, we can undermine the power of the industry who aims to further class divide and access.²

So what should one lovely reader of this article do? Create and develop your own taste!

Developing Taste, not Performing it: a How To Guide

No matter how much we watch, critique and learn about the fashion on the red carpet, we will never be *creating* something while observing this high fashion game. Art critique should inform how we create and curate, but it is not an end.

² That said, I understand the faults of a neoliberal argument that places ultimate responsibility for social change on individuals. Yes, we must hold the oligarchy to its responsibilities, but let us not forget our choice in the game.

Developing taste takes *engagement*. It means participating in decisions with intention, reflection, and simply *yourself*. People with “taste” have skills in curating pieces that reflect their individuality. If you’ve never picked up a sewing needle, fear not. Lessening the distance between your clothes and their creation doesn’t mean you have to handmake your barrel jeans. Building a closer relationship with clothes can, in practice, look many ways. Instead of rebuying the latest cut or wash of jeans until you have ten from the last decade, try cuts in and out of style until you find a couple you *love*. This will often lead you to second hand stores and non-curated collections that allow you to break out from the trickled down selections in firsthand stores. Taking the time to sample, say no, and discern the good from the great will divert your choices from the latest season forecast.

This practice will affect people differently. Maybe you discover a new style that brings you a Marie-Kondo type joy every time you open your closet in the morning. Maybe you realize, “wow, I really don’t have a care in the world for what I put on my body beyond the comfort it provides” and instead of feigning interest in the latest colors, you buy three (sustainably sourced!) tees—hopefully also relieving you of the pressure to keep up. Maybe you fall in love with the functionality of your clothes, focusing on mending and durable materials that will stand up to your hobbies’ demands. Maybe you find love in hands-on creation and begin upcycling or pattern making. Ultimately, engaging more in your choices can help you discover a practice that makes you feel more secure, comfortable, inspired and excited than any abercrombie top ever has. And maybe, just maybe, it changes the practices of your community, our culture, and the market, too.