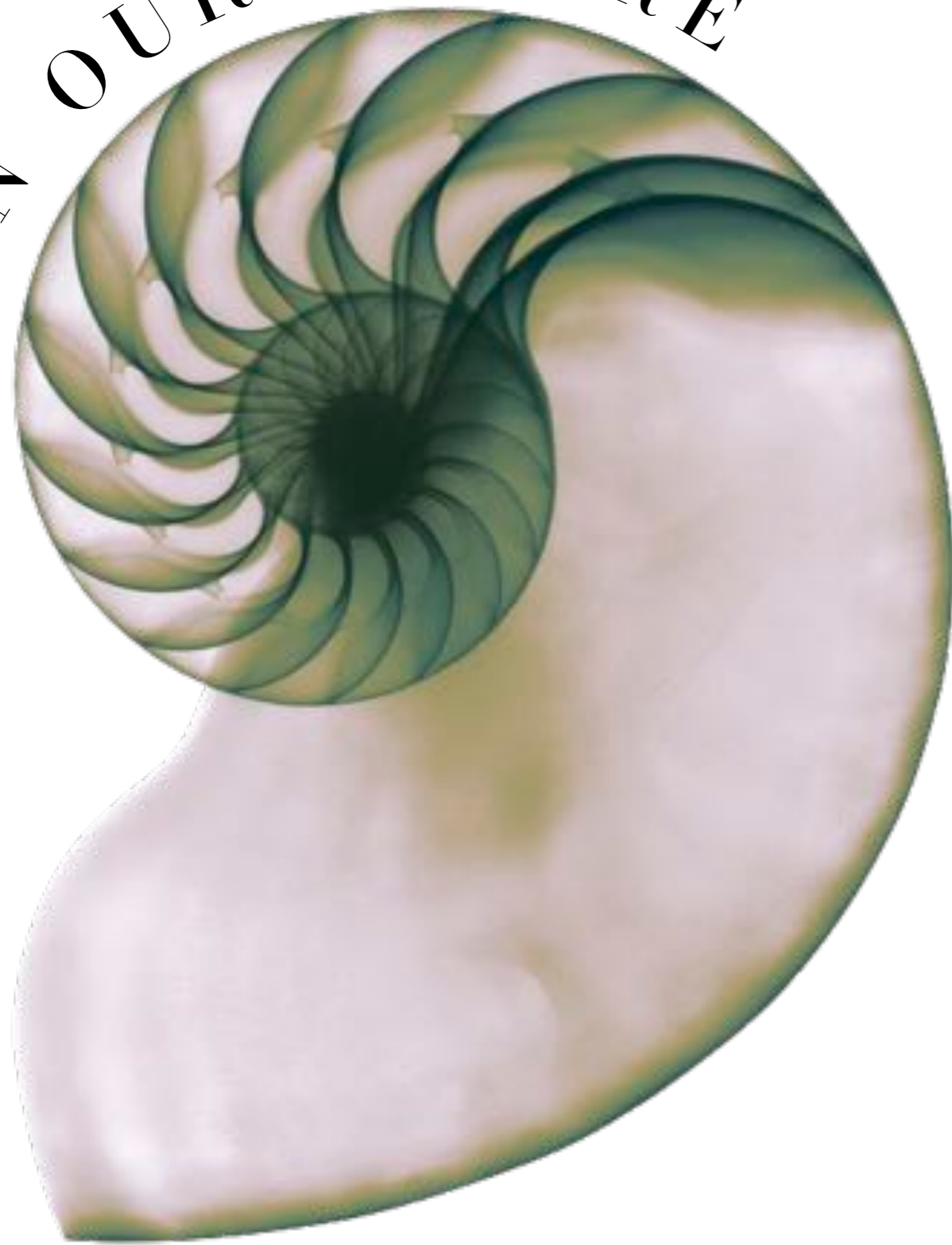


IN OUR NATURE



From mother-of-pearl buttons to feather-trimmed millinery, the natural world has long been at the heart of our sartorial expression, as a new exhibition at the V&A reveals

By CATRIONA GRAY

PHOTOGRAPHS: ERIK MADIGAN HECK, GETTY IMAGES



Madison Stubbington in a Bazaar shoot wearing a Chanel dress with details that recall the form of seashells



Irina Kravchenko in an Erik Madigan Heck floral fashion shoot for Bazaar

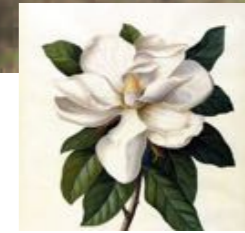
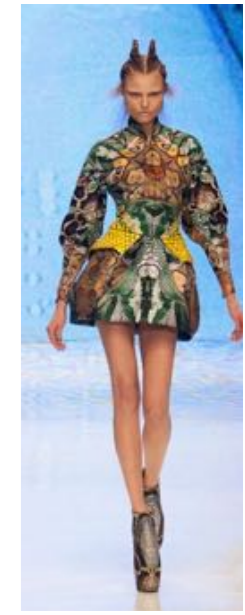
Last year, it was announced that the only known surviving fragment of Queen Elizabeth I's wardrobe had been discovered. The intricately embroidered skirt, sewn with gold thread, had been made into an altar cloth and lay undisturbed for centuries in a quiet Herefordshire church. Covered in roses, daffodils and a menagerie of animals, insects and caterpillars, this exquisite relic is a testament to how nature was such an intrinsic part of life that even its humblest creatures were elevated into decorative symbols to adorn the costliest of royal fabric.

Humans have always relied upon the environment for survival, but it is easy to forget that it is also the source of the clothes that we wear. In the past, this connection was acknowledged and even celebrated, but our increasing detachment from the natural world makes it harder to appreciate that the most luxurious pieces of couture are still made from the simplest of materials. This rich and unexpected history, from the early 17th century to the present day, is the subject of a major new exhibition at the V&A.

'Fashioned from Nature' charts the complex and ever-evolving relationship between our clothes and the environment. It reflects the inspiration that fashion has always drawn from flora and fauna, and the industry's impact on nature, these two strands combining to reveal how our own attitudes have altered over the course of several hundred years.

'Previously, people really understood where their clothes came from and valued that knowledge,' says the V&A curator Edwina Ehrman. 'Even in my own childhood in the 1950s, your "best" garments were cherished and cared for. They lasted for years – they would be mended and preserved and handed down. They were prized possessions.'

The earliest garments in the exhibition date from the early 1600s and are perfect examples of how the wonders of nature were displayed through clothing. There are jackets and dress fragments embellished with flowers and twining vines, their details picked out with brightly coloured silks, and silver and gold threads. For almost as long as patterned textiles have been produced, the natural world has provided ideas for their designs, and in the 17th century, these motifs held far more power and significance than they do today. Courtiers were well-versed in the language of flowers, and used



Above: a botanical watercolour by Georg Dionysius Ehret (1743), from the V&A exhibition. Clockwise from left: an 18th-century silk waistcoat. A Regan Cameron shoot for Bazaar. Alexander McQueen's S/S 10 Plato's Atlantis collection. Fabric designed by William Kilburn in the 1780s. A 1760s French silk dress. An English silk dress from the 1770s. Norman Parkinson's shoot from the September 1937 issue



PHOTOGRAPHS: ERIK MADIGAN HECK, REGAN CAMERON. © VICTORIA & ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON. © THE NORMAN PARKINSON ESTATE/ICONIC IMAGES, GETTY IMAGES

these emblems to convey sentiment, from purity to political allegiance. Certain furs, such as ermine, were highly regarded and worn only by the nobility, while silk had a similar high status, due to the difficulty of obtaining it – the silkworms from whose cocoons it was made only thrived in certain climates and so the raw material had to be imported.

These elaborately embroidered cloths were so expensive that they were not cut unless absolutely necessary. Instead, the dress-makers would fold and pleat them into shape, using running stitches so that their creations could easily be taken apart and reused for new items of clothing or ecclesiastical vestments.

As the mania for exploration gathered pace and new trade routes opened up, fashions reflected the ever-changing map of the world. Ivory, mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell became extremely sought after for hair accessories, buttons and fans, and were often intricately carved by hand. Dyes were produced in ever-richer hues – the cochineal insect, for example, yielded the rich crimson used for soldiers' red coats – while imported animal pelts, such as beaver-skins from North America, were prized for their useful qualities. By the 19th century, Britain's colonial expansion had reached a peak, and with it came a widespread interest in the horticulture and wildlife of these overseas nations.

This desire to chronicle and catalogue was a particularly Victorian passion – Charlotte Brontë famously spent her honeymoon gathering and pressing ferns with her new husband, while generations of little boys robbed birds' eggs from nests to add to their amateur collections. The fashions of the day mirrored this passionate interest in nature too – dresses were encrusted with the iridescent wings of beetles, seal-skin was a popular choice for winter mufflers and jackets, while whale-bone was used to construct corsets, valued for its strength and flexibility. There was even a brief American fad in the 1880s of wearing living makech beetles – they were attached by a chain to a lapel or corsage, their hard shells decorated with precious stones as if they were jewellery.



While few species survived the Victorian era wholly unscathed, birds had a particularly bad time of it. A long-held vogue for feather-trimmed hats meant that there was a perennial demand for exotic, showy plumage. Smaller types, such as the hummingbird with its jewel-toned colours, were used whole, stuffed and sewn onto millinery, as were birds of paradise and tiny, emerald-hued cuckoos. Some breeds, such as the osprey, were hunted almost to the point of extinction, and it was only the efforts of a group of suffragettes who finally helped to end this widespread killing of the avian population, banding together to form the RSPB in 1889.

The advent of World War I and the decline of regional industry saw the English countryside represented in a new light, reimagined as an Arcadian idyll, with a host of writers from Thomas Hardy to DH Lawrence romanticising the great outdoors. 'The rural

landscape was mythologised as the antithesis of the modern urban environment,' says Edwards. 'The regularity of the seasons and traditions of the land were interpreted as symbols of stability, offering a refuge from the political upheavals and economic uncertainties of the period.' Country fabrics such as tweed and wool were seen to embody a quintessentially British style. A September 1937 photograph by Norman Parkinson for *Harper's Bazaar* shows a tweed-clad model walking down a deserted country lane in high summer. Although she is smartly dressed, she appears completely at one with her surroundings, her clothing perfectly in keeping with her environment.

Not long afterwards, with the onset of World War II, thousands of city dwellers around Europe headed to the countryside in search of refuge, among them a young Christian Dior, who left occupied Paris for rural France in 1940. 'I found myself living for the first time in the depths of the country,' he recalled in his autobiography. 'I became passionately fond of it and developed a feeling for hard labour on the land, the cycle of the seasons, and the perpetual mystery of germination.'

He spoke of designing 'clothes for flower-like women,' and so many of his designs evoked that look – the narrow, stem-like torso contrasting with the very full skirts, like the corolla of a plant. While Dior's women resembled cultivated, hothouse specimens, the V&A exhibition considers his work alongside that of Alexander McQueen, who was also influenced by nature, albeit in a very different way.

McQueen explored the wild and animalistic in his work, often highlighting its darker side. His 2001 collection Voss featured clothes embellished with ostrich feathers, oyster shells and razor clams, while the spring/summer 2007 show *Sarabande* included a dress that mixed real blooms with artificial ones. He told this magazine: 'I used flowers because they die. My mood was darkly romantic at the time.'

His final complete collection before his death was Plato's Atlantis for spring/summer 2010, which imagined a future where global warming had caused sea levels to rise and humans to evolve in order to survive. Models sported gills, their hair twisted into horns, their feet encased in claw-like 'armadillo' boots. The entire show – streamed online, filmed by two robotic cameras – seemed to illustrate the mental disconnect between humans and the Earth we inhabit, while highlighting the fact that physically we are inextricably linked to it – the amphibious models a reminder that we change in response to our environment, even as it is changed by us.

Past fashions chronicle our historic preoccupation with the beauty of nature; but perhaps the way forward is to celebrate it in a more sustainable way, that protects rather than exploits our precious materials. Mesmerising as Alexander McQueen's underwater dystopia was, few of us would choose to live in an Atlantis. □
'Fashioned from Nature', sponsored by CELC, is at the V&A (www.vam.ac.uk) from 21 April.



This page: a Brazilian fan featuring a stuffed hummingbird, from 1880. Opposite: Arizona Muse wearing an ostrich-feather embellished Ralph & Russo dress, photographed by Agata Pospieszynska for Bazaar



This page: a British cotton dress from 1869 embellished with beetle wings imported from India. Opposite: Lindsey Wixson in Dior, photographed by Erik Madigan Heck for Bazaar