

The power of the humble t-shirt

[Daisy Wallis](#) reports on the 'T-Shirt: Cult, Culture, Subversion' exhibition at the Fashion and Textile Museum

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Image: Daisy Wallis

The t-shirt is a universally loved garment that can be found in every wardrobe or closet across the world. But how has the t-shirt we all love developed and changed since the original t-shirt shape in the 5th century? The latest exhibition, 'T-Shirt; Cult, Culture, Subversion, at the Fashion and Textile Museum' in London celebrates the power of the t-shirt. In a series of displays, the exhibition highlights the many different typologies of the basic tee, tracking its history from the university athletic style tops favoured for sporting uniforms across the world to the more controversial use of the campaign t-shirt. It is amazing to see the history of the humble t-shirt brought to life.

The exhibition offers an extensive timeline of the t-shirt as a piece that reflects community, commerce and, most importantly, individualism. While the t-shirt may be seen as the more casual item in anyone's wardrobe, the significance of the t-shirt cannot go unnoticed. The many displays at the exhibition highlight the most poignant designs and styles in the history of the basic garment, as a complete biography of the tee from 500 AD would fill multiple museums. With a focus on the modern, visitors to the exhibition can see the t-shirt's significance in popular culture from the very first time the term was used in print in F Scott Fitzgerald's debut novel *This Side of Paradise* in 1920. From the 1920s, the t-shirt has grown in prominence in an array of typologies that have made the garment so universally loved and accepted.

The main focus of the exhibition, however, is the t-shirt as a political tool. With examples from Katharine Hamnett and Vivienne Westwood, the displays look at some of the more politically charged pieces that have shocked and inspired audiences for decades. Katharine Hamnett's "Choose Life" t-shirt from 1984 is one of the most iconic slogan tees ever, being famously worn by Wham in their video for 'Wake Me Up Before You Go Go.' Embracing the more agitprop movement, Vivienne Westwood's more controversial t-shirts have been a part of pop culture and the rebel movement for decades, from the infamous "Sex" tee to the more recent "Climate Revolution" t-shirt. Hamnett and Westwood's works set the standards for protest and campaign fashion, emphasising how the t-shirt can be an effective vehicle for the

communication of important political messages.

Fashion as a communicative tool has shown resurgence over recent years regarding issues of feminism and female empowerment. The designs from Maria Grazia Chiuri's first collection at Dior, took inspiration from the 'We Should All be Feminists' essay by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and offered a simple take on protest fashion. Money made from this particular design was given to singer Rihanna's non-profit organisation The Clara Lionel Foundation, which supports education and health programmes globally. While the design of the t-shirt may be simple and not of the typical style of a runway piece, the t-shirt's presence on social media has helped to raise money and awareness for an important cause. The impact that one simple t-shirt can make emphasises just how important the garment can be as a communicative tool.

While the main aim of the exhibition is to bring to light the political power of the tee, the t-shirt is also a symbol of individualism and uniqueness. In Susan Barnett's collection of images entitled "T: A Typology of T- Shirts" the artist identifies how the individual wears what is almost a badge of honour when dressed in their favourite graphic tee. Her premise for this collection is simple: she presents a back view of an unnamed person, a blue sky and a graphic tee. This collection from Barnett offers an illuminating look into the true potential for individuality and expression with a basic tee, offering an interesting compliment to the other displays on the political power of the t-shirt.



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