

Ossie's Hoopla World

M Nava

History of Fashion

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Ossie Clark created a fun, unsustainable fantasy world that not only was manifested through his clothes, but also his lifestyle. He lived an exciting life filled with sex, drugs, and music.

Ossie was friends with influential people such as Mick Jagger, Marianne Faithful, and John Lennon.¹

I love the flirty, modern, and graphics quality that Ossie Clark put in his dresses. It looks like the modern revolution that I want to see in the near future created in my own designs. I appreciate clean lines and understated details, which can be found in the image of a dress that inspired me to learn more about Ossie. This image is of British model Patti



Boyd pictured in one of top designer Ossie Clark's creations, a dress called 'Hoopla' of brushed tricot with cut circles.² Leading him down a path of tragedy, he eventually retired and was met with his ultimate fate of being stabbed to death by his partner Diego Cogolato.

Born Raymond Oswald Clark to a working class family in Liverpool. Ossie was raised in northern Oswaldtwistle, and which is his ancestral northern English village, to which he owed his middle name, and later became his nickname 'Ossie'. He was awarded a scholarship to attend the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London. There he quickly became a star fashion

¹Taylor, Kerry, Hubert De Givenchy, and Christopher Kane. *Vintage Fashion and Couture: From Poiret to McQueen*. Buffalo, NY: Firefly Books, 2013.

² Archive, Bentley. April 21, 1966. Bentley Archive/Popperfoto, Getty Images, London.

student and at 23, he was featured in British Vogue as a ‘young mastermind’ in August 1965.

After graduating from RCA, he went into business with Alice Pollock. Together they opened a fashion boutique called Quorum.³

“In 1965 and 1966, his work chined naturally with the look of the moment – such as his ‘Hoopla’ dresses – short sleeveless mini-dresses in blue wool with geometric inserts in orange and white at the bust, launched in 1966. Like Janice Wainright, whom he admired (and for whom Celia produces Op-Art designs), and Foale and Tuffin, he was influenced by the American designer John Kloss, whose cutting was based on geometrical shapes without darts. The ‘Hoopla’ dress was modeled by Patti Boyd, and Vogue featured this and a sleeved mini-dress, modeled by Twiggy in its ‘Young Ideas’ section (November 1966),” (Watt, 55).

“The Quorum boutique launched his, Birtwell’s, and Alice Pollock’s reputations and attracted names including John Lennon, Yoko Ono, George Harrison, Pattie Boyd (who also modeled for Clark), Mick Jagger, Bianca Jagger, and Marianne Faithfull,” (Taylor).

“Clark was designing much of what the boutique sold speaks to his vast skill set and artistic vision. His innovative cutting and draping techniques and experimental use of different fabrics made him capable of producing slinky, often bias-cut, jersey gowns with plunging necklines but also expertly tailored suits. The contribution of his talented wife’s textiles added to the depth of his opus. Birtwell’s nature-inspired prints were both striking and romantic,” (Whitaker). Ossie’s earlier work, such as the ‘Hoopla’ dress, pictured on the first

³Whitaker, M. B. 2009 "Clark, Ossie." *Oxford Art Online*. 7 Apr. 2019. <http://www.oxfordartonline.com.libproxy.newschool.edu/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-7002080235>.

page, was made of brushed trice. “In 1950 the British firm Courtaulds Ltd. began to develop triacetate fibres, which were subsequently produced on a commercial scale after methylene chloride solvent became available. Courtaulds and British Celanese marketed a triacetate fibre under the trademark Tricel.” (Britannica).

“By 1968, Mr Clark was referred to as ‘King of the King’s Road’. He was totally immersed in a charismatic group of ‘flower power’ people, convinced of their own talent, whether they were artists, actors, writers or musicians,” (Guerrini-Maraldi). Flower power was a term of identity used by young people between 1967-1976 that lived by a philosophy of love-and-let-live.⁴

Ossie’s designs were described by Anne Price in the October 1969 issue of *Country Life* magazine as illustrating “the contempt evening look on a much cheaper and younger scale. It combines, one might venture to say, hippy sophistication with an originality in step with the present mood. Ossie Clark has a great feeling for fluid clothes, and is a leader in this direction among the young London set,” (Price). He always knew what women wanted and because of that, he became wildly popular. “His world was filled with a ritzy cast of rock stars, models and aristocrats, and his creative partnership with the fabric designer Celia Birtwell led to marriage. Their chiffon dresses enchanted the world, and remain design classics enchanted the world, and remain design classics today,” (Guerrini-Maraldi). His party-boy lifestyle had an impact on his designs, as he began to take orders from his celebrity friends.

⁴ Price, Anne. "FLOWER POWER." *Country Life* (Archive : 1901 - 2005) Dec 07 1967: 1543,1543, 1545. ProQuest. 1 May 2019 .

Celia was a huge contributor the success of Ossie's dresses. The two were able to create designs that thoughtfully used print that would complement the body. "Clark revealed and accentuated the female form, especially the breasts, and his dresses often featured self-covered buttons that fastened down the front, to be undone according to the courage of the wearer. He filled sketchbooks with delicate line drawings with titles like 'Milky Way', 'Guitar', 'Bridget', 'Acapulco', 'Come Fly with Me', 'Cuddly', or 'Ziggy Stardust'. Birtwell likewise packed sketchpads with beautiful, coloured fabric designs, also individually named," (Taylor).

Clark and Pollock had a lot of fun, but "in 1968 Quorum had to be rescued by Al Radley, a shrewd businessman specializing in wholesale clothing. The company now launched a mass-market, ready-to-wear line, which bore the 'Ossie Clark for Radley' label, sometimes with the addition of 'Print by Celia Birtwell'," (Taylor).

In 1969, Ossie was working for Quorum and designed a chiffon and Satin trouser suit with a print by Celia Birtwell. Shoes by Rayne complete the outfit that Prudence Glen describes as "[exemplifying] the 1969 look at its most appealing and its most subtle. This is the year of the pant dress, the year of the see-through. Women's trousers should not make them look like men, See-through should never be crude enough to subtract rather than add to the promise."⁵

Ossie was able to reach a much bigger market thanks to Radley. Under his label, Ossie was able to create mid-priced dresses that were hugely successful. Teaming up with Celia, they created ribbon-edged trouser suits, low-cut halter neck dresses, and 1930s-inspired sleek

⁵ Lester, Richard, and Rosemary Harden. *Dress of the Year*. Woodbridge: Antique Collectors Club, 2014.

tailoring. Celia applied her prints on moss crepe and cotton fabric for this more affordable collection.⁶

In 1973 Ossie and Celia divorced, “Birtwell continued to produce fabrics for Quorum until 1976 – her later designs show pointillism influences and the motifs are less flowery and more graphic, including matchstick repeats. As Clark’s hedonistic lifestyle took its toll, the Radley contract was terminated and in the late 1970s he filed for bankruptcy. Despite attempts to relaunch his career, the world had moved on from romantic, flowery dresses,” (Taylor).

I now know people like Ossie have influenced fashion that continues today. The image of Pattie Boyd wearing the ‘Hoopla’ inspired me to learn more about Ossie. I hope to take what I’ve learned and put it into my own work. I am now going to be more conscious of the body wearing my garments. Ossie studied at RCA and I am studying at Parsons. I hope to capture some of Ossie’s ethos and bring share it. His life was exciting, he was friends with celebrities, and was free to create a fantasy world. His life began to spiral when his pattern designer and wife, Celia Birtwell left him in 1975. Leading home down a path of tragedy, he eventually retired and was met with his ultimate fate of being stabbed by his partner Diego Cogolato. Diego was jailed for six years for repeatedly stabbing Ossie to death because he believed Ossie was the devil. Cogolato admitted to manslaughter on the grounds of ‘diminished responsibility’. Cogolato was apparently in a drug-induced ‘transient psychotic state’.⁷ I hope to have as much fun as Ossie did and to honor his memory in a way he would have appreciated.

⁶ Lester, Richard, and Rosemary Harden. *Dress of the Year*. Woodbridge: Antique Collectors Club, 2014.

⁷ Veash, Nicole. "Ossie Clark's Ex-lover Is Jailed for His Killing." *The Independent*. October 23, 2011. Accessed May 05, 2019. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/ossie-clarks-ex-lover-is-jailed-for-his-killing-1273500.html>.

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