

Lasting Style

In the youth-centred world of fashion, it’s time to give credit where it’s overdue—to mature women and men who dress with distinction.

By Michele Meyer Illustration by Hadley Hooper

THE ONLY PHOTO of me in a miniskirt before age 40 shows a gawky teen tugging self-consciously at her hemline. But I’ve left that sartorially shy girl behind. My style sense has blossomed with age, as my confidence deepened and my inhibitions loosened. Now, I’m likely to drape a bottle-green cape over chocolate leather leggings and Manolos, or match an Alexander Wang neoprene skirt and a Chanel bowler.

I’m not alone in later-life style bravado. My fashion idols are older than I am, and anything but invisible. When regal international socialite Lynn Wyatt, 80, strides into a gala, I notice, and so does everyone else. Delight and energy filled my day in London with designer Zandra Rhodes, 75, whose rainbow hair and garb fit her colourful life. Octogenarian model Carmen Dell’Orefice was just as inspiring when I caught sight of her gliding through a Park Avenue high-rise.

These women dare to be elegant, eccentric and, yes, hot—but not in the way of a flash in the pan. They demonstrate that after 60, 70, even 80, you’re not over the hill but on top of it, having negotiated the steep slopes of stylistic experience. Such graduate-level fashionistas accept themselves, and many couldn’t care less what you think. They dress as an art form. They dress for themselves.

For perspective, I checked in with Ari Seth Cohen, creator of *Advanced Style*. His blog honours senior fashion from New York to Tokyo, and was perhaps the first to prove that people over 30 could be worthy candidates for admiration in the world of street style. “Your style only gets bolder with age,” Cohen says. “You’ve had years of experimenting, getting to know your body and what makes you feel good. Dressing should be about joy. As children, we’re encouraged to play with clothes. The people I photograph recapture that spontaneity.”

Maturity in fashion is now fashionable itself—see Marc Jacobs and Cher, Céline and



Joan Didion, Alexis Bittar and Iris Apfel. Brands everywhere are aligning themselves with striking older women. But is this a movement, or a moment? I hope it’s the former, a sign we’ve become inclusive of older people when it comes to fashion.

I’d hate for timeless style to become a lost art, like hats and gloves on airplanes in the 1950s. But it’s not necessarily about clinging to the elegant wardrobes of yesteryear. Don’t let age bar you from sampling the most up-to-the-minute flavours of the style buffet. Ruffle some feathers in chiffon scallops, as Gucci proposes for spring. Sashay proudly in a pencil skirt

draped with fringe, as Tom Ford suggests. Even show a little skin—expose your shoulder. As Donna Karan has said, “It’s the one place that is perfect on every woman’s body. No one ever says, ‘I have fat shoulders.’”

Or ignore today’s trends as well as yesterday’s. Cover yourself in leopard print head to toe. Wear bloomers that match your gladiator sandals. Just remember: You’re paying homage to stylish generations that have gone before, as well as to those that will follow.

When I dress, I think of my mother. She was ultra-chic, a fact that old age did not change. Each detail and pattern was thought out, each shape and shade mated, from her buttons and gloves to the hose that peeped from her trousers. In fact, under her coat she wore two scarves: one in cashmere visible at her neck, and the second in silk hidden beneath, to tie together her ensemble and topper. She learned this élan from her father, a dapper gent who, even when blind and in his 90s, would take long walks in a three-piece suit and fedora. (He would have been perfect for Cohen’s recent documentary *Advanced Style: Men*.)

Rarely, though, did their sophisticated style receive plaudits—even from me. Since my mom’s death, I’ve reflected on her efforts, and how, despite dressing to please herself, she would have loved it had I shown that I’d noticed. So now I compliment any woman of a certain age who’s made that effort to look good or stand out (pay attention and you may be surprised by how many have), whether at a party or in a parking lot. Once, when I praised her outfit, an elderly woman at a supermarket nudged her husband and asked, “Did you hear that?” I knew the answer from the way his chest and his smile expanded. They walked away hand in hand—a look that never goes out of style. ■

Michele Meyer is a fashion writer and editor whose work has appeared in *Women’s Wear Daily* and *Allure*.