



AUSSIE *rules*

FUN, EFFORTLESS *and* INFORMED *by our* GLORIOUS *climate,*
AUSTRALIAN GIRL CHIC *is in a* CLASS *of its* OWN

words TESS DE VIVIE DE RÉGIE

In the late '80s, an estimated 22 million viewers globally tuned in to witness *Neighbours'* Charlene Mitchell (the role that pitched a teenaged Kylie Minogue to fame) marry Scott Robinson, played by Jason Donovan – a wedding that has become part of soap opera lore. The bride wore a now-iconic 'Cinderella-style' high-necked apricot pink and ivory silk, organza and Chantilly lace gown with puffed sleeves designed by Melbourne costume designer Jocelyn Creed, featuring a full skirt and train and handmade rose embellishments.

"This wedding of Australian suburban royalty had an ongoing influence on bridal fashions in Australia and the United Kingdom," reflects Peter Hughes, senior curator of decorative arts at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (which now holds the dress) on the demand for similarly princessy wedding gowns that Charlene fuelled at the time – placing Charlene's gown squarely in the realm of dresses that achieved pop-culture immortality in the '80s, a decade which had, of course, begun with Princess Diana's own fairytale silk and taffeta meringue designed by David and Elizabeth Emanuel. It's just one example of Australian fashion influence – a potent weapon in any country's soft-power arsenal.

"You [can] observe an ease and informality, a confidence and a sense of playfulness and fun," observes Bendigo Art Gallery curator Emma Busowsky, who curated the 2023 exhibition *Australiana: Designing a Nation*, of the broad contours of Australian style. According to Katie Somerville, senior curator of fashion and textiles at the National Gallery of Victoria, there is a freedom to Australians' personal style that manifests as an inclination not to take themselves too seriously – and an openness to experimenting with new trends. "Australians are good early adopters," says Somerville.

The rise and rise of Australian Indigenous fashion designers is producing work that is, as Busowsky puts it, "truly unique to this place". They include Bundjalung artist Bronwyn Bancroft, owner of Designer Aboriginals in Sydney, whose painted designs on cloth were exhibited in Paris and London as early as the late '80s.

After the inaugural, but short-lived, Australian Indigenous Fashion Week at Sydney Town Hall in 2014, a flowering of First Nations fashion occurred at Australian Fashion Week (AFW) from 2021 onwards. A key player in this has been Meriam Mer

Photography: Ron Galella via Getty Images.

OPPOSITE PAGE Modelling icon and entrepreneur Elle Macpherson in 1992.



OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Helen Reddy in 1975; Germain Greer in 1970; Kylie Minogue performing at the Brit Awards in 2002. THIS PAGE: Olivia Newton-John in 1978.

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Photography: Gijsbert Hanekroot (Reddy); John Hedgecoe (Greer); Dave Hogan (Minogue); Keystone (Newton-John); all Getty Images.

designer and weaver Grace Lillian Lee, the founder of the First Nations Fashion + Design collective, whose many recent accomplishments include having collaborated with Jean Paul Gaultier on a costume for the Australian season of his *Fashion Freak Show* at the 2024 Brisbane Festival.

Migration has also significantly shaped Australia's fashion identity. Somerville cites Italian-born Carla Zampatti and her enduring influence on the wardrobes of working women as well as Akira Isogawa, who channels construction and layering techniques from his native Japan into his designs.

Sydney-born Annette Kellerman, a competitive swimmer turned Hollywood and Broadway actress, is credited with pioneering the one-piece swimsuit in the early 1900s – a liberating alternative to the constrictive pantaloons traditionally worn by women at the time. She went on to develop wildly popular water-themed vaudeville routines before heading to Hollywood and being cast in a string of silent movies in the 1910s and '20s, including *A Daughter of the Gods* – the first film with a US\$1 million budget.

Swimming has played a significant role in the culture of Australia, an island continent where more than 80 per cent of the population resides near the coastline, which stretches 34,000 kilometres and boasts at least 10,000 named beaches, the highest of any country. Although long since gone from Australian hands, Speedo, the world's leading swimwear brand (and inventor of the racerback style) was born on Bondi Beach in 1928. Founded between 1969-73, the 'Big Three' of Australian surfwear – Quiksilver, Rip Curl and Billabong – would go on to become global surfwear icons.

For the inaugural AFW in 1996, five years after launching their Zimmermann fashion brand, co-founders Nicky and Simone Zimmermann decided to branch out into swimwear because they knew the event would be attracting international buyers and they felt bikinis and maillots might prove an enticing export option to complement their ready-to-wear. The result was a capsule of fashion-forward luxury swimwear that became an instant hit with buyers for its elevated point-of-difference and was credited with popularising the boyleg and tankini cuts.

Australia's first fashion unicorn – with a US\$1 billion valuation as of August 2023, when American global private equity firm Advent International acquired a majority stake – Zimmermann today boasts more than 75 boutiques around the world and, while still producing swimwear, has become a formidable fashion force and regular on the Paris Fashion Week show schedule, its embellished boho de luxe party dresses and sleek tailoring popular with It girls and high-profilers, including Catherine, Princess of Wales, and Beyoncé.

Germaine Greer became an international icon in 1970 courtesy of her groundbreaking debut literary work, *The Female Eunuch*. A foundational text of second-wave feminism, the book argued that the patriarchal structures that bound women into their age-old roles as wives and mothers left them powerless, both economically and sexually. Her personal style at the time was textbook hippy chic. Of particular note is an orange paisley coat that Greer herself created and in which she was photographed for the cover of *LIFE* magazine in 1971; the coat now resides at Canberra's National Museum of Australia.

Another key Australian figure of the second-wave women's rights movement, Melbourne-born singer Helen Reddy moved to the US in 1966 in search of a record deal. After floundering for a few years, her career took off when she provided what would become feminism's unofficial anthem: her 1972 hit 'I Am Woman'. The song was played at a 1973 gala of the National Organization for Women convention. The legendary feminist

writer Betty Friedan reported in her memoir, *It Changed My Life*: "Maybe a thousand of us were dancing and singing, 'I am strong, I am invincible, I am woman.'" During this period, Reddy's uniform of choice comprised bell bottoms, halter neck dresses and a shag haircut – glamorous yet relaxed and self-assured in an unmistakably Australian way.

A few years later, British-born, Melbourne-raised Olivia Newton-John shot to international fame off the back of her performance in 1978's *Grease* as fresh-faced Sandy Olsson. Particularly legendary is her good-girl-gone-bad makeover into a high-heeled siren, clad in black skintight leather, serenading John Travolta's Danny Zuko in 'You're the One That I Want'.

After her stint on Ramsay Street and her teenage pop princess era (think 'I Should Be So Lucky' and 'The Loco-Motion'), Kylie Minogue assumed an edgier, more grown-up image, largely credited to the influence of INXS frontman, the late Michael Hutchence, whom she dated from 1989-91. Around the turn of the millennium, Minogue enjoyed a career renaissance via disco-oriented hits such as 'Spinning Around' and 'Can't Get You Out of My Head'. Her costumes for these videos – of note, the flea market-sourced gold hotpants of the former and the Grace Jones-inspired white-hooded jumpsuit of the latter – now reside at the Arts Centre Melbourne as part of the Australian Performing Arts Collection (both gifted by Minogue in 2004).

Busovsky notes that visual assertions of Australia's national identity frequently crop up at important moments in Australia's



THIS PAGE, L-R Jenny Kee at the Chelsea Antiques Market in 1964; Queen Mary of Denmark wearing a Zimmermann blouse in Copenhagen in 2025.



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Credit: Martin Sylvest Andersen

that same decade by the legendary Helmut Newton and was later photographed by Lord Snowdon, before segueing into a hugely successful career as a television personality, fashion editor and fashion retailer, with her pioneering, size-inclusive Maggie T label.

More recently, Awabakal model-turned-actor (in 2023's *Anyone But You* and 2024's *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga*) Charlee Fraser was the first Australian Indigenous model to enjoy an international career after her breakthrough fall 2016 runway season, in which she walked for some of the biggest luxury brands. A champion of sustainability, Fraser, in June 2024, auctioned off a custom-made Toni Matičevski gown that she had worn to the *Furiosa* world premiere in May that year, with profits going to Bush Heritage Australia as part of her 'Repeat For Purpose' campaign, an initiative fighting back against single-wear, red-carpet fashion.

Even fictional icons, like Dame Edna Everage, have left significant sartorial footprints. Created by the late Barry Humphries, the Moonee Ponds housewife gained fans globally with her unmistakable lilac 'do, spangled cat-eye glasses and flamboyant wardrobe after first appearing on a Melbourne stage in 1955. Humphries decamped to London in 1959 and, alongside Greer and other antipodeans, helped shape the city's counterculture movement. Last February, Humphries' personal collection – including some of Dame Edna's costumes and 'face furniture' – raised £4.6 million at auction at Christie's in London. Then there's *Bluey*, The Wiggles and Snugglypot and Cuddlepie, the adorable gumnut baby characters from Australian children's illustrator May Gibbs' beloved *Snugglypot and Cuddlepie* series, first published in 1918. In recent years, the gumnuts, in particular, have become formidable fashion influencers, seen in prints on official licensed merchandise sold by brands including

Photography: courtesy Jenny Kee; Martin Sylvest Andersen/Getty Images (Queen Mary).



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Credit: Jason Howard/Bauer-Griffin



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Credit: Marc Piasecki

Romance Was Born, Kip&Co, Walnut Melbourne and Big W (and a raft of totally unofficial tribute merch on Etsy).

The dreamlike quality of Peter Weir's 1975 film *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, based on Joan Lindsay's 1967 novel of the same name, owes a great deal to the ethereal Victorian dresses, in a palette of creams and whites, designed by Judith Dorsman and worn by those ill-fated schoolgirls on Valentine's Day 1900. The costumes inspired Alexander McQueen's Victoriana-inflected 2005 S/S collection, Sofia Coppola's atmospheric *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) and Zimmermann's 'Hypnotic' Fall 2025 collection, which was presented in Paris last March.

A slew of world-renowned Australian actors such as Cate Blanchett, Nicole Kidman, Sophie Wilde and Margot

Photography: Jason Howard (Kerr); Ben Montgomery (Blanchetti); Marc Piasecki (Akech), all Getty Images.



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Credit: Ben Montgomery

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
Miranda Kerr in New York in 2025; Cate Blanchett in London in 2025; Adut Akech in Paris in 2025.

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Robbie frequently figure on red carpet best-dressed lists. So, too, Tasmanian-born Queen Mary of Denmark, who often makes a point of including Australian labels in her regal wardrobe, such as Zimmermann and Scanlan Theodore. "For a smallish population, we punch above our weight [in terms of] the number of high-profile Australians designers overseas want to dress," muses Somerville.

It's notable that Christian Dior selected Australia as the first country outside of France for the presentation of the first full Dior collection, which took place at David Jones in Sydney in July 1948, DJs buyer Mary Alice Shiell having travelled to Paris to secure the deal. "[That] was a big surprise for many – why Australia before New York, London or anywhere else?" reflects Somerville. One possible clue may lie in Dior's great friendship with Percy Savage, the Brisbane-born fashion PR maverick (for whom Dior's 1966 fragrance Eau Sauvage was named, it is widely believed).

Before the parade, Dior told *The Sydney Morning Herald* that "living in the sunshine of a comparatively new country unscathed by war, Australians have a cleaner, brighter outlook and are more receptive to new ideas than the tired people of European countries". Some 80 years later, it would seem that the bright-eyed appeal of Australian style remains as strong as ever. HB