

Fit for a Queen

To mark the centenary of the late Queen Elizabeth II's birth, BAZAAR examines her sizable sartorial legacy defined over the course of her record-setting reign

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Queen Elizabeth II in 1956.

Photography: Baron (opener); Elliott & Fry (opposite, top); © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2025 / Royal Collection Trust.

FROM TOP Queen Elizabeth II when Princess Elizabeth of York, 1934; illustration for a silver lamé beaded shift dress (designed by Norman Hartnell) worn during a state visit to France in 1972.

It was 100 years ago this month when, on April 21, 1926, a princess and future queen was born in an upmarket townhouse in London's Mayfair. And from her coronation in 1953 to her death in September 2022, Queen Elizabeth II was known for her dependable and dignified statesmanship, an image articulated in great part by the clothing she wore.

The exhibition *Queen Elizabeth II: Her Life in Style* will run between April and October at The King's Gallery at Buckingham Palace, displaying some of her most well-known ensembles, including her wedding and coronation gowns. "Queen Elizabeth II's fashion archive is one of the most important surviving collections of 20th century British fashion," notes Caroline de Guitaut, surveyor of The King's Works of Art and curator of the exhibition.

"[It tells] a story of the best of British fashion and craftsmanship, from the early 20th century court dressmaker, through the birth of British couture in the '40s to '70s and on to the arrival of the contemporary British fashion designer from the '80s onwards," she continues. "With the inclusion of pieces by Erdem Moralioglu, Richard Quinn and Christopher Kane, it brings the exhibition right up to the present day and demonstrates her enduring legacy."

As a teenager, she largely followed the fashions of her mother, being outfitted by Elizabeth Handley-Seymour, the Mayfair doyenne of fashionable court dressing in the early 20th century, before coming into her own style in her twenties.

At her June 1953 coronation, a vision of the newly crowned queen beamed into living rooms across the UK and Commonwealth – a welcome dose of pomp and pageantry that illuminated the dreariness of post-World War II Britain (rationing wouldn't be lifted until the following year).

"When you see it under lights, the whole thing shimmers in cream and pastel colours," relays Jane Eastoe, author of the 2023 book *Queen Elizabeth II: A Lifetime Dressing for the World Stage*, of the gown by Norman Hartnell, crafted from white silk satin and studded with diamantés, pearls and gold bugle beads. "It does look like an extraordinary piece of armour. It is a dress that was superlative for its purpose." The gown was also embroidered with garlands composed of the floral emblems of Commonwealth countries – Australia was represented with the wattle flower, New Zealand via the fern.



"QUEEN ELIZABETH II'S FASHION ARCHIVE IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT SURVIVING COLLECTIONS OF 20th CENTURY BRITISH FASHION. IT TELLS THE STORY OF THE BEST OF BRITISH FASHION..."

As a young queen, her influence on the fashion landscape was significant. "It's easy for us to forget that she was like Princess Diana – her clothes were copied slavishly," explains Eastoe. "There were paper patterns made of evening dresses she'd worn that went on sale the next day." The phenomenon is not unlike the so-called 'Kate Effect', where pieces worn by the Princess of Wales sell out almost immediately, a phenomenon estimated to be worth some £1 billion (\$2 billion) to the British economy.

The outfits of the late Queen frequently served as vehicles for diplomacy and were laden with symbolic meaning. "What she realised was that acknowledging the soft power of dress was very much a tool to

convey all sorts of things," offers Dr Kate Strasdin, senior lecturer in cultural studies at Falmouth University and author of this year's *Dressing the Queen: Two Hundred Years of Makers and Monarchy*. "She became an absolute master at diplomatic dressing for state visits." A famous example was Hartnell's 'Wattle Gown' – a strapless, gold tulle gown scattered with motifs of our national flower – which the Queen wore for the 1954 royal tour of Australia.

While remaining true to her inherently conservative aesthetic, the Queen's style gently evolved over the decades: the fitted bodices and full skirts of the '50s made way for tailored suits and shift dresses in the '60s. By the '70s, designer Ian Thomas, who also



Queen Elizabeth II on Princess Margaret's wedding day, Cecil Beaton, 1960.

Photography: Cecil Beaton / Victoria and Albert Museum, London (opener); Paul Burley (opposite page, right) © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2025 | Royal Collection Trust.



L-R The Queen's Coronation Dress, Norman Hartnell, 1953; evening gown, Norman Hartnell, 1957 (worn for a state banquet given for President Eisenhower at the British Embassy in Washington, D.C.), displayed in the Green Drawing Room at Windsor Castle.



worked with the likes of Margaret Thatcher, was responsible for the Queen's first foray into trouser suits. In this period, Her Majesty also patronised couturier Sir Hardy Amies, a former spy who notably dreamt up the salmon pink dress, cape and hat ensemble on the occasion of her Silver Jubilee in 1977.

From 2002, Angela Kelly served as the Queen's personal dresser and 'right-hand woman', leading a team that produced her clothing in-house. "[Kelly] encouraged the Queen to dress in a way that really suited her for her age and to be confident in trying different things," reflects Eastoe. Kelly is recognised for the Queen's kaleidoscope of coat dresses in eye-catching colours she sported almost exclusively from the 2000s onwards – perfect for increasing her visibility in a dense crowd.

Reams could be dedicated to her off-duty style: the Harris Tweed, Barbour waxed jackets and Hermès silk *carré* head scarves. (In 2024, Miu Miu released their 'Miu Balmoral' collection, which drew heavily on the Queen's country aesthetic and included Argyle and cable knits, waxed cotton overcoats, kilts and lounging attire in the shape of pyjamas.)

And, of course, there is her headwear. "Hats have become such a rarefied object for

most people, so I think that came to define her," adds Strasdin of the structured, broad-brimmed headwear the Queen frequently sported. There's an Australian connection there, too, via Frederick Fox, the NSW-born milliner who crafted hats for the Queen over some four decades.

Jewellery, from her more everyday strands of pearls and polite brooches to showstopping crowns, tiaras and necklaces, were fundamental

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to the Queen's sartorial vocabulary. "She was all too aware of the ancient relationship between sovereignty and finery and so the display of the remarkable jewellery in the royal collection was something she adhered to," reflects Geoffrey Munn, former managing director at Wartski, the London-based antique jewellery firm of which the late Queen was a patron.

Image has always been a powerful tool in a monarch's soft-power arsenal. "[In the distant past], it was essential to signal the royal presence

with silks, furs and jewellery not only on the sovereign but also the retinue. 'Your Majesty' means just that: majestic," explains Munn. "Now things are very different, but royalty does what it always did and [couture] and jewellery plays a different but still hugely important role. The Queen must have recognised that, too – she once said, 'I have to be seen to be believed'"

Her style certainly followed a formula: the vivid colours, the brooches, her signature rolled curls and the top-handled, box-shaped handbags from British firm Launer to which she was unwaveringly loyal. But it was a formula that worked, presenting an image that remained reassuringly steady and recognisable throughout her reign.

"She was not a fashion leader, because I think royalty had decided many years before that to be at the cutting edge of fashion was not their goal," notes Strasdin. But the Queen was conscious that her fashion did, nonetheless, hold a great deal of weight. "For the majority of people, how you experience royalty is through the lens of what they wear on a walkabout or at a state dinner. That's what people see. And so I think she did recognise the importance of it." **HB**

Queen Elizabeth II: Her Life in Style, The King's Gallery, Buckingham Palace, April 10-October 18.