

Poets in Vogue

National Poetry Library, Southbank Centre, London,

17 February – 10 September 2023

Exhibition conceived and curated by Sophie Oliver, Sarah Parker and Gesa Werner
Original displays created by Gesa Werner

Poets in Vogue brings together the fashion worlds and poetic work of seven twentieth-century women poets. You will encounter imaginative recreations of some of these poets' signature 'looks', along with archival and reconstructed garments. You will also be invited to consider the relationship between language and dress. The exhibition challenges assumptions about the superficiality of fashion, unveiling the importance of clothes to these poets' art, in turn stressing poetry as an embodied practice.

Words veil (with Theresa Hak Kyung Cha)

Knitted polyester. Image: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Aveugle Voix*, 1975. Performance, 63 Bluxome St, San Francisco. University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; gift of the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Memorial Foundation. Photo: Trip Callaghan

The poet, performance artist and filmmaker Theresa Hak Kyung Cha often used clothes and textiles in her interdisciplinary work. Stressing words as material, she also drew attention to the opacity of language, and to the difficulties of communication. Cha's Korean-American identity informed her thinking about the politics of language and legibility. In several performances she used fabric to conceal her body, as in *Aveugle Voix* (1975), reproduced here, and *A Ble Wail* (1975), in which the audience was separated from Cha by an opaque veil.

Anne Sexton's red reading dress: a recreation

Polyester interlock jersey

The audience at the first Poetry International Festival in 1967, here in the Royal Festival Hall, were apparently horrified when Anne Sexton blew them a kiss. Her live readings – and her confessional poetry – were often criticised as sensationalist. But Sexton's carefully constructed presence was a crucial part of her practice, and her poems often reflect self-consciously on the spectacle of white womanhood. For years Sexton wore the same red dress to her readings, and she was eventually cremated in it; the dress has been recreated using photographic documentation and anecdotal descriptions.

Repeating patterns: Stevie Smith's collars

Cotton, linen, felt

Photographic portraits and accounts of Stevie Smith's live performances in the 1960s reveal her dedication to a consistent look, involving a neat collar, eye-shaped brooch and pinafore. Smith's strangely girlish appearance compliments her child-like drawings and deceptively simple poetry, in which sing-song rhymes and off-kilter metres conjure a sense of something not quite right. In poems like 'Pretty', Smith's playful repetition empties the word 'pretty' of meaning, defamiliarizing language in the process.

'The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith' (1945) by Gwendolyn Brooks: a material reading

Underwood No. 5 typewriter, paper, Reemay, mixed fabrics (silk, cotton, felt, synthetics).
Poem reprinted by consent of Brooks Permissions

Satin-Legs Smith, a poor but fashionable man from Chicago, dresses sharply in a brightly coloured Zoot Suit, an outfit comprising a long coat, exaggerated lapels, and trousers that ballooned at the hips and tapered at the ankles. In the 1940s, the Zoot Suit was popularly associated with African-American and Hispanic-American men, and vilified as a sign of excess and poor taste. Brooks takes up these charged questions of taste and style in her mock-epic poem, asking us to compare her ornate, intricate language to Smith's sartorial metamorphosis. Following Brooks, this installation considers: What are the materials and purpose of art? What is beauty? And how are clothes and fabric related to poetic language? You can read the whole poem here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43314/the-sundays-of-satin-legs-smith>

Dress/theatre: Amplified interpretation of Edith Sitwell's gown

Mixed fabrics (polyester brocade, velvet, silk, felt), wood, metal, glass. Based on a gown worn for the role of Lady Macbeth, performed by Sitwell at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1950 and photographed by George Platt Lynes

Edith Sitwell was famed for her larger-than-life appearance, as well as her striking poetry. Both combined antiquated opulence with modernist innovation. As she explained in a *Face to Face* interview in 1959: 'I can't wear fashionable clothes... I'm a throwback to remote ancestors of mine and I really would look so extraordinary if I wore coats and skirts. I would be followed for miles and people would doubt the existence of the Almighty'. Sitwell's theatrical gowns were often made from curtain fabric, as is this amplified interpretation.

Asymmetrically printed caftan, after Audre Lorde

Silk. Recreation closely based on garment in the Audre Lorde Collection, Spelman College Archives, Atlanta

In 1978 Audre Lorde was diagnosed with breast cancer and had her right breast removed. Defying beauty norms, she chose not to wear a prosthesis. After her mastectomy, Lorde increasingly wore – and designed – clothes and jewellery that helped her claim what she called 'the changed planes of her own body'. Like her poetry, clothes were a way to 'transform silence into language and action', and to articulate her identity as a Black lesbian woman.

Skirt owned and worn by Sylvia Plath, c. 1956

Tartan plaid. On loan from The Second Shelf, a feminist rare bookshop

Plath was pictured wearing this skirt on a trip to Paris in April 1956, aged 23; her name is conscientiously sewn into the waistband. The skirt's neat conformity is in keeping with much of Plath's wardrobe. She loved clothes, and her diaries and letters are full of descriptions and drawings of new purchases. In her poetry, and in her 1963 novel *The Bell Jar*, Plath also took clothes seriously, but there she undressed the kind of well-behaved image this skirt presents, insisting on the messier realities of women's bodies and minds.

For more on the connections between poetry, clothes, style and self-fashioning, including newly commissioned poetry by Amy Key and Jane Yeh, visit www.poetsinvoque.com



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