Spectacular clothing is often created and worn within a context of celebration. The meanings contained within each work on display in this section of Twister range from the literal rendition of party clothes to a more metaphoric commentary on individuality and belonging. Whether created to be worn at an Academy Awards ceremony, the opening gala of a new gallery, or as an assertion of a sub-cultural identity, these works collectively address the ways in which designers and wearers of fashion seek to convey confidence, glamour and recognition – and, in some cases, infamy – through their designs and the performance of dressing.

Attention to the designer’s choice of cut, colour, form and decoration of a garment reinforce connections between individual ideas and cultural expectations of celebration through dress.

The works in this section exemplify the ‘look at me’ phenomenon. Central to the success of each of the works featured here is their visibility and ability to engage the gaze. In some cases the wearer seeks recognition within the mainstream. For others, the ultimate goal is subversion of the status quo via parody and transformation.

For full details of these works see pages 6-8

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The Ingenious

How do concepts of the ingenious operate within the realm of fashion and how can we determine which works communicate this best? Original, innovative and new are all words that spring to mind, but they represent only one approach to developing the criteria for this theme. More broadly, it is recognition of the designer’s capacity to combine a complex mix of inspiration, concept and form that underpins this way of looking at fashion.

This section explores how we identify a designer’s signature approach to the development of ideas or the fabrication of a new work, whether it be a shoe, a hat or an entire outfit. Often executed with great subtlety and humour, the designer may combine disparate sources, influences, creative and technical practices and redefine them in a distinctive style or garment form. Here, we seek to examine what it is that sets these works apart.

The catalyst for the creation of the work may be the raw materials, historical and cultural inspiration, or the investigation of a specific technique. The resulting ingenuity is manifest in anything from a hat made of pink loofah, created in the resourceful environment of post World War II rationing, to the sculptural form of a contemporary skirt that doubles as a dramatic A-line cape.

For full details of these works see pages 9-12

The Exotic

The focus of the Exotic encompasses both the literal and the metaphoric – the physical nature of materials used and the inspiration behind a garment’s design. Numerous related concepts can be identified at work within our understanding of the exotic. These include luxury versus the everyday, foreign versus familiar, imported versus local, and natural versus artificial. The materials incorporated in the works on display in this section of Twister, whether taken directly from nature or manufactured to replicate natural materials, reveal much about a work, regardless of when it was made or identity of the maker. For example, the use of animal skins (whether simulated or real) can be viewed in terms of contemporary ethical, political and environmental perspectives that are often at odds with the prevailing attitudes and motivations that were in existence when the work was created.

The vacillating acceptance of ‘home-grown’ content in Australian fashion is important to acknowledge, both in reference to the past and the future. Some of the selected works in the Exotic reflect the conscious decisions of the designer to incorporate Australian iconography in their work. This may manifest itself in the application of native animal motifs, forms that mirror the shape of a parrot or patterning that evokes the markings found on a native animal skin.

For full details of these works see pages 13-15
Lizzy GARDINER
born Australia 1966
The American Express® gold card dress (after 1995)
plastic, metal
Purchased, 1999 (1999.56)

This dress was Lizzy Gardiner’s personal homage to, and subversion of, the famously fashionable US annual event, the Academy Awards. Nominated for Best Costume designer award in 1994, Gardiner responded with irony to the expectations that outfits worn to this ‘night of nights’ should be expensive, exclusive and extremely memorable. Gardiner’s personal version of this dress is featured in this exhibition, while the original is held by the American Express archives, USA. Made from a total of 220 credit cards, unlined and linked by simple metal rings, the dress sits within a particularly Australian lineage of designers, including Jenny Bannister and Peter Tully, who have worked with unusual and everyday found materials to create their unique designs.

Pat RODGERS, designer
Neil RODGERS, business partner
Evening dress (c. 1956)
silk, cotton, glass, plastic, metal
Gift of Mr. J.O Wicking, 1999 (1999.451)

This evening dress encapsulates the more traditional interpretation of ‘dressing to impress’. Like many Melbourne boutiques of the 1950s, the creation of exclusive and desirable gowns for key social events drew considerable inspiration from the northern hemisphere, particularly Paris. The influence of French fashion in Australia at this time can be seen in numerous ways: label names with a French flavour (i.e. La Petite, Le Louvre), fabrics imported from France, and the use of French mannequins to model fashion to the local market. The wish to associate with the French fashion Mecca also translated into garment designs, which were a direct homage to the fashionable silhouettes of French designers. In this dress the influence of Christian Dior is evident.

Zara HOLT, chief designer
Betty GROUNDS, business partner
born Australia 1909
Evening dress (1968)
silk, metallic thread, plastic, viscose rayon
Presented through The Art Foundation of Victoria by Mrs Patricia Davies, Member, 1988 (CT53–1988)

This evening dress, created by Zara Holt for her fashion label Magg, was worn to the spectacular gala opening of the National Gallery of Victoria, on 20 August 1968, when it moved to its new home on St Kilda Road. With its dramatic hemline and textured brocade encrusted with rows of plastic sequins, this one-off creation was tailor-made for the celebration.

James LYNCH, decorator
born Australia 1966
Des KIRWAN, designer
born Australia 1965
Punk outfit (c. 1983)
cotton, leather, paint, metal, plastic, fur, blood, rubber, wool
Purchased, 1986 (CT163a–m–1986)
Punk music, dress and attitudes manifested themselves in London during the mid 1970s to early 1980s. Mass culture was rejected out of hand in favour of extreme, defiant and provocative imagery, sounds and actions. Likewise, mainstream dress codes were discarded and individuality was asserted by punks within the realm of a ‘tribal’ sub-culture. In this outfit James Lynch customized his own version of punk in Melbourne as it existed in the early 1980s. The black leather jacket, self-consciously adorned with safety pins, fake fur, graffiti-style band names and metallic studs, reflects the creator’s desire to identify with a local and international underground phenomenon, while asserting the primacy of the individual.

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LA PETITE, Melbourne
1939–86
Pat RODGERS, designer
Neil RODGERS, business partner
Evening dress (c. 1961)
silk, cotton, glass, plastic, metal
Gift of Mr. J.O Wicking, 1999 (1999.451)

This evening dress encapsulates the more traditional interpretation of ‘dressing to impress’. Like many Melbourne boutiques of the 1950s, the creation of exclusive and desirable gowns for key social events drew considerable inspiration from the northern hemisphere, particularly Paris. The influence of French fashion in Australia at this time can be seen in numerous ways: label names with a French flavour (i.e. La Petite, Le Louvre), fabrics imported from France, and the use of French mannequins to model fashion to the local market. The wish to associate with the French fashion Mecca also translated into garment designs, which were a direct homage to the fashionable silhouettes of French designers. In this dress the influence of Christian Dior is evident.

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Le Louvre, Melbourne

Lillian WIGHTMAN, chief designer
Australia 1903–92

Evening coat (c. 1935)
cotton, silk
Gift of Mrs Pringle from the estate of the late Mrs Guy Bakewell, 1982 (CT186–1982)

I believe that good clothes are a most wonderful form of art, a most satisfying and interesting occupation, something that delights the soul.

Lillian Wightman

Le Louvre chief designer Lillian Wightman equated clothing with art. In this evening coat, the designer’s skillful articulation of the complex collar and sleeve gathering of the shoulders and sleeves construction demonstrate the capacity for fabric to be manipulated into sophisticated 3-D forms.

Thomas HARRISON, Melbourne

Thomas HARRISON, designer
Australia 1897–1981

Hat (1946–50)
loofah, silk
Gift of Thomas Harrison, 1976 (D307–1976)

World War II saw the introduction of clothing, fuel and food rationing. With shortages in the availability of decorative trimmings and luxury fabrics, milliners were forced to improvise. Thomas Harrison sculpted this delicate hat by overlapping slices of pink, dyed loofah (material usually associated with bathing), forming the crown and brim in one seamless sweep.

William BEALE, Melbourne

William BEALE, designer
Australia 1929–92

Sunrise hat and bag (c. 1946)
cotton, straw, silk
Gift of Mrs Pringle from the estate of the late Mrs Guy Bakewell, 1982 (CT186–1982)

The Sunrise hat and bag are rare examples of William Beale’s earliest designs and were made for a Sydney client to wear to the Melbourne Cup. Combining contrasting materials and dramatic sculptural form, Beale created a ray-like effect, evocative of the rising sun.

Beale was renowned for the theatrical titles he gave to his works and for the matching hat and bag sets he created. These were regularly launched by Beale with extravagant parades in the fashionable hotels of the day.

Leigh BOWERY

Leigh BOWERY
born Australia 1961, worked in Great Britain from 1981, died 1994

The Metropolitan (c. 1988)
cotton, rayon, leather, plastic, metal, paint

Working at the limits of fashion, music and performance, Leigh Bowery created multiple versions of himself for public consumption. Using artifice, exaggeration and hundreds of metres of tulle and lycra, his make-up and costumes were a direct challenge to one’s comfort zone. A key figure in London’s 1980s club scene, Bowery’s relentless self-reinvention generated expectation and awe in those who witnessed his confronting and outrageous parody of dressing up. The resulting infamy and cult status form an integral part of his work.

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PACIFIC SISTERS, Auckland
Rosanna RAYMOND, designer
born New Zealand 1967
H'nard K'nore G'nang G'near outfit 1995–97
cotton, tapa, coconut shell, jute, shells, wood, metal, flax
Purchased, 1997 (1997.143.a–d)

We follow the ancient way of working from the environment. We get our inspiration from our immediate urban/media environment. We don't stare at coconut trees – we stare at motorways.

Rosanna Raymond

Pacific Sisters is a Polynesian fashion, performance and music collective that celebrates and reconstructs Island culture and identity. Imagined as a ‘thickskin for the streets for warriors in the ’90s’, this outfit fuses indigenous materials with contemporary denim. Placing a traditional understanding of personal cultural heritage within the context of contemporary urban life, Raymond customizes a pair of Levi’s jeans and a Levi’s jacket, making them personally and culturally relevant.

HALL LUDLOW, Melbourne
Hall LUDLOW, designer
born New Zealand 1919, arrived Australia 1947
Evening ensemble 1955
linen, silk, cotton, metal, elastic
Purchased, 1995 (1995.520.a–b)

One of the few designers who would do everything from choosing fabric to cutting and then stitching a garment, Hall Ludlow created this dress and wrap in the same year that he won the Australian Gown of the Year award. Rarely using a pattern, Ludlow draped and cut each garment over a form, paying close attention to proportion and detail.

The use of white linen and a seemingly simple silhouette in the dress are accentuated by Ludlow’s signature rows of parallel stitches. These construct and sculpt the floral linen blooms that frame the wearer’s neck and face.

JOHANNA PRESTON, Melbourne
Johanna PRESTON, designer
born Australia 1967
Wedge sandals 1997
perspex, leather, rubber
Purchased, 1997 (1997.63.a–b)

Combining traditional bespoke (handmade) techniques with her own bold, structured styling, Johanna Preston’s works reflect her appreciation of historical shoe shapes. Matched with the need to develop a personal language of footwear forms, these Wedge sandals reinterpret the exaggerated platforms of chopines, worn by courtesans during the sixteenth century in Renaissance Italy, Spain and England. At the same time, they signal her desire to extend the range of materials and heel shapes in her designs. Using clear, laminated perspex and hot-pink leather lacing, Preston presents her contemporary notion of footwear as ‘jewellery for the feet’.

ALEXANDER McQUEEN, London
Sarah HARMARNEE, designer
born Great Britain 1970, arrived Australia 1971, worked in Great Britain from 1996
Blade headpiece 1997
autumn/winter ready-to-wear collection, ‘It’s a jungle out there!’ silver-plated metal
Purchased, 1998 (1998.10)

Harmarnee created this work for fashion designer Alexander McQueen’s 1997 runway show entitled ‘It’s a jungle out there!’ Working outside the traditional jewellery format, Harmarnee constructs pieces that traverse the line between passive decorative embellishment and dramatic assertion of sculptural form. The sharp blades framing the wearer’s cheek contrast with the delicate lace-like surface treatment of the metal.

RUDE BOY, Melbourne
Glen ROLLASON, designer
born 1969
Outfit 1998
polyester, cotton, elastane, metal, nylon, plastic
Purchased, 1998 (1998.37.a–g)

It’s a sportswear label to do nothing in.

Glen Rollason

Reinterpreting menswear, the Rude Boy label presents a parody of contemporary street fashions. This outfit combines wristbands that double as ‘stubbie’ holders, a reversible denim bib that makes reference to historical waistcoats, denim pants with a spanner pocket, and a ‘hunting’ cap lined with gingham. The result is an ironic comment on the popularity of active sportswear and workwear in the realm of casual male dress.
Feathers became a highly sought-after fashion commodity in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Vast quantities were used to adorn hats and other accessory items, such as muffs and fans. Hats, in particular, were heavily trimmed with feathers and sometimes even whole birds. Millinery houses traded internationally and indiscriminately for these desirable materials. However, some materials were sourced closer to home.

Believed to have been made by Chinese settlers in Darwin, this fan combines a carved ivory stick and guard with the feathers of the female red-tailed black cockatoo, commonly found in northern Australia.

While the use of fur and feathers in fashion today is laden with political, moral and environmental implications, in the late nineteenth century these were quite acceptable and highly regarded materials. The popularity of fur was widespread throughout the world at this time, and Australia's fashion industry was voracious in its demand for materials to meet consumers' needs. In this environment, many amateur hunters looked to the local fauna to supply individuals and manufacturers.

This cape features Tasmanian platypus fur, identifiable by the large pelts. Platypus fur was not valued as a potential export item as it was difficult to work the thick skin into garments. Tasmanian laws changed in 1907 to give platypus legal protection.

Unusual or ‘exotic’ skins have long been used extensively in the making of shoes and other accessories. The restrictive rationing in place during and after World War II forced designers and makers to be extremely resourceful, utilizing available materials. It was during this period that the use of cork, timber, raffia, snake, lizard and fish skins became commonplace. The popular use of reptile skins for shoes, gloves and bags prevailed well into the 1950s.

Akira Isogawa creates contemporary garments that present the wearer with numerous possibilities. Incorporating unstructured layers and asymmetrical shapes, there is no single prescribed way to wear the outfit. In this outfit, the beaded bolero jacket can be reversed and worn as a top.

By reinterpreting the customs, materials and techniques of traditional Japanese costume, Isogawa creates garments that present the wearer with numerous possibilities. Incorporating unstructured layers and asymmetrical shapes, there is no single prescribed way to wear the outfit. In this outfit, the beaded bolero jacket can be reversed and worn as a top.

I'm not someone who designs conservative business suits. I like people to wear my designs back to front, upside down — whatever they like. Akira Isogawa

Unusual or ‘exotic’ skins have long been used extensively in the making of shoes and other accessories.
The use of fur and feathers in fashionable dress is not the only way in which fashion can be made to appear exotic. Concepts of luxury, excess and decoration are also bound up with the attractiveness and ‘sparkle’ of materials such as sequins, beads and paste jewels. These buttons and buckles form part of a range utilized by Hall Ludlow in his fashion collections. Function has been surpassed by form, with some buttons so large and encrusted that they ultimately serve as decoration to accentuate rather than fasten a garment.

The referencing of Australian flora and fauna by fashion designers has not always relied on a literal use of their skins, but has extended to encompass their role as an inspiration and source of imagery, colour and pattern. Jenny Kee’s ‘Blinky’ knits and Kanga and encrusted that they ultimately serve as decoration to accentuate rather than fasten a garment.

The many hued colour palettes and simplified, layered construction of Linda Jackson’s Rainbow parrot costume is typical of the designer’s unconventional approach to creating fashion. Jackson has played a key role in popularizing Australian motifs. Inspired by her immediate environment, she has combined everything from opals and native flora and fauna to tea characterics and Indigenous Australian designs into her textiles and garments.

Having worked in the fashion industry for close to thirty years, Bannister is well known for the inventive and adventurous clothing she created during the 1970s and early 1980s. A local advocate for developing an independent Australian fashion design identity, during these years Bannister sought inspiration in the topical and accessible ideas and materials of her immediate environment.

Indulging a personal fascination with the Tasmanian tiger, the Extinct hat is Bannister’s playful simulation of the skin of the extinct Thylacine (Tasmanian tiger). The stripes and improvised spots of this mythical creature have been created by stencilling black dye onto calf skin. The exaggerated wide, flat form of the hat is the perfect vehicle on which to display these exotic markings.

Sydney shoe designer Andrew McDonald used the skins of barramundi fish for these Mules, 1995. The surface effect is delicate and textilised, although the skins are actually very resilient and hardwearing. Many of the methods and tools used for the design and creation of handmade shoes have remained unchanged over the centuries. It is often experimentation with exotic materials that provides the greatest scope for contemporary designers to develop their own approach to design.