

Fashion's Space Race: Why The Spacesuit Is A Huge Future Branding Opportunity For Designers



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The mock rocket launch at Chanel's fall 2017 Paris Fashion Week show (Photo by Pascal Le Segretain/Getty Images)

Space travel has long been a source of inspiration to the fashion industry. When the space race between the Soviet Union and the US was underway in the 1960s, it influenced designers including Paco Rabanne, Courrèges and Pierre Cardin into all manner of both sculptural and streamlined looks.

High fashion houses since have regularly referenced everything and anything

related to the galaxy, the fantasy of its contents and the way in which we could navigate it.

One giant leap to modern day and little has changed. This time around it's the likes of Chanel and Gucci taking their cues directly from exploring our solar system and beyond.

In March 2017, the former went so far as to showcase a rocket (as above) complete with mock launch during Paris Fashion Week, while astronaut prints and lashings of metallic looks took to the runway alongside. The latter then followed up on its otherworldly Milan show with [a campaign film featuring everything from UFOs to multiple Star Trek references](#) just last month.

Accessories brand Coach, meanwhile, recently unveiled a limited edition capsule collection of NASA-themed pieces, including handbags, purses and sweatshirts. Said creative director, Stuart Vevers, at the time: "The collection is very nostalgic. There's something about the time of the space program that just gives this feeling of possibility. The space references, rockets, and planets are symbolic of a moment of ultimate American optimism and togetherness."



Coach's NASA-branded space collection COACH

In today's political environment, that feeling of hope may be particularly sought after once more, but the renewed interest in space goes beyond just nostalgia.

For the first time in a generation, the possibility of space exploration is on the horizon again, this time supported by private companies including Elon Musk's SpaceX, Sir Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic and Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin.

Beyond returning to the moon, the aim is both to enable space tourism on the one hand, and to work towards reaching Mars, on the other. As soon as 2018, we'll see these businesses launching crewed missions to the International Space Station initially, before dabbling with the civilian side of things too. SpaceX, for instance, is planning to send two tourists on a flight around the moon, also next year.

While a trip on a rocket has been the preserve of very few to date, this 21st Century version of the space race will see it eventually becoming more consumer facing than ever.

What this means is outer space become a genuine branding opportunity for the fashion industry, rather than just a source of inspiration.

“Public access to space is just beginning, and so this notion of dressing for space that was so often science fiction is going to become a reality,” Nicholas de Monchaux, author of [Spacesuit: Fashioning Apollo](#), recently told Quartz.

His book tells the tale of underwear manufacturer Playtex designing the spacesuits for the Apollo 11 space mission – the ones worn by Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin as they walked on the moon. It’s a story of technical triumph, above all else, which is where enormous amounts of work continues today in terms of both the new materials and the engineering needed to support the demands of such attire.



First glimpse of the SpaceX spacesuit via Elon Musk's Instagram account @ELONMUSK

But, what those suits look like – the form factor – is also being ever taken into consideration. SpaceX founder Elon Musk gave a [first glimpse this week of the spacesuit his astronauts will wear](#) in the reusable Dragon crew capsule, for instance.

As per [his Instagram post](#), the design is not a mock up, but a fully functioning suit

that can withstand double the pressure of the vacuum of space. Yet it wasn't just the utility he referred to, but its style also. "Was incredibly hard to balance aesthetics and function. Easy to do either separately," he wrote.

The image revealed shows a design with sleek and slim lines. It's been called the "James Bond" of space suits by some outlets, following earlier comments from Musk that he wanted it to look "badass". He reportedly hired Hollywood costume designer Jose Fernandez to work on it in May 2016; the man behind some of the most iconic superhero movie looks, including Ironman, Batman, X-Men and more.

Matthew Drinkwater, head of the Fashion Innovation Agency at London College of Fashion, who focuses on bringing together designers and technology companies to progress the industry, says he isn't surprised by SpaceX's focus on what the spacesuit looks like on top of its technical ability.

"If consumers begin to have a choice [in commercial space organizations], then ultimately they'll think about what is more desirable. Competition in the space is driving the need to build a brand and an identity, and ultimately that's where fashion lives," he explains.

His view is that there is a huge opportunity for other brands to associate themselves on the basis that this industry is only going to become bigger. "If you listen to Elon Musk talk and his utter belief that we don't have any option for preserving our race than in exploring the galaxy, then this is something that will become more embedded in wider society than it is now, so obviously there is an opportunity for brands to begin to fill a gap there; to service a need that will eventually become real."

"Fashion has always represented culture. That's what we're selling. If this is an important part of our world, then that's something brands should be taking part in and noticing," he adds.

One place this has already started to play out is over at Virgin Galactic, where Y-3, the high-end sportswear line created by adidas and Japanese designer Yohji Yamamoto, has been [brought on to create the flight suits](#) for future space tourists and pilots.



Virgin Galactic's Y-3 spacesuit VIRGIN GALACTIC

Beyond just a PR story, the partnership, announced in January 2016, is about both design and technical development – stating the use of “advanced fabrics, special techniques and bespoke specifications to ensure fit, comfort and performance”.

Said Adam Wells, head of design at Virgin Galactic: “Our evolution into a fully-functioning spaceline presents unprecedented opportunities to create original designs in support of our unique customer experience. Together with the incredibly talented team at Y-3, we will explore the potential to create innovative apparel and accessories – both for our staff and for our pioneering customers – that is appropriately functional and fit-for-purpose, is thoughtfully and elegantly crafted, and is fulfilling and fun to wear and use. Our design teams’ shared values will doubtlessly result in the creation of some extraordinary, special and highly treasured products, and we look forward to sharing their development stories as Virgin Galactic steps closer to commercial operations”.

The idea of “craft” and “fun” in such suits arguably emphasizes the focus Virgin Galactic has on design. But the point ultimately is that in this new space race, performance will have to become an inevitability for such apparel, meaning while there are huge opportunities for technical brands and new materials’ companies, aesthetics will be the true differentiator.

“If you’re a space tourist, when you’re going up there, looking the part is all part of

the experience you are having,” Drinkwater notes. He sees aspirational brands as a natural fit. “Space travel has always been unattainable – something the ordinary individual could not get access to. That experience will become democratized thanks to Virgin Galactic and SpaceX, but it’s still with a big price tag attached to it, so you could mirror that with luxury.”



Alessandro Michele’s Gucci or Karl Lagerfeld’s Chanel teaming up with any one of the contenders isn’t too far a stretch of the imagination. Nor is some branded Louis Vuitton space luggage, a touch of Gareth Pugh exuberance, even some Stella McCartney minimalism or some Vetements edge.

Where to start if you were to take the list of designers referencing space in the past into consideration is the difficult thing – it stretches from Valentino to Dolce & Gabbana, Zuhair Murad, Hussein Chalayan, Rodarte and beyond. Buzz Aldrin himself even ‘walked’ in the Nick Graham menswear show in New York in January 2017.

And British designer Christopher Kane sent part of his latest collection into space already – or nearly. Both a handbag and a high-top sneaker were launched into the earth’s atmosphere in February 2017 (as above), reaching altitudes of up to 38km. Outer space is considered to be above 100km.

The question then is which brand will be the first to truly go beyond? If Y-3 metaphorically grabbed the Sputnik moment with their announced Virgin Galactic

partnership, who will own the equivalent of the Apollo 11 mission in fashion's space race? There's no doubt, after all, that it's coming.

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