

The Guardian

Déjà you? The rise of the five-year trend

Fashion used to operate on two seasons a year. Now trends are staying in fashion for years, not months. From now on, fads are out and personal style is in

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Jess Cartner-Morley

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Sleeves are having a moment. But here's the weird part: sleeves have been having a moment for five years.

From left: Balmain in 2014, Melania Trump in Roksanda in 2016, Erdem in 2016, Natalie Portman in 2017, Ellery in 2018. Composite: Getty/Rex

So there I was, perched on my gilt chair at the Paris haute couture shows one evening in January, waiting for the Givenchy show to start, fiddling with the satin ribbons that cinch the wrists of my favourite new Mother of Pearl sweater, idling the time away with a little light screen-shopping. I zoomed in on a new-season Ellery dress whose sleeves, curled and trailing like a lemon zest twist in a cocktail glass, caught my eye, but then I was distracted by the heavenly black Givenchy blouse being worn by the PRs, with frothy tulle sleeves that look like tremendously chic angel wings.

Sleeves are having a moment. But here's the weird part: sleeves have been having a moment for five years. Towards the end of last year, we were at fashion week swooning over puff-sleeved gothic blouses on Stella McCartney's catwalk, while wearing Versace knits with POWER or UNITY emblazoned from elbow to wrist. "The Statement Sleeve - STILL!" proclaimed Vogue in its spring trend report, reporting on the poet sleeves and trumpet flares that abounded a year ago. And the year before that, sleeves made headlines both at London fashion week (virago sleeves at Erdem) and during the presidential campaign, when Melania Trump wore bell-sleeved Roksanda. And two years before that, the Alexis Colby statement sleeve was already being championed by Olivier Rousteing, at the height of Balmainia.

This is not, surely, how fashion is supposed to work. Spring comes along and kicks the winter look into touch, as surely as day follows night and with the same ones-and-noughts contrast. Out with the old, in with the new: that's the whole point. What's hot, what's not; what goes up (hemlines) must come down; keep up at the back. This is both the business model and the manifesto of fashion.



Outsize earrings are back on the catwalks in 2018, despite many previous outings in recent years. Earrings by Chanel and Dolce & Gabbana pictured. Composite: Getty

Not any more, it seems. The midi-length skirt caused a sensation when it swept across fashion weeks during the spring/summer 2014 shows; four years later, hems haven't budged an inch. ("Midi skirts make up the largest proportion of our skirt sales and we don't see that stopping," says Lisa Aiken of net-a-porter.com.) Trenchcoats have been top sellers for so long now that retailers struggle to remember what they sold before everyone wanted a trench. Outsize earrings have slowly, surely, edged out every other fashion jewellery category. "The trend cycle is diverging down two separate paths," says trend forecaster Chrissy Hilton-Gee. "We still have high-speed fashion with a short turnaround - but we also have these slow-burning trends that shift very subtly, influenced by consumer lifestyle rather than fashion industry diktats."

A five-year period is a fundamentally different proposition from a six-month one. Five years is a term in government. It's a university degree. You can conceive, have a baby and be standing at the school gates waving that baby into reception in five years. This is a weighty, meaningful length of time. A five-year trend is an entirely different concept from a flash in the pan. This is where fashion gets real.

The long-life trend “can be a great piece, like a trench, or a fabric, such as velvet,” says Lydia King, director of womenswear at Selfridges. Vanessa Spence, design director at Asos, nominates the floral tea dress, which “has been around in various guises for a few seasons, and still looks really new”. “Midi-length dresses, trenchcoats, floral prints, animal prints,” adds Coco Chan, head of womenswear at online retailer stylebop.com. And “the high-fashion sneaker isn’t going anywhere,” points out Tiffany Hsu, buying director of mytheresa.com.

Frankly, the two-seasons-a-year model was broken anyway. Fashion week became a victim of its own success a decade or two ago. Once the looks on the catwalk started getting beamed all over the world immediately, it was tricky to make them feel exciting six months later. Catwalk shows were conceived as industry previews, the secrets of fashion week heavily guarded against “spies” who might reveal the “new look” before it was ready to hit newsstands and shop windows several months after the event. Even within the industry, secrecy was once the norm: in the 1950s, the legendary fashion editor Carmel Snow would maintain a poker face in the front row, alerting her assistant to make a note of those looks she planned to feature in the pages of Harper’s Bazaar via a sly dig in the ribs. Now, catwalk looks are on Instagram within moments of hitting the catwalk, and copies are on sale on the high street within a matter of weeks, several months before the actual collection arrives in designer boutiques.

And besides - for reasons both selfless and self-centred - women are no longer content to be instructed to change what we are wearing at arbitrary intervals. The impulse to be proud of what you buy is as strong as ever, and sustainability is now as much a status issue as an oversized beribboned shopping bag once was. “There is less of a throwaway culture than we used to see,” Lydia King says. “Our customers want a long-lasting piece that will still be relevant the next season.” Six months is a ludicrously short lifespan for any piece of clothing; five years, on the other hand, is a realistic time frame in which a frequently-worn piece of clothing may well wear thin, or fray, or otherwise give out.



Not going out of fashion any time soon: the trenchcoat. Coats pictured here by Céline and Maison Margiela (centre). Composite: Getty

The 21st-century mindset is that personal taste takes precedence. “The modern attitude, in all areas of life, is that we look for what suits us, rather than wait to be told what to do,” says

Lizzy Bowring, head of catwalks at trend forecasting agency WGSN. In other words, “We cherry pick.” At Harvey Nichols, “If customers like wearing something, they don’t stop wanting to wear it just because the designer has a new collection out,” says Hazel Catterall, the store’s head of womenswear buying. The modern woman wants “easy ways to make a relatively boring top or shirt into a standout. That is why sleeve detailing appeals to the magpie in all of us - it’s that eye-catching glint that transforms a run-of-the-mill piece into something special and noteworthy, while being easier to wear than bold pattern or colour.”

“That old word ‘consumer’ is terrible,” muses trend consultant Anne Lise Kjaer. “No one thinks of themselves as a ‘consumer’. We are moving toward a more human-centric way of thinking about the interactions we have with fashion brands. Take the success of Phoebe Philo’s Céline. That look was about who you were as a person.”

The kind of whimsically themed collections that were once fashion week bread and butter - “Geisha meets Motocross”, “Dolly Parton goes raving”, “Alpine hippy” - have fallen away in favour of words such as minimalism, utility and athleisure which chime with the way we live now. Alessandro Michele at Gucci and Demna Gvasalia at Balenciaga have forged a new model of an agenda-setting brand that is based on “repeating and developing ideas that women respond to, rather than starting from scratch each season,” Lisa Aiken says.

The trends that go the distance, says Natalie Kingham, buying director of matchesfashion.com, are “pieces that stand the test of time because they work hard. Cross-body bags and year-round boots, for instance. The trends that are fussy, complicated and uncomfortable tend to be the ones that burn out quickly - like super high heels and over-long trousers that drag in the rain.” The industry is recognising “that fashion and comfort aren’t mutually exclusive,” says Maria Milano of Harrods womenswear. “Realistic dressing has introduced new long-term trends. For instance, flats were once reserved just for daytime or commuting - but an embellished flat is now often the most chic choice for evening.”

The high street has shifted gear from the relentless churn of new trends to a drip feed of newness. At Topshop, “the sleeve has been a focus for the last few seasons, but we are still seeing some dramatic new shapes, from extreme puffs and deep cuffs to extra-long lengths,” says head of design Mo Riach. At Marks & Spencer, the design studio talk is of “updates” to foundation looks; of “nodding” or “tapping into” trends rather than following them.



Sleeves, still having a moment ... as seen here on Natalie Portman in 2017. Photograph: Christopher Polk/Getty Images for TNT

With its starry cast of influencers showing off their look-of-the-day on the beach, on picturesquely graffitied urban streets or just in their bedroom mirror, Instagram has lifted fashion off the catwalk and put it in a new context. “There is a much stronger sense of the importance of personal style,” Coco Chan says. Social media celebrity happens, for the most part, organically - which makes for a slower tempo than the all-change-every-six-months of old. A decade ago, supermodels starring in advertising campaigns destined for glossy magazines were paid to look completely different from last season, but on social media, an immediately recognisable personal brand is all-important. So savvy influencers are motivated to stick to a recognisable aesthetic. It is in their interest to make consistency look desirable.

“If you are kicking yourself for not buying a velvet dress or a padded jacket last season, don’t worry,” Lydia King says. “More collections than ever are focusing on these for 2018.” Not got round to buying a floral tea dress yet? You haven’t missed the boat, “layered over jeans and white ankle boots”, Vanessa Spence says. Natalie Kingham tips a trouser suit (“Because you can wear it as separates, it works really well as a long-term buy”) and Lisa Aiken a trenchcoat (“They don’t date, they don’t go out of season”). Me, I’ve got a hankering for a spiral-sleeve dress. But maybe I said that already.

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