

THE AGE OF

By Harriet Quick

Audrey Hepburn and Givenchy, Inès de la Fressange and Lagerfeld—the role of the fashion muse is legendary.

But today, the muse's work is undeniably shifting from inspiring the designer to create towards inspiring us to buy.

INFLUENCE

Photography Gareth Cattermole/Getty Images for Burberry



Front and Centre
In recent years, influencers such as Alexa Chung (centre) have begun to sit alongside celebrities and magazine editors in the front rows at fashion shows.

LEAF GREENER HAD A BUSY July. The Shanghai-based stylist flew to Paris for haute couture week to work with Chanel on its Coco Crush fine jewellery collection and to appear in the front row of its runway show. She flew on to Florence for a party hosted by *L'Uomo Vogue* fashion editor Robert Rabensteiner. She returned to Asia to shoot a story for *Elle* in Hong Kong, and finally arrived back in Shanghai to do styling and art direction for up-and-coming Chinese designer Chrisou by Dan. All month, scores of stylish images of her—and created by her—appeared in media around the globe.

Greener's role is typical of today's fashion muse: a new breed of influencer who flits between locales, accompanied by myriad outfits from different designers and by a slew of street-style snappers who document her every turn. Some have special creative relationships with designers, consulting on styles; some work with brands to select and wear hero products; and some are simply enlisted to represent a brand's brains-and-beauty ideals at social events. Varying degrees of actual inspiration flow from muse to designer and vice versa; what counts most in the modern arrangement is individualistic style—think Alexa Chung—that singles out a tastemaker from the fashion hordes, as well as a level of sincerity. "If I don't believe the philosophy and aesthetics of the brand, I don't think I could keep a sense of integrity," Greener says.

Today's influencer inspires us to assemble outfits with pieces from her favoured brands. But with consumers highly sensitive to blatant promotion, designers and their ambassadors must navigate the dance of content and commerce nimbly. These days, "designers

HANNELI MUSTAPARTA | Norwegian Photographer

“I have my own voice and can focus only on that. I know what I like; I find my inspirations in so many other places than just online and bring that into my work.”



Style:
Classic Casual

View this *Vogue* contributor and former model's glamorous photographs: @hannelim

LEAF GREENER | Shanghai Stylist

“It's a step-by-step process. First of all, let people see you. Secondly, let people know what you do. I never knew I would become this successful, but I still have a long way to go.”



seek influencers to interpret their clothes with their own unique sense of style and make them more relatable for their audience,” says Katrina Judd, owner of the brand development and PR firm In + Addition, which works with influencers including Hanneli Mustaparta and Anum Bashir. But gone are the days when a womenswear designer cultivated a single muse and worked with her as a collaborator and confidante over many years.

The Rise (and Fall) of the Model as Muse

Many muses from this earlier era began as fashion models: Hubert de Givenchy in the 1950s had the beautiful Bettina, Yves Saint Laurent in the '60s his beloved Betty Catroux. These muses were paid a wage by the house and became part of the designer's extended family, often working as fittings models by day and social companions by night. It's perhaps too easy to fall into the nostalgic trap of imagining early muse-designer relationships were based purely on art and creativity. But the purpose these women serve has always been partly promotional. In fact, the symbiotic relationship between designer and muse dates to the birth of the fashion industry in the late 19th century, preceding the professional model as we know her. Quite simply, the muse came to be when a growing class of couturiers needed willing and aspirational figures on which to show off their latest creations. Entrepreneurial Englishman Charles Frederick Worth, who

had a gift for self-publicity, enlisted his wife, Marie Vernet (a former salesgirl), to promote his collections when he set up his couture business in Paris in 1858. Worth drew inspiration from his wife, and she in turn sought to inspire other women to buy his designs. Madame Vernet would set off to the races—which were keenly watched social events—modelling Worth's clothes with the aim of being sketched and talked about. Eventually, she caught the attention of Princess Eugénie and was dispatched to the Imperial Court to introduce Worth's designs. Vernet, who later trained girls to show off Worth's garments at their best, was the blueprint for the modern influencer.

With photography and magazines in their infancy, word of mouth and peer admiration remained the most effective forms of publicity well into the 1930s. Early editions of *Vogue*—established to engage with an emerging generation of style-hungry young women—featured wealthy socialites and couturiers' clients as models. Designers continued to showcase their creations via *mannequins du monde*, or “real women,” into the 1940s. Modelling as a profession, taboo until the end of World War II, was not to become acceptable until the 1950s, when modelling agencies emerged.

In the 1960s, though, models like Jean Shrimpton, Pattie Boyd and Twiggy were such intriguing figures that they became known outside the tight circle of fashion, gaining fame (and boyfriends) in the rock 'n' roll world and beyond. In the 1980s, the model/muse took on even greater importance, slipping outside the cocoon of the designer to become her own independent being. The Pygmalion myth was fully realised with the birth of the supermodel in the 1990s, when the

Photography: clockwise from top left: (Greener) George Angelis; (Bashir) Wasas Farid; (Ferragni) Giorgio Montersino; (Mustaparta) courtesy Hanneli Mustaparta

model eclipsed the fame of the designer. But backlash set in by the 2000s, and an endless turnover of nameless pretty faces populated runways while celebrities dominated magazine covers. It seemed that the muse—at least in the form she had taken for more than 40 years—was dead.

Enter Instagram

What brought her back to life? The birth of social media. The modern muse, the influencer, began to take shape, and would come to dominate in the digital world. Harking back to the early 20th century, today's muses are not all—or not simply—fashion models. A hybrid creator/beauty muse has appeared, bringing along her own vehicle of communication and a spectrum of peer-to-peer influence that traditional media could not hope to achieve.

By the late 2000s, illustrator/photographer/blogger Garance Doré, blogger Bryanboy, socialite/model Olivia Palermo and model/journalist Alexa Chung all started appearing in the front row at fashion shows, wearing the designers' clothes or carrying their accessories. Their presence began to subtly shift the balance of power that once rested firmly in the hands of magazine editors. Suddenly, instead of a handful of arbiters of style, there were many, all seeding thoughts, tips and images to inspire a global audience—and the designers themselves. Today, the average front row sees a roughly 30/60/10 percent split of influencers, editors and celebrities.

These social-media muses are natural successors to the mannequins du monde, straight from the pages of early *Vogue*—aspirational but “everyday” women courted

CHIARA FERRAGNI | The Blonde Salad



Style:
Global Chic

The blogger and shoe designer shares snaps of beauty, fashion and travel: @chiaraFerragni

“I feel that right now, we are in the best moment in the fashion industry for what I do. Because all the rules have changed so much, and so now there are no rules.”

by designers to influence other women to buy a particular brand or style of clothing. We are now as familiar with the names of Man Repeller's Leandra Medine, Spanish blogger Gala Gonzalez and The Blonde Salad's Chiara Ferragni as we are with high-profile models. “We all know that we will never have the physique of Karlie Kloss; we know she is an outlier, but the influencers appear more ‘real,’” says Ivana Giachino, vice president of VIP services and events at fashion and PR agency Starworks. “They have a real voice and are often working, professional women.”

The Business of Inspiration

The fashion industry has had to mutate quickly to accommodate and engage with the swelling ranks of influencer/muses. Greener has more than 96,000 followers on Instagram, a figure that exceeds those of many small-circulation magazines—though in some circles, she'd be an ingénue. (Gary Pepper's Nicole Warne boasts 1.3 million followers, Chung 1.8 million and Ferragni 4.3 million.) Greener is a spirited, stylish figure, dressed in Céline's '70s floral wrap dress one day, Dior's embroidered frock coat the next. But more than a clothes horse, she's also a creative consultant and stylist. “I create an image as a dialogue with my audience,” she says, “reflecting a part of my personality and what inspires me at the moment.”

Behind the scenes—and behind those “spontaneous” photographs of influencers kissing designers or flashing long evening coats through revolving doors—is a carefully managed system of placements. Who is wearing what and where counts for all. Perceived impact is meticulously monitored, as key performance indicators are measured by number of likes, reposts, paparazzi images, mentions and any uptick in sales. Few will talk about the business of contracts and exclusivities for fear of spoiling the magic, but in general, the influencer depends on a brand's or designer's patronage for her outfits and travel budgets, while the designer is paying an increasingly high price for the sway of the influencer.

ANUM BASHIR | Desert Mannequin



Style:
Eclectic Artisan

The communications officer for Qatar Museums shows her style: @desertmannequin

“I draw inspiration from men's clothing. Androgyny is everything to me. I'm a huge fan of the ‘normcore’ school of style. Style should be effortless—not too serious or overly thought out.”

The result is an enlarged halo of awareness for the brand—and product sales. Bottom-line results are difficult to measure; the average follower might not be in the market for a \$7,000 Dior dress, though she may be able to buy a Dior nail lacquer. But for emerging designers, in particular, influencers have a great impact on awareness, and the investment is significantly smaller than for creating an advertising campaign or dressing a celebrity.

So designers battle it out to enlist the services of the top tier, while lower ranks jostle for attention, often borrowing items for as little as 20 minutes—just enough time to pose for a selfie. Top influencers can earn tens of thousands of dollars for a single outing with a new handbag at a high-profile event. At the other end of the scale, fresh names keep coming: New platforms create talent pools of emergent influencers. And, looping back to a chief source of earlier muses, the modelling industry is taking note. Key international agencies such as Next and Storm now have “influencer” divisions, with professional managers representing major players, and models are developing blogs and expansive social-media profiles.

But it's largely the illusion of girl-next-door reality and friendly intimacy that's compelling and lucrative. “Paparazzi and street-style photographers swarm around these influencers,” Giachino says. “You would think Madonna had arrived, but it might be just Yasmin Sewell,” the Australian fashion consultant and street-style icon. “The attention around the leading influencers is astonishing.” ■

Harriet Quick is a fashion writer for *British Vogue* and *The Wall Street Journal*. She's the author of *Catwalking: A History of the Fashion Model*.