

TEACHERS'  
RESOURCE  
PACKET



# The World of Anna Sui

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# welcome

Dear Educator,

Thank you for your interest in visiting the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) and the current exhibition *The World of Anna Sui*.

During a MADlab school visit, Artist Educators facilitate engaging discussions around selected works in our current exhibitions that prompt students to think about the aesthetic, narrative, psychological, practical, or activist dimensions of art and design and serve as inspiration for their own creative expression. The studio portion of MADlab focuses on experimenting with different materials and processes, as students create their own artworks based on concepts discussed in the galleries.

Moreover, school groups have the opportunity to interact with residents in MAD's Artist Studios program and witness a diversity of creative processes in an open studio setting. MAD encourages students to take advantage of its full range of offerings as a cultural resource in the heart of New York City and, in doing so, seeks to foster a sense of ownership and belonging in young people. Each visiting student receives a family pass so they can return to the Museum and share their insights and discoveries with family, friends, and caregivers.

For educators planning to bring their students to the exhibition, this packet can be used for pre- and post-visit discussion at your discretion. For those who cannot attend the exhibition, it can nonetheless be used to teach your students about the fashion design process through thoughtful discussions and engaging activities.

At MAD we believe that educators excel at determining the content and activities best suited to their students. We invite you to decide which materials are developmentally appropriate for the young people you work with, and encourage you to exercise your creativity and skill in adapting these materials to best serve the unique needs of your group.

To facilitate this process, words in bold are defined in the glossary at the back of the packet.

We look forward to inspiring conversation, dialogue, and discovery!

Sincerely,

MAD Education Department

# how does a museum work?

**The Museum of Arts and Design (MAD)** has been functioning as an international resource center for craft, arts, and design since 1956. Through its collections, exhibitions, programs, and publications, the Museum serves as a forum for critical debate concerning the nature of craftsmanship and the engagement with process that links materials, techniques, forms, patterns, and concepts in all creative work.

## **ADMINISTRATION AND DEVELOPMENT**

This team, led by the Director of the Museum and the Deputy Director of Institutional Advancement, determines the institution's programs, plans, and philosophy. It also raises funds to realize the Museum's goals and works directly with the Board of Trustees, which guides the Museum's functions.

## **CURATORIAL**

Led by the Chief Curator, this is the team that decides which exhibitions will be shown, what artwork is to be included, and how the exhibitions are to be interpreted. In addition to researching and writing content, this team makes galleries look inviting to visitors and determines how to best showcase the objects.

## **REGISTRATION**

Led by the Director of Collections, this team arranges for the safe packing, shipping, and handling of art to be placed in an exhibition and maintains the permanent collections acquired by the Museum.

## **EXHIBITIONS**

The exhibitions team designs the way an exhibition is going to look and oversees the installation of pedestals, vitrines, wall labels, and other features.

## **EDUCATION**

This team provides the interactive interpretation of the objects on view by designing educational programs for children, adults, and families who visit the Museum.

## **MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS**

Marketing and communications staff define the image of the Museum both on site and online. They oversee the content and design of the website and issue press releases and marketing materials. They also build and maintain relationships with the press.

# how does a museum work?

## **VISITOR SERVICES**

The visitor services team is at the front line of every museum. They greet visitors at the admissions desk and help them get oriented to the layout and exhibitions.

## **DOCENTS**

The docent team engages and educates adult audiences by leading tours of the exhibitions.

## **FACILITIES**

This is the team that facilitates the day-to-day operations of the Museum, from the lights being turned on to ensuring the safety of all who enter the building.

## **SECURITY**

This is the team most often seen in a museum. Security's main task is to protect the artwork from harm so that visitors in the future will be able to see the same objects on view today.

Museums are places where we can learn about the past, present, and future of the world around us. There are endless opportunities to diversify knowledge when the habit of museum exploration begins at an early age. We look forward to welcoming your group into our galleries.

# helpful hints for your visit

While visiting the exhibition, try to use all your senses. Notice the way the objects are displayed. Can you distinguish any specific groupings? If you enjoy looking at one work more than others, can you explain why?

Here are some questions and suggestions to think about as you move around the exhibition:

## WHAT CAN BE OBJECTIVELY OBSERVED?

- Describe what you see.
- Consider the choices the artist or designer made as part of the creative process, such as the materials used; the scale or size of the object; lines, colors, patterns, and textures; and the original function of the object.
- Did the artist or designer intend this item to be a work of art or a functional object, or both?
- How was the object made — by hand, by machine, or both?
- What **iconography**, if any, is used? Why do you think the artist or designer included these symbols?
- What would it be like to interact with this piece of art? How would you handle, lift, or display it?
- How might the artwork feel if you touched it?

## WHAT IS YOUR EMOTIONAL RESPONSE TO THIS ARTWORK, AND WHY?

- Responses might include joy, excitement, appreciation, curiosity, indifference, revulsion, or other descriptive words.

## HOW DOES THIS ARTWORK CONNECT WITH THE WORLD AROUND US?

- Does the artwork tell a story? Does it have underlying political or social meaning?
- Do you have any questions about this work of art? Develop a strategy to investigate your questions through looking, discussion, or further research.
- Based on your observations and investigation, consider what was going on in the world when the work was produced to develop possible interpretations of the piece.

# introduction

Born and raised in Detroit, Anna Sui wanted to be a fashion designer from a very early age. She was inspired by stories and images in fashion and lifestyle magazines, and by her mother, who often made her own clothes. Although both of Sui's parents had emigrated to the United States from China, Sui recalls that her youth was shaped mostly by American popular culture, from Barbie dolls to preppy style to rock music. After graduating from high school, she followed her dream of moving to New York to enroll at Parsons School of Design. Sui immersed herself in the city's vibrant energy, frequenting the **punk** scene and downtown clubs. She worked in the **Garment District** while attending Parsons and started making and selling her own line of clothes, eventually reinventing pop culture fashion with her signature label in the 1990s. She has remained a design icon ever since.

Beginning with her premiere catwalk show in 1991, Anna Sui has shaped not only the garments, textiles, accessories, cosmetics, and interiors that comprise her design universe but also the course of fashion history. She popularized the boutique fashion look, combining frilly details and beautifully designed patterns into a rock 'n' roll romantic style that immediately resonated with models and pop culture icons in 1990s New York and beyond. The store she opened on Greene Street in New York City became an immersive environment for her look and a meeting spot for fashion-minded young people.

Sui's unique approach to creating narratives through her work is legendary: unlike other popular American designers who celebrate no-nonsense practicality, she is driven by storytelling. Her clothing immerses audiences in the worlds of cowgirls, **grunge** girls, hippies, **Mods**, pirate rockstars, fairytale maidens, surfer nomads, and other characters. A self-taught historian of culture, art, and fashion, she samples music, books, exhibitions, movies, time periods, photography, and art movements in her designs.

*The World of Anna Sui* gives insights into the designer's process, allowing the viewer to step inside her imagination and watch it unfold. The exhibition features approximately seventy-five looks from the designer's archive, presenting thirteen **archetypes**—recurring visual motifs and themes that are staples of the Sui aesthetic. It also spotlights her childhood role models and places of importance to Sui, including the New York City Garment District.

Looking at Anna Sui's clothes can feel like you're traveling through time and space, on a journey through fashion history: you might see poufy **Rococo** skirts, lacy **Victorian** collars, hippie bell-bottoms, floral fabrics reminiscent of the 1930s, or Mod minidresses—sometimes several of these in combination. Some of her designs spark the imagination, transporting you into another world. Others might inspire you to research her references and inspirations, which will open up a new window into Anna Sui's visual universe.

# introduction

Here are some key questions to consider along the way:

- In your own words, how would you define fashion, as it relates to clothing?
- Is fashion important to you? Why or why not?
- What does fashion tell us about the world around us?
- How do people use fashion to construct their identities?
- What image of yourself do you create based on your fashion choices?
- What/whom are you inspired by? Why?
- How would you define a trend or a fad? What is the relationship between trends/fads/fashion and individual expression?
- Where do fashion design and entrepreneurship meet?
- Can fashion tell stories?
- How do influences from art, music, and film inform Anna Sui's designs?
- To what extent does fashion reinforce or subvert gender stereotypes?
- Do brand names matter? Why or why not?
- How has globalization affected local industries such as the New York **Garment District**?



# object lessons

mod



## Look:

- Imagine you are a fashion reporter. How would you describe the outfit on the previous page in just a few words, conveying to readers or listeners its silhouette, spirit, and mood?
- What different components does this outfit consist of?
- What would it feel like to wear this outfit?
- Where/when would you wear this outfit—to school, to work, or for a special occasion? Why?
- Anna Sui works with a team of stylists who make choices about the type of hairstyle and makeup to include with each outfit. How do you think the hairstyle and outfit relate to each other?

Although this outfit looks like it consists of a skirt, vest, tie, and shirt, all the different components, with the exception of the blazer and tights, are connected and can be put on like a dress, with a single zipper in the back. Anna Sui called it a “**trompe-l’oeil**” **ensemble**, from the French term for “fooling the eye.”

- Why do you think she decided to connect the different pieces of clothing to create a single dress?
- How does the design of this outfit change the experience of putting it on and wearing it?

## Explore:

- Where do you think this outfit belongs on the fashion timeline below?
- Based on the examples in the timeline, how is 1960s fashion different from the fashion of other decades?
- How do you think changes in fashion silhouettes and conventions in dress come about? What do you think makes fashion evolve? Can you think of an example of a change in fashion serving as an indicator of larger societal change?

The early 1960s **Mod** style, often associated with British fashion, is a recurring inspiration for Anna Sui. While many of her other references, especially to pop cultural styles, are directly related to her own experience in New York in the 1980s and 1990s, her yearning for the sixties seems to be rooted in a nostalgia for an era that was already over during her youth: “I was just born too late. So I’ve probably spent a lifetime playing catch-up. I feel that, to this day, the drawings I do for my collections are always trying to recapture the leggy, smock-topped nonchalance of the dollybirds.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Sui quoted in Tim Blanks, *The World of Anna Sui* (New York: Abrams, 2017), 32

## Discuss:

*The World of Anna Sui* presents thirteen **archetypes**, recurring visual themes that have shaped the designer's aesthetic over the years: **Grunge**, **Punk**, Hippie, Rockstar, Surfer, Nomad, Schoolgirl, Americana, Retro, **Androgyny**, Fairytale, Mod, and **Victorian**.

Sui often remixes archetypes, as you will notice in other object lessons in this packet. However, her Fall 2013 collection was an all-out homage to the look—and spirit—of the early 1960s. The group of models opening the runway show copied moves from the famous dance scene in French director Jean-Luc Godard's 1964 movie, *Band of Outsiders* (you can find a link to the scene in the webography at the back of this packet). Thanks to her penchant for meticulous research and passion for creating immersive environments, Anna Sui introduces a new visual universe with each collection.

Look at the fashion drawings on the **next page**. Can you find the trompe-l'oeil outfit?

- What are some common themes among the outfits?
- What are some variations or differences?
- If you were a fashion designer, what additional archetypes might you focus on?
- Is there a historical era that you are nostalgic for and would like to revive?
- Is there a specific place or cultural reference you would like to **evoke** through your fashion? Please explain.

## Make:

Fashion journalists cover all aspects of the fashion industry. They review seasonal collections and runway shows of fashion designers around the world. Online, you can find reviews of Anna Sui's runway shows over the years. Refer to the webography section in the back of this packet for some examples.

Looking at the Fall 2013 fashion drawings on the **next page** or the slideshow of that season's fashion show (included in the webography), imagine you are a reporter for your favorite magazine (online or in print). Write a review of the collection; be sure to include descriptions of themes, inspirations, colors, patterns, and overall mood.

# mod



# punk/fairytale



# punk/fairytale

## Look:

Moving from head to toe, describe this **ensemble** on the previous page (the hat, clothing, and shoes) in as much detail as possible.

- What is the most surprising element to you? Why does it stand out?
- What kind of image does this outfit convey?
- What type of character do you think Anna Sui wanted to create? How would they act and what do you imagine their story to be?
- If you were the designer, what would you name this outfit? Explain your choice.
- Share your ideas with your classmates, and compare: Do you notice any similarities or differences in your responses?

## Explore:

Anna Sui often combines elements from disparate contexts and remixes them, resulting in unusual combinations.

- Looking at the individual items of clothing or accessories, what inspirations do you think the designer drew on (think art, movies, music, books)?

Anna Sui is frequently considered to be the premier visual storyteller in American fashion, which traditionally has been characterized by simplicity and practicality. Like her European counterparts, such as John Galliano (Dior), Yves Saint Laurent, and Vivienne Westwood, Sui builds an **evocative** fantastical universe, which nevertheless is often uniquely American in its inspirations: from interior design and art exhibitions to movies and music-inspired pop culture phenomena including **punk**, rock and roll, and **grunge**.

For this particular ensemble, Sui's inspirations range widely, from the bold stripes famously used by interior design legend **Dorothy Draper** to pirate movies, as well as the ripped fabric and limited color aesthetic of New York punk bands. The designer recalled: "I had just seen Bob Gruen's documentary on the **New York Dolls** called *All Dolled Up*, and it reminded me that back in the 1970s, if you were part of the rock scene or if you went to clubs like Max's and CBGB's you only wore red, white or black. Everything was heavily **codified**."<sup>2</sup> Another inspiration came from the recent (2006) film *Marie Antoinette* by writer/director Sofia Coppola, which is set in eighteenth-century France and delves into the tastes and dress codes of the French court of King Louis XVI before the **French Revolution**. The wide skirt and petticoat are inspired by the **Rococo** gowns favored at the time but are cut off above the knee.

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Bolton, *Anna Sui* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2010), 238.

# punk/fairytale

- In your mind, what is the effect of this mix of styles and inspirations?
- Not everyone will necessarily know the sources of Sui's references. Do you think this would change the experience of seeing or wearing her clothes?
- If you had to choose one historical time period, one movie, and one music group or style of music as your inspiration for a fashion design, which ones would you use?
- What effect would combining these influences have? For instance, would they harmonize, clash, or playfully bounce off each other?

## Discuss:

- How do your everyday (or special-occasion) fashion choices relate to the elements of pop culture you enjoy (music, sports, movies)?
- What image of yourself do you create through clothing?
- With your classmates, discuss the relationship between fashion trends and individual expression. Are trend and individual expression contradictory in nature, or can they coexist?

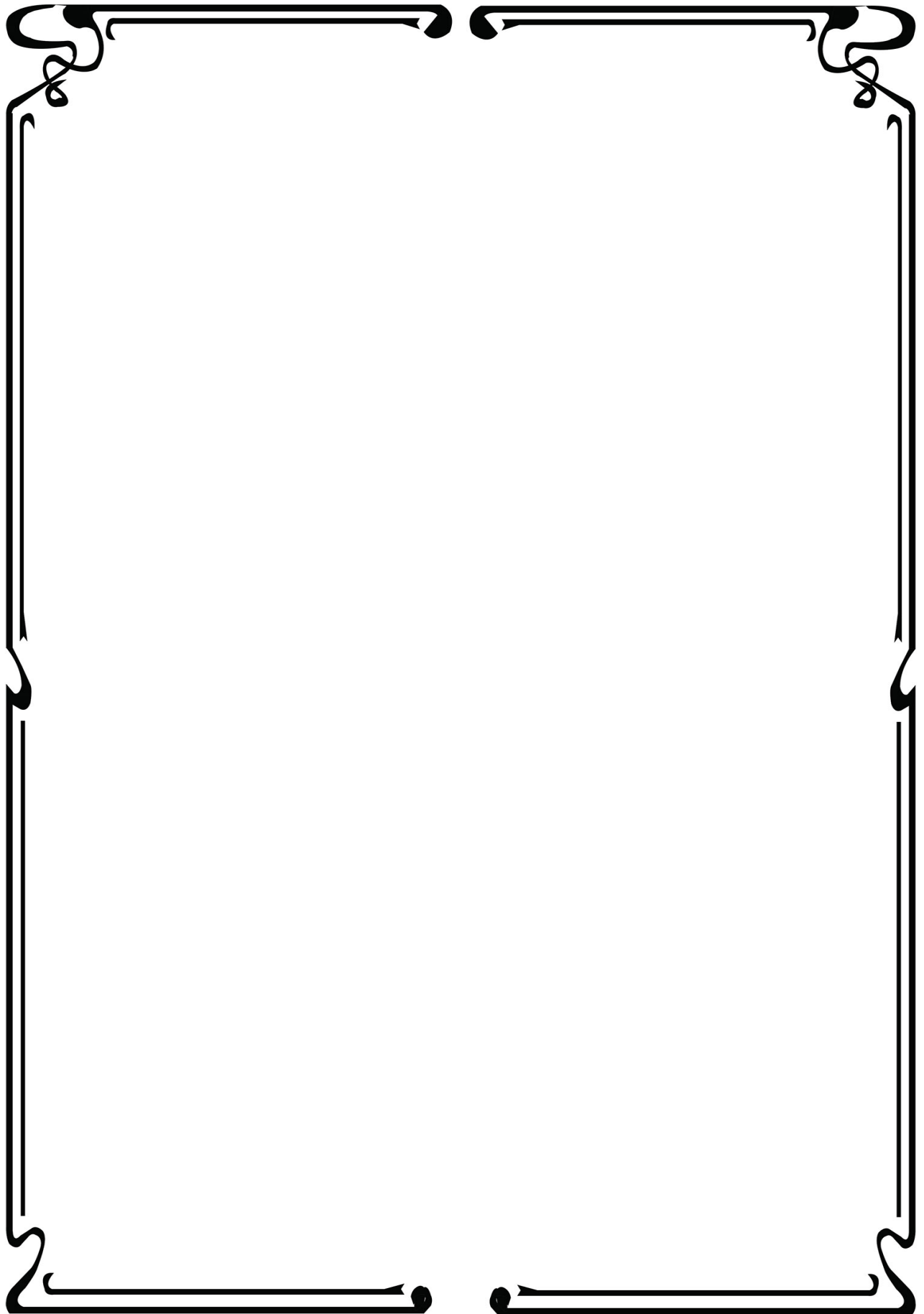
## Make:

For each of her collections, Anna Sui creates a mood board, where she compiles inspirations—from magazine clippings, art reproductions, and movie stills to fabric swatches and photographs of historical interiors. To look at them means to gain a glimpse into the mind of the designer, as well as a sense of how a range of ideas come together to form the vision for each season.

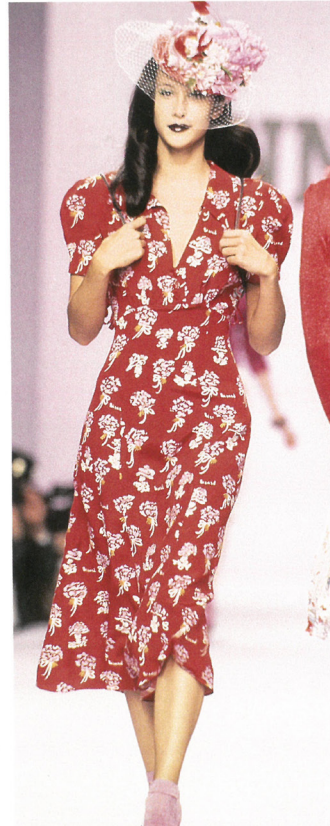
Over the course of a few days, gather pictures (magazine cutouts and/or your own drawings) and other pin-able materials that interest and inspire you, and glue them to a poster board to create your own mood board. Include notes, song lyrics, or any other complementary materials. Share your mood board with the class. Alternatively, you can do this in a digital format.







# retro / surfer



# retro / surfer

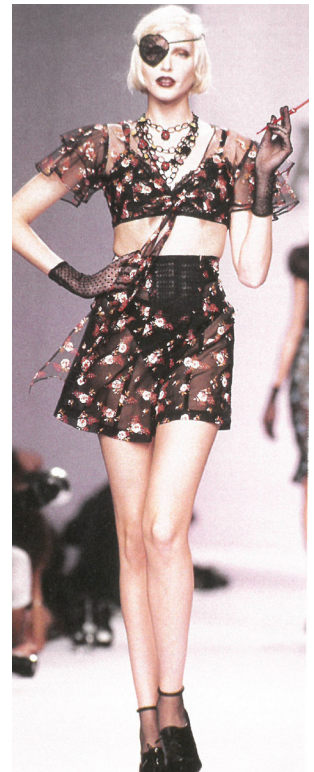
## Look:

- Take a close look at the images on the previous page. Make a list of the various items of clothing you see, trying to name them as precisely as possible.
- Go around the room with each student sharing one item they found, compiling a master list as you go.
- Many of the featured items **evoke** a particular context, place, or wearer. Consider the following items: What associations does each spark for you?
  - Mary Jane shoes
  - Pinstripe suit
  - Feather boa
  - **Fedora**
  - **Lei**
  - Veiled lady's hat
  - Flower **corsage**
  - Grass skirt
- Taken together, what sort of world do these pieces of clothing and accessories evoke?

## Explore:

All of the pictured outfits were part of Anna Sui's Spring 1995 collection. The designer recalled seeing "an exhibition on pulp comics. And I fell in love with their **noir** quality, so I wanted to create a collection with a comic-book noir mood."<sup>3</sup> She achieved this with gangster suits, superhero-like vinyl garments, and dresses reminiscent of the 1940s, the heyday of **pulp fiction**.

- Pick two outfits from the selection above and create a short character profile for each.
- If both characters were in a story together, how might they interact? What action might unfold between them?



<sup>3</sup> Bolton, *Anna Sui*, 67.

## Discuss:

Whimsy and play are often key ingredients in Anna Sui's creations. However, her work is also informed by a tremendous amount of research and a deep knowledge of cultural, art, and fashion history. Model Naomi Campbell said, "She introduced me to so many things. She's such a good teacher because she also passionately loves learning about new things herself. Everyone knows she's one of the true great scholars of fashion today. But not just of fashion—also art, interior design, music, history—she's a total living encyclopedia."<sup>4</sup>

The Spring 1995 collection was Sui's particular homage to French designer Yves Saint Laurent. His groundbreaking Spring 1971 collection made waves in the world of Parisian high fashion because it heavily relied on everyday looks and stirred painful memories of World War II, which even after thirty years were still fresh. Sui said:

It's easy to pick the designer moment that had the biggest effect on me: Yves Saint Laurent's *Libération/Quarante* collection for Spring '71. That was a time when people used to speculate that style ran in thirty-year cycles. Saint Laurent made an explicit, scandalous connection between the style of the forties in **collaborationist Paris** and the mood of the early seventies: decadent, glamorous, subversive. It was around the same time I was beginning to pick through thrift shops in Detroit, buying floral dresses from the forties, pairing them with snakeskin platform shoes.<sup>5</sup>

- Why do you think the sharp and formal looks of the 1940s resonated so strongly within the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, which were characterized by economic and political struggles?
- Do you think there is something true about the notion of a thirty-year cycle in fashion? Give examples both in favor of and in opposition to this concept.
- Can you think of fashion influences from around thirty years ago that are prevalent in what we wear today?
- Does a previous era provide inspiration for the way you dress, the music you listen to, or the movies you enjoy? Please explain.

## Make:

Drawing from a historical period or an artistic or literary inspiration, create an outfit for the mannequin on the following page. Don't forget the accessories, and come up with an **evocative** title for your creation. Ask your classmates whether they can identify some of your inspirations.

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<sup>4</sup> Blanks, *The World of Anna Sui*, 7

<sup>5</sup> Blanks, *The World of Anna Sui*, 192.



# grudge / androgyny



# grudge / androgyny

Create a display in your classroom to exhibit everyone's designs.

## Look:

- What is your first impression of the photograph on the preceding page?
- Describe what you see, moving from the first few things that catch your eye to more and more detail, including makeup, hair, facial expressions, body language, and accessories.
- Comparing the two models, what similarities and differences do you notice?

## Explore:

- The photo was taken during the Anna Sui Spring 1994 fashion show. How do you think the audience reacted to these **ensembles**?
- What soundtrack might have accompanied these models as they strutted down the runway? If you were the designer, what music would you choose?
- What vibe do you think Sui aimed to create?
- How would you compare Sui's designs in this image with styles you see today?

From the start of her fashion design career, Anna Sui has been inspired by popular culture, especially music and bands from the 1970s through the 1990s. Several of her early runway shows borrowed heavily from **grunge**, a rock music genre and subculture characterized by grinding guitars, dark lyrics, and a "smelly caveman look" and "thrift-store aesthetic"<sup>6</sup> that combined flannel shirts and chunky cardigans with leather coats and flowered dresses, often matched with combat boots.

One of the most iconic heroes of the movement was **Kurt Cobain**, the front man of the band Nirvana, who famously wore dresses during concerts and photo shoots, deliberately bending the boundaries of gender in dress. Likewise, guitarist James Iha from the grunge group the Smashing Pumpkins appears in a summer dress in the video for the band's 1993 hit "Today," which was actually included in the track list for the Spring 1994 fashion show (see link in the webography at the end of this packet).

- In what way do the outfits depicted above challenge expectations of a traditional fashion show or collection?

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<sup>6</sup> Rick Marin, "Grunge: A Success Story," *The New York Times*, November 15, 1992, accessed August 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/11/15/style/grunge-a-success-story.html>.

# grudge / androgyny

James Truman, the Editor in Chief of *Details*, a style magazine for young men, said at the time: “To me the thing about grunge is it’s not anti-fashion, it’s un fashion. **Punk** was anti-fashion. It made a statement. Grunge is about not making a statement, which is why it’s crazy for it to become a fashion statement.”<sup>7</sup>

- Discuss this quote. What is the meaning of Truman’s comment?
- Can you think of other times when countercultural movements became mainstream?

## Discuss:

Fashion has traditionally relied heavily on differentiations between male and female. To this day, clothing stores typically feature men’s or women’s styles, and while there is some crossover, it is still limited.

- What are some clothing items, accessories, or colors that are heavily associated with either a masculine or feminine look?

Associations between gender and dress are deeply cultural, and they change depending on time and place. Whereas in most Western societies, pants are associated with men and skirts and dresses with women, kilts are considered traditional attire for men in Scotland, for example, and men in Indonesian and West African cultures (such as in Ghana and Niger) wear tube-like lengths of cloth that closely resemble long skirts.

- In your opinion, who decides who wears what—and why? Consider fashion from a cultural as well as a social perspective: Do other countries and cultures follow similar gender differentiations as those found in American fashion? Be sure to support your ideas with evidence, either through individual or group research.
- Research the use of pink and blue for girls’ and boys’ clothing, respectively, over the centuries. This might include the practice of breeching in young boys (see link in the webography at the end of this packet) or instances when one gender group adopted clothing historically associated with the other (e.g., 1920s **garçonnes**, Yves Saint Laurent’s “Le Smoking” tuxedo suit, or the fashion of Coco Chanel).
- Share your findings with the class.

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<sup>7</sup> Marin, “Grunge.”



# grudge / androgyny

**Androgyny**, which combines feminine and masculine attributes into an ambiguous appearance, is a concept Anna Sui uses regularly as a way to play with, bend, and challenge established boundaries. In a 1992 interview, Nirvana lead singer Kurt Cobain, who spoke up on behalf of feminist and LGBTQ causes and often wore gender-bending outfits as well as makeup and nail polish, recalled being drawn to dresses and other stereotypically female clothing as a child and discussed his resistance to being tied down to a single sexual identity: "I'm definitely gay in spirit and I probably could be bisexual," he said. "If I wouldn't have found Courtney [Love, a fellow grunge musician and his wife], I probably would have carried on with a bisexual lifestyle."<sup>8</sup>

## Make:

Design your own gender-affirming, gender-neutral, or gender-bending outfit, taking inspiration from magazines and clothes you might find in a thrift shop or even in a closet at home. Look through magazines and newspapers and create a collage of an entire ensemble. Share your designs with your classmates. Discuss the choices you made: Why were these decisions important to you?

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<sup>8</sup> Kevin Allman, "The Dark Side of Kurt Cobain," *The Advocate*, February 9, 1993, 35–43, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://kevinallman.typepad.com/ARTICLES/MAGAZINES/Advo-Cobain.pdf>.

# fairytale/nomad



## Look:

Take a close look at the **ensemble** shown in the photo on **page 27**.

- What is the first thing that comes to mind?
- What colors do you notice?
- What materials did the designer use?
- What do you notice about the accessories, including the hat, jewelry, and shoes?
- What clues do they give about what might be worn under the warm winter coat?
- Who would you expect to see wearing such an outfit, and where?

## Explore:

- What do you think might have inspired the designer to create this ensemble? In what way does it tell a story?

Contrary to many American designers' tendency toward practicality and straightforwardness, Anna Sui is celebrated as "rare among her compatriots in that her clothes tell tales. She is, in the truest sense of the term, a **raconteur**. But instead of words or letters, Sui uses stitches and seams to express her nimbly crafted fables."<sup>9</sup>

## Discuss:

Looking at a collection by Anna Sui gives you a glimpse into the inspirations and process of a designer who is constantly combining different source materials into sometimes outlandish yet strangely coherent looks. Individual clothes or outfits become part of a larger whole that comes together in the end.

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<sup>9</sup> Bolton, *Anna Sui*, 117.

# fairytales/nomad

For her Fall/Winter 1998 collection, “storytelling was the overriding thematic ... It began with a series of clothes inspired by children’s costumes, including such storybook creatures as lions, bears, and rabbits.”<sup>10</sup> Sui found inspiration for the collection in nursery rhymes, children’s book illustrations, **Pre-Raphaelite** fairy paintings she saw in an exhibition at the Frick Collection, and fairytales such as Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Snow Queen,” as well as folkloric motifs and clothing practices from different cultures. This coat, for example, was styled after **Inuit** parkas, worn with the fur side facing inward to provide additional warmth in a polar climate. The runway show concluded with a princely figure wearing a toy horse created by longtime Anna Sui collaborator James Coviello (left).

- Consider what happens after the fashion show is over: Do you think this sort of fashion travels well from the runway to actually being worn in real life?
- Would you wear an outfit like this?
- Do you think the use of real fur in clothing is more acceptable in some contexts than in others? Please discuss.
- If you were a designer, would you focus on practicality or storytelling? Why?
- What sorts of stories would you be inspired by?
- Think of a book or story you read as a young child: How might it shape your fashion design concept?

## Make:

Create a story character based on one of the two ensembles pictured in this section. Who are they, where do they come from, what do they believe in, and whom do they encounter? Invent a name for this character and write a short story about their adventures.



<sup>10</sup> Bolton, *Anna Sui*, 117.

# hippie/rockstar



# hippie/rockstar

## Look:

The image on the previous page is a photograph from Anna Sui's Spring 2018 fashion show.

- Describe the colors, patterns, and shapes you notice.
- Where might you see clothing that looks like this?
- What time periods, places, or other references might have inspired the designer?
- Can you imagine anyone you know wearing one of these outfits? Share whom you are thinking of and why you chose that person. If nobody comes to mind, explain why you think that is.

## Explore:

In her review of the runway show for *Vogue*, Steff Yotka wrote: "Listen, nobody does it like Anna Sui. She laser-cuts through the past, pulling references together for a beautiful collage that is at once nostalgic, modern, and a bit kooky. The biggest grudge you can hold against her is that she's more of a historian than a forward thinker, but to reduce her whimsy to so basic a complaint is to do her the ultimate injustice."<sup>11</sup>

- Can you make out what past decade the designer is inspired by here? Hint: in the exhibition, the **ensemble** is on view in the Hippie/Rockstar section.
- Do you think it's acceptable for fashion designers to mostly draw references from the past, rather than looking to the future?
- Are those two perspectives mutually exclusive?
- If you were to create a future-inspired collection, what might it look like?

## Discuss:

One of Anna Sui's key inspirations for this collection was a 2017 exhibition at MAD: *Counter-Couture: Handmade Fashion in an American Counterculture*, which celebrated the handmade style of the 1960s and 1970s. The show's organizers described the counterculture of that time as follows: "Often referred to as the hippie movement, the Counterculture swept away the conformism of the previous decade and professed an alternative lifestyle whose effects still resonate today. Moved by the rejection of a materialist and consumerist interpretation of the American Dream, Counterculture youths embraced ideals of self-sufficiency and self-expression."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Steff Yotka, "Spring 2018 Ready-to-Wear: Anna Sui," *Vogue*, September 11, 2017, accessed August 21, 2019, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2018-ready-to-wear/anna-sui>.

<sup>12</sup> *Counter-Couture: Handmade Fashion in an American Counterculture* (exhibition description), Museum of Arts and Design, accessed August 21, 2019, <https://madmuseum.org/exhibition/counter-couture>.

# hippie/rockstar

Anna Sui has long been an advocate for the Garment District in New York, addressing the fact that much of the fashion business has moved overseas by supporting the local industry whenever possible.

- For the Spring 2018 collection, the designer brought vegetable-dyed boots and hand-painted Levi's jeans to the runway. Does this challenge the way you think of the relationship between DIY and an established fashion brand?

The *Counter-Couture* exhibition centered on the DIY ethic of the Summer of Love and beyond, which was all about the handcrafted expression of individual style.

- Do you think fashion trends and self-expression are mutually exclusive? Why or why not?

Anna Sui's runway shows are well-crafted, all-encompassing spectacles in which fashion, music, backdrops, and lighting all work together. You can view a video of the Spring 2018 show here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2GcVtWQXWRE>.

- Watch the video. In what way does the staging of the fashion show contribute to the overall look and feel of the collection?

## Make:

Painted or crafted backdrops literally set the stage for a runway show. Design your own version of a backdrop that evokes a hippie aesthetic of peace, love, and rock and roll. Think of what materials you would need and create a **prototype**.

# schoolgirl/americana





# schoolgirl/americana



# schoolgirl/americana

## Look:

The outfits on the previous two pages were part of Anna Sui's Spring 1994 and Spring 2003 collections.

- What might have been the themes of these collections?
- What details do you see that give clues as to what inspired the designer?
- Take a close look at all the elements in each **ensemble**. Do you see anything that you yourself have worn at some point? Please elaborate.

## Explore:

Americana and Schoolgirl are two of the **archetypes** Anna Sui draws on in her work time and again.

- Where are these two archetypes in evidence in the images above?
- What aspects of American culture does Anna Sui draw on, in terms of class, location (urban vs. rural), and leisure activities?

Anna Sui, whose Chinese parents emigrated to the United States before she was born, grew up in the Detroit area, and she often talks about how her childhood shaped her imagination. From a very early age, she was sure that she wanted to be a fashion designer and move to New York, where so much of the popular culture that so deeply fascinated her unfolded in real time. She frequently reflects on how these different spheres have shaped her vision: "I am American, born in suburbia, raised on pop culture. Sitcoms, rock 'n' roll, movie stars, I sucked up everything that mass media could unleash on me."<sup>13</sup>

## Discuss:

For her Spring 1994 collection, varsity sports, including cheerleader outfits complete with pom-pom hats by James Coviello, served as a key inspiration, whereas the Spring 2003 collection drew heavily on a more upscale country club culture and **evoked** tennis, horse racing, and golfing.

- What are some strategies Anna Sui uses that differentiate her ensembles from typical leisure outfits or sports uniforms?

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<sup>13</sup> Blanks, *The World of Anna Sui*, 128.

# schoolgirl/americana

Sui has said that, as in the work of artist Andy Warhol and movie director Wes Anderson, whose character Richie Tenenbaum from the film *The Royal Tenenbaums* inspired the tennis accessories in the 2003 collection, “there is always something slightly off-kilter”<sup>14</sup> in her celebration of America.

- Where do you see this in the depicted outfits?
- Can you think of a contemporary filmmaker or artist who simultaneously celebrates parts of American culture and questions them?

## Explore:

Having started her career on Seventh Avenue, in the heart of New York’s **Garment District**, while she was still a student at Parsons School of Design, Anna Sui feels deeply connected to the local fashion industry:

Being American, I’ve always wanted to be an American designer, to support the industry here. The secret is resourcing. My favorite thing was always research. I met all the trim people, button people, the pleating and embroidery people. When I did my golfing collection, [my friend] Jane Holzer found a place that makes ribbons for horse shows and I had them printed with my name. And I spend a lot of time going to fabric companies, figuring out who the owners are, asking to see archives.<sup>15</sup>



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<sup>15</sup> Blanks, *The World of Anna Sui*, 128.

# schoolgirl/americana

However, the designer has found that many of the small businesses that worked as valued collaborators on a range of projects have been forced to shut down, due to high rents and production costs and the choice by many companies to outsource production to places like China. A recent attempt to reissue the Fall 1994 collection led her to the following insight: All the technology that created those prints and patterns is gone. There are so many things that can't be done anymore. Discharge printing doesn't exist anymore. A company in France that did a sort of 3-D embossing on prints has gone. Almost everybody I worked with on that collection is out of business.<sup>16</sup>

- Do you think we as consumers are partially responsible for this change? In what way?
- What are some other ways in which fashion—especially **fast fashion**—takes a toll on the environment and workers throughout the world?
- Can you think of any strategies that would work against the huge negative environmental and **humanitarian** impact of the garment industry as it exists today?

## Make:

Research the history of New York City's **Garment District**. Create a strategy to revive businesses in this neighborhood. Imagine you are the owner of your own fashion company. What might you do to protect your employees' working conditions or to produce clothing locally?

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<sup>16</sup> Blanks, *The World of Anna Sui*, 282.

# dolly heads



# dolly heads

## Look:

- Take a close look at the images on the preceding page. What do you see?
- What do you think these dolly heads are made of?
- What could they be used for?
- Describe the individual styles. What distinguishes them from each other?
- What do they have in common?
- Which one is your favorite, and why?

In 1991, Anna Sui's friends started encouraging her to open her own store: "The designer Zack Carr lived on my block, and one day he told me that people wouldn't really get me until I brought them into my world, and the easiest way to do that was to open a store,"<sup>17</sup> she remembers. Sui, who had long had a penchant for boutiques, ultimately secured a lease on a space on Greene Street in SoHo. Since there was no budget for decor, she and her friends got together to create the dolly heads that would ultimately become a trademark of the Anna Sui look. Inspired by thrift-store finds (including a doll with a broken head, which allowed Sui to see how it was made) and the papier-mâché creations of the artist Gemma Taccogna, they "competed against one another to see who could give our heads the most character: big noses, high cheekbones, prominent chins."<sup>18</sup>

- What personalities emerged from this making session?
- Can you imagine some of the sources that inspired Sui and her friends?



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<sup>17</sup> Blanks, *The World of Anna Sui*, 14.

<sup>18</sup> Blanks, *The World of Anna Sui*, 15.

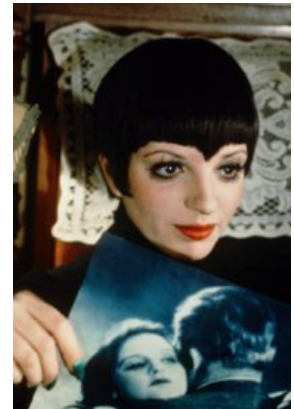
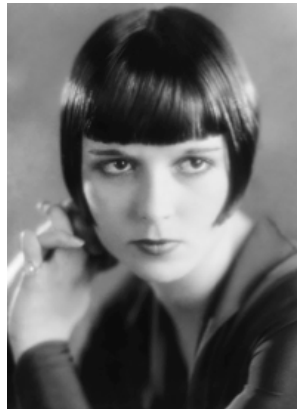
# dolly heads

## Explore:

The dolly heads became an important part of Anna Sui's brand identity, popping up on t-shirts and posters over the years, with the originals remaining at the boutique as part of its decor.

To celebrate the twentieth anniversary of her makeup line, in 2018, Anna Sui created makeup cases in the shape of dolly heads that came in decorated tins. The tins served as an environment of sorts for each character, which even came with names: Marion, Bea, and Sally.

- Take a look at the pictures below, and figure out which elements of the iconic looks inspired which dolly head.
- The makeup cases came with corresponding tins that were shaped like houses, creating environments for the characters, like a stage set. What furniture, accessories, or other setting element would you assign to each of the dolly heads?
- Can you imagine creating your own dolly head? Whose personal style might you be inspired by?



# dolly heads

## Discuss:

Building complete, immersive worlds and environments has always been at the root of Anna Sui's practice as a designer—and it has become part of her brand identity. **Branding**, which means promoting a product or company through a distinctive design, is important for most businesses, from supermarkets to museums, but in few industries is branding as important as in fashion. How would you describe Anna Sui's brand identity?

- Who do you think would be particularly drawn to her look?
- What about it appeals or does not appeal to you, and why?
- What are some brands that you are aware of or like?
- What attracts you to them?
- Do brands matter? Why or why not?

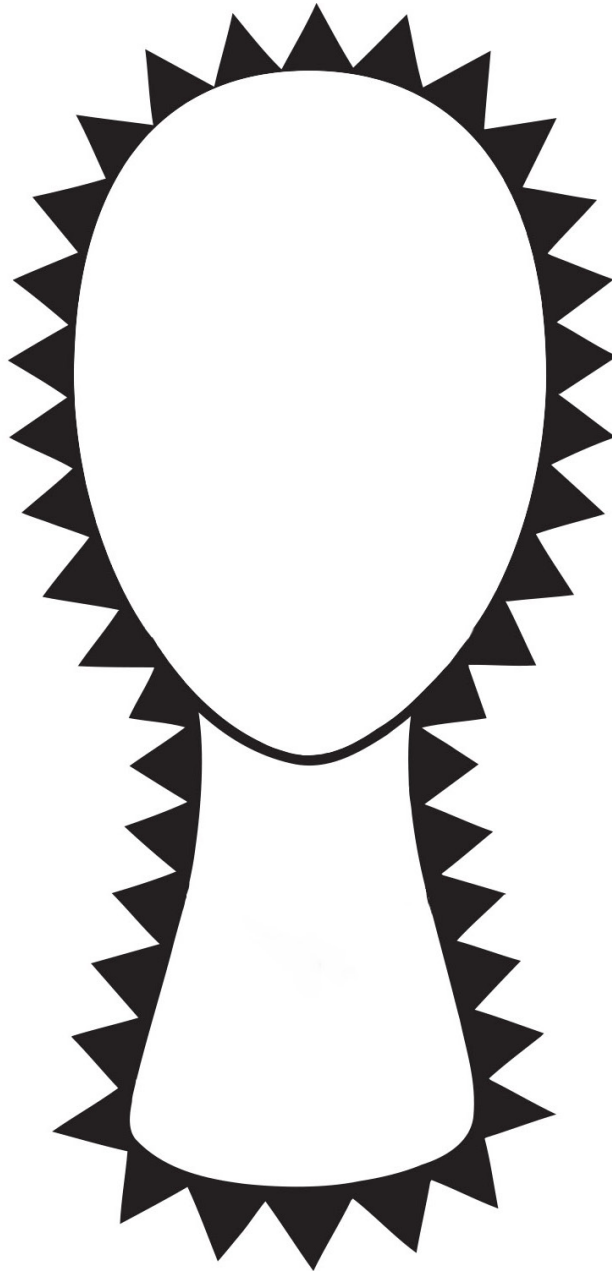
## Make:

- Use the outline on the following page to fill in your own dolly head, with hairstyle, coloring, features, and makeup of your choosing. Look to a celebrity or historical figure you admire for inspiration. For a more advanced project, tape together an air balloon (head) and bent cardboard (neck), cover with papier-mâché, and paint.





# dolly heads



# scent: *fantasia*



# scent: *fantasia*

## Look:

Describe the overall design of the object on the preceding page:

- What colors do you notice?
- How is it decorated?
- How might it feel to hold this object in your hand?
- What is it made of?
- How do you think it was made?
- What might it be used for?
- How does it work?

## Explore:

Anna Sui launched her first perfume, named after her, in 1999, roughly a decade after starting her fashion company. Since then, a total of forty perfumes have been created under the Anna Sui brand, each **evoking** a facet of the designer's fantastical narrative universe.

- What sort of story does this perfume bottle tell?
- Who do you think the packaging would appeal to?
- Based on the bottle, what would you expect this scent to smell like? Explain your answer.
- Every perfume needs an evocative name. What would you call this scent to best capture its essence, described on the Anna Sui website as follows:

Its "woody and floral fragrance conjures up sensuality, femininity, and mystery. Sweet pink pomele is blended with undertones of spicy pink pepper to create a complex and vibrant mix. The floral bouquet is offset by undertones of golden cypress and Himalayan cedar wood, giving [it] the aura of an enchanted forest."

- Imagine an advertising campaign or promotional video for the perfume. What sorts of images, music, or settings would it contain?

# scent: fantasia

## Discuss:

Getting a new product on the market and promoting it requires collaboration among many people: a designer whose overarching vision sets the tone, perfumers, graphic designers, and video directors, as well as models.

Watch the promotional video for Fantasia, the Anna Sui scent pictured on **page 42** (found in the webography at the end of this packet).

- Analyze and discuss the video.
- How is it similar to what you imagined? How does it differ?

## Make:

In 2019, Anna Sui launched the scent Fantasia Mermaid. Both the name and the packaging signal that it is a variation on the themes set by the original Fantasia.

Look at the image to the right. Drawing on the description of Fantasia provided above, write a promotional paragraph to introduce this perfume to a broad public. Describe what you imagine the scent to be like and what environment, mood, or atmosphere it evokes.

Imagine you are a movie director tasked with creating an advertising video for Fantasia Mermaid. What might it look like? Create a **storyboard** for the video.



# **glossary, webography & credits**

# glossary

## ANDROGYNY

Combination of feminine and masculine attributes into an ambiguous appearance, manifested in a person's biological sex, gender identity, or gender expression.

## ARCHETYPE

The ideal model or version of something.

## BRANDING

Certain visual aspects, like logo or color scheme, that set a company apart from others.

## COBAIN, KURT

(1967–1994) Lead singer of rock band Nirvana. Known as one of the most iconic musicians in alternative music.

## CODIFIED

Classified in a specific, strict manner.

## COLLABORATIONIST PARIS

Paris during its occupation by Nazi Germany during World War II, when some French citizens collaborated with the occupational forces to further their goals (e.g., the persecution of Jewish people or political adversaries).

## CONFORMISM

The act of adapting to or complying with the beliefs/behaviors of a given group of people.

## CORSAGE

A small bouquet of flowers worn on a woman's dress or around her wrist for formal occasions in the United States.

## DIY

Short for "Do It Yourself." Most often used in reference to crafting or fashion projects.

## DRAPER, DOROTHY

(1889–1969) Legendary American interior designer who established the first interior design company in 1925, when working was considered taboo for women. Her work is characterized by bright, exuberant colors, bold printed wallpapers, black and white stripes, and pattern mixing, combined with Rococo.

## ENSEMBLE

A group of items organized in a specific way; an outfit. From the French for "together."

## EVOCATIVE

Expressive; powerful; tending to bring strong images to mind.

## EVOKE

To call forth; to cause to arise; to call up (memories, associations).

## FAST FASHION

Unsustainable apparel-making practice that produces inexpensive clothing rapidly in response to the latest style trends.

## FRENCH REVOLUTION

The period in France between 1789 and the late 1790s during which French citizens rejected the country's established politics, overthrowing the French monarchy and culminating in Napoleon's rule.

## FEDORA

A hat with a soft brim and indented crown, typically creased lengthwise down the crown and "pinched" near the front on both sides. Particularly popular from the 1920s to the 1950s, fedoras are often associated with both the gangsters and detectives in film noir.

# glossary

## GARÇONNE

A woman in the 1920s who rebelled against conventional ideas of ladylike behavior and dress by dressing and behaving in ways more commonly associated with men.

## GARMENT DISTRICT

Also known as the Garment Center or the Fashion District. The heart of New York's fashion industry, home to many showrooms, fashion design companies, wholesalers of fabrics and notions, and other fashion-related businesses, located along Seventh Avenue in Midtown Manhattan.

## GRUNGE

A rock music genre and subculture that emerged in the late 1980s, characterized by grinding guitars, dark lyrics, and a thrift-store aesthetic including plaid shirts, flowered dresses, and army boots.

## HUMANITARIAN

Concerned for human well-being.

## ICONOGRAPHY

The science of identification, description, classification, and interpretation of symbols, themes, and subject matter in the visual arts.

## INUIT

Group of culturally similar indigenous people living in the arctic regions of Greenland, Canada, and Alaska.

## LEI

A flower garland around the neck commonly worn in Hawaii, symbolizing love, friendship, welcome, and celebration

## MOD

Of, relating to, or being the characteristic style of 1960s British youth culture; one who wears Mod

## NEW YORK DOLLS

American punk rock band formed in New York City in 1971.

## NOIR

In film, a genre of Hollywood crime movies, particularly of the 1940s and 1950s, that tend to present complex heroes and create strong atmospheric moods through dramatic lighting and carefully staged shots.

## PRE-RAPHAELITE

Of or relating to a group of English painters, poets, and art critics, founded in 1848, that was dedicated to reviving the artistic principles seen as characteristic of Italian art before Raphael.

## PROTOTYPE

A first model, akin to a first draft, for three-dimensional machines or sculptures.

## PULP FICTION

Popular mass-paperback novels with catchy covers produced on cheap paper made of wood pulp, focusing on the gangster, western, sci-fi, and superhero genres.

## PUNK

Aggressive, fast-paced form of music that emerged during the economically depressed mid-1970s in opposition to an increasingly commercial music industry. Punk style became a powerful subcultural phenomenon that went beyond music and found its manifestation in art, fashion, and graphic design.

## RACONTEUR

A storyteller.

# glossary

## ROCOCO

Exceptionally ornamental and theatrical style of architecture, art, and decoration, prevalent in eighteenth-century Europe, which combines asymmetry, scrolling curves, gilding, whites and pastels, sculpted molding, and trompe-l'oeil frescoes to evoke surprise, motion, and drama.

## STORYBOARD

A panel or series of panels depicting the important scenes in a film, used to map out the story visually and figure out what it will look like before it is produced.

## SUMMER OF LOVE

Summer of 1967, when some seventy-five thousand young people flocked to San Francisco, causing the media to take notice of hippies and the underground alternative movement.

## TROMPE-L'OEIL

Art technique that uses a highly realistic painting style to create the optical illusion that the depicted object is three-dimensional. From the French for "to fool the eye."

## VICTORIAN

Of the historical period during the reign of Queen Victoria, from the mid- to late nineteenth century, characterized by social, economic, and scientific changes as a result of colonialism and industrialization.



# webography

## GENERAL

Vogue on Anna Sui

<https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/designer/anna-sui>

## MOD

*Band of Outsiders* dance scene

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1MKUJN7vUk>

Slideshow of Anna Sui's Fall 2013 fashion show

<https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2013-ready-to-wear/anna-sui/slideshow/collection>

## PUNK/FAIRYTALE, SPRING 2007

Anna Sui's Spring 2007 collection

<https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2007-ready-to-wear/anna-sui>

Dorothy Draper

<https://www.dorothydraper.com>

## RETRO SURFER, SPRING 1995

Yves Saint Laurent's "scandalous" Spring 1971 collection

<https://www.thecut.com/2015/04/what-was-so-scandalous-about-yvls-scandal-show.html>

<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/fashion/features/yves-saint-laurents-1971-collection-shocked-the-world-but-changed-the-direction-of-fashion-a6882051.html>

*Atlas Obscura* on pulp fiction

<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/pulp-magazines-books-detective-fiction>

## GRUNGE/ANDROGYNY, SPRING 1994

Anna Sui's Spring 1994 collection

<https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-1994-ready-to-wear/anna-sui>

*New York Times* on grunge

<https://www.nytimes.com/1992/11/15/style/grunge-a-success-story.html>

"Kurt Cobain's Feminist Fashion Appeal"

<https://www.anothermag.com/fashion-beauty/8807/kurt-cobains-feminist-fashion-appeal>

Smashing Pumpkins, "Today"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xmUZ6nCFNoU>

Encyclopedia.com entry on "Gender, Dress, and Fashion"

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/fashion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/gender-dress-and-fashion>

# webography

## HIPPY ROCKSTAR

MAD exhibition description of Counter-Couture

<https://madmuseum.org/exhibition/counter-couture>

## SCHOOLGIRL/AMERICANA

Trailer for *The Royal Tenenbaums*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=caMgokYWboU>

Sustainability in fashion

<https://sustainable-fashion.com/>

## DOLLY HEADS

The Makeup Museum on Anna Sui's dolly heads

<https://www.makeupmuseum.org/home/2018/10/anna-sui-fall-2018.html>

The Cut on Anna Sui's dolly heads: photos and reflections from the designer

<http://www.thethick.com/anna-sui/>

Gemma Taccogna

<http://differentdrum.blog/artist-gemma-taccogna-paper-mache/>

## SCENT: FANTASIA

*Fantasia* promotional video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehOS25XPfxc>

*Fantasia* promotional video: behind the scenes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RB-JOmUpo7s>

Review of *Fantasia Mermaid*

<https://nstperfume.com/2019/03/15/anna-sui-fantasia-mermaid-fragrance-review/>

# image credits

## COVER

Anna Sui Fashion Show Spring 2007  
Photo by Thomas Lau

## MOD

Anna Sui Fashion Show Fall 2013  
Photo by Thomas Lau

Anna Sui Fall 2013 Sketch  
Courtesy of Anna Sui

## PUNK/FAIRYTALE

Anna Sui Fashion Show Spring 2007  
Photo by Thomas Lau

Installation view of *The World of Anna Sui*  
at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York  
Photo by Jenna Bascom

## RETRO/SURFER

Anna Sui Fashion Show Spring 1995  
Photo by Raoul Gatchalian

Mannequin Drawing by Michael Economy

## GRUNGE/ANDROGYNY

Anna Sui Fashion Show Spring 1994

## FAIRYTALE/NOMAD

Anna Sui Fashion Show Fall 1998  
Photos by Raoul Gatchalian

Installation view of *The World of Anna Sui*  
at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York  
Photo by Jenna Bascom

## SCHOOL GIRL/AMERICANA

Anna Sui Fashion Show Spring 2003  
Photo by Raoul Gatchalian

Anna Sui Fall 1994 Sketch  
Courtesy of Anna Sui

## DOLLY HEADS

Anna Sui Dolly Heads  
Photo by Bramble Trionfo for thethick.com

Installation view of *The World of Anna Sui*  
at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York  
Photo by Jenna Bascom

## SCENT: FANTASIA

Fantasia Mermaid  
Eau de Toilette  
Courtesy of Anna Sui

Fantasia  
Eau de Toilette  
Courtesy of Anna Sui

# credits

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