

preview

THE NEW BLUE

IKB79, Yves Klein (1959) Courtesy of ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London

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*70 years after Matisse created his 1952 “Blue Nudes,”
fashion is reinventing blue for the body yet again.*

Text JACQUIN CUNNINGHAM

Standing in front of Lyubov Popova's 1917 Painterly Architectonic at the zenith of the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, I had Henri Matisse's Dance (1910) in the corner of one eye, and an Yves Klein on my mind just around the corner. Tragedy strikes, someone almost sent me flying into Popova's pioneering constructivist tableau! As I turned around, I found to my delight it was an impossibly chic woman in an ultramarine cashmere jumper which she told me she stole from her sister-in-law. Why delighted you might ask? Because

I've been seeing blue everywhere, from tops to trousers it's like Haley Joel Osment in The Sixth Sense; except I don't see dead people, I see blue. This was the ultimate sign.

I'm not talking about Joni Mitchell's turbulent indigo or Miranda Priestley's ever controversial cerulean shades. Fashion's bleu-du-jour is that piercing ultramarine that shakes and pulses when you stare at it too long. Walk around New York or London, and you'll spot at least five ensembles looking like a walking Yves Klein

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painting or Matisse collage, whose work with color inspired a generation of designers.

70 years ago, Matisse was fed up with combining colors to create collages and threw himself into ultramarine, painted onto paper then cut and pasted together. This spring awakening became the Blue Nudes, a series which has passed into art legend—the woman's body is cast in ultramarine, cut by scissors and hand like a dressmaker cuts fabric. He (with the help of intrepid assistants) created the series with an exhaustive precision like that of Gabrielle Chanel—pinning and unpinning blue paper pieces on his studio walls just as Chanel ripped sleeves clean off jackets until they fit perfectly. By the summer, Matisse was in Cannes with assistant Lydia Delectorskaya who set out to their favorite pool. Beaten back by the sun, Matisse returned to his hotel room and began to create his own swimming pool in the room itself, pasting undulating blue forms across four walls immersing the artist in water. Matisse's opus-en-papier evokes ultramarine's fluidity, the way the color moves on the body and as in fashion, its ability to cleanse.

Ultramarine's history is a long one beginning in ancient Egypt, where lapis lazuli was brought in from what is Afghanistan today to create the now famous headdresses and scarabs of the pharaohs, and when crushed was even Cleopatra's eyeshadow of choice. By the time Rome had fallen and Italy entered its renaissance, a new hue called ultramarine from

the Latin "beyond the sea" was all the rage.

The French artist Yves Klein created his own ultramarine pigment, International Klein Blue (IKB) to better capture something immaterial. Of ultramarine Klein decreed: "Blue is the invisible becoming visible. Blue has no dimensions, it is beyond the dimensions of which other colors partake." Ellsworth Kelly took this a step further, giving ultramarine abstract forms which would go on to inspire Calvin Klein to drape his tunic dress curved to the right when laid flat and hug the hips on the body, leaving the wearer swathed in a summer sky or dripping from a dip in the gulf of Mexico.

Cennino Cennini wrote at the turn of the 15th century, "Ultramarine blue is glorious, lovely and absolutely perfect beyond all other pigments." At the time ultramarine was more expensive than gold and clothed the Virgin Mary and other religious figures across European art. Fast forward 500 years and Spanish couturier Cristobal Balenciaga, a lifelong Catholic, allowed divine inspiration to seep its way into the cut and color of his most beautiful blue looks. A 1965 dress and shoulder cape with a puffed ruffle rendered in sculptural silk gazar evokes Bartolomé Murillo's 1680 Immaculate Conception: The Virgin looks up to the heavens as the ruffle on Balenciaga's cape is pointed upwards, mirroring the drape of an ultramarine shawl in Murillo's masterpiece. Today at Balenciaga, Demna prays at the temple of reference and delivers sartorial sermons which





have come to define the zeitgeist. Since 2020, his blue couture looks have trickled down into the mainstream through his accessible aesthetic—though fashion’s blue wave at the time was dampened by a pandemic and Bottega Veneta’s green which has faded to a fad, ultramarine has become a color story about reemergence and transformation.

Beyond religious reverence, illustrator Richard Kilroy summons sexual machismo through the bright shade. His illustrations, which feature as little fashion and as much skin as possible, channel the raw power of ultramarine onto the body. Though he may have started his journey with blue drawings Sonic the Hedgehog as a child, it was on a foundation trip at La Centre Pompidou where Kilroy first really felt the weight of blue through Yves Klein. “My original reaction to it was this is actually quite wanky, the kind of stuff that gets parodied; but after I got into the color theory of it all I began to appreciate it more.”

Like Matisse, frustration with his old style led him to experiment with color moving on quickly from yellow to ultramarine on mostly nude male forms. “While I do love looking at clothes, I do love seeing their relation to the body; I hate drawing straight lines. I think there’s something about the curves and anatomy of the male body.” Gareth, accented by a titillatingly tiny Gucci SS97 thong seen round the world, drips with a sultry elegance as hands lay ready for action, eyes closed and lips pursed ever so slightly.

Gareth, wearing SS97 Gucci thong, illustration by and courtesy of Richard Kilroy.

Culture Hustle’s newest pigment, Easy Klein, a secret pigment Kilroy was reluctant to give up, is bringing blue up to its high tide. Injections of ultramarine from the next generation of designers like Thebe Magugu at his eponymous label and as an AZ Factory “Amigo” have brought blue back into non-Western context where it all began. Looking forward, the new blue allows us to see beyond the now into the future. If the ocean and the sky are inevitably intangible to us land dwellers, clothing ourselves in their colors allows for a moment of escapism in a world which is being torn apart by climate change, conflict and greed. This time around, ultramarine isn’t being thrown down to the street from the heights of couture houses; this time, it’s an oasis from the everyday, a shining blue pool of water in the desert, one that anyone has access to. After years of living in turbulent indigo, it seems like we’re ready to embrace clearer skies—fashion is following suit.