

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

From caveman to the catwalk, animal print has enthralled us for thousands of years. *Stylist* explores its enduring appeal

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Run a quick mental inventory of your wardrobe. Among the reliable mix of black dresses and sentimental T-shirts, chances are you'll spot a flash of something exotic; a zebra-print silk scarf perhaps or a pair of leopard Louboutins. For centuries, clothes, accessories and interiors have been adorned with the spots and stripes of tigers, zebras and cheetahs, and to this day they remain firmly on every high street and catwalk. And a/w 2014 is no exception, with an

explosion of animal patterns on the runway. Carven dressed its models in primary print coats with faux leopard fur collars; Sportmax clad them in amber python print. Chloé and Céline chose head-to-toe muted fawn patterns, while Givenchy teamed snake and leopard designs with vibrant butterfly motifs. But this is so much more than an attraction to spots and stripes; delve into its history and you'll find tales of sexual liberation, power and adventure. We explore our passion for animal print. 

STONE AGE PSYCHE**50,000-40,000 BC**

Some psychologists believe humans are fixated with animal print because the patterns are stitched into our genetic code. Coveting the skins of lions, tigers or leopards goes back to a time when our ancestors were hunter-gatherers and pelts were treasured because they meant warmth, protection and, above all, survival. We know early man wore the spoils of his hunt proudly. Archaeologists excavating caves dating back to the late Stone Age (30,000 to 40,000 years ago) have discovered rudimentary tools including bone scrapers and flint knives, which early humans would have used for scraping, cutting and punching holes in animal pelts. "Leopard and lion skins have always had an authority to them," says Oriole Cullen, curator of textiles and fashion at the Victoria and Albert Museum. "Killing this extraordinary animal and wearing the spoils imbued the hunter with a sense of power."

ANCIENT APPARELS**2686-2181 BC**

Leopard and lion skins were extremely popular in early civilisations such as Ancient Egypt and Greece. Ancient Egyptian artwork shows the spots of big cats on woven and printed textiles and tailored pelts as far back as the Old Kingdom (around the third millennium BC, when the civilisation was first established). Kings and priests of high ranking wore the skins when they performed funeral ceremonies (wearing a leopard-skin robe symbolised the defeat of the evil god, Set) and the notion of the 'divine' cat – the sacred lioness and tigress – was prevalent in iconography and folklore at the time.

POWER DRESSING**753 BC-1485 AD**

The wearing of exotic furs spread throughout the early civilised world and was used for both protection and adornment. During the period of the Roman Empire (753 BC-476 AD), German Barbarians were known to wear tough striped seal skins in battle. In the warmer climates of southern Europe, the ruling classes began to use luxury furs to project an image of power and wealth. In the middle ages (1154-1485 AD), legislation was introduced to regulate the use of fur as a means of signifying class. The pelts of finer, rarer animals such as ermine, marten and chinchilla were reserved for the royalty, nobility and high-ranking clergy while coarser, more commonplace furs such as goat, wolf and badger were worn by the lower classes, primarily for warmth.

FUR BECOMES FASHION**1300-1435**

Around the 14th century there was a cultural shift and the wearing of fur transitioned from a practical choice, or symbol of class status, to a style decision. Fur fashions came to signify decadence and exclusivity. Isabeau of Bavaria (1371-1435), wife of Charles VI of France, became a fashion icon when she married the king in 1385, spending vast sums

explosion in the popularity of animal print – costumes designed by Carpaccio and Titian took the place of the comparatively austere garments of before. Necks, cuffs and hems were often trimmed with ermine, letice or miniver (all furs from members of the weasel family) and became marks of the fashionable aristocrat. The leopard continued as an enduring symbol of luxury (Europe's burgeoning trade links with the Middle East meant the leopard became a familiar symbol of wealth), and often appeared in paintings of the time to denote power and nobility.

TEXTILE REVOLUTION**1760-1840**

Come the Industrial Revolution (1760-1840), large-scale embroidery machines were invented and animal-inspired patterns could be embroidered and printed on velvet, wool, cotton and linen. High society women in Paris would sport robes à l'Anglaise (a fitted dress with a full pleated skirt) printed with leopard spots, alongside feather headdresses and barrel-sized fur muffs. Napoleon's archaeological discoveries in Rome, Greece and Egypt inspired a fascination with all things classical – boosting the popularity of animal prints in textiles – while increasing contact with other cultures through expeditions in the Far East and Africa fuelled an interest in the natural world. "This was a time of Empire and change," says Celia Joicey from London's Fashion and Textile Museum. "The West Africa textile trade was thriving and high society clamoured to wear furs or clothes with animal prints." In 1787, the zebra-print suit, championed as the 'aristocratic stripe', became popular among dandies in Paris, inspired by a period of fascination with nature. Stylised zebra prints had been gaining popularity since Louis XIV's (1638-1715) acquisition of a zebra to his exotic menagerie some decades before, appearing on men's overcoats, vests and waistcoats. The early Victorian era (mid 1800s) saw the arrival of crocodile and snakeskin accessories. Handbags were especially sought after and sometimes came with the feet of the crocodile or alligator sewn into the interior. The reptile trend was continued by Louis Vuitton, whose crocodile skin luggage was popular in the 19th century, and by Gucci and Prada in the early 20th century.



on balls, feasts and ermine-trimmed gowns. Animal skins were also popular at this time – usually as trophy rugs or tapestries. Their prints were replicated in furniture, especially in the Islamic world, where Ottoman Turkish textiles were emblazoned with stylised tiger print motifs, as the animals were revered for their magical associations.

THE RENAISSANCE**1300-1700**

The artistic upheaval brought about by the Renaissance (which spanned the 14th to 17th centuries in Europe) prompted an

ZARAF THE GIRAFFE

1827-1845

Often, a boom in a particular type of animal print would be directly inspired by public events. In the early 19th century, France fell under the spell of giraffe print because of the influence of Zarafa, the first giraffe ever to set hoof on French soil. The animal was one of two gifted to Europe by Muhammad Ali (the Ottoman viceroy of Egypt) in 1827 in a bid to quell Greek resistance to the Ottoman rule. He sent one to George IV of Britain and the other to curry favour with the newly crowned King Charles X of France. Zarafa became a national treasure, sparking a giraffe-inspired cultural frenzy. Thousands took to the streets to catch a glimpse of the exotic creature (also known, at the time, as a camelopard) and Zarafa became the subject of songs, poems and even high fashion, with women trussing up their hair in exotic up-dos to resemble the animal's horns and styling themselves in giraffe-print dresses.

OUT OF AFRICA

1930s

Come the Thirties, the vogue for fashions inspired by Africa was in full swing. Animal furs were widely displayed in the colonialist exhibitions of the time (intended to boost trade and bolster support for the various colonial empires). American

DIOR MAKES IT A TREND

1947

The high-fashion appeal of animal *print*, rather than fur, was solidified by Christian Dior in 1947, when he showcased two leopard-print dresses in his spring collection – the mid-length 'Jungle' dress and the silk chiffon 'Afrique' gown, referencing the neoclassical Empire look of the early 19th century. This was the first time a designer had paraded animal print as a trend, meaning it was no longer just a symbol of luxury or unattainable film fashion. The pattern was inspired by Dior's muse, Romanian Mitzah Bricard, creative director of the company, who loved leopard print. The designer subsequently included leopard in every collection as a tribute to the women he said had "a divinely chic allure and captivating presence."

FELINE FEMINISM

1950s

Animal print's retro kitsch appeal was spearheaded by

Seventies. International laws were introduced prohibiting the trade of endangered species and lobbying organisations such as Lynx (now dissolved) and Peta harnessed the power of the media to raise awareness of the cruelty involved in fur production. Their campaigns encouraged designers to reject real fur and actors such as Brigitte Bardot and Kim Basinger lent their voices to the cause. In the early Nineties – when the debate reached a pinnacle – even 'pro-fur' designers such as Karl Lagerfeld introduced faux fur into their lines.

POP CULTURE BOOM

1985-1997

Hollywood continued to fuel animal print's appeal and *Out Of Africa's*



silent film actress Marian Nixon cemented the modern appeal of leopard print in 1925 when she paraded down Hollywood Boulevard in a floor-length leopard fur coat, accompanied by her very own pet leopard on a leash. Showgirl Josephine Baker was even known to take her cheetah, Chiquita, to the cinema with her. This Hollywood appeal was further strengthened by the film *Tarzan The Ape Man* by MGM in 1932; the risqué animal-patterned outfits sported by Johnny Weissmuller as Tarzan and Maureen O'Sullivan as Jane sparked an explosion in the popularity of leopard and cheetah-printed textiles and interiors.

Fifties B-Movie pin-ups from Bettie Page to Jayne Mansfield and came to represent women's burgeoning sexual empowerment. Actresses such as Marilyn Monroe and Brigitte Bardot also brought overt sexuality to the big screen – often clad in animal print as they did so – and this lean towards the loud, powerful and exotic not only signalled the gain in momentum for the women's rights movement, but also represented the post-war return to glamour. Animal print provided a welcome reprieve from the restrained styles women had been wearing since World War Two as a result of fabric rationing, when dresses were often made out of dull, heavy fabrics.

THE APPEAL OF FUR WANES

1970-1990

Political questions concerning the use of real fur gained momentum in the

release in 1985 ensured safari style was never far from the catwalk, from zebra-print Manolo Blahnik shoes, to 'panther' printed suede and cashmere from Valentino. Dolce & Gabbana introduced animal print into its spring/summer collection for the first time in 1992 (it subsequently never left) and the look was given memorable trash-chic pop culture makeovers by many, including Spice Girl Mel B – whose leopard print catsuit will forever be wheeled out at fancy dress parties – and *True Romance's* Patricia Arquette, who cemented the trend's cult appeal with her pink leopard print leggings.

MODERN UPDATE

2014

Today, the trend continues at full steam. For a/w 2014, Armani and Sportmax both played with snakeskin, while Gucci rolled out sheer leopard print blouses. "Leopard print is now a neutral," says Cullen. "It's as ubiquitous as marinière stripes." Sasha Sarokin, buying manager at Net-a-Porter agrees: "It's an investment, as it simply doesn't date." And considering the trend started some 40,000 years ago in the caves of Neanderthal man, we might be inclined to agree.

ILLUSTRATION: SARAH VANE HOWELL/DEBUT ART