

A Fashion Force To Be Reckoned With

Meghan, Duchess of Sussex strolls along a bustling street in Nottingham on a cool December evening, her first public appearance following her engagement announcement. Clad in a navy trench coat and black suede boots, attention is drawn to her medium-sized maroon tote. The elegant leather tote is primarily burgundy, with navy colour-blocking details and an ivory handle. It is the Midi Tote Tri-Colour in Burgundy/Navy/Vanilla, belonging to little-known Scottish brand Strathberry. Cameras capture the moment and photographs are quickly shared online. Not 11 minutes later, following a brief pause where the website crashed, the HK\$5,250 bag was sold out, with visitor numbers on the Strathberry website up by 5,000%. Within the following week, the waiting list for the bag grew to over 3,000 people.

Although these figures are impressive, this is certainly not the royal family's first rodeo, with royal members serving as fashion tycoons for as long as the monarch has been around. Queen Elizabeth, the longest-reigning British monarch, celebrated her 65th year on the throne in 2017, where she was awarded the Sapphire Jubilee. Her colourful and bold suiting choices are renowned with an 89% increase in the search term 'bright colour block suits' seen over the last year, with the search term at a five year high. Admirers continue to look to the 93-year-old trendsetter for inspiration, with her beloved Launer London handbag- that she has been loyal to since the 1950s- looked up once every 6 minutes. Although perhaps the obsession with royal fashion stemmed from the royals themselves. Princess Margaret was known for her infatuation with couture houses, attending Chanel shows in Paris whilst in talks with a number of top designers. Her distinctive style, obsession with fashion and rebellious personality made her a key royal figure in fashion, which was exacerbated by her exuberant sartorial choices and indulgence in luxury spending. On her 21st birthday she wore a creamy-white Dior gown. Photographed perched on a plush maroon sofa, with a decorated tapestry behind her, Princess Margaret was a vision in the long, frothy dress, looking every bit the princess that she was.

While Queen Elizabeth and Princess Margaret sparked initial interest with the royal monarch in the UK, the obsession with royals as notable trendsetters accelerated with Princess Diana. The public was fixated with Princess Diana's lovable charm, earning her the reputation of the 'People's Princess'. An inadvertent pioneer of fashion, Princess Diana's power and resonance as a style icon is indisputable. On the 20th anniversary of her passing, Virgil Abloh paid tribute to her in his Spring/Summer 2018 Off-White collection. He featured slinky black dresses reminiscent of her infamous 'revenge dress', silhouettes with strong, emphasized shoulders that nodded to the shoulder pads she popularized, mismatched gloves not

unlike the ones she sported at the America Cup Ball in 1986, and the bike shorts that she wore unapologetically. Princess Diana served as the muse for Tory Burch Spring/Summer 2020, where 80s style trends were loosely reinterpreted with subtle reference to the late Princess and inspiration was also drawn from the fearlessness and strength of her character. Princess Diana also popularized the coveted Lady Dior bag, which she owned in every colourway and iteration, and was renamed in her honour following her passing. Diana's impact as a royal fashion influencer did not go unnoticed, as the cover girl of three Vogue covers during her lifetime, before her final feature in October 1997, which paid homage to the beloved Princess' life. Just this past September 2019, Hailey Baldwin paid tribute to a selection of Princess Diana's most iconic outfits for Vogue Paris' September Issue. Her lasting legacy continues to serve as inspiration, from designers of the most sought-after fashion houses and world-famous celebrities to fashion enthusiasts and the average layman.

Although the royal impact as style icons and fashion moguls can be clearly seen through the lasting impression of Princess Diana and the iconic status and outfits of Queen Elizabeth, Kate Middleton reignited the fascination with royal fashion when her engagement with Prince William was announced in 2010. The appropriately royal-blue wrap dress by Issa that she donned during the announcement sold out everywhere within five minutes, prompting what then became coined "The Kate Effect". Middleton's wedding dress was yet another turning point in the Duchess' fashion journey. The sartorial masterpiece featured delicately embroidered lace and hand-cut flowers engineered onto ivory silk tulle, and was designed by British designer Sarah Burton for Alexander McQueen. While Princess Diana's fashion influence kick-started now perennial trends, the infatuation with royals has developed to create a sense of urgency, as doting fans scramble to purchase the exact outfit that a royal wore. Dedicated blogs and websites such as whatkatewore.com and meghansmirror.com have one prerogative: to find out what the royals wore, where said items can be purchased, and to share it with their fervent fanbase before the item sells out. According to Newsweek, Middleton generates over £1 billion to the fashion industry in the UK annually, as outfits she is seen wearing sell out within hours, with more affordable, high-street picks sold out in a matter of minutes. However, this phenomenon is not exclusive to the UK. According to Brand Finance's British Luxury survey in 2018, when Kate wears a piece of clothing or accessory, the desirability of the item increases by 38% for U.S. shoppers. Her pared back yet contemporary style resonates with a global audience, with similarly widespread impact, gracing the cover of the centenary issue of Vogue UK. So how has her sister-in-law, foreign to both royal territory and the UK itself, been received by the public?

Meghan Markle is certainly unlike any other British royal before her. Born and raised in America and of mixed ethnic heritage, it was uncertain how she would be received by the public as the latest royal addition. But her authenticity, charm and effortless style quickly won over the hearts of the public. And the love and adoration for her and her sartorial choices grow by the day, with search rates reaching explosive figures at her wedding in May 2018. Stella McCartney, designer of Markle's reception dress, had a search increase of 3,000% the week following the wedding. Givenchy, who designed the haute couture wedding dress, saw an increase of 61%. Markle is also a champion of sustainable fashion, frequently wearing ethical clothing brands such as Stella McCartney, Reformation and Everlane. In fact, in her guest-edited September issue of British Vogue, Markle revealed the launch of her sustainable "workwear collection" with Marks & Spencer, John Lewis and Jigsaw. For every garment sold, another will be donated to Smart Works charity, which provides free training and interview clothing to empower women re-entering the workforce. According to Yasmine Bachir, Lyst's Senior Communications Executive, after Markle wears a designer the brand will see on average a 200% increase in searches over the following weeks. Therefore, clothes not only endorsed by but also created with Markle herself would undoubtedly lead to skyrocketing sales and unprecedented demand.

So what is it about the royals that makes them so endearing? Why is it that everything they touch turns to gold, with hundreds and thousands of fans eager to mimic their every move and purchase? Clinical psychologist Dr. Donna Rockwell, who specializes in fame and celebrity, offered some suggestions as to how and why the actions of a royal can have such colossal impact. She described life as tumultuous and dislocated in nature, proclaiming that the royal family represented a sense of order, stability and a calmness in communication which the ordinary layman psychologically gravitates to and yearns for. Whether or not this may be true, it is clear that there is no simple answer to understanding where this infatuation stems from, nor how it seems to be constantly accelerating. But one certain factor would be the Royal's warm demeanour, genuine care for their people and their easy-going and relatable personalities. Although the Royal family appears to be an elusive enigma, it is this combination of mystery and authenticity that attracts dotting fans and widespread admiration. The Duchess of Cambridge is a philanthropic aspiration with humble roots, The Duchess of Sussex is your similarly benevolent down to Earth girl-next-door and Princess Diana is the beloved "People's Princess". Regardless of whether Meghan has taken the reins from Kate as leading royal fashion influencer, or if the title has and forever will be firmly held by Princess Diana, it is clear that the royals are a fashion force to be reckoned with.