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FALL 2019 COUTURE

# Viktor & Rolf



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PARIS, JULY 3, 2019

by AMY VERNER

Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren insist they never expected such a viral response to last season's collection, *Fashion Statements*, never mind that it was inspired by—and wholly suited to—social media. But then how to top all those language memes in tiers of tulle? “We try to stay away from expectations,” Snoeren said backstage. Still, something about the final

dress back in January—its message of “I want a better world”—seemed to trigger the direction of today’s show.

Calling the collection *Spiritual Glamour*, the designers noted how they were playing into the original definition of glamour as casting a spell. “Our spell is to transform the feeling of doom about our environment into positive action,” said Horsting. To do so, they enlisted help, marking their first time collaborating so directly with someone else. Claudy Jongstra has spent decades developing her own textiles—raising rare Drenthe Heath sheep and producing the botanical pigments—from a farm near the northern Netherlands village of Húns. More recently, she headed up a research group to recreate “Burgundian Black,” ostensibly the holy grail of dyes used during the Renaissance (black being associated with status and with fashion even back then).

The process involves magical-sounding ingredients like woad and madder; and the result, a dense black felt, is what the duo used throughout the lineup but especially for the night sky scenes on coats and dresses worn by models who were either punk-like or witch-like but not the least bit irreverent.

As Jongstra’s wilder materials became more and more integrated into V&R’s dramatic shapes, the designs turned increasingly colorful—shifting from moonscapes with bats

into sunrises with flowers and butterflies. Dresses featured intricate patchworks of vintage sourced fabrics as well as re-constituted needle-punched textiles, so that the effect fell somewhere between quilt and Klimt.

Whereas the previous collection was unapologetically camp—of course earning its place in the Costume Institute’s current exhibition—this one had pagan overtones. The approach was so methodical, though, that even the DIY, craft intentions—complete with embroidery rings as embellishment—were outshined by the technical finesse. And whereas the designers could have obviously been more explicit, they opted to stay subtle, more “romantic” as Snoeren put it.

So do Viktor & Rolf make a stronger impact when they’re ironic versus earnest? Without the backstory, the designs had interest, but as a specific Kate Bush-goes-glam vision.

Interestingly, though, if this collection seemed like the antithesis of Iris Van Herpen’s high-tech engineering and futuristic fabrics, both treat couture like a laboratory through which they arrive at new ideas manifested as quasi-historical dress. “The appeal for us is that we can work with nature, and Claudy is changing the way people think about production,” said Snoeren. Here’s hoping they have more spells in them yet.