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SPARKLE

Jessica Barker

DOI: 10.5040/9781474260428-FPA459

Abstract

Use of the word “sparkle” began in the thirteenth century. It originally referred to the act of giving off sparks, indicating an association with fire. Scholars have suggested that the human attraction to sparkle is a primal instinct related to the need for life-giving water and light. Associating such objects with wealth and beauty, countless cultures across the globe have incorporated them into dress for centuries. In the Western world, fashion has glimmered because of silk and metallic threads, spangles, sequins, lamé, Lurex, beads, and bling. Sparkle has figured prominently on stage, on screen, and on the catwalk. Companies like Swarovski have built empires on the enchanting effect of scattering light through crystal, while artisans have spent countless hours affixing sequins and beads to couture creations. From the opulent gowns of Charles Frederick Worth to Norman Norell’s shimmering mermaid shifts and Elie Saab’s romantic red-carpet dresses, fashion has sparkled through the centuries.

History and Significance of Sparkle in Clothing

Use of the word “sparkle” began in the thirteenth century. It originally referred to the act of giving off sparks, indicating an association with fire. Scholars have suggested that the human attraction to sparkle is a primal instinct related to the need for life-giving water and light. Associating glittering objects with wealth and beauty, countless cultures across the globe have incorporated them into dress for centuries. In the Western world, fashion has glimmered because of silk and metallic threads, spangles, sequins, lamé, Lurex, beads, and bling. Sparkle has figured prominently on stage, on screen, and on the catwalk. Companies like Swarovski have built empires on the enchanting effect of scattering light through crystal, while artisans have spent countless hours affixing sequins and beads to couture creations. From the opulent gowns of Charles Frederick Worth to Norman Norell’s shimmering mermaid shifts and Elie Saab’s romantic red-carpet dresses, fashion has sparkled through the centuries.

Textiles can either be woven with eye-catching materials such as silk and metal, enhanced with glittering embellishments like crystals and rhinestones, or accessorized with jewelry. Sumptuous silk fabric, precious metals, and gemstones hold cultural significance, having long been associated with wealth and status. In the West, glimmering fabrics and adornments were once available only to royals and elites due to their rarity, cost, and the complexity of their production in preindustrial eras. With the arrival of synthetic materials, low-cost imitations soon became readily available to a wider range of consumers.

Silk’s natural luster has been exploited for centuries via satin weave. Threads were also wrapped in thin metal filaments which, when woven, created dazzling and costly textiles known as cloth of gold or silver. Metal threads were featured in lavish embroidery designs, metallic lace trims, and looped-pile ciselé velvet. Often incorporating silk and metallic materials, passementerie embellishments like gilt braid, tassels, fringe, gimp, and gold bullion were found in military uniforms and added interest to heavily ornamented women’s fashions in the nineteenth century. Lamé gained popularity in slinky 1930s evening gowns, which shimmered on curvaceous film stars. Lurex, a trademarked metallic yarn, followed in the 1940s and found its way into evening wear, knits, and accessories.

Sparkling embellishments were worn by Ancient Egyptian elites whose garments were adorned with small gold disks, perhaps the earliest spangles. Spangles—also known as paillettes and oes because of their circular shape—decorated the clothing of wealthy Europeans from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. Spangles were made by hand: a small metal coil was cut into individual rings, which were hammered flat and individually sewn onto fabric. By the nineteenth century, sequins had replaced spangles. These were initially made in a similar manner but were later die-cut from thin sheets of metal. Sequins were made of gelatin in the early twentieth century, followed by Mylar and plastic in the 1950s.

As for jewelry, Byzantines favored polished uncut gemstones called cabochons in opulent gold settings. Faceting came into practice in the late thirteenth century, enabling gemstones to scatter light more brilliantly than before. Paste, a type of glass backed by metal foil, was widely used in jewelry, shoe buckles, and elaborate bodice ornaments in the eighteenth century. The embrace of costume jewelry, popularized by Coco Chanel, demonstrates how sparkle can make everyday dress look and feel more special. Yet even in the most opulent of eras, the taste level of sparkle has been called into question. During the rococo period, the overwhelming combination of glinting metallic embroidery, silk satin, spangles, and bodice ornaments in addition to interiors decorated with gold leaf, mirrored corridors, and crystal chandeliers was critiqued. Evoking the image of fluttering butterfly (*papillon*) wings, the term *papillotage* was used to describe how this flickering luminescence caused the eyes to blink and blur out of focus.

Though less dazzling, the wearing of metal coins or polished shells has been a way for nomadic people to keep currency close to their bodies while adding visual interest. Different cultures have attributed spiritual powers and monetary value to beads, which have been made of countless natural materials since prehistory. Such objects have figured prominently in cross-cultural exchange. In fashion, beads became especially popular in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from the somber jet beads worn with Victorian mourning attire to the festive beaded designs found on flappers’ dresses. Swarovski, established in 1895, manufactures lead glass—commonly known as crystal—in all shapes, sizes, and colors. Swarovski crystals have shimmered on the gowns of countless couturiers from Charles Frederick Worth onward; they continue to dazzle on the runway each season. Rhinestones are made of glass or plastic and can be sewn or glued directly onto garments. Invented in 1970 and reaching peak popularity in the 2000s, the Bedazzler tool sparked a fad for decorating one’s own clothing with glue-on rhinestones.

Performers regularly incorporate glitz and glamour into their stage costumes. From ballet to Bollywood, sparkle is used in dancewear to create a sense of magic, enhance performers’ movements, and dynamically interact with stage lighting. Pianist and showman Liberace sported lavish costumes including sequined tuxedos, crystal-covered shoes, mirrored capes, and light-up garments from the 1950s onward. Since the 1970s, Cher has memorably donned Bob Mackie’s showgirl-style costumes for performances and red-carpet appearances. The 1970s glam rock genre was sometimes called glitter rock in reference to the shimmering ensembles of artists including David Bowie and Marc Bolan, and sparkle has become somewhat of a uniform for pop artists since the 1980s. Country musicians wore custom-embroidered and bejeweled suits by Nudie Cohn in the 1950s; in the 2000s and 2010s, stars like Carrie Underwood paired glittering gowns with laid-back cowboy boots. The desire to display wealth and status through sparkling accoutrements has figured prominently within rap and hip-hop culture as well. Gold and diamonds—called ice—are worn in the form of heavy chains, tooth caps or grills, and rings. In the 1990s, these flashy fixtures were called “bling.”

Sparkle is attention-grabbing in a way that borders on sartorial aggression, yet this assertiveness has been embraced by some. Glitter, worn by drag performers and during Pride parades, has become a symbol for the LGBTQ community. During campaigns for the 2012 presidential election, glitter bombing (throwing mounds of glitter at politicians) became a form of protest against anti-LGBTQ policies. Invented serendipitously in 1934, glitter is created by cutting thin sheets of colored plastic or foil into powder-fine circles and hexagons, as well as minuscule stars, hearts, and other shapes. Fabrics like tulle and organza can be treated with a glitter finish, delivering a high level of sparkle but leaving behind traces of shimmering dust.

Sparkle on the Catwalk

Associated with fantasy and fairytales, sparkling materials possess a magical quality; innumerable points of light dancing across a surface can be enchanting. In folklore and film, magical transformations occur within a swirl of sparkling fairy dust. Glittering red-carpet gowns seem to have a similar effect. Since the early 2000s, Elie Saab has outfitted starlets in romantic pastel gowns covered in crystals, sequins, and metallic detailing. In the 1960s and 1970s Norman Norell was known for his so-called mermaid dresses. These floor-length, jewel-toned silk jersey dresses were covered in hand-applied sequins that shimmered like scales. Celestial deities are also recalled through sparkle, as with two dazzling ball gowns from Christian Dior's fall 1949 collection. Featuring embellished scalloped skirts, the designs were named "Venus" and "Junon" after ancient Roman goddesses. Angel imagery figures prominently in the Victoria's Secret fashion show, a televised catwalk spectacle wherein lingerie is presented with the addition of elaborate accessories. Angel wings were introduced in 1998, and the fantasy bra concept was first presented in 1996 with the diamond-encrusted "Million Dollar Miracle Bra." It was soon followed by the ruby-laden "Red Hot Fantasy Bra" of 2000, valued at a record-breaking \$15 million. The brand's fantasy narratives would be incomplete without attention-grabbing glitz.

Sparkle can provide glimmers of the future as well as the past. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Thierry Mugler's strong silhouettes and futuristic aesthetic dazzled in white and silver sequins, lamé, and PVC. In the 1960s, Paco Rabanne designed unusual dresses made of plastic disks, metal chains, and other reflective materials that channeled space-age aesthetics. For many of the designers who look to historic influences, the resplendent styles of the past are interpreted using shimmering textiles, cascading crystals, and heavy metallic embroidery. John Galiano, known for his theatricality and eclectic influences, has unsurprisingly employed sparkle, featuring it prominently in many of his collections for Dior in the late 1990s and mid-2000s. Influences included Ancient Egypt and its gilded splendor (spring 2004), body armour and paillettes recalling Joan of Arc (fall 2006), dripping Austro-Hungarian-inspired jewels and embroidered satin (fall 2004), crystalline Edwardian-meets-African adornments (fall 1997), and cool metallics à la Marlene Dietrich (spring 2004). Versace has used shiny surfaces to communicate ancient influences as well as sexual assertiveness. Orotton, the house's signature metallic mesh material, was used in chiton-style dresses presented during the 1980s and 1990s. Classical and baroque motifs often appear in the form of gold medallions and *trompe l'oeil* brocade prints, while Versace's fall 1991 and fall 1997 collections channeled Byzantium through glossy leather, Orotton, and bejeweled crosses.



Paco Rabanne, fall/winter 1997. Source: Niall McInerney, Photographer © Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Sparkle has been used to add glamour and pizzazz to traditional styles as well as special-occasion dress. In the 1980s, Karl Lagerfeld reinterpreted Chanel's classic tweed jacket using black sequins arranged in a quilted effect. In the 1970s, Halston's disco-ready dresses and jumpsuits glimmered on lighted dance floors beneath mirror balls. Sparkle also figures in the maximalist methodology and is often used to animate bold silhouettes and bright color combinations. Christian Lacroix enhanced his exuberant designs with glimmering accents and glossy textiles in the late 1980s and 1990s, as has Zandra Rhodes. On screen, Nolan Miller created extravagant costumes for the 1980s television show *Dynasty*. The characters' flashy jewels, beaded gowns, and strong-shouldered satin suits left a strong impression on women's fashion.

Advanced textile development processes have yielded innovative interpretations of traditional cloth of gold and spangles. Jakob Schlaepfer, which began as an embroidery business at the start of the twentieth century, has become one of the most innovative textile manufacturers of the twenty-first century. The brand created the opalescent Phantom fabric, a lightweight composition of bronze, copper, and aluminum fibers, as well as a phosphorescent sequined material and many other bespoke textiles. For example, Jakob Schlaepfer developed ethereal golden fabrics for Guo Pei's spring 2017 "Legend" collection, and Vivienne Westwood selected a shimmering silver textile made of recycled plastic bottles for a gown worn by Lily Cole to the 2016 Academy Awards.

More widely publicized are Swarovski's designer collaborations through the Swarovski Collective program. Since its founding in 1999 in partnership with Alexander McQueen and Isabella Blow, the program has promoted the innovative use of crystal in fashion, supporting over 150 designers. One such designer is Hussein Chalayan, who used Swarovski's crystal mesh—developed in 1993—in his spring 2007 collection. Crystals were shocked with light for Chalayan's LED minidresses (fall 2007) and laser dresses (spring 2008). Alexander McQueen has used Swarovski crystals in provocative ways as well, often to advance his dark and fantasy-driven themes. McQueen presented a silver crystal mesh hood in spring 1999 and crystal mesh body armor in spring 2000. His "Bell Jar" dress from spring 2009 was described by the Victoria and Albert Museum as "more crystal than textile." Philip Treacy has crafted many elaborate headdresses with Swarovski crystals and other shimmering materials; some developed in partnership with McQueen, such as the "Bird's Nest" headpiece presented in fall 2006.



Philip Treacy, 1999. Source: Niall McInerney, Photographer © Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Embellishing couture garments with sequins and crystals requires considerable skill. Independent craft workshops once supplied couture houses with custom embroidery and beadwork, but as demand waned they faced extinction. Between 1985 and 2013, Chanel acquired a dozen of these businesses, including the renowned Maison Lesage, under the subsidiary Paraffection. Whether painstakingly sewn onto couture fantasies or knit into casual daywear, sparkle adds visual and cultural dimension to the fashionable world, from the catwalk and the stage to the street.

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See also [Alexander McQueen](#); [Ball Gowns](#); [Cher](#); [Christian Dior](#); [Coco Chanel](#); [John Galliano](#); [Paco Rabanne](#); [Philip Treacy](#); [Thierry Mugler](#); [Vivienne Westwood](#)