

Do Oscar Dresses Matter Anymore?

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With a yearlong awards season providing countless runways, Academy Awards gowns becoming increasingly safe and boring, and designers and consumers experiencing who-wore-what fatigue, the greatest runway in the world is getting rough around the edges.

Once upon a time, the Oscars produced the gowns seen and heard around the world by film fans, fashion critics, retailers and designers. The reverberation of one great dress — or one bad one — could ring up millions of dollars or lose them, as memorable Oscar gowns had a trickle-down effect on American and European brand sales, trends, prom gowns, color palettes — even on designers' makeup lines.

And that's before the Internet made the dresses and their fashion credits accessible prior to a star even stepping onto the red carpet, thanks to luxury-brand press releases trumpeting who-wore-what down to the shoe and diamond stud. So how did the Oscars get outclassed fashion-wise? For one thing, the competition raised their game: Cannes exploded as a couture runway, social media helped the Met Ball become fashion's biggest night, and designers jumped into the fray for the Golden Globes, SAG Awards and even the Emmys. But a key reason has been that the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences never really cared about fashion coverage. "They never gave us decent spots on the red carpet," says a major fashion journalist. "We can't get quotes from stars or early designer credits from them, so we just don't cover the Oscar red carpet that much anymore." Upon hearing such complaints, the Academy PR department has been known to say, "I'm sorry, this is not a fashion show."

Oscars 2016

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It used to be one — with Jodie Foster, Annette Bening and Michelle Pfeiffer looking regal in Armani, Angelina Jolie exuding sex appeal in Versace and Cher strutting in anything Bob Mackie or almost nothing. In the '80s and beyond, the Academy Awards' red carpet was a platform to reinforce a brand's fashion values, says historian Bronwyn Cosgrave: "Armani used the Oscars to launch his evening collection, and Prada transformed its identity from nylon backpacks to eveningwear with one dress on Uma Thurman."

Then, around 2010, suddenly all the gowns looked the same: columns, often sequined or beaded, with no sleeves, no trains, no mistakes — and no fun. Instead of fashion impact, designers began to focus instead on the Oscars as a business and PR opportunity, paying actresses up to \$250,000 to wear a dress or up to \$1 million for a piece of jewelry. (These days, stylists are even taking a cut: Last May, veteran dresser Jessica Paster admitted at a panel to receiving "anywhere from \$30,000 to \$50,000" for putting a gown on a client.) Observes Film Fashion founder Susan Ashbrook, who wrangled celebrities for Lanvin, Escada, Herve Leger, Harry Winston and other brands in the heyday of Oscar fashion (say, 1994 to 2010): "It's the same designers over and over again — Dior, Armani, Versace, Valentino — because after 25 years of working them, they now own the Oscars."

Unlike the Met Ball, says Peggy Siegal, who is both a New York fashion-event expert and an Oscar campaign vet, "the Oscars has cut back on true glamour because the Hollywood press and fashion police nitpick, and don't understand European high fashion. The Met Ball is impervious to mainstream schlock celebrity press, so it gets all the good gowns." Jeweler Kimberly McDonald, who has bedecked Michelle Obama and Halle Berry, says, "Half the actresses at the Oscars are afraid of being bashed. I hear it all the time, even about the jewelry."

