

Models wear creations part of N'21 women's Fall/Winter 2017-2018 collection.

Gucci alchemist

In his two years heading the Gucci label, Alessandro Michele has created collections that looked as if they were pulled from an attic trunk. Sheer blouses tied at the neck with a bow, floral suits and proclamations of love accompanied by tiger motifs are instantly recognizable as his, even when copied, which they are, profusely. If Michele's work to date has been concrete with clear references, his latest collection was otherworldly.

The ambitious, sometimes extreme, collection of 120 looks was viewed through a glass-encased breezeway, a passageway that served as the crossroads for bygone eras and ones yet to come. A pyramid stood at the center, topped with a rooster weather vane, seeing which way the fashion winds blow. Backstage, Michele said he approaches fashion like an alchemist, hewing to his own aesthetic.

"You take something poor and transform it into gold, into something precious," Michele said. At his most extravagant, Michele created a hooded robe of ruffles so profuse that it recalled a 17th century barrister's wig, or an adult version of a christening dress. The latter suggestion was ironically undercut by devils-horn jewelry poking out of the nose and crystal-stud-

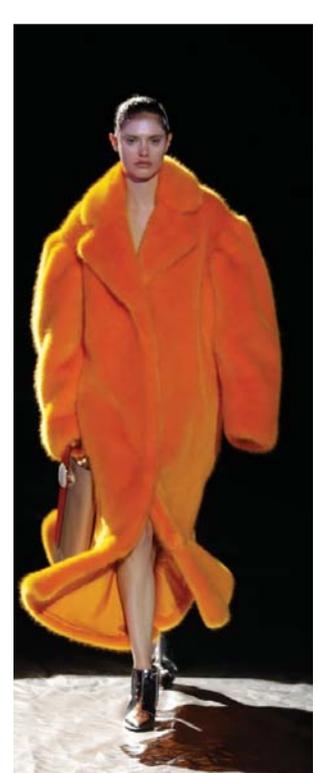
ded lightening-shaped sunglasses. The look befitted a Venetian Carnival ball.

But there was also a snugly fit black dress with a ruffle defining the curves that was as restrained and elegant as anything Michele has created at Gucci. The vastness of the tour de force collection owed to Michele's decision to show menswear alongside his womenswear collection.

For men, there were shimmering circus strongman suits with tiger motifs on the bottom half and an ab-baring circle cut on the torso. There also were suits with oversized Gucci stripes and a brand-familiar duffel coat. There was an exoticism to the looks, a meeting of worlds and a pulse of imagination. Collars were pointy or swirly. Headgear ranged from aviator caps to Gucci-embellished headbands to enormously brimmed millinery. Umbrellas suggested by turn a Victorian-era stroll or a tropical cocktail on the beach.

But no detail was more otherworldly than crystal-studded masks that completely encased the head like a robber's stocking cap. "When you dress like this, you don't want to be anything else anymore," Michele said. He was dressed in ripped jeans and a Gucci T-shirt overwritten with the words, "I want to go back to believe in a story."

Michele appears to have settled in at Gucci. After a couple of itinerant seasons showing at a former customs railway, Michele unveiled his latest collection at the new Gucci Hub showroom and offices on the outskirts of Milan. Florence Welch and rapper ASAP Rocky were in the front row. The artists both read texts by William Blake and Jane Austen on the vinyl LP that served as the show's invitation.



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