

# "ThursdayStyles"

The New York Times



Virgil Abloh

1980-2021

ANDREW WHITE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The barrier-breaking designer ascended to the heights of the traditional luxury industry, changing what was possible in fashion. For him, clothes were not garments but fungible totems of identity that sat at the nexus of art, music, politics and philosophy.

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BY JON CARAMANICA, GUY TREBAY, GINA CHERELUS, JESSICA TESTA, ANDRÉ WHEELER, ANNA P. KAMBHAMPATY AND VANESSA FRIEDMAN

# Texts From Virgil

After Virgil Abloh's death, many of his friends and colleagues shared screen shots of their exchanges with Mr. Abloh, ranging from mundane to profound. For those on the receiving end of these energetic, relentlessly optimistic DMs, his messages now serve as mementos, encapsulating the spirit of who he was in their lives.

By ANNA P. KAMBHAMPATY, ANDRÉ WHEELER and JESSICA TESTA

To: **Joe Holder**, entrepreneur

Fighting like it's my day job, imma beat this, with a head up !!

To: **Samuel Ross**, designer

Our black lands  
Africa/ Caribbean  
Are waiting for us  
Let's find a funding model to have us build prototype homes / hospitals / centers

To: **Tyler Mitchell**, photographer

Congrats x100000 on this Vogue cover and premise  
Nonsense is the future as fun as that is to say  
2021 is a picture for us all to urgently paint 🌟

To: **Gabriella Karefa-Johnson**, stylist

It's in our DNA to birth the new versions of us

To: **David De Giglio**, co-founder of New Guards Group (licensee of Off-White)

THIS IS OUR ACCOMPLISHMENT  
Your the first person on planet earth that not only believe but supported my ambition to design  
More than Kanye more than anything  
I can't thank you enough

To: **Cole Bennett**, director

Your eye is vital, only comes around once in a generation 🌟

To: **John Geiger**, designer

Know your doing it all the right way  
The grass roots way  
When I started I felt like there was no traction  
So I kept my head down just working  
And it worked out  
For you it will be the same

To: **Juelz Santana**, rapper

The world is ours  
Our vision is timeless

To: **Kendall Jenner**, model

LOVE YOU TO THE MAXXXX  
KEEP NATURALLY SLAYING IT GRACEFULLY 🌟

To: **Sean Wotherspoon**, designer

Life has a funny way of taking twists and turns  
It's how we surf them that defines us  
To me we're on the same community  
I'll give up all my achievements to stand up for what I believe in, even in the face of public miss understandings  
It's unfortunate the public can take such dark turns but it's important to take the highest road always

To: **Alexis Ohanian**, entrepreneur

Yoooooo  
How goes it !?  
Whats top of the list on your passion projects these days?

To: **Bella Hadid**, model

YOUR AN ANGEL. Not even of this earth. You walk thru a door and we all smile. All energy from your heart. In this shifty world it means the most to cruise thru it with real ones. You shine light and actually make the world a better place. I'll know you in 30 years from now and we'll laugh at the last 5.  
Shine B, shine 🌟

To: **Daniel Arsham**, artist

Gotta keep it from getting monotonous  
That's the trick with fashion

To: **Timothée Chalamet**, actor

A bottle of tequila and the Cudi album on 12 🌟

To: **Billie Esho**, rapper

This is a marathon, bumps in the road can't detour one of our paths ... I can attest ... the bumps will come when we least expect it, but the story will be writing by us and our work not them and their white pen.

To: **Jeff Carvalho**, co-founder of Highsnobiety, Burrata

Word is we only live once

## Honoring 'the Ultimate Designer' at His Store

Outside Off-White's Em Pty Gallery in SoHo, fans paid respects to a talent lost early.

By GINA CHERELUS

On Monday, as the fashion world mourned the death of Virgil Abloh, fans of his work went to SoHo to pay their respects. There, at his Off-White store, they remembered a visionary artist who had opened doors for a new generation of creative thinkers.

As a light flurry of snow fell, mourners scattered bouquets of red, pink, blue and white roses; lit prayer candles; spray-painted messages ("REST IN POWER 4EVER V.," "LEGEND"); and placed signs inscribed with dedications to the transformative Black designer outside the store (called Em Pty Gallery), which was closed to shoppers.

Mr. Abloh, the founder of Off-White and the artistic director of Louis Vuitton men's wear, died on Sunday in Chicago at 41 after a private two-year battle with a rare cancer, just days before he was expected to show a new Vuitton collection in Miami. The news came as a shock to many of his collaborators and admirers who saw in him a tremendous talent and an industry leader.

For many aspiring fashion designers, Mr. Abloh was a role model, proof that a Black man could ascend to one of the highest seats in luxury without ever conforming to a traditional notion of what "luxury" should mean.

Xander Evans, 24, was visiting New York from Virginia when he stopped by the Off-White store to honor Mr. Abloh — the "ultimate designer," in his words.

"My dream is to open up a sneaker and



JEEHAH MOON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

clothing store," Mr. Evans said. "He was one of the front-runners for people who look like me in the fashion industry, so it means something to me as a Black man."

Nour Sassine, 25, a fashion and textile designer in Beirut, had been shopping at Acne Studios next door when she noticed the altar outside Off-White. "He created a lot of hope for younger designers to make it," she said.

One man walked up to the storefront with a Wite-Out pen and wrote "VIRGIL" in

Off-White's Em Pty Gallery was closed to shoppers but drew a crowd of people who saw Virgil Abloh as an inspiration, an artist and a role model.

small letters with a heart beneath the designer's name. About 30 minutes later, a woman covered the heart with a red logo sticker.

Maggy Rogow, who was standing with her dog and watching the woman, ripped the sticker off. "It was her own brand or something," she said. "Just self-promotion."

Ms. Rogow, a 33-year-old graduate student who used to work in fashion, said that Mr. Abloh represented a change in the industry that "needed to happen" for people

of color. She added that she wished she could have seen his future creations.

"His influence on so many different industries, whether it be music, fashion, art, is huge," she said. "He will leave a legacy, and it's just absolutely tragic that he was taken so soon and really young."

Jose Tejeda, a 31-year-old New Yorker, pulled up in a white BMW and left a bouquet of red roses on the sidewalk. When asked what Mr. Abloh's work meant to him, he said it was too hard to put into words.

"It hits home because I'm a fan of him always setting that bar," Mr. Tejeda said. He worried about who could possibly fill such a role now. "Especially as a Black man breaking down that door. Creative director at Louis Vuitton? That's huge."

The mood was quiet and the crowds that formed were small, but many paused for a few moments to observe the growing display and take photos and videos on their phones. At one point, "Touch the Sky," by Kanye West, began playing from the speakers of Galli, a restaurant nearby — a coincidentally fitting song, given Mr. West's longtime relationship with Mr. Abloh.

Chanan Lalmi, a 17-year-old model who appeared in a 2019 Instagram campaign for Em Pty Gallery, was there with his father. "I'm shocked and very sad," he said in French that was translated by his father.

Connor Garrett, 28, arrived at the store wearing various Off-White pieces (he noted that he works in tech so that he can "afford to buy fashion") and with a bouquet of roses.

"He changed the way people think about clothing," Mr. Garrett said. "I think he influenced a whole generation, and I think it's safe to say that he is the most influential artist of our generation."

# EVERY OBJECT WAS A CANVAS

Throughout his life, Virgil Abloh was obsessed with the idea of collaboration, and many of his partnership projects were cornerstones of hypebeast culture. This makes sense for a cross-disciplinary artist who sharpened the visions of other artists, including Kanye West and ASAP Rocky. As the founder and chief executive of Off-White and, later, the artistic director of Louis Vuitton men's wear, he expanded the idea of what a collaboration could be. Evian water bottles, Ikea furniture, Warby Parker frames, compostable Cha Cha Matcha cups. To Mr. Abloh, every object was a canvas.

Today collaborations have become, in the eyes of many, a runaway train. The glut of partnerships inevitably means

that they often feel void of emotional connection. This was never the case for Mr. Abloh, whose personal and artistic interests always acted as his compass. One day he would work with the vegan cafe he frequented for lunch, the next with a multinational brand.

And the products almost always became instant totems. Many shoes to come out of his lucrative, years-long partnership with Nike are listed on resale markets for more than 10 times their original price. A limited-edition Mercedes-Benz and a Louis Vuitton collaboration with the Bathing Ape creator Nigo were among Mr. Abloh's final projects. *ANDRÉ WHEELER*



One of Virgil Abloh's designs for "The Ten," his collection for Nike.

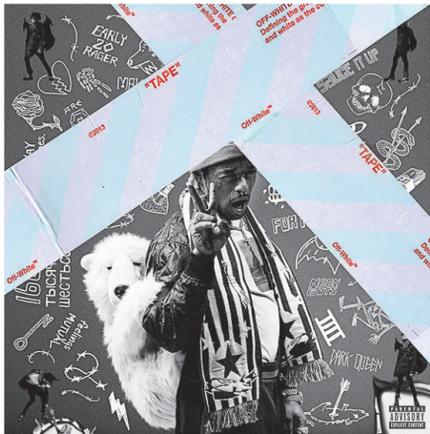


**JUNE 2016**  
**Moncler**

This collection drew from fishermen motifs, highlighting Mr. Abloh's penchant for unexpected references. "The style of dress in that form-meets-function field I found interesting to explore with an Off-White sensibility," he told GQ magazine at the time.

**DECEMBER 2016**  
**Chrome Hearts**

The distinctive visual identity of Off-White was really beginning to take shape at this point. The tee-focused drop featured what would become popular motifs for the brand, including a highlighter-green colorway and text-heavy designs.



**SEPTEMBER 2017**  
**Lil Uzi Vert**

Mr. Abloh pulled a Tom Ford here and directed the music video for the rapper's smash hit "XO Tour Llif3." The video, with nearly 500 million views, even kicks off with the Off-White logo at the bottom. A true branded experience.

**NOVEMBER 2017**  
**Nike**

Some of Mr. Abloh's most popular and buzzy designs came in the form of his long-running Nike collaboration. The partnership kicked off with Mr. Abloh reconstructing 10 popular Nike models. During his time with Nike, Mr. Abloh also designed custom-made tennis dresses for Serena Williams, one of which featured a black tutu.



**OCTOBER 2018**  
**Instagram**

Instagram is a key way that Off-White's younger customers engage with fashion. So of course Off-White teamed up with the popular app to create face filters that allowed users to try on its new neon green sunglasses.



**NOVEMBER 2016**  
**Levi's**

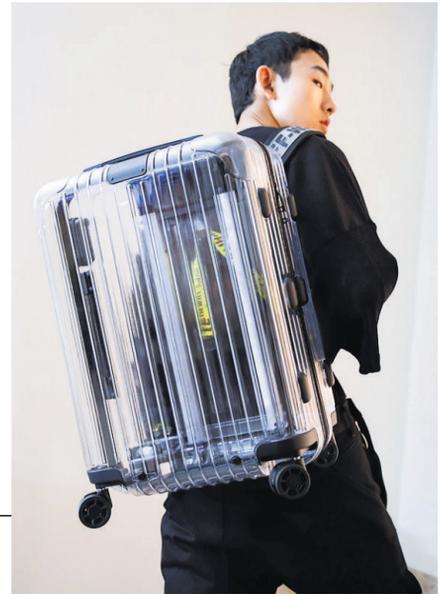
Here's when the collaborations really started kicking off. Mr. Abloh was commissioned by the denim brand to create 11 looks that featured spliced fabrics with bold, contrasting colors. The release was a hit.

**JULY 2017**  
**Warby Parker**

Mr. Abloh designed Wayfarer-inspired sunglasses for the brand. They sold quickly, as would many future Abloh collaborations.

**NOVEMBER 2017**  
**Champion**

With these pieces, the first of multiple collaborations, Off-White continued its streak of teaming up with some of the biggest legacy retail brands.



**JULY 2018**  
**Rimowa**

A collaboration that, arguably, infused new life into the German suitcase brand after it joined the LVMH group in 2016. Possibly for the first time ever, see-through suitcases were in.

**JANUARY 2019**  
**Mr Porter**

Remember office wear? Well, before the work-from-home era, Mr. Abloh dedicated a 40-piece capsule collection with the e-retailer Mr Porter to modern office wear. In his vision, cherry red khakis and long-sleeve logo tees are the perfect Tuesday look.



**DECEMBER 2018**  
**Cha Cha Matcha**

Mr. Abloh's creative ventures were not centered purely on fashion. For this one, he redesigned the to-go cups for a trendy matcha cafe with locations in Los Angeles and New York.

**JULY 2021**  
**Snapchat**

Off-White digitized its fall 2021 collection for Snapchat's popular bitmojis, allowing users to deck out their personal avatars in sidebags and logos galore.



**NOVEMBER 2021**  
**Louis Vuitton Men's x Nigo**

The second collaboration between Mr. Abloh and the Japanese designer Nigo was also released shortly before Mr. Abloh's death, merging aughts-flavored street wear tropes with the luxury house codes.

**NOVEMBER 2019**  
**Ikea**

Another highly successful collaboration, this one led to select pieces selling on resale markets for astronomical markups. The collection, which featured a green rug emblazoned with "WET GRASS," had hypebeasts waiting outside Ikeas as if they were Supreme shops.

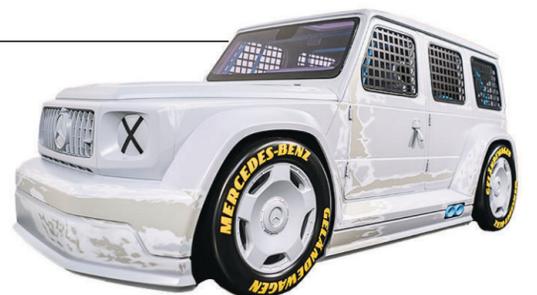


**NOVEMBER 2021**  
**Nike x Air Jordan x Off White**

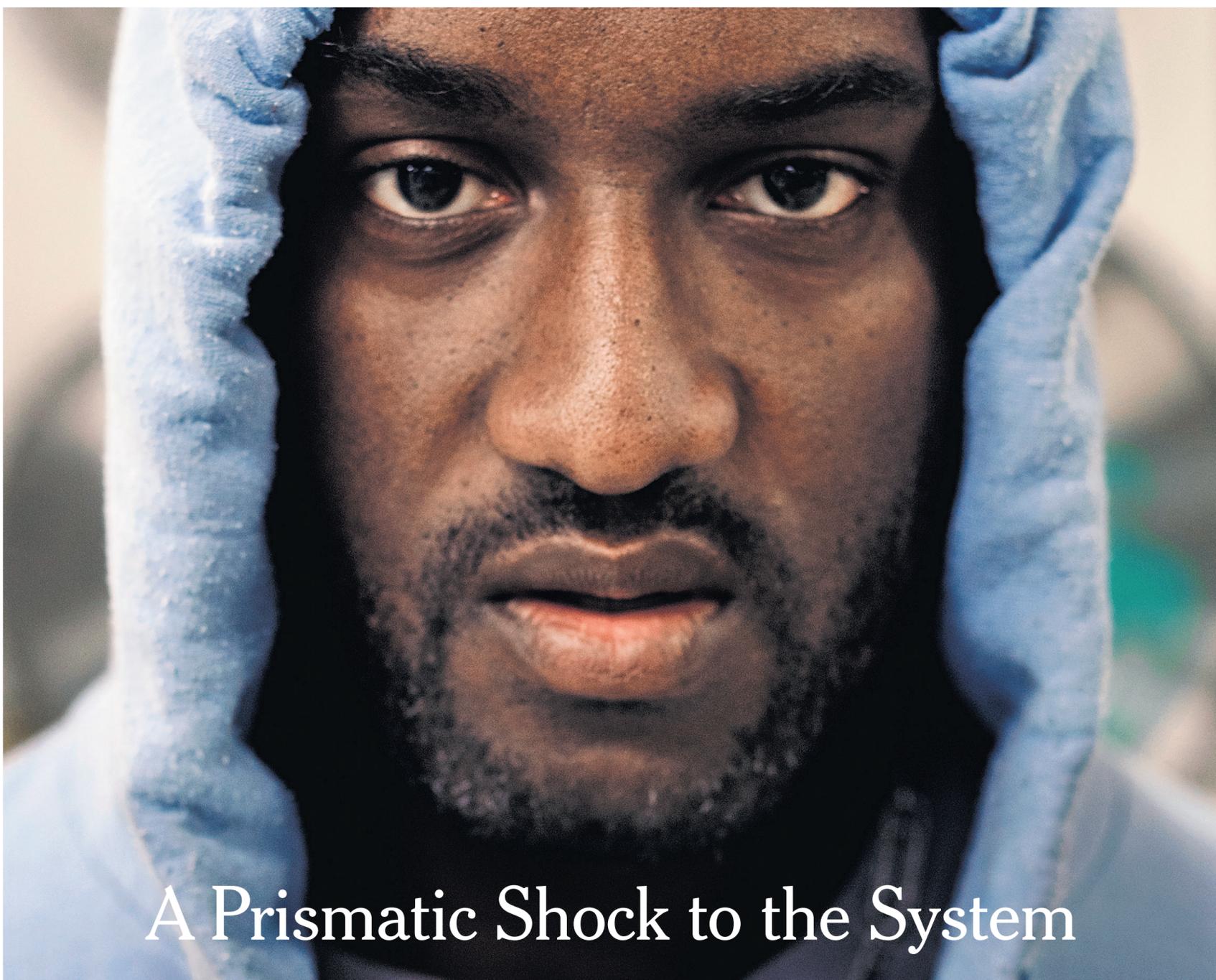
In these pieces, released shortly before Mr. Abloh's death, the designer focused his eye on remaking Jordan apparel, applying his popular cut-and-stitch aesthetic.

**NOVEMBER 2021**  
**Mercedes**

One of the designer's final projects was a collaboration with Mercedes-Benz. Titled "Project Maybach," the decked-out coupe is heavy on the glitz and can be viewed at the Rubell Museum in Miami through Thursday.



LEFT COLUMN, FROM TOP: VIA OFF-WHITE X CHROME HEARTS; VIA GENERATION NOW/ATLANTIC RECORDS; JULIAN FINNEY/GETTY IMAGES; VIA OFF-WHITE. RIGHT COLUMN, FROM TOP: VIA NIKE; VIA WARBY PARKER; VALERIO MEZZANOTTI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES; VIA CHA CHA MATCHA X VIRGIL ABLOH; WHITTEN SABBATINI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES; VIA SOTHEBY'S.



# A Prismatic Shock to the System

DAVID KASNIC FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

By GUY TREBAY

Right out of the gate after being hired as artistic director of Louis Vuitton mens's wear, Virgil Abloh scored a whopping commercial hit with an iridescent plastic tote bag, or "keepall," he called the Prism. In the hours since Mr. Abloh's death at 41, of a rare cancer, was made public, people struggled to characterize a man whose contributions to the industry extended far beyond any individual design. He was variously termed kaleidoscopic, a Renaissance man, a protean force in the history of fashion, and yet, looking back on his brief tenure at the apex of the business, what seems clear is that the word that best describes Mr. Abloh was there all along. He had provided it himself.

Mr. Abloh was prismatic, a designer capable of capturing the varied colors and lights of an evolving culture, refracting and then beaming them out to a waiting world. Justly heralded as one of the first Black designers to head a European luxury goods house (Olivier Rousteing began his successful run in the top job at Balmain back in 2011), Mr. Abloh treated that achievement, if not its accompanying stature, with a seriousness that was impressive in and of itself.

"What is diversity?" Mr. Abloh once asked a visitor to Vuitton headquarters in Paris just hours before one of his men's wear presentations.

The answer was everywhere you looked. Since Mr. Abloh's arrival at the label, Vuitton's drab corporate offices on the Right Bank had been transformed into something more closely resembling a communal gathering space.

"I want all this to mean something," he said then, words that echoed something he had told this reporter just months before he was officially named to his post at Louis Vuitton.

On that occasion, in June 2017, Mr. Abloh was a guest designer at the summer edition of Pitti Uomo in Florence. Most designers in that position understandably exploit the unusual platform — Pitti Uomo is the world's largest men's wear trade fair — to hype their brands. Yet rather than promoting his own Off-White label, Mr. Abloh used his stipend to engage the artist Jenny Holzer in a collaboration that saw the two of them excerpting fragments of poems by exiles caught up in the global immigration crisis and projecting them onto the walls of the ancient Palazzo Pitti.

Two years later, at the Vuitton studio on the afternoon of my visit, models milled around trying on designs for seemingly every permutation of gender. Friends of Mr. Abloh's like Kid Cudi and others from overlapping spheres of hip-hop, skating, art and design crowded around a table laden with the absurdly costly accessories that kept most everyone there employed.

Mr. Abloh, whose fingernails were painted gray that day, had just returned to work from what he referred to as a period of rest and reflection — a break from a punishing schedule that had once kept him on planes at least once a week for years — and that may in fact have been for the cancer that eventually claimed his life. If anything, he seemed more committed than ever to an expansive view of what constitutes both

fashion and its message.

"Me being here, in this space is about so much more than just making stuff that's cool because it's luxury," Mr. Abloh said.

Yet right from the start he created cool "stuff," in volume, through regularly timed drops and with a maximalist aesthetic that was often far from the sleek refinement of those designers who dominated the upper reaches of men's wear when he was on his way up. Whereas seminal late 20th-century designers like Helmut Lang and Jil Sander worked from an aesthetic of crisp, if still sexy, subtraction, Mr. Abloh generally favored a pile-on, whether of garments them-

Virgil Abloh disrupted a static industry and altered fashion for good.

selves or of references. (At one of his last Vuitton shows, it was coats atop tunics over trousers with hats clamped on hoodies and bags slung around waistlines, across bodies and strapped to backs.)

He was notably liberal in his samplings from other designers — to wit: a cloud print collection Italo Zucchelli designed for Calvin Klein in 2014 (and that Drake would later wear on tour) turned up again on a Vuitton fall 2020 runway in pretty close replica — or uninflected by invisible quotation marks. He mixed with abandon, snagging exoskeleton shapes from Rick Owens's tool chest, creating \$550 flannel shirts for his

cult label Pyrex Vision from logoed Ralph Lauren deadstock.

As a designer, he was a stealth sentimentalist, someone whose '80s and early '90s influences — whether they were Saturday morning cartoons; or "Thriller"-era Michael Jackson (in a collection that was pulled by LVMH in response to the "Leaving Neverland" documentary that detailed allegations against the singer of sexual abuse); or the dewy young Princess Diana, circa her chiffon and pussy-bow period; or the Statue of Liberty as reimagined as a Sudanese infant; or else the flags of the African continent — he wore on his sleeve.

At times, his shows could be as campy as a revival house matinee of a Warner Bros. musical. For his Louis Vuitton men's show debut in 2018, Mr. Abloh covered the gravel paving at the Palais Royal gardens in Paris with an ombré rainbow carpet and then opened the gates to a guest list including 600 students from local architecture, art and fashion schools. For his Jackson-inspired show, he reconstructed a Lower East Side street in a tent erected in the Tuileries Gardens. (Guests smoking weed added a touch of Alphabet City verisimilitude.)

For his spring 2020 show, which closely followed a fire that came close to destroying the beloved cathedral, he took over the nearby Place Dauphine, where he installed a Louis Vuitton bouncy castle, had aproned waiters serve Champagne to invitees seated at cafe tables set on the ancient cobblestones and gave away Vuitton-branded trinkets like ashtrays and miniatures Eiffel Towers to guests who wholeheartedly shoveled these souvenirs into their bags.

"I was stuck with this idea of celebrating what's here while we're here," said Mr. Abloh, the designer, who also remained throughout his life Virgil Abloh, the suburban kid who could hardly credit where his own good fortune and hard work had gotten him.

The inner child Mr. Abloh often claimed as his creative North Star, the person he said he thought of when he sat down to design, had never been tutored in fashion, learning instead to sew from his mother, Eunice. No matter how high-flying his life became, he returned with regularity to the Midwest, to his wife and two children and to the extended Ghanaian American family from whom he learned — in the words of his father, Nee — the importance of having "a distinguishable career."

From this critic's vantage, what will distinguish Mr. Abloh's truncated career in fashion most durably may not be the goods he had a hand in creating — his sneaker collaborations, his fashion collections or his highly coveted accessories. What people will remember Mr. Abloh for above all is the structural changes he was instrumental in bringing into effect.

Once again, he foresaw that for himself. "There's one level of the work that's designing at Louis," Mr. Abloh said in January in an interview Pharrell Williams conducted with him and the artist KAWS for the OTHERtone podcast. His real mission, as Mr. Abloh saw it, was "to make sure there's, like, six young Black kids that take my job after me."



COREY TENOLD

Justin and Hailey Bieber on their wedding day. The train of the dress included Mr. Abloh's signature quotation marks.



CATWALKING/GETTY IMAGES

Off-White, spring 2018.



VALERIO MEZZANOTTI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Louis Vuitton, spring 2019.



VALERIO MEZZANOTTI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Playboi Carti in the Louis Vuitton spring 2019 men's wear show.



VALERIO MEZZANOTTI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Louis Vuitton, fall 2020.



VALERIO MEZZANOTTI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Virgil Abloh's fall 2019 men's wear show for Louis Vuitton.



VIA LOUIS VUITTON

Louis Vuitton men's, fall 2021.



VALERIO MEZZANOTTI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The British singer Dev Hynes, center, in the Louis Vuitton spring 2020 show.

**ONLINE: VIRGIL ABLOH'S OBITUARY**

Vanessa Friedman, *The Times's* fashion director, wrote about the path-blazing designer whose expansive approach inspired comparisons to artists including Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons. [nytimes.com/obituaries](https://www.nytimes.com/obituaries)