

In Fashion: A tale of two dresses

by Sharon_Mosley

On the 10th anniversary of her death, the Princess of Wales still captures the fashion fancy of many fans who followed her style evolution from a somewhat frumpy Sloane Ranger dubbed "Shy Di" to one of the world's most sexy and glamorous women of all time. Now, London author Colin McDowell, gives us even more insight into Diana's role as a fashion icon in "Diana Style" (St. Martin's Press, \$30).

LADY DI - A fashion icon, the late Diana Spencer, princess of Wales, is the subject of a new book, 'Diana Style' by Colin McDowell. CNS Photo courtesy of Snowdon, Camera Press London. The 120 photos alone would be enough to wow any reader who admired the British princess; however, the fresh stories behind the clothes from this renowned fashion expert and his interviews with designers and Diana's close confidantes also prove to be an enticing read, one that you'll want to read cover to cover.

As shoe designer Manolo Blahnik in his foreword says: "It is a peculiar combination that made Diana, Princess of Wales as iconic as she eventually became. It was not only the right dresses or the allure - it was also her particular type of humility, a heart as big as the world and a sweetness of character that was part of the phenomenon, that help turn the Princess of Wales into an icon forever worthy of her stature."

While McDowell acknowledges the details of Diana's "fascinating and tragic" life - "that story has been told often enough is by now known by virtually everyone," he writes, this new book concentrates on the fashion messages in her life - and of course there were many throughout her years - all devoured by the media and the public.

McDowell does include chapters on her shoes, her hats, her jewelry, her makeup, and of course her wonderful haircuts that inspired Di dos around the world as it kept getting shorter and shorter through the years. But the real fashion evolution, the fashion expert says is the story of two little black dresses - a very telling example of how her life and her style evolved and came full circle.

She first breached palace protocol in March of 1981 by wearing a long strapless \$1,000 black gown designed by David and Elizabeth Emanuel (who would also design her wedding gown) for her first official appearance as the Prince of Wales's fiancée. She elicited gasps from the public and the royal family who

reserved black for funerals and mourning clothes. But McDowell quotes the princess as saying, "Black to me was the smartest colour you could possibly have at the age of 19. It was a real grown-up dress."

Thirteen years later, Diana also used a little black dress to make not only a fashion statement, but to send a message about her new life separated from the Prince of Wales.

At the same time on June 29, 1994 that a documentary about Prince Charles was airing on the BBC where the prince would acknowledge his affair with Camilla Parker-Bowles, Diana was attending a fundraising dinner hosted by Vanity Fair at the Serpentine Gallery in London wearing a short black dress that she had bought years before designed by Christina Stambolian. It blew the press and public away - again there were gasps.

McDowell acknowledges that Diana's breathtaking appearance dominated the front pages of the newspapers the next day upstaging her husband's revelations about his infidelity.

"Not for the first time, she had used the simplest of means - her physical appearance - to send a message to millions of members of the public: I'm doing fine by myself," he writes, and adds, "As fashion messages go, few could be stronger."

"Diana Style" manages to tell this fascinating story of a princess who took her fashion role seriously, but never took herself too seriously: "This book is the story of the journey between those two black dresses and beyond," states McDowell, "to the last phase of Diana's life, when she could finally define her own style without any regard for an official position. The story of two contrasting black dresses illustrates clearly how far Diana had come."

After Diana's death, American fashion designer Donna Karan may have said it best: "She was a symbol of what one meant when one spoke of icons - She was a mentor to women and she set standards."

Sharon Mosley is a former fashion editor of the Arkansas Gazette in Little Rock and executive director of the Fashion Editors and Reporters Association.

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