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Fringe Tactics

Long a hotbed of bohemianism, New York City's East Village birthed key counter-cultural movements with lasting impacts

During its heyday of the 1970s-80s, New York City's East Village was synonymous with all things "anti-." Subsuming a crop of cultural trailblazers, the neighborhood provided a safe haven for those who spoke a common language of defiance. Its creative denizens—painters, musicians, photographers, poets, and scenester It-Boys and Girls—were icons in-the-making, coming to define a time and place where dissidence was a way of life.

Here, at the intersection of bohemianism and punk rebellion, artistic paragons made their mark: Basquiat, Koons, and a Material Girl boasting the modest ambition "to rule the world" emerged from the East Village's grit and grime. Though eventually absorbed by pop culture, it was in a fringe sphere of dark excesses that their groundbreaking enterprises took root. Read on for more about the people and places that made up the substance of the East Village during this formative era, and whose brash spirit and aesthetic echo in fashion today.

THE ARTISTS

Reacting to the height of '80s capitalism and conservatism, fuelled by a cocktail of passion, vision, and sometimes drugs, members of the East Village Arts Scene produced work steeped in a local purview of the world at-large. The time gave rise to artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat, who boldly splashed canvases with colorful, layered mixed media; Keith Haring, whose vivid pop art imagery found its way onto stage costumes for Madonna and the body of Grace Jones; and Futura 2000, who helped legitimize and elevate graffiti by crafting beauty via aerosol can. Such virtuosos' vibrant works influenced fashion, too, with threads of street art seeping into urban Ready-to-Wear offerings in subsequent decades.



1. Artist Keith Haring, 1985 2. Grace Jones at La Mouche Disco in New York, 1977
3. Madonna and DJ Jellybean Benitez, 1984 4. Andy Warhol and Keith Haring, 1986

THE MUSIC

The East Village's soundtrack during this time was nothing less than a thunderous sonic mélange. The psychedelia-tinged experimentation of bands like *The Velvet Underground* eventually gave way to a punk insurrection, introducing the reverberating guitar strains of *The Ramones* and layered neo-garage rock of *Television* to the world. The scene's doyenne was Patti Smith, whose unrestrained lyrics and androgynous garb—best illustrated on the memorable cover of *Horses*—inspired future Riot Grrrl and femme-positive frontwomen.

Meanwhile, the genre-bridging work of graffiti artist-come-hip-hop maestro Fab 5 Freddy drew influence from the thriving East Village Arts scene, as it pioneered a new genre. Even today's Queen of Pop gustily forged her way through the neighborhood's harrowing climes, waitressing and dancing until making her mark at local clubs.

These racket-raising performers proudly sported ensembles of glamorous ostentation, leather, studs, ripped threads, and gave nods to street culture, wearing nothing if not anti-authoritarianism on their proverbial sleeve. Though disavowing sartorial rules, these musicians' signature manner of dress eventually crept

into the mainstream, influencing later aesthetics like grunge and evolved urban streetwear. Yet those that unwittingly begot now landmark styles donned them with cool flippancy—the sign of true tastemakers.

THE "IT" GIRLS/BOYS

Swinging alongside the culture-shifters of the time were those who earned fame via a combination of their own creative pursuits and "right place, right time" tactics, with some controversy thrown in for good measure. Warhol's Superstars, including the diaphanous "Youth-quaker" that was Edie Sedgwick, sultry singer-actress-model Nico, and glam Velvet Underground muse Candy Darling were but a few of the East Village's original hipsters. As the fifteen minutes of these dolls tick, tick, ticked away, new neighborhood ambassadors assumed the spotlight, including radically ribald per-



1. Fab Five Freddy, 1990
 2. The Ramones, 1978
 3. Edie Sedgwick and Andy Warhol, 1965
 4. Patti Smith, 1976

formance artist John Sex. With his bejeweled turbans, bleached blond pompadour, and shockingly X-rated antics, Sex was a staple of the East Village arts scene, rubbing shoulders with local royalty like Ann Magnuson as he assumed the status of an erotic rockstar. The brand of indie-cool later cultivated by '90s New York icons like Harmony Korine and Chloe Sevigny certainly owe something to their splashy, on-the-scene predecessors.

THE PLACES

The East Village's creative class found sanctuary in the area's subculture citadels, seen-and-be-seen outposts where punk revolt, over-the-top sexuality, and emerging artforms were embraced. CBGB celebrated aural misfits and their fans, inviting avant garde rock group Talking Heads and New Wave idols Blondie to stage. Club 57's Ann Magnuson touted "Punk DIY" with concerts, exhibitions, and themed parties that welcomed suburban outcasts who migrated to the Village in search of sanctuary. And Fun Gallery extolled the work of Basquiat et al. long before illustrious contemporary art museums came to recognize their salient cultural impact. The dress code for such locales was never strictly dictated, though certainly swayed by subcultural happenings. From Debbie Harry's spandex regalia to the erotic, anti-disco costuming seen at some clubs, style was nothing if not confounding, confrontational, and always statement-making.



1. Candy Darling, 1970

2. The Fillmore East, 1970

3. Punks outside CBGB's, 1978