

Virgil Was Here

An influence beyond boundaries.

Written by: Kendall Minaldi

Legacy. What defines a legacy, really?

Maybe it isn't something tangible, and is felt rather than seen. A body of work can stand for something, but the humanity behind the work is what leaves a lasting impact. The way a person makes others feel, their presence, and the ways they inspire are the things that are truly remembered. Virgil Abloh, the innovative, visionary Black designer who redefined the fashion industry, leaves a legacy so widely influential that it is difficult to define.

On November 28, 2021, Abloh died at age 41 after battling a rare cancer, cardiac angiosarcoma. He was undoubtedly one of the most outstanding designers and public figures of his time, as he reshaped the landscape of fashion and permeated pop culture. He broke down barriers in a notoriously structured industry, making himself and his work nearly impossible to compartmentalize in the best way. To him, fashion carried so much more weight than just clothes and appearance. They are tokens of personal identity and represent more than we credit them for.

Abloh initially entered the fashion scene as Kanye West's creative director, which sparked a longtime collaboration. From here, Abloh's success skyrocketed, as he jumped from various creative collectives and eventually landed by founding Off-White, the cult-favorite streetwear brand.

Off-White emerged at a critical point in the fashion industry, when consumers began looking inwards at their own habits and challenged fashion titans to be transparent with theirs. A stronger push towards sustainability and a rejection of materialism led people to question whether luxury fashion was truly necessary. Subcultural fashion rose higher than ever, giving streetwear the spotlight and making it the perfect time for the arrival of Off-White and Abloh along with it. Just a few short years later, Abloh took over as the artistic director of menswear at Louis Vuitton, making him the most influential Black executive at one of the highest-regarded fashion houses in the world. However, Abloh's influence only begins with fashion - it extends well beyond, reaching music, art, politics, and culture. He flexed creative muscles that we didn't even know existed, as he constantly brought innovative ideas to the table.

The foundation of Abloh's career and his sense of purpose rests on creating opportunities for those who wouldn't normally be offered access. He made it a point to consistently find ways to open doors and build bridges for those who needed it most. The emphasis he placed on inclusivity is something to be applauded and continued, as he shed light on otherwise hidden gems. "My power is to show Black talent [and] Black people inside of my output," he says of his commitment. He intentionally created space for unheard voices, through various avenues such as the "Post-Modern" Scholarship Fund, employing minorities and undiscovered talent at Off-White, and working to garner support, funds, and exposure for Black-owned businesses and creators. He faced adversity head-on, never shying away from asking the hard questions and

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addressing the uncomfortable. Abloh made it his mission to be the change he wished to see in the world, noting that “the people have changed, and so fashion had to.”

In a society becoming increasingly pessimistic about the future, Abloh saw immense hope and opportunity for the days to come. He was constantly searching for ways he could lend a helping hand and fill in the gaps between the ranks of humanity. With each design, he stitched together seemingly mismatched communities and subcultures. This is clearly reflected in his work, as Off-White blurs the line separating streetwear from luxury fashion. To this point, Abloh notably argued the idea that his work could be confined to one thing. He was unwavering in his belief that Off-White should not be considered strictly streetwear or Louis Vuitton considered luxury. The two could be interchangeable and fluidly blend with one another. Why can't sneakers be on runways or leather on red carpets?

His work was sometimes controversial, but isn't that the purpose and beauty of art? To raise questions and cultivate conversations among our communities and within ourselves? Abloh was a disruptor. He saw convention as a mere construct and never felt the need to fall in line with the norm. He played by his own rules, or rather, completely disregarded the structured rules already set in place and rewrote new ones. Refusing to be defined as one thing, Abloh made himself genreless and indefinable.

Just after his passing, Louis Vuitton paid tribute to his life and legacy with the presentation of his final show in Miami, titled “Virgil Was Here”. This, along with the outpouring of love and remembrance across the globe, was a beautiful testament to Abloh's impact and legacy, leaving one thing absolutely definable: Virgil Was Here.