

## ENTERTAINMENT

# For Meghan Markle and the royal family, a dress is never just a dress

Analysis by [Talia Lakritz](#)



**Meghan Markle said she wore neutral colors as a working royal in an effort to blend in. A more colorful wardrobe signaled her departure from royal life, and she since left**

**beige behind.** Joe Giddens/PA Images via Getty Images; **re** [Save](#)  
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- Meghan Markle rarely wore color as a working royal until her last week of royal engagements in 2021.
- Her wardrobe now consists of bright colors and mission-driven designers, signaling her values.
- Fashion allows women in the royal family to make subtle statements without actually saying a word.

A team of dressmakers surrounds Meghan Markle in a flurry of activity, fluffing the voluminous overskirt of her bright-red, Carolina Herrera gown and pinning seams on the bodice until the garment sits perfectly.

"Have you ever had four people helping you into a dress?" someone in the room asks in episode three of "Harry & Meghan," as the Duke and Duchess of Sussex prepare for the Salute to Freedom Gala at a friend's apartment in New York City.

"No! Never!" Meghan says.

"The color is amazing," a stylist adds.

It was November 2021, more than a year and a half since Meghan and Prince Harry stepped back from their duties as senior royals and their life in the UK in March 2020.

Meghan turned heads at the gala in her poppy-red gown, which featured a billowing train and plunging neckline. She paired the dress with red Giuseppe Zanotti heels and wore her hair pulled back into a high bun to highlight her diamond-drop earrings.



**Prince Harry and Meghan Markle at the 2021 Salute To Freedom Gala in New York City.** Dia Dipasupil/Getty Images

Meghan's bold outfit was quite a departure from the "muted tones" she purposely wore as a working member of the royal family, as she said in the docuseries.

## Meghan said she 'rarely wore color' at royal engagements

Part of the reason for her neutral wardrobe was royal protocol, which Meghan said to her understanding dictated that royals couldn't wear the same color as higher-ranking family members.

But that wasn't the only reason she stuck to a subdued color palette at public appearances; Meghan said she was also doing her best not to stand out.

"I never wanted to upstage or ruffle any feathers," she said. "So I just tried to blend in."

At royal engagements, she opted for conservative designs in various shades of khaki and cream, such as the camel Sentaler wrap coat that she wore to her first Christmas Day service with the royal family in 2017. At the same event, the Queen wore a bright-orange coat, and Kate Middleton chose a festive plaid ensemble.

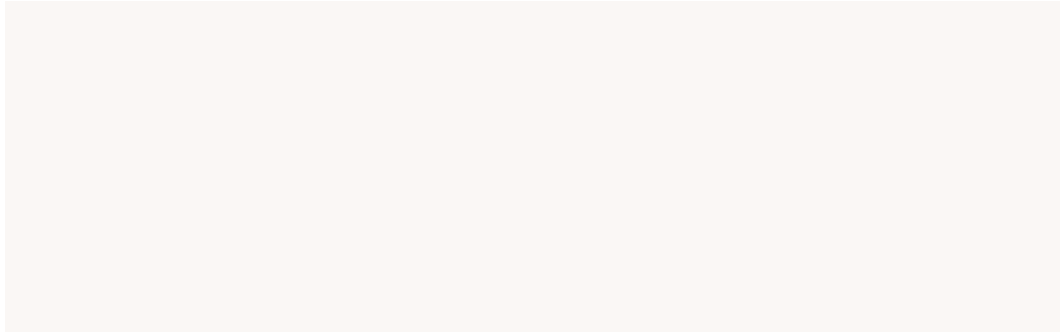


**From left to right: Queen Elizabeth, Meghan Markle, and Kate Middleton on Christmas Day in 2017.** Joe Giddens/PA Images via Getty Images ; Joe Giddens/PA Images via Getty Images ; Joe Giddens/PA Images via Getty Images

After Meghan and Harry announced they were stepping back from royal life in 2020, her wardrobe also underwent a dramatic shift.

## Meghan wore a 'rainbow' of outfits to send a message at her final royal events

During their last week of royal appearances in the UK in March 2020, Meghan left beige behind.



On March 5, Meghan wore a cerulean-blue Victoria Beckham pencil dress to the Endeavour Fund Awards; on March 7, she matched Harry's red military uniform in a scarlet Safiyaa gown for the Mountbatten Music Festival at the Royal Albert Hall; and on March 9, she paired an emerald-green Emilia Wickstead cape dress with a matching William Chambers fascinator for the Commonwealth Day Service at Westminster Abbey — her final official engagement as a senior royal.

"I wore a lot of color that week," she said in "Harry & Meghan." "I just felt like, 'Let's just look like a rainbow.'"



**Meghan Markle's colorful outfits from her farewell tour of the UK in March 2020. From left to right: at the Mountbatten Music Festival, the Endeavour Awards, and the Commonwealth Day Service at Westminster Abbey. SIMON DAWSON/POOL/AFP via Getty Images, Max Mumby/Indigo/Getty Images, Dan Kitwood/Getty Images**

Lauren Rothman, a corporate and political fashion stylist, image expert, and author of "Style Bible: What to Wear to Work," told Insider that Meghan's shift to brighter colors for her final royal appearances signaled her newfound freedom and confidence. Fashion, she said, is "one of the strongest forms of nonverbal communication."

"Anytime boundaries are removed, or we feel that sense of freedom to be who we want to be, we'll see a shift in how someone dresses and how someone's expressing themselves," Rothman said.



She added: "When you go from being wallpaper and blending in to stepping into your authenticity, that's when we start to see what power looks like in your language."

## Meghan's style changed considerably after she left royal life and the UK behind

Since relocating to California, Meghan has embraced a more relaxed wardrobe consisting of denim shirts from J Crew, olive shorts, and Adidas sneakers. For formal events, she has continued leaning into vivid hues. For example, she wore an emerald Giorgio Armani midi dress with a twisted mock-neck and keyhole cutout in November while speaking at a fundraising event sponsored by the Women's Fund of Central Indiana. She paired the long-sleeved dress with bright-purple Manolo Blahnik BB pumps, Women's Wear Daily reported. The unique neckline and unconventional color pairing created an eye-catching look the duchess likely wouldn't have worn to an official engagement as a working royal.





**Meghan Markle speaks at a fundraiser for the Women's Fund of Central Indiana in November 2022.** Nathaniel Edmunds Photography

She has also opted for bold outfits from sustainable designers. During the same New York visit in November 2021, during which Meghan wore the red Carolina Herrera gown, she wore a burgundy suit by the sustainable designer Loro Piana to visit an elementary school in Harlem. And at the One Young World Summit this September, Meghan chose a bright-red ensemble by the activist brand Another Tomorrow, which advocates for human, animal, and environmental welfare, according to its website.

Meghan has been vocal about the importance of sustainability outside of her wardrobe. In October 2021, she partnered with the asset manager Ethic to promote sustainable investing and in November of that year she and Harry said their nonprofit organization Archewell plans to reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2030.



**Meghan Markle has worn bolder colors since stepping back from royal life. Left: Meghan visits a Harlem elementary school in November 2021 wearing Loro Piana. Right: Meghan wearing Another Tomorrow at the One Young World Summit in September 2022. Robert Kamau/GC Images ; Chris Jackson/Getty Images**

With this shift in her style, Meghan may be sending messages about who she is, what she values, and what kind of impact she hopes to have through her fashion.

Long gone is her desire not to "ruffle any feathers," as she put it in the docuseries. She no longer has to fade into the background.

"I think what's tiring at times for folks in the royal family — but really in any family of prominence — is not everyone can do sameness," Rothman said. "That's a lot of what Meghan describes, is this sameness in color and fashion and style and etiquette and presence."

It's that sameness, Rothman says, that Meghan was "ready to disrupt."

## Other royals have leveraged public fascination with their wardrobe

Princess Diana's "revenge dress" is perhaps the most famous example of a royal fashion moment with a purported message.

In 1994, Diana wore a black off-the-shoulder dress designed by Christina Stambolian on the same night Charles publicly admitted to having an affair in a documentary interview. Her fashion choice dominated headlines the next day, overshadowing coverage of her husband's affair, according to The Independent.

"Previously considered too daring, the dress showed that Diana was an independent, powerful woman who was not going to be overshadowed or intimidated by anyone anymore," celebrity stylist and royal fashion expert Miranda Holder told Insider via email.



**Left: Princess Diana in her "revenge dress" in 1994. Right: Queen Elizabeth wears a brooch gifted to her by the Obamas in 2011. She wore the brooch again in 2019 on the same day former President Donald Trump arrived in the UK for a state visit.** Jayne Fincher/Getty Images; Yui Mok - WPA Pool/Getty Images

There have also been more explicit royal fashion statements, such as when Queen Elizabeth wore a brooch given to her by the Obamas on the first day of former President Donald Trump's state visit to the UK in 2018. Was it a sly indication of the Queen's opinion of the then-president? Or simply a tribute to her relationships with many US presidents over the years? The subtlety of a color, cut, or accessory lends itself to plausible deniability.

## Royal fashion can speak volumes without saying a word

Because royals must remain "as neutral and apolitical as possible," Holder said, fashion remains a powerful tool that they can use to speak volumes without uttering a single word.

While the palace has not formally responded to claims made in "Harry & Meghan," royal-family members wore coordinating outfits at a December 16 Christmas concert, which appeared to contradict Meghan's claim that wearing the same color as more senior members of the monarchy breaks royal protocol, as she understands it. Kate Middleton, Princess Charlotte, Zara Philips, and Pippa Middleton all arrived in maroon to the event — the first that the whole family attended since Harry and Meghan's Netflix show premiered, Insider's Samantha Grindell reported.





**Zara Tindall, Pippa Middleton, Kate Middleton, and Princess Charlotte all wore maroon to the "Together at Christmas" carol service at Westminster Abbey on December 16, 2022. Chris Jackson/Getty Images ; Samir Hussein/WireImage/Getty Images**

Holder viewed the royals' matching outfits as a demonstration of "resilience and strength, along with unity and togetherness as a family" following the premiere of the docuseries.

"Fashion is a visual artform that communicates so much to the onlooker in one single glance," she said. "Whether it is the psychology of the color they are wearing, the history or symbolism of a piece of jewelery, support for a new British designer, the rewearing of an item as a climate conscious statement, or simply the formality or fluidity of their silhouette, their style always speaks volumes."



Or, as Rothman put it: "A dress is never just a dress."



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