

# SUPER POWER

From the legendary supers of the '80s and '90s to the diverse and algorithm-savvy models of today, supermodels have shapeshifted endlessly over the decades. But does the title of supermodel still hold cultural relevance in 2026 – or has it been diluted beyond recognition?

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**B**y 1990, after spending his late teens and twenties in the spotlight, George Michael was somewhat tired of the trappings of celebrity. Ahead of the release of his second solo album, *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1*, he was reluctant to feature in any accompanying music videos, much to the chagrin of his record label. So, for his song 'Freedom! '90, he settled on a compromise: booking a bumper lineup of that decade's most high-profile models – Linda Evangelista, Naomi Campbell, Cindy Crawford, Christy Turlington and Tatjana Patitz – to appear in Michael's stead.

"We forget now that the phenomenon of the music video was instrumental in the rise of the 'supers,'" explains Sonnet Stanfill, senior curator of fashion at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). "When that video came out, these models were beamed into the living rooms of people who didn't follow fashion, so all of a sudden, people of all classes and backgrounds were made aware of these women. And it's that

excitement and the intrigue of celebrity that takes over." The video represented a convergence of the advent of MTV with a crop of exceptionally charismatic, photogenic women – producing an alchemical moment in which these models became mega celebrities in their own right.

"The first supermodel, in my opinion, was Lisa Fonssagrives-Penn," offers Caroline Leaper, author of the 2025 book *Supermodels Discovered: The inspiring origin stories of the biggest names in the fashion industry*. "Her name was known to the public, when models generally received no name-check with their picture in an editorial. The images of her from that era are incredible and inimitable." One such memorable photo, shot by Erwin Blumenfeld in 1939, shows Fonssagrives-Penn, her skirt billowing around her, breezily hanging with one arm off the Eiffel Tower.

As beauty standards have evolved, so too have the makings of a top-tier model. The models of the '50s typically possessed hourglass figures and a regal, almost haughty beauty – think of the ultra-polished appeal of titans of that decade, such as American models Dovima and Suzy Parker. By the '60s, a cohort of coltish, fresh-faced girls, like Lesley

Photography: GofRunway.



FROM LEFT Carla Bruni, Claudia Schiffer, Naomi Campbell, Cindy Crawford and Helena Christensen with Donatella Versace (foreground) for the Versace Spring 2018 runway show.



Photography: Getty Images (this page); Alamy (opposite page).

THIS PAGE English model Jean Shrimpton attending Derby Day at Melbourne's Flemington Racecourse in 1965. OPPOSITE PAGE, T-B Jerry Hall on the runway for the Yves Saint Laurent Spring 1985 show; Twiggy in 1965.



Hornby, better known by her moniker of Twiggy, had arrived, setting the beauty standard of the Youthquake generation with her boyish figure and gamine prettiness, set off by a cropped bob, defined lashes and modish eyeshadow.

Another icon of Swinging London, Jean Shrimpton fronted magazine covers across the globe and made an unforgettable mark on Australia's fashion landscape when she appeared in an above-the-knee minidress, sans hats or gloves, at Derby Day in 1965 – an aberration from the staid, conservative dress generally expected of ladies attending the event.

There is, of course, Veruschka, the long-limbed German countess-turned-model, whose balletic ease in front of the camera helped create some of the most iconic fashion photography of the '60s. China Machado – described by photographer Richard Avedon as “probably the most beautiful woman in the world” – made history as the first woman of colour to appear in a major US fashion magazine, via *Harper's BAZAAR* in 1959, the publication where she went on to work as fashion director. Next came disco, the heady heydays of Studio 54 and the rise of glamazons Jerry Hall, Iman and Pat Cleveland.

While frequently applied retroactively to modelling titans of earlier decades, the label of supermodel truly came into its own in the late 20th century. “The term supermodel, for me, is very specific to the late '80s [and] early '90s,” reflects Stanfill. During this era, Gianni Versace would harness the supermodels' combined star power and cast them together in a group: a few months after 'Freedom! '90' was released, Evangelista,

Campbell, Turlington and Crawford closed Versace's Fall 1991 show by descending the runway, lip-syncing the song's lyrics.

At Versace's Spring 2018 show at Milan Fashion Week in September 2017, that iconic moment was echoed when Campbell and Crawford, flanked by Carla Bruni, Helena Christensen and Claudia Schiffer, closed the show together, draped in shimmering gold lamé and replete with the glamour of Greek goddesses.

By the late '90s, Kate Moss heralded yet another era of models – this time, less polished and more waifish – in tandem with the rise of reigning designers of the same period Alexander McQueen and John Galliano. The Victoria's Secret Fashion Show made its American TV debut in 2001 on ABC and, over the next two decades, earning one's Angel wings, as the likes of Gisele Bündchen, Adriana Lima and Miranda Kerr did, was synonymous with commercial modelling success.

Compared to the earth-shaking impact of those legendary supermodels – who, as Evangelista famously put it, wouldn't get out of bed for less than \$10,000 a day – can the label still be credibly applied in 2026? The cultural monopoly enjoyed by the original supermodels is largely a feature of the past due to today's fragmented attention economy, offers Stanfill. “It's not that there isn't still an elite group of top models who are celebrities.” But in the 20th century, there was a ubiquity of content that simply no longer exists. “Thanks to social media, there's a plethora of channels through which to consume imagery of fashion, but also for individuals through their own separate social media channels to curate their own celebrity.”

Social media has certainly remoulded the industry. “It has created a more layered fashion





Kate Moss and Naomi Campbell in London, 1993.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Adut Akech in Max Mara Fall 2018 show; Miranda Kerr in Christian Dior's Spring 2012 show; Gemma Ward in McQueen's Fall 2007 show; Gisele Bündchen in Dolce & Gabbana's Fall 2007 show.



Photography: Getty Images (opposite page); GoRunway (this page).

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 – Rick Matthew, IMG Models



landscape, where models are no longer just faces attached to campaigns, but voices with their own narratives,” reflects Rick Matthew, co-managing director at IMG Models in Sydney. “Models can now build personal brands alongside their careers, shaping how they are seen and understood by the public. It has also opened non-traditional pathways to success – Nara Smith demonstrates how a model can move fluidly across fashion, lifestyle and culture while reaching audiences far beyond the fashion industry.

“Today’s supermodels are defined less by uniformity and more by individuality, perspective and reach,” he continues. “Models like Paloma Elsesser, Alton Mason and Alex Consani resonate because they are culturally fluent, digitally savvy and unapologetically themselves. Their influence extends beyond fashion into conversations around identity, representation and social change, with social media allowing them to connect directly and meaningfully with global audiences in a way previous generations never could.”

Few are better qualified to speak on what now makes a supermodel than Gemma Ward, one of Australia’s most successful fashion exports of all time. “It could be the ability to gain a social media following, a playful quirky persona or a reputation for being hard-working and humble,” she reflects. “But what has always been important across the many decades of ‘supermodels’ is the ability to see, carry and create another person’s vision – that will be forever.”

Reflecting on contemporary supers, Leaper says: “Angelina Kendall’s work has been prolific; Vittoria Ceretti has won a lot of important advertising campaigns. I personally love Mona Tougaard’s work and think her career will have longevity – she has also starred in some really creative editorial bookings as well as commercial projects.”

A fresh complement of Australian models – notably Aylah Peterson, Stella Hanan and Libby Taverner – have now arrived as heirs apparent to Ward, Elle Macpherson and Adut Akech.



Photography: GoRunway.



The offspring of the original supers and those of their glamorous entourage – think Kaia Gerber, Lila Moss, the Hadids and Jenners – have also risen through the ranks; some write them off as nepo babies; others chalk up their success, at least in part, to their good genes.

Those able to reach the loftiest heights of the industry are drawn from a wider pool compared to three or four decades ago – largely thanks to the pioneering groundwork of models such as Campbell. “Naomi has been a barrier-breaking model,” recognises Stanfill, who oversaw the V&A blockbuster NAOMI: In Fashion, a retrospective on Campbell’s life and career, which ran between 2024-25. “When *TIME* magazine did their ‘Supermodels’ cover [in September 1991], of all the supermodels, they chose Naomi to be on the cover.

“As a champion of diversity and equity, both in terms of equal pay and coverage for models of colour, Naomi’s been really important,” continues Stanfill. “She is looking to the next generation of young Black talent to ensure there’s a pipeline in the fashion industry.”

Models of the moment like Anok Yai (the British Fashion Council’s 2025 Model of the Year) and Awar Odhiang, who delighted watchers by spinning and smiling while closing Chanel’s Spring 2026 collection, reflect a diverse industry that looks refreshingly different to decades past.

Perhaps what hasn’t changed over time is what, fundamentally, makes a good model.

“Beyond physical attributes, [it would be] personality, presence and the ability to connect with others,” notes Kiki Minter, co-managing director at IMG Models in Sydney. “Fashion is a relationship-driven industry and long-term success is built as much on reputation and trust as it is on talent.” HB



FROM OPPOSITE PAGE, L-R Angelina Kendall in Schiaparelli’s Spring 2026 couture show; Libby Taverner in Saint Laurent’s Spring 2026 show; Stella Hanan in Calvin Klein’s Spring 2026 show; Anok Yai in Fendi’s Spring 2026 show.