

Translating Inspiration Styleboards Into a Wearable Wardrobe

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Have you meticulously curated a Pinterest board or folder of photos for fashion inspiration and absolutely love the aesthetic you've found, but realized that all the outfits in the photos are too impractical to directly translate to your lifestyle?

I hope that this guide can help anyone who feels lost trying to pull the aesthetic of their more fantastical inspiration boards into their actual wardrobes without feeling like they're wearing a half-assed cosplay, and could use a detailed framework to help make that happen.

This is not a complete guide to doing a wardrobe overhaul. For that, I recommend reading "The Curated Closet" by Anuschka Rees. A lot of this post has roots in the methods she uses to do a wardrobe overhaul, though I've emphasized and added content that I've personally found helpful as well as included some outfit styling tips. The book goes over a lot more areas related to wardrobe overhauls, such as learning how to shop mindfully and evaluate clothing fit, as well as going into more detail on things that are just briefly discussed here, such as closet composition.

Examples

You can find detailed examples working through this process with different boards at

<https://mgetsdressed.com/category/translating-inspiration-to-outfits/>

Or if you prefer to read on reddit:

https://reddit.com/r/femalefashionadvice/comments/cd6m24/translating_inspiration_styleboards_into_a/ (this is a collation of three of the posts from the blog)

IMHO, seeing various ways to use this guide in practice is just as important as having the guide itself. The process is outlined in each of the individual posts as well, but this exists because I wanted to create a downloadable reference (also, depending on how you're viewing it, reddit formatting on long posts isn't the easiest to read).

Distilling the elements of your inspiration board

When taking notes for this section, avoid vague terms like "ethereal" or "1970s". Go for concrete details like "low square necklines" or "monochrome tie-dye". You can use the more vague terms to

group details together, but most of the list should be things that you can literally search for online, or something that is an instantly identifiable property of an item.

What are the recurring visual elements in the style board?

Since you're going through all this because most of the items in the board aren't directly wearable for your lifestyle, you want to start off looking at more basic properties of the style. For example, it's easier to look for something if you're looking for a "light colored longline wool(-blend) coat with faux fur collar/cuffs" than "something that feels like a snow queen would wear it".

Colors and prints

Get really descriptive with your notes on prints. For example, if there are polka dots, are they large, bold, randomly placed polka dots or tiny evenly-spaced polka dots? Is animal print a realistic pattern or stylized? Does the print have crisp edges or is more painterly? Are the colors high contrast or muted?

In addition to noting specific colors, I like to identify types of colors that works for the style because when shopping it is usually impractical to literally only buy five exact shades. For example, cool-toned pastels and deep jewel tones, saturated earth tones, or warm greys.

Fabrics

Note general fabric properties. Structured and crisp suiting fabrics? Earthy fabrics like heavy linen? Diaphanous fabrics like mesh and lace? Are there a lot of technical/performance fabrics (i.e. athletic fabrics). Pay attention to fabric weight, drape, and texture, even for things like t-shirts.

Silhouettes

What common outfit silhouettes are there? Which parts of the body are emphasized and de-emphasized? Are shapes more organic and slouchy, or tailored? You can get a bit more clothing specific here where it makes sense, as some descriptors are only applicable to a particular category of clothing, e.g. "wide leg pants", so we can start getting more specific here). For example, "sharply emphasized shoulders in a structured silhouette that defines the waist", "a soft columnar silhouette with long dresses that lightly skim the body with lots of fabric", "structured cropped outerwear over a very fitted top and slouchy pants", or "sack silhouette that leaves no idea of the body shape, but with fitted sleeves / sleeveless".

Motifs

A catch-all for any other notable (but specific!) details. For example, "celestial objects" (if they appear a lot in jewelry and as clothing embellishments but aren't exactly a print) or "visible mending".

Styling choices

How is the clothing worn can also make or break a look. Are tops always tucked in? Are they tucked in neatly or in a looser partial way? Are shoes always worn with visible socks? Are pants cuffed or shirtsleeves rolled up? Are tops buttoned up all the way? Is there always a ton of layers? Is jewelry bold or minimal? Is hair worn down and loose or up? Does hair have volume or is it kept sleek/short? Is there visible makeup? Is it graphic or soft and blended?

What makes this distinct from other similar styles?

What subset of the visual elements should we focus on to keep the style intent more obvious? Thinking about what not to include can be as helpful for keeping the style distinct as what to include.

For example, if you have a “queen of the night” board and decide you will be wearing all black, how will you keep your look distinct from other commonly black monochrome aesthetics? You could note to avoid denim and t-shirts (especially together), and to try and avoid completely unembellished outfits (the queen of the night is not a ninja).

Thinking about the requirements of your lifestyle

What constraints does your lifestyle put on your wardrobe? E.g. Is this capsule for work, weekends, or both? Are you in a business casual office? Have an active job? Bike commute? What’s your tolerance for fussing with clothes? Is dry cleaning okay? Do you go clubbing? Attend operas? How often? Do you have fluffy pets that shed a lot? Young children?

Note hard requirements to put on clothes based on these constraints. E.g. no fabrics that collect or show lint easily, machine-washable and dryable fabrics only, only items that have enough stretch you can bend over and do squats easily, nothing that requires special undergarments to look nice, long sleeves must be able to be pushed up, no skirts or pants that drag on the ground, nothing that requires a very specific kind of tuck to look nice.

You can keep some distinction for special occasion clothes, but be realistic. If you are at work or at home or doing something active outdoors 97% of the time, if you want to minimize the number of items which collect dust in your closet, aim to buy everything to fit into your criteria.

Identifying specific items that make the biggest impact

What specific pieces do you think would make the biggest impact for this style? These will likely be more distinct types of clothing (e.g. flare pants, military style jackets, wide-brimmed hats) that appear in multiple images, or a detail (e.g. plaid fabric, embroidery) that appears in multiple pieces.

Be specific but not so specific you have no hope for finding the item at all lest you get it custom made. Think along the lines of detail in “plaid wide-leg or loose tapered trousers” or “heavy boots with a lot of hardware”. Write down anything you think could work, and note whether there’s a range of colors you’d like to find it in, or are set on finding it in a specific color.

For any pieces that do not work with the list of lifestyle requirements, try and think of a similar item that still has the same feeling. For example, if your board has lots of people wearing pointed toe stilettos but you don't wear heels, you could add leather pointed toe flats or boots. Sometimes there might not be any obvious toned-down version for an item, but that's okay. There are so many dimensions of style to work with that you can always incorporate something else.

How do you actually find pieces once you have a list?

This is a bit of an art, and it's a combination of knowing the pure elements you want and finding some brands that tend to make that style.

- It helps to know more fashion vocabulary so you can search particular shops or on Etsy or ebay. The easiest way to do this is to image search for "types of { collars / sleeves / skirts etc }" and take a look at some infographics. Learning what different fabrics are called is helpful too.
- If you have no idea what shop to start with, use the shopping tab on Google or search in shopping aggregators like Lyst.
- If you find one brand that fits the style, find their Instagram and see if they follow similar brands. Check out posts they are tagged in, or posts that use their hashtag. See what other brands those people wear.
- Err towards looking at a lot of stuff and bookmarking it and filtering things down later. If the style you're chasing is incredibly specific, it's unlikely you'll find a brand that caters to it exactly.

Definitely don't buy a new wardrobe in a month! Start with getting a few items (I'm talking like, 2-3 things) and see how you feel from there.

Building a well-rounded wardrobe

As you're looking for new pieces, **consider the role each item plays in an outfit.** Is it more of a statement or a base piece? Is it a shirt/bottom/outerwear/shoe/etc? Is that a niche that is filled in the items you have already?

Try and fill out categories of clothing evenly. If you have 10 items of new style that you're mixing with 50 items of your old style but 7 of the new items are blouses in the same color family, that's probably not going to make as much of an impact as if you had a few bottoms, a piece of outerwear, a pair of shoes, and some accessories mixed in.

Notes on color palettes

In my opinion, keeping a limited color palette is the easiest way to get a cohesive feel in a wardrobe that may otherwise be eclectic.

A limited color palette doesn't necessarily mean a neutral palette. You can pick neons and cool neutrals, colors that remind you of a tropical vacation.... you name it. Just keep constraints on some dimensions of the color.

Color can also be used to create a sense of variety in a smaller wardrobe. To create more depth in the capsule using color, you can include at least one color each that's dark, medium, and light value.

Check that the color variety isn't just in one category of your wardrobe. Try and have as much of your palette as possible in each category (i.e. if all your tops are colorful but all the bottoms are dark, that still won't feel like much variety).

Integrating a new style into your existing wardrobe

It's fine to keep items for this new style as a separate mini capsule within your wardrobe. But if you want to be able to integrate them without looking too eclectic, I recommend sitting down with the list of key items you've identified and a shortlist of your most-worn clothing (a simple paper list or spreadsheet with one column per clothing category works great) and considering how things could work together in different combinations. e.g. if you are deciding what type or color of top you could get, think about whether it would work with at least 3/5 of your most-worn bottoms.

Depending on your wardrobe, the style you're trying to add, and what level of eclecticism you're cool with, tasteful integration with your current wardrobe may not be feasible and you may want to just keep the new style as a small capsule within the rest of your wardrobe.

Finding a balance of wearability and drama in outfits

We're essentially aiming to half-ass the style on the original board. But to look intentional, **half-ass it evenly in the whole outfit**. Keep the parts of the outfit at similar levels of formality. Items don't have to be exactly the same level of *extra*, but it will look more cohesive if they are all about one level of formality from each other.

Zoe Hong's video "How to Design From Runway to Real Life" (https://youtu.be/_d56Ago5fVQ) goes over a lot of elements that can make things more or less wearable. It's written with an audience of design students in mind rather than consumers, but the concepts are all solid. Formality of clothes in women's fashion is much less clear cut than in men's fashion, but generally fabric will determine a lot of it. i.e. Just because it's a dress doesn't mean it's formal. A stretchy knit cotton sundress is less formal than a cotton poplin sundress, and a dress in the same cut with tiers of eyelet lace is more festive.

If you're going to err towards more disparate levels of *extra* in the items used in one outfit, I recommend grounding the look (literally) with shoes that have visual interest. Doesn't mean you have to wear bedazzled heels, but the shoes should have visual weight and contribute to the style of the outfit. For example, flat leather oxfords, pointed toe boots, and chunky strap platform sandals all have more visual interest than your standard pair of low-profile black sneakers or flip flops, but are very wearable relative to a lot of the shoes you find in Pinterest outfits.

Another method that you can try instead of starting with a plain outfit and adding more fanciful pieces, is initially going all out with the look and then removing (or swapping out for a more low-key version) a few accessories or base items until you feel comfortable.