

ART IS FASHION IS ART

by Holland Hiler



Fashion in Art

When you hear “fashion” and “the Met” in the same sentence, your mind immediately jumps to the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. But what if I told you that even when the exhibit closes for its annual makeover ahead of the first Monday in May, you could still see fashion at the Met?

On our Strong Suits class trip to New York City this winter, we took a tour with Columbia University art history professor Page Knox. The tour, “Fashion in Art,” took us on a winding journey through the

“Fashion is not something that exists in dresses only. Fashion is in the sky, in the street, fashion has to do with ideas, the way we live, what is happening.”
- Coco Chanel

sprawling rooms of the Met to view pieces showcasing fashion. Perhaps most striking is “Madame X,” with her plunging neckline black gown, slinky straps, and refusal to meet the viewer’s gaze. But this was not the original image. Artist John Singer Sargent originally portrayed Madame Pierre Gautreau with the right strap of her dress slipping provocatively off her shoulder. When the piece generated outrage at the Salon of 1884, he resigned to repainting the strap in its appropriate position.



The Met

Then there are Mr. and Mrs. Stokes, but it is Mrs. Stokes that commands the piece. Initially set to pose Mrs. Stokes in an evening gown, Sargent later decided to portray her in a belted white skirt and blouse with a mutton sleeve jacket, and a boater hat held jauntily to the side. When her Great Dane became unavailable for the portrait, her husband stepped in to assume its role posed in the shadows of the painting. Mrs. Stokes, with her “sporty daywear” and strong pose, appears the happiest woman in any of the works we saw.



The Met

The discerning eye can find fashion references within the frame. We might say that the most important element of a painting is the colors, or the lighting, or the landscape. But sometimes fashion is what delivers the most impact for the viewer.

Fashion Inspired by Art

Not only does fashion play an important role in works of art, but art has a storied history inspiring works of fashion.

As I turn into yet another gallery room at the Wallace Collection in London, I spot it: The Swing. Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s best-known work. I move closer to see the woman perched on her swing, pink gown billowing out around her as her legs dangle wildly, a foot outstretched as a shoe seems to fling outside the frame of the painting and onto a nearby display case. Except, there really is a pink kitten heel court shoe positioned just out of frame, with its matching pair right at its side, and it’s designed by none other than Manolo Blahnik.



Original

In 2019, I had the pleasure of visiting “An Enquiring Mind: Manolo Blahnik at the Wallace Collection.”

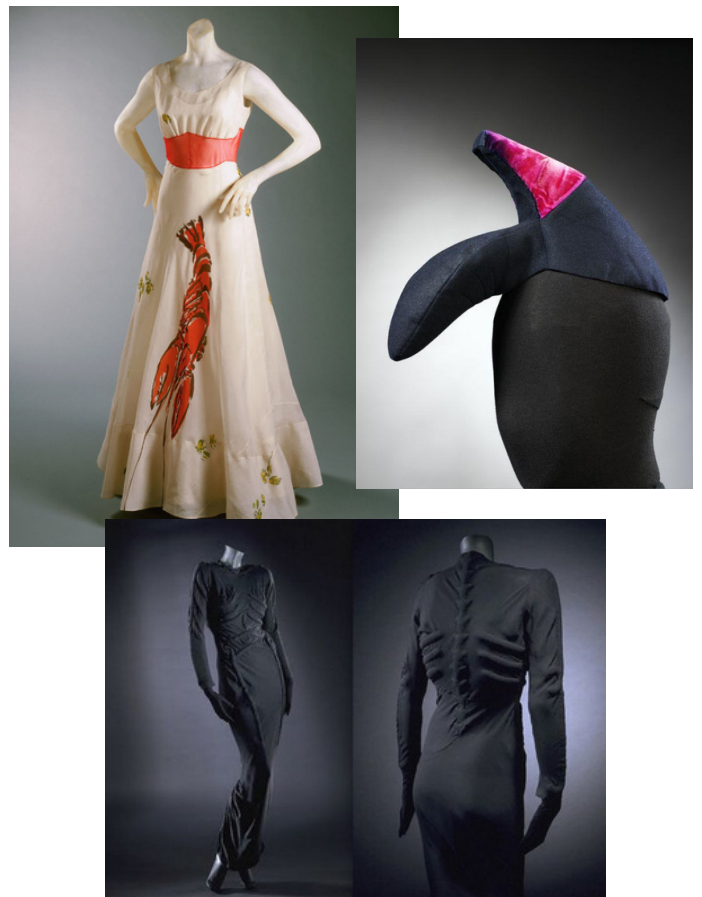
Carefully intertwined within the ornate rooms of paintings, sculpture, and furniture sit countless pairs of archive Manolos. Manolo Blahnik, who co-curated the exhibit, says that “the Wallace Collection has been a point of reference” since his early days in London. The exhibition highlights the seamless integration of shoes with the works that inspired his “enquiring mind,” and creates “a dialogue between the old and the new, the art and the craft, the real and the fantasy.”



Original

In the 1930s, one of the most memorable creative partnerships began, fueled by a shared fascination with Surrealism. Elsa Schiaparelli and Salvador Dali: both creative geniuses in their own rights. While Dali warped the world into imaginative illusions, Schiaparelli made the surreal real (and wearable) with her trompe l'oeil pieces.

The pair would go on to create famously daring collaborations like the 1937 Lobster Dress, which featured a Dali drawing (he reportedly lamented Elsa’s decision to forgo showing the dress with a side of mayonnaise), the 1937 Shoe Hat (a sort of upside-down heel worn atop the head), and the 1938 Skeleton Dress (a drapery gown with protruding rib-cage quilting).



The Dali Museum

Evidently, the two artists exchanged inspiration as Dali provided surrealist imagery for Schiaparelli’s designs that brought art to the living. Of their shared love of art, Schiaparelli remarked: “one felt supported and understood beyond the crude and boring reality of merely making a dress to sell.” Clearly, commercial success was not the goal of such creations, (though American socialite turned Duchess of Windsor Wallis Simpson did purchase the Lobster Dress)

but rather they were intended to shock, to wow, to create, to challenge conventional notions of beauty. And that, they certainly did. The Schiaparelli-Dali duo continues to be upheld as an epitome of fashion-art interaction that took the art and fashion world by storm. In 2017, The Dali Museum opened “Dali & Schiaparelli, In Daring Fashion,” an exhibit commemorating the relationship Vogue proposed “invented the art-fashion collaboration.”



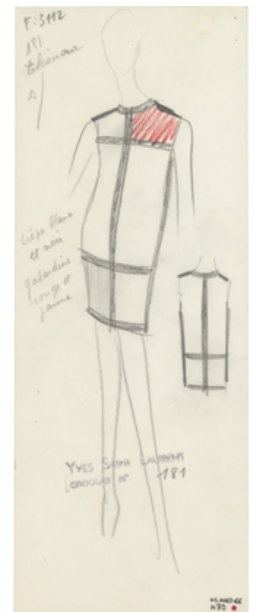
The Dali Museum

The 1960s saw another artist make his way down the runway when Yves Saint Laurent paid tribute to the colorblocked works of Piet Mondrian. Mondrian, fascinated by color theories, helped to develop the neoplasticism movement of geometric paintings executed in primary colors. Drawing inspiration from a book his mother had given him for Christmas, Piet Mondrian Sa vie, son œuvre, YSL infused Mondrian’s

artwork into twenty-six of the 106 looks in his Autumn-Winter 1965 collection. With their swifty simple lines and blocked crayon-box colors, Saint Laurent’s cocktail dresses carried Mondrian’s two-dimensional paintings into the three-dimensional plane. Though appearing in clean, uncomplicated lines, the dresses required considerable technical intricacy to hide the seams of each square.



Yves Saint Laurent



The press raved over these modern creations, and the collection was a success. One paper described the designs as a “revolution” that would certainly appear in the street due to its reflection of modern style desires, perhaps unsurprising to Mondrian, who once said, “not only does fashion accurately reflect an era, it is also one of the more direct forms of visual expression in human culture.”

“The difference between fashion and art is that fashion is art in movement.”
- Carolina Herrera

Fashion as Art

Fashion has an incredibly long history of appearing in art, of being inspired by art, and of bringing it to life and giving it movement. But is fashion itself, art?

Anyone who has watched a behind-the-scenes atelier video of couturiers in immaculate white coats working with the precision of scientists in lab coats knows the craftsmanship and savoir faire required of a single couture piece. Artisans spend hours and hours perfecting the miniscule details of beading, embroidery, pleating, and so forth. The craft of haute couture is regulated and presided over by the Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode, and includes only those houses and companies approved each year by the Chambre Syndicale de la Couture.



Vogue, Anne Combaz

Look 65 of Karl Lagerfeld's Spring '17 haute couture collection chez Chanel exemplifies this line of hand-made construction.

The square-neck straight-silhouette gown took 600 hours of hand embroidery using special techniques to create the mirrored crystal effect, followed by 80 hours of hand-stitching the pouf of cream ostrich feathers to the hem. It is easy to see the artistry of a Chanel couture gown, but what about the more avant-garde? What about the looks that appear more as a moving sculpture than a dress?

Increasingly, designers are creating spectacle in their runway shows—whether it's spray-on dresses at Coperni, or Issey Miyake dresses floating down from the ceiling to drape over models, or Chanel morphing the Grand Palais into a full-fledged space station (and airport, and grocery store, and café). Couture and the “non-commercial” often post a loss in these high-fashion companies. So why do they do it? The runway presents fashion as fantasy, as something that is aspirational, as a theatrical performance of what the brand is about and wishes to say.

One would be remiss to talk about artistry in fashion, in couture, and in runway without discussing Thom Browne. His high-concept shows include notions like Cinderella goes to an American prom at the opera (and returns home in a pink convertible), or an island of misfit toys with layers-upon-layers and ballooned proportions, or even a mock office space with rows and rows of his signature grey suit clacking away at typewriters.

In February of this year, our Strong Suits class had the opportunity to experience first-hand just the sort of other-worldly performance with which Thom Browne's runway shows have become synonymous.



Original

As the lights dimmed over the sand-covered “runway,” a space-suit quilted aviator and an oversized grey suit adorned prince emerged. 35 minutes of Thom Browne’s vision of *The Little Prince* ensued. We watched, enamored, as “planets” with artificially long nails curling into the sand processed out. We followed a string of “adult businesspeople” march onward with their strong-shouldered suits and bouclé tweed.



Original

Next, interpretations of characters from the novel appeared in mix and match patterns and sculptural hair. Then came the deconstructed suits, “the kids,” the ones who really “know what they are looking for.” Then, a spin on the wedding dress finale as “angel” Precious Lee rescues the prince in a voluminous-sleeved white gown whose skirt is constructed and reconstructed from suit jackets.



Thom Browne

In speaking to our class, both design director Thi Wan and Thom Browne himself emphasized the status of the runway collections as the purest form of the vision, and that they first strive to make beautiful things before considering the commercial prospects.

It is impossible to attend a show with such spectacle and not walk away with the undeniable feeling that fashion is art. The fantasy of the runway, the construction of the garments, the concept of the production – all artistic in their own rights. But whenever such looks appear in designers' collections, there will always be this comment that bubbles to the surface: "But when would you ever wear that?" Let's suppose one never does. When faced with a Dali or a Mondrian at a museum, we don't often ask ourselves "but how would this look in my living room?" We just look and analyze and feel. If all fashion must be wearable it presupposes that it is simply a vehicle of pure functionality, a means to appear appropriate as one runs out to the grocery store.

But what about *saying* something?
About *changing* something?
About *challenging* something?

The moveable, three-dimensional, (and theoretically) wearable artworks created in fashion can have something to say, can evoke certain emotions, or cause one to turn previously-held beliefs on their heads. And sometimes, it's just *fun to look at*.