

COSTUME DRAMA

When Diana Vreeland curated her first fashion exhibition at the Met in New York, she hit on a hugely successful new model for clothes-based museum shows.

HANNAH ROTHSCHILD examines the history and future of these extravagant exhibitions



An exhibit from the 'David Bowie Is' show at the V&A-tk. Opposite: tkktkktkkt



Once upon a time, few museums took fashion seriously. Costume departments were relegated to a dusty backwater; their curators ranked low on the academic pecking order. Clothes were seen as a subsection of social history, addenda to a bigger, more interesting picture. Many argued, and still do, that art is about creativity, while fashion is about business: so art belongs in a museum, fashion in a shop. The creation of a work of art is an essentially purposeless act; the making of an item of clothing is practical. Art is free to exist outside market forces; fashion is a prisoner of economics.

Audiences, however, have voted with their feet; frocks rock the box office. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's show 'Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty' was the fourth most-attended exhibition worldwide in 2011, with more than 661,000 visitors. This year, the V&A sold a record 67,000 advance tickets to its 'David Bowie Is' show, a fusion of fashion and popular culture, and around 300,000 people poured through

its doors. In Colorado, the Denver Art Museum extended the hours of its exhibition 'Yves Saint Laurent: The Retrospective' to cope with demand. In 2012, there were more than 44 costume shows in major museums worldwide.

This reclassification of fashion pieces as museum-worthy works of art makes many nervous. The art business depends on keeping art exclusive, rarefied and otherworldly. 'Fashion is fashion and art is art,' says Damien Whitmore, director of programming for the V&A. 'Art is about meaning; fashion is a craft.' The V&A, with an established textile and fashion department, puts on exhibitions that explore the stories and skills behind costume. As Whitmore says: 'We're not just about "wow", we're about "why" and "how".'

Yet hard lines that separate high and low culture have blurred; and the roles of feminism and micro-history have also elevated fashion's status. The art historian Richard Martin observed that fashionable attire was devalued in Western culture because it was seen as the province of women. 'While the feminist movement of the 1960s might be cited as a reason for the reassessment of fashion,' says Harold Koda, the curator in charge of the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 'I think it has more to do with a broadening of the definition of art in the 20th century.'

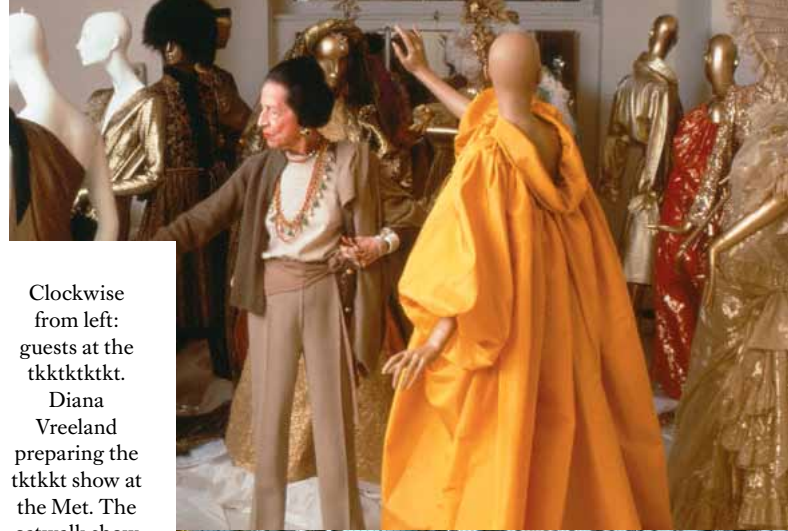
Traditional classifications of what constituted a work of art ended a century ago when Marcel Duchamp signed a urinal with 'R Mutt'. 'Art is not about itself but the attention we bring to it,' he said, placing the lavatory on a pedestal for inclusion in an art exhibition. Since then, an artist's hand only has to hover near his or her work. When Charles Saatchi commissioned a pickled shark from Damien Hirst for £50,000, most thought the collector had gone mad. However, armed with a lofty title and a slew of attention, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* eventually sold for a reputed \$12 million. If a box, a shark or a lavatory qualifies as art, many might argue that a shoe, hat or bra should as well.

There is, after all, a rich interplay between fashion and art. In portraiture, clothes are a reflection of character and status. Velázquez was careful to put Philip IV in far more important, bejewelled clothes than his subjects. Queen Elizabeth I's portraits were full of sartorial messages: dresses decorated with vine leaves demonstrating England's love of the natural world; clothes decorated with pearls to depict virginity and purity; complex ruffs of the finest lace available only to a ruling monarch. The early Impressionists shocked society by painting the middle classes in their everyday garb. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres lavished so much attention on the detail of his sitters' clothes that their faces become the



Clockwise from left: Tktkkt tktk in the Ttkkktk exhibition. Tktkkt and Tktkt at Ttkkktk.





Clockwise from left: guests at the tktkktktkt. Diana Vreeland preparing the tktkkt show at the Met. The catwalk show for tktkktkt. Jackie Onassis. Below: tktkktktktk



supporting act. Lucian Freud painted his models' apparel with astonishing attention to detail.

Mass production and delegation are nothing new for artists. Canaletto had a studio to crank out views of Venice to sell to tourists; Andy Warhol his 'factory', whose amateur employees made screen prints. Meanwhile, a haute-couture dress is a one-off creation needing many hours of skilled labour to realise a particular fantasy. Many cost more than works of art. Even high-end ready-to-wear looks are manufactured in smaller editions than Damien Hirst's *Spot* prints. So which object is more deserving of inclusion in a museum? How do we judge?

Some – though not all – designers aspire to be promoted to the first division of fine arts; having your clothes exhibited in a museum elevates a garment and adds to a brand's allure. Labels gain kudos by association with museums and, increasingly, the language of art suffuses the lexicon of fashion. Prada, Trussardi, Salvatore Ferragamo, Balenciaga, Montblanc, Cartier, Louis Vuitton, Hermès and Gucci have created foundations that collect and show art, often alongside their products. LVMH sponsors exhibitions, as well as providing classes for children and a young artists' award; Marni is one label that collaborates with artists on its catwalk shows. And the overlap continues elsewhere: in Paris, designers show their new-season collections in venues traditionally associated with high arts: Versailles, the Grand Palais, the Jeu de Paume, the Rodin Museum and the Louvre. Conversely, the Gucci Museo in Florence recently showed work by the American artist Cindy Sherman, while Gucci's owner François Pinault, who also counts Christie's auction house and two museums in Venice among his assets, has one of the world's most important art collections.

It was a former fashion editor of this magazine, Diana Vreeland, who invented the blockbuster fashion exhibition. When she left publishing, Vreeland joined the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where she curated 14 shows before her death in 1989 ('I was only 70; what

was I supposed to do? Retire?' she said about taking the position). There had been a Costume Institute at the Met since 1946 and an annual gala

A couture dress is a one-off creation; many cost more than works of art

the wig-maker to use concrete blocks to vastly exaggerate the size of the hairpieces, as it would be 'more amusing'.

With Anna Wintour joining as co-chair in 1994, the Costume Institute scaled new heights. One show, 'Dangerous Liaisons' in 2004, was the first to integrate the clothes of 18th-century France into rooms adorned with furniture and objects of the period. In her first year, Ms Wintour raised \$1.3 million for the ball; last year, she corralled cheques for \$11 million. Thanks to a massive gift from Lizzie and Jonathan Tisch, the Costume Institute is being revamped; from next year it will have a 4,200 sq ft exhibition space, an updated conservation centre, a library and expanded storage facilities. Koda explains one of the new gallery's innovations: 'We will be able to introduce isolated zones of sound – say, of the drag of a mourning ensemble's heavy satin train and the glassy crackle of jet fringe in movement, or the dry abrasion of an 18th-century court gown's overdress against its petticoat.'

Putting on a show devoted to fashion does not always guarantee success. This year's 'Punk: Chaos to Couture' at the Met was



criticised for a lack of understanding about the period. Punk was about ugliness, discordancy and, above all, an anarchic 'fuck you'. Gwyneth Paltrow, who turned up in an pink ballgown, said the show 'sucked'. But Koda is sanguine: 'Everyone is entitled to their opinion. We thought it was amazing how elements of a provocative, even nihilistic, street style could in 30 years come to be reflected in the creative strategies of prêt-à-porter and haute-couture designers.'

Leaving the Punk show, visitors could buy a \$565 silk-screened T-shirt that would have set Sid Vicious off on a spitting fit. The show's sponsor, Moda Operandi, an online retailer, had exclusive merchandising rights. On its website you can buy a peacock-blue mohawk for \$1,500, or a Thom Browne wool zipped kilt for \$3,820. The V&A says it would never accept such self-interested sponsorship. 'Our brand, reputation, scholarship and integrity have to remain unblemished,' Whitmore says. 'We keep a critical distance.'

Yet in an era when public funding is being cut and sponsors are even harder to find, museums are under pressure to come up with profitable exhibitions to entice new audiences. There are only so many Da Vincis, Lowrys and Hockneys. Big names and powerful brands are important to help sell shows. The Saatchi Gallery had a runaway success with its exhibition of Chanel's 'Little Black Jacket', photographed by Karl Lagerfeld. Alexander McQueen's clothes are objects of extraordinary beauty and craftsmanship in their own right; few could deny, though, that his suicide and tragic story helped to create a frisson around the Met show.

Another problem museums face is how to attract new and younger audiences. The wide availability of cutting-edge design means that everyone, whatever their shape, size and budget, can be part of this once rarefied and elusive world. No wonder that a newly enfranchised fashion-buying population is interested in the stories behind the brands. 'Fashion in museums has an increasingly knowledgeable and critical audience,' Koda says. 'Today, every blogger has more information and knowledge easily at hand than a costume curator did 20 or 30 years ago, when I was starting off. It is exciting to have a more fashion-savvy audience to address ideas to.'

My problem with these shows is that garments need to be animated by a wearer; hanging on a rail or on a mannequin, outfits lose their character and become pieces of material. Clothes are made to be worn. The greatest outfits are realised by the body they encase; by the shimmy of a seam across a hip or breast, the flick of a hemline, the arrow of a dart, the slip of a stitch and the suggestion of form lurking beneath fabric. Like a great play or piece of music, clothes lose out without that element of interpretation or performance. Fashion needs the input of an individual. 'How many historic houses have we been to where the glass-eyed mannequin has her wig faintly askew and her eyelashes de-laminating?' asks Koda. 'Because of conservation restrictions, we can never animate a skirt or a sleeve.'

A fashion exhibition is just part of the story. However, provided that the exhibits are based in their social context, and staged with wit and imagination, and so long as sponsors don't compromise the curators, their popularity will endure. There are many to look forward to in the near future. Few doubt that 'Cartier: Style and History' at the Grand Palais in Paris (from 4 December) will be a success. The Brits are bound to like 'Hello My Name Is Paul Smith' at the Design Museum (from 15 November) and, for the more adventurous, there is 'The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk' at the Barbican (from 9 April 2014) and 'Club to Catwalk: London Fashion in the 1980s' at the V&A (until 16 February 2014). The most important thing is not to throw your old clothes away; today's cast-offs might be tomorrow's works of art. □