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# Sine Qua Non: An Exploration of a “Catholic Imagination” at the Met

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**Abstract** Recently, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, a hallowed cultural institution, was transformed into an ecclesiastical couture extravaganza through the installation of the Anna Wintour Costume Institute’s latest exhibition, *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination*. This exhibition showcased papal finery as well as gorgeous couture gowns juxtapositioned with icons from the Met’s collection in various galleries, some even installed within vitrines where fashion objects nestled right in beside antiquities. This exhibition went on to become the highest attended (and therefore also highest grossing) exhibition in the museum’s history, and while undoubtedly a beautiful spectacle, it also brought up relevant issues of didactic cultural display, the incursion of commercial interests in public institutions, and which

voices are included and which are excluded from this specific display. Of particular note are some of the other messages that have been inspired by a Catholic “imagination,” both implicit and explicit, especially in how they relate to LGBTQ+ people and the original intentions of some of the designers. Ultimately, the exhibition inadvertently illuminates what is truly worshiped by a contemporary, urbane, non-believer living in a secular society: fashion. This paper is an exploration of some of the larger themes that are brought up when secular and religious iconography are brought together in a large-scale public institutional display, and also includes an experiential review of the exhibition by the author at both the Met 5th Avenue as well as the Cloisters locations.

**“Cause beauty’s religion and it’s christened  
me with wonder.” – “And if Venice is Sinking,”  
Spirit of the West (1993)**

Outside they wait patiently to enter. Two long lines form; one trails south down the steps and the other goes north. Numbering in the hundreds, hopeful museum-goers nearly traverse the entire span of 5th Avenue between 80th and 84th. Observed as a whole they resemble nothing so much as a line of pilgrims in eager expectation. Today they endeavour to gain entry to the church of the garment, a cathedral of the gown, a secular engagement with awe and the sublime. The location is the Metropolitan Museum of Art and today the hallowed cultural institution is transformed into an ecclesiastical couture extravaganza through the installation of the Anna Wintour Costume Institute’s latest exhibition entitled *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination*, which is temporarily ensconced within these palatial halls of cultural power. The Met offers a cornucopia of some of the

finest artisanal objects ever produced; many of these are held within their own vast collections, along with frequent augmentation by travelling blockbuster exhibitions. *Heavenly Bodies*, however, curated by Andrew Bolton, Head Curator of the Costume Institute, has now become the blockbuster to end all blockbusters, the highest attended (and therefore grossing) exhibition in the history of the museum (Brooke 2018). These impressive statistics can certainly attest to the popularity of museum-based garment exhibition, and also inadvertently illuminate what is truly worshiped by a contemporary, urbane, non-believer living in a secular society: fashion. This essay presents an experiential review of *Heavenly Bodies* and provides a brief history of the development of the museum fashion exhibition. This paper also addresses missed opportunities and gaps within the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibition, as well as the potential for didactic, counter-hegemonic action within museum-based fashion display.

The Met is a palace of culture, and although possessing similar scale and majestic presence to the Louvre in Paris, unlike its Parisian counterpart (that was originally a royal residence and later repurposed as a museum), the Met was built specifically to house and showcase the ruling ethos of the triumph of industry and ascendant American power. Situated in the premiere city of

a young country that has no monarchy, the Met is a place to educate and culturally enrich the public *en masse*. Erected as venue for didactic cultural display (Tomkins 1989), it follows that the Met also must function as a means of disseminating the message of how that culture is created and maintained. The actual objects on show consist of fashionable garments whose design were inspired by Catholic religious themes, and could be viewed at two Met Museum locations: 1000 5th Avenue and the Cloisters. The installation of these garments sees them interspersed with and at times sharing display areas with non-fashion related artefacts. Overall, the exhibition design has been extremely well-planned and executed, with the garments juxtapositioned alongside icons from the Met's collection in various galleries, and even installed within vitrines where fashion objects nestle right in beside priceless antiquities.

The proximity of the garments and the religious artefacts naturally compel the viewer to draw comparisons between the two. The Gaultier, Dolce & Gabbana, Lacroix, and Mugler clothing all engage in a dynamic visual dialogue with each other, with other artefacts in their immediate vicinity, and with the space itself. Observed in passing for example, a voluminous YSL dress with an oversized bow also has stone angel wings caught in its sightlines.

**Resplendent with their crystalline beaded surfaces, their byzantine ornamentation and miles of silken finery all coalesce into a fashion-based museum experience that can accurately be described as *absolutely fabulous*.**

These garments had all been seen as a part of their respective fashion shows, but had never been shown together. Grouped thematically, the outfits corresponded with objects in the various gallery spaces. For example, there are fashions inspired by the religious art and architecture of Byzantium in the Mary and Michael Jaharis Galleries of Byzantine Art, as well as “fashions inspired by the cults of saints and angels” (Bolton 2018, par. 5) in the Robert Lehman Wing. In the Medieval Europe Gallery, Medieval Sculpture Hall, and Medieval Treasury you will find “garments [which] reference the hierarchies and gendered distinctions of the Roman Catholic Church, as well as the cult of the Virgin Mary” (Bolton 2018, par. 5). Most impressive was the installation in the great hall where gowns were placed in order as if in a *défilé de mode* in a fashion show, where the “models” appear to walk in sequence through the massive wrought iron choir screen from the Cathedral of Vallodid of 1763 and gracefully cross the cathedral-like space.

Here, comparisons can be made in relation to surrounding objects, both general as to the themes of sartorial display and to the coded messaging communicated by visual costume cues. Down in the basement in the Anna Wintour Costume Center, “pontifical vestments and accessories from the sacristy of the Sistine Chapel, Apostolic Palace, Vatican City” (Bolton 2018, par. 5) can be found. Providing a discrete, albeit somewhat bland, display of the finest of papal finery, physically and vocationally separated from the fashion offerings upstairs, the selection shown in this area of the exhibition includes embroideries on loan from

the Vatican. These vestments are of exquisite workmanship; truly, they are paintings made using silken thread and needle as media. Throughout the duration of the exhibition, the clothing will be visited by curious multitudes, tourists, and throngs of the fashionistas, all of whom can be observed staring in reverent awe at the exemplary craftsmanship and the iconography of the garments on display.

The truly powerful moments of the exhibition, however, take place at another location: the Met Cloisters. Here, there are garments “that relate especially to the reflective worlds of religious orders” (Bolton 2018, par. 5). Situated at the north end of the island of Manhattan, the Cloisters sits high up on a hill and looks out over a bucolic rolling landscape of public parkland, and onto the cliffs across the way on the other side of the Hudson River. Where the Met 5th Avenue was bustling and possessed a festival-like high energy due to the crowds, the Cloisters presented a very different atmosphere and viewing experience. The space (one can’t really call it a gallery) according to the Met museum website is a “paraphrasing of medieval proportions and styles” (“The Cloisters: A History” 2006, par. 6). Building on an existing collection established by George Grey Barnard pre-World War 1, the building was bought by John D. Rockefeller in the early 1920s and was expanded upon with the addition of his own collection and the construction of the current building. Rockefeller purchased sections of architectures in Europe and even donated land on the New Jersey side of the Hudson to preserve the sweeping vistas afforded by the cloister and gardens installed high upon a promontory (“The Cloisters: A History” 2006, par. 5). The result is a bricolage of various remnants of religious institutional architectures bought in Europe, shipped, and subsequently reassembled in America. This act is in itself a form of cultural repurposing, similar in some ways to the ideas at play in the garments exhibited within.

Whatever the motivation, the combination works, and the Cloisters is a venue of unique charms and atmosphere. Here, something truly penitential and devotional can be experienced, the sublime surroundings adding gravitas to the gowns on display. The intimacy of the space adds to the experience, as the garments are positioned throughout the winding, interconnected spaces of the cloisters. A circular stone stairway leads down to further treasures and visual delights, towards an enclosed courtyard with gowns intermingled with the herbal scents of the living rosemary plants already growing in pots, then to a heavy wooden door through a portico onto a medieval garden, and then back into another hushed room of exquisite garments in dialogue with the relics in their vicinity. For example, the 16th century "Unicorn in Captivity" tapestry contrasts with a 2018 Thom Browne dress also based on a unicorn motif; the dress is constructed with shredded strips that have

been pieced together in a manner similar to assembling the warp of a tapestry, echoing the process if not the final product. The Garden of Eden motif on a Valentino gown draws comparison to the aforementioned sumptuous Vatican embroideries, but to give due credit to those unnamed Vatican City liturgical embroiders, the couture gown (although certainly lovely) is no match for the workmanship of the vestments. A Balenciaga wedding gown, closely resembling the habit of a nun, shown here in the Fuentidueña Apse, stands installed as a solitary bride of God as is the stated intention of novitiate nuns. A Dior dress with one armoured sleeve evokes a fallen crusader; reposed body returned from violent religious wars in the Holy Land and now laid out in eternal rest. One wonders what non-fashion visitors to the Cloisters made of the fashion objects, as I have been to the Cloisters previously and have never seen crowds like I saw during this visit.

**Fashion has gathered a whole new audience to what has always been a very special venue.**

Costume and textile exhibitions in museums are ephemeral events that create intimate experiences, “resulting in a unique union of psychological, physiological and social factors” (Ramlijak qtd. in Palmer 2008, 32). Regarding their methodology, “Some take a social history approach, others a fine art model” and their organization and flow can be chronological or thematic (Palmer 2008, 32). Valerie Steele, director of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) traces the ascendancy of this particular form of museum exhibition in “Museum Quality: The Rise of the Fashion Exhibition” (2008). Steele states that, originally, “Museum officials . . . regarded some artistic and allied subjects with a certain suspicion, especially the study of historic costume, which most of the staff thought of only as a sort of rather unholy byproduct of the textile industry” (Gibbs-Smith qtd. in Steele 2008, 9), in spite of this resistance:

**The first popular fashion history exhibition was held at the International Exhibition in Paris in 1900. Housed in the Palais du Costume, it consisted of thirty tableaux containing waxwork figures arranged in both historical and contemporary scenes, ranging from “Gallic Women at the Time of the Roman Invasion” (with reproduction costumes) to “Getting Ready for the Opera” (featuring the latest couture creations). (Steele 2008, 9)**

Fashion museums that had specialized fashion collections were subsequently established, often comprising the contents of private collections like that of Doris Langley Moore, who founded the Museum of Costume in Bath (Steele 2008; Taylor 1998). However, it was more common to incorporate private collections into an already established museum:

**The Costume Institute, for example, became a branch department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1944,**

**having originated as a collection organized by Irene Lewisohn, Aline Bernstein, and Polaire Weissman. The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) developed out of the Edward C. Blum “Design Laboratory,” which was originally founded at the Brooklyn Museum in 1915 as a teaching collection and a source of inspiration for American designers. Eventually, this evolved into two separate collections, one belonging to the Brooklyn Museum, an encyclopedic art museum, the other forming the basis for a specialized museum of fashion at FIT. (Steele 2008, 9)**

Clothing was not displayed in the Victoria and Albert Museum until 1914, although the museum was first established in its nascent incarnation as the *Museum of Manufacturers* in Marlborough house in 1852 (Taylor 1998). Lou Taylor asserts the reasons for this late adoption include that dress carried associations of “vulgar commerciality, and valueless, ephemeral style” for the male museum staff (1998, 341), and credits the changing of attitudes with the appointment of “professional women curators” in the 1950s (1998, 42). Taylor also identifies the breakthrough moment for the visibility and credibility of fashion in a museum setting as the exhibition *Fashion an Anthology* (1971), curated by Cecil Beaton (under the museum stewardship of Roy Strong) who assembled and exhibited over five hundred twentieth-century pieces (Taylor 1998, 343). These collections grew through donations and acquisitions, and exhibitions continue to be mounted.

Fashion exhibition at the Met is also not a recent phenomenon, as the “Costume Institute displayed eighteenth-century dresses in the Wrightsman Galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as early as the 1960s” (Steele 2008, 10). The rise of the mega fashion exhibition as we know it today “coincided with the explosion of interest in lifestyle, museum going, and fashion as a part of late-twentieth-century commodity culture” (McNeil 2008, 79). As such, it has been conjoined with the ambitions of entertainment and spectacle, which bring with them the commensurate pressures of sponsorship, PR, and the financial burdens of popular public display.



## The *Heavenly Bodies* exhibition leaves the institution as a whole open to the criticism that is inherent in all display of fashion objects: namely that the museum is being used as a shill for the brands that are sponsoring the exhibition.

As such it may blur the "...boundaries between academic curated exhibitions and exhibitions that are really marketing..." (Palmer 2008, 35). These garments were obviously not for sale, but their labels were certainly on show, no doubt elevating the garments and their respective brands through association. Hilton Kramer, art critic for the *New York Observer*, commented on this phenomenon: "These are very cynical museological decisions, determined to break down the distinctions between art and commerce," and felt of museum/fashion display that "It is creating the impression — and I think there's a lot of reality to the impression — that the museum is for sale" (qtd. in Steele 2008, 18). Kramer then went on to categorically declare that garments are not art (qtd. in Steele 2008, 18).

The uninspiring entry galleries at the Met 5th Avenue with their elevated mannequins don't help to refute Kramer's imputations. Positioned high above

the throngs below, untouchable and remote, their details could not be seen. As a result, the garments simply registered as flashy set-dressing. Those displayed were not the best selection from the clothing genre as a whole, and were not even the designers' best work within their own respective ecclesiastical-inspired oeuvres, especially when there are many relevant and interesting pieces to choose from. Real-estate-wise however, the display was certainly a good way to include a healthy number of Versace pieces in a contained space, given that Versace was a sponsor of the exhibition.

The debate about fashion in the museum is not new, and is ongoing. The 2008 Giorgio Armani exhibition — which followed on the heels of a US\$15 million donation to the Guggenheim coffers from the label — was a lightning rod for eliciting criticism from the media (Steele 2008, 17). Discussion arose from the fact that the Armani garments were not considered

“museum objects” and that the “Guggenheim does not even collect decorative arts,” among other critiques (Palmer 2008, 34). A particularly egregious corporate incursion in the museum realm was The Manchu Dragon: Costumes of China (1980) exhibition, which “featured magnificent garments, but their symbolic meaning was completely ignored...” (Steele 2008, 11). As if this acultural and tone-deaf representation wasn’t enough, the indignities compounded:

**Worst of all, visitors to the exhibition were overwhelmed by the smell of Yves Saint Laurent’s new perfume, *Opium*, which Vreeland described as “capturing the essence of China.” Considering how hard the Chinese government tried to keep opium out of China, and how the British fought two wars to force them to import it, Vreeland’s neo-colonialist celebration of the “exotic” Orient seemed like a cruel joke. (Steele 2008, 11)**

Steele claims however, that the “real crisis” in these museum/corporate/fashion assemblages “came in 1983, when Mrs Vreeland’s retrospective of Yves Saint Laurent became the first major museum show devoted to a living designer” (2008, 12). This exhibition, in turn, caused “tremendous controversy” due to the close ties to “the economic interests of that particular designer” (Steele 2008, 19). Harold Koda, former curator-in-chief of the Met Costume Institute, and co-curator of the notorious Armani/Guggenheim exhibition, identified the hypocrisy in these critiques when he answered a question about the “role of money, glamour, and politics in the fashion world” with a wry “What, as opposed to the art world?” (Koda qtd. in Steele 2008, 18-19). Then as now, commercial influences on public spaces are something that must be monitored. This discussion also speaks to a need for a better permanent space

for a fashion exhibition, as defending the legitimacy of an entire discipline, namely fashion studies, is an argument that unfortunately still needs to be waged each time garments are installed in the museum setting; in spite of (or perhaps as an indirect result of) the overwhelming success of recent museum-based fashion exhibitions.

Regarding gaps in the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibition, noticeably missing from a show of this nature in this particular venue was visual commentary and connections to the syncretic origins of the Afro-Caribbean and Latin American iconography that could easily have served as inspiration for some of the garments on display (Tavárez 2017). The main critical concern however, was not actually with the objects exhibited, as the show was beautifully and creatively staged, but rather with the larger messages and metanarratives the entire exhibit communicated as a whole. Any exploration of the Catholic Church in a publicly funded institutional space needs to be communicating the reality of that religious organization. This exhibition only presented one side of a story that is currently being fought out in contemporary society, resulting in a drastic asymmetry of message. Susan Sontag talks about these papal initiatives conjoined with art in “An Argument about Beauty” from her collection of essays *At the Same Time* (2007):

**Responding at last, in April 2002, to the scandal created by the revelation of innumerable cover-ups of sexually predatory priests, Pope John Paul II told the American cardinals summoned to the Vatican, “A great work of art may be blemished, but its beauty remains; and this is a truth which any intellectually honest critic will recognize.” (3)**

Through alignment with prestigious high fashion and the illustrious reputation of the Met, this exhibition functions as propaganda that showcases a singular dominant voice, in this case a form of visual proselytizing for a normative Catholic history. Missing in all this gorgeous display was commentary surrounding Church misogyny, the Church and the sexual abuse of children, the Church and homophobic activity, Church opposition to reproductive rights, and the negative effects of colonial clerical incursions, all of which was noticeably absent. There is a didactic quality to all museum exhibitions, and if one sees a representation of only a benign continuation of the status quo on

display, then there can be no evolution of social awareness; in this case, leaving only the history that has seen the Church hierarchy use its enormous wealth and power to dominate and cover up its own misdeeds and exploitation for millennia. As Sontag argues:

**Is it too odd that the pope likens the Catholic Church to a great — that is, beautiful — work of art? Perhaps not, since the inane comparison allows him to turn abhorrent misdeeds into something like the scratches in the print of a silent film or craquelure covering the surface of an Old Master painting, blemishes that we reflexively screen out or see past. The pope likes venerable ideas. And beauty, as a term signifying (like health) an indisputable excellence, has been a perennial resource in the issuing of peremptory evaluations. (3)**

There are other themes and historical narratives that can be discerned peeking out between craquelure, or contained within the pentimento if one only looks a little closer, and in the spirit of a more nuanced representation these should have been curated

into this exhibition. Where was the scarlet Versace papal gown Nikki Minaj wore to the Grammy's? Her costume was a powerful visual rebuke to the lack of women in authority at the Vatican. Similarly, the very pregnant Beyoncé, evoking a non-European holy mother and goddess figure during her Grammy's performance, should have been represented. Madonna's naughty nuns found on her *Rebel Heart* tour in garters and stockings and wimples with their cross-shaped poles have their place here; and if nothing else, one of Madonna's corsets layered with a multitude of crucifixes from her early fame should have been featured. The closest to a transgression on display was a draped Rik Owen robe that had an opening where a bare penis had peeked out during his runway show. Unfortunately, for all of the exquisite finery on show there was a lack of critical analysis of the genesis of some of the pieces, and therefore an unreflective acceptance of only one voice: the gilded, institutional, papal voice. Given the ongoing struggles of survivors of myriad victimizations by Catholic clergy members, it was a glaring oversight.

**The museum is a publicly funded institution and it therefore has a responsibility to deliver a more balanced message.**

In his writings about the exhibition, curator Andrew Bolton does seem very sensitive to the reactions of members of the viewing population, writing that “some practicing Catholics might perceive certain fashions shown as indelicate or even offensive,” and that “Catholics and non-Catholics alike may be concerned that fashion is an unfitting and unseemly medium by which to convey ideas or reflect imagery related to the sacred and the divine...” (2018, par. 2). My concerns, however, lie with those that have been on the receiving end of Catholic judgment, intolerance, and persistent harassment. I myself am included in this group, as a Catholic who is no longer welcome in my own church due to my sexual orientation, and who saw so many wonderful creative people (many of whom lived lives dedicated to fashion) have their lengthy and agonizing AIDS-related illnesses exacerbated by ignorance and hatred. Their fear-filled and untimely deaths were an awful, tragic process that was drastically worsened by the hideous rhetoric of the Catholic Church at that time. For me, this exhibition as it was presented felt like a celebration of Catholicism itself, a redemptive public celebration as a way of mitigating negative press.

Even when anger or criticism was a part of the original designer’s intention, it was defanged, leaving a palimpsest on display at best. There is an element of subversion and protest in much of the work of Jean Paul Gaultier, Thierry Mugler, and Alexander McQueen (all homosexual designers). For example, McQueen told *Women’s Wear Daily* in 1996 that “...religion has caused every war in the world”; therefore, it stands to reason his use of religious symbolism was certainly not intended as a form veneration (“Europe Goes on Maneuvers” 1996, 6). It is wrong to exhibit work like this without the original message communicated as well; the exhibition then functions instead as a form of suppression and censorship.

Clearly, for the purposes of this exhibition the evocation of the Catholic Church was meant to connote the baroque, exquisite fineries of papal display, but exposition of objects communicates a multivalent, agglomerate message, and in this case it is a complicated and emotionally loaded one for many people. There are therefore other “imaginaries” that warrant inclusion in this exhibition. For example, one of the most iconographic images conjoining Christianity and fashion was a 1992 Benetton advertisement, which featured a photograph of the Kirby family preparing to lose their beloved son David, an AIDS activist, to the disease, evoking a Pietà with loved ones cradling

their destroyed Jesus after his removal from the cross (**Figure 1**). This was an image that was slammed as offensive, distasteful, and exploitative by both queer and Christian commentators when it was originally used for advertising. However, there was little else so humanizing and poignant being exhibited anywhere in the media or in public discourse about the AIDS crisis at that time. The fundamental paradox of the Met exhibition is that it is hard to identify a queerer industry than fashion, yet what we are given here is an unquestioning, de facto celebration of what can be a powerful, oppressive force attacking LGBTQ+ personal and political liberation today.



FIGURE 1

Benetton advertisement from 1992, using the colorized photograph *David Kirby* by Therese Frare, shot May 1, 1990. Therese Frare, *David Kirby*. 1990, Benetton Advertisement. Time.com. <https://time.com/4592061/colorization-benetton-aids-ad/>.

It does not have to be this way. Steele maintains that exhibitions can be “beautiful and intelligent” as well as “entertaining and educational” (2008, 14). However, the research and execution of supporting collateral necessary for exhibitions that are both entertaining and didactic is not always included within their planning and budgeting, or factored into the time allotted for mounting an exhibition (Palmer 2008, 54). In “‘We’re Not in the Fashion Business’: Fashion in the Museum and the Academy” (2008), scholar Peter McNeil relates that he has “frequently observed young French people debating the footnotes in scholarly tomes as they exit a show” (2008, 77) and quotes the previously-mentioned Koda, who observed that within the environs of museum exhibition “Europeans will queue to read ‘tiny handwritten letters’” (qtd. in McNeil 2008, 77). McNeil feels that this is less likely to happen in North America or Australia as the “aura of entertainment and leisure drives a large part of museum planning and marketing” (2008, 77). Entertainment and education are not conflicting agendas, however; they can be effectively imbricated within an exhibition with adequate foresight and institutional support.

**Fashion is a commercial product, but it is also an art object. How to balance the didactic with the economic potential encoded within the exhibition of modern fashion?**



Exhibition without auxiliary information also goes against the mandate of any museum as the educational is conjoined to their exhibition efforts. As Laura-Edythe Coleman says in *Understanding and Implementing Inclusion in Museums* (2018) "...museums are in service to humanity — not one human in particular, or even a group of humans, but humanity as a collective" (129). Yet this responsibility and, really, exciting potential, is unrealized at this time, and Coleman lists some reasons for this:

**First, American museums struggle to be culturally responsive and inclusive of their entire community. Second, as institutions, American museums are hesitant to form partnerships with social organizations and agencies that have similar but still different mission statements. Third, American museums refuse to become the conduit or platform for broad social change. (2018, 2)**

In their chapter "From the Ground Up: Grassroots Social Justice Activism in American Museums" from *Museum Activism* (2019), authors Coleman and Porchia Moore advocate for a repositioning of the museum space towards one that represents social justice in addition to *social value* within museum display:

**Increasingly, in American museums, we see the term "social justice" used as a call to action for systemic change and transformation in museum practice; most specifically as it relates to issues of diversity, equity, access, and inclusion...As a result, American museums are poised at a junction: arriving at a destination where museums are replete with possibilities of changing the landscape of American culture and society, or remaining institutions whose values fail to mirror the equity and access that our 21st-century audiences demand. (146)**

Collectively and institutionally, there are concerted efforts to remedy the imbalance and power inequities in museum exhibition and provide potential solutions for them, and there are also collectives providing resources in aid of this goal. [1]

[1] Museum as Site for Social Action (MASS) is an initiative that offers resources for museum professionals interested in pursuing progressive institutional change. Described as follows on the MASS website, "The Minneapolis Institute of Art, in collaboration with stakeholders across the field, is creating a platform for public dialogues on a variety of topics and issues affecting our communities locally and globally, leading to actionable practices for greater equity and inclusion in our institutions" ("Mass Action").



In this vein of social-justice-based exhibition that seeks to subvert and disrupt the normative processes of social value based display, there have been some thoughtful exhibitions that intentionally go deep into social theory and critical analysis of garments. Case in point is the recent exhibition *Fashion Victims: The Pleasures and Perils of Dress in the 19th Century* (2014-2016), curated by progressive fashion scholar Alison Matthews David and Elizabeth Semmelhack, head curator of the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto and based on research by Matthews David (2015). Far more Marxist than elitist in tone and content, the show positioned an exhibition of clothing artefacts in a way that highlighted the physical perils posed by nineteenth-century clothing dye and garment construction. Here, the toxic nature of arsenic dyes and mercury are clearly illustrated by the garments and accessories on show. The exhibition effectively highlighted the inequities of class, underscoring that it was the dressmakers and milliners who were the victims of these toxic chemicals due to their repeated exposure, not the young society ladies in their poisonous ball gowns that were pictured in contemporaneous lithographs. This exhibition was conceptually rich, clearly presented in display and supporting collateral, and so popular it was extended for an extra year and a half. Clearly, these types of critical fashion exhibitions are possible.

In conclusion, the garments on display at the Met needed to be represented within a more comprehensive theoretical delimitation; many were clever in their use of religious symbolism and motifs overall, mildly provocative at best but never profane. However, there was no overt criticism to counterbalance the Church doctrine on display that I could see, even when it was the intention of the designer to do so. Palmer quotes Giovanni Pinna, who remarked upon the opening of the British Galleries at the Victoria & Albert Museum: "It is always the Museum which guides the games and sets the rules; the public can move intellectually, but always within the limits imposed by the Museum" (qtd. in Palmer 2008, 35). Omission of alternative voices is political, calculated, and can be used to further larger hegemonic processes. As we are living in times that are seriously challenged by the rolling back of personal liberties and autonomy, to offer up one of the most illustrious public spaces in the world to an institution actively engaged in homophobic, anti-women's rights, and destructive colonial processes globally is problematic at the very least.

Fashion historian Valerie Steele says that "it is not fair to criticize curators for not doing what they never intended to do" (2008, 19). I strongly disagree. My intention, however, is not to pillory the curator, as he did what he intended to do: present a show of beautiful garments inspired by Catholic

themes, exhibited in a way that balanced the intelligent with the spectacular extremely well. Rather, I would like to draw attention to a larger lost opportunity for exposition of a more balanced Catholic “imaginary,” one that shows that where there is great beauty there has also been terrible pain. This exhibition presented an aestheticized and normative iconography, one that now functions as a legitimizing, sanitizing agent for Church misdeeds, and that left potential for critique, political counter-action, and the voices of victim’s rights activists pressed up against the glass, firmly excluded outside the doors of the museum. This needs to change, as every time an exhibition misses the opportunity to further social justice everyone is impoverished, and a progressive opportunity is lost. As Robert Janes and Richard Sandell write in *Museum Activism* (2019):

**[T]he silences and distortions that have characterized the treatment of same sex desire and gender diversity across the global museum landscape have consequences in effects that powerfully impact LGBTQ lives, and help to create the conditions within which equality struggles are staged (Sandell 2017). It follows, therefore, that an unwillingness on the part of museums to acknowledge and purposefully address the causes and consequences of widespread discrimination for LGBTQ communities, is to be complicit in the practices that make this inhuman treatment permissible. (37)**

In spite of this missed opportunity, massive numbers of people still made their pilgrimage to the Met.

Here in the museum setting where previous didactic iconography found in relics and stained glass communicate moral and religious messages, fashion is communicating an equally powerful message to a population that is no longer grounded in religious philosophy, but still seeks spiritual fulfillment and transcendence of some sort.

Seeking out something divine in an otherwise secular life and engaging in a search for meaning and beauty in a world that has seen the old structures of religious life eroded and sometimes discarded entirely, it is fashion that may fill this void. Beauty as religion is not new; in fact, one wonders if it pre-dates any form of organized worship entirely. Clothing, luxury, and materialistic pursuits are now able to provide access to the contemplative imagination within a secular society. The modern pilgrimage, then, is one that involves a veneration of luxury brand signifiers, and consequently one that also may place blinders on believers, a congregation who fervently revel in an ecstatic but uninformed, unquestioning reverie of consumption.

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