

Art in fashion essay

[Art & Culture](#), [Artists](#)



Fashion as Art: Is fashion today considered a high art form worthy of being exhibited in museums? What is fashion? Is it art? Is it high art? In the world of fashion and art today, this is a contested question. Many art critics do not see fashion as an equal to the fine arts such as painting and sculpture.

Critics have made remarks that fashion design should be “under the heading of vanity for its intent is of no inner value” (Miller 25-40). Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant both said that fashion is a form of imitation. Burke held that it is a “kind of imitation that is from a social need of conformity”, while Kant says that it is a form of vanity (Miller 25-40). Sanda Miller, the author of *Fashion as Art; Is Fashion Art?*, states that “a work of art in the classificatory sense is 1.

an artefact, 2. a set of the aspects of which has been conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain institution (the art world)” (Miller 25-40). Marcel Duchamp used everyday objects as art in an unusual way. Noel Carroll asked questions such as “must all art emerge from a pre-existing network of social relations? Does it appear to be informative? Does it depend upon stretching the notions of social institutions, social practices, and social relationships beyond the breaking point?” (Miller 25-40). Miller at one point states that the issue is one of intention versus function. “The study of clothes from a historical perspective is an even more recent endeavor and, therefore, it has not yet acquired a status equal to that of the fine arts; this may well have something to do with the perceived lower status of craft. Nevertheless, the historical study of clothes is inextricably linked to and dependent on that of visual art for a simple reason: their perishable nature” (Miller 25-40).

“ The entry of fashion exhibitions into high art settings where fashion is normally not displayed, such as Giorgio Armani designs at the Guggenheim, has caused much heated debate from art critics” (Palmer 121-126). “ Fashion exhibitions and their reviews offer a bridge for crossing these perceived boundaries as they combine new scholarship with artifact study” (Palmer 121-126). Along with the catwalk show and the retail store, the museum has become an increasingly important site for fashion. In recent years, fashion exhibitions have been held for the first time at venues as different as the Guggenheim Museum, the Imperial War Museum, and the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Musee de la Mode, and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Some of these fashion exhibitions “ have attracted up to 500, 000 visitors and brought in millions of dollars of sponsorship money, as well as reams of publicity, not all of it positive” (Steele 7-30). Two fashion exhibitions in New York, for example, were described, respectively, as an “ egregious paid advertisement” and “ a fawning trifle that resembles a fancy showroom” (Steele 7-30). Partiality, distress and distrust still surround fashion within many museums. This sometimes “ takes the form of fashion being tolerated as a form of ‘ entertainment’ which will ‘ pull the crowds’, with no acknowledgment of the serious contribution it also makes to the educational role of the museum” (Steele 7-30).

To some extent, the hostility towards fashion in the museum, especially the art museum, “ replicates the traditionally low status of fashion within academia, but it is also related to disagreements between academics and curators, as well as by conflicts about the role of the museum in

contemporary society and about fashion as an aspect of popular culture” (Steele 7-30). Fashion finds similarities in known art forms. Compare architecture and fashion; Architecture reached an artistic status very early on, it did not have the sole role of being functional. It is questionable as to why fashion has not reached the same status that architecture has. Relate fashion and time-based work such as photography and film; one is a token and one is a type. One individual put forth the idea that a reason for the lack of seriousness attributed to fashion is that fashion has predominantly been a female art and society in the past was predominantly patriarchal. “ Arguments against have ranged from the fickle nature of fashion and its impermanence to its functional nature, and so on.

.. The arguments for are to do with the visual loveliness of clothes, which cannot be disputed” (Miller 25-40). If one were to sit down and compare an art form such as traditional drawing and fashion design, they would surely find a high amount of similarities. Fashion design is very much about the details and the process involved in turning out the final product as well. Some details are used to distinguish things such as social class, like in the French Revolution. “ When a fashion outfit includes a new detail, it is the detail that leads fashion into the future” (Black 499-510). Details in fashion can give the consumer a certain feeling, contributing to whether or not they see they item as in trend and whether or not to buy it.

Fashion design begins its roots with a sketch. The sketch is more than just a random drawing. It is “ the most critical step of the fashion-design process, as everything—from concept to construction—depends on its ability to

realistically convey an imagined vision” (Malafronte 46-59). It is a crucial part of the design process. Fashion designers should be and are now more commonly trained in the fundamentals of drawing as it is so crucial to succeeding in the competitive world of fashion. At Parson’s School of Design, for example, “ students are trained in a similar fashion as fine artists, taking numerous drawing courses and regularly drawing from the live model” (Malafronte 46-59). That training is beneficial to a fashion designers ability to understand color and proper aspects of design. In fashion, “ a sketch must not only be aesthetically pleasing but also proportionally accurate” (Malafronte 46-59).

Fashion designer Chris Benz says, “ Drawing is the major catalyst for my creative process. First, I start thinking about the season I am designing for and meld that idea with some inspiration I have at the time-if its fall, then I think about the fabrics, weight, and textures I am feeling for the silhouette. In my little Smythson sketchbook, I do sketches of ideas and thoughts that will be fleshed out later in the process” (Malafronte 46-59). Something puzzling to a large portion of the fashion industry is the fact that performance art is considered high art to the masses, while this is still contested for fashion.

Countless museums have recently started “ displaying” performance art. “ Part of what changed is that some visual artists have come to see performance as a natural extension of their overall artistic practice, which may also embrace painting, video and installations” (Rush 331-341). Two examples of extreme performance artists are William Pope.

L and Paul McCarthy. Both artists, in addition to Geoffrey Hendricks and Patty Chang, have had performances at the Sculpture Center in New York. The performances, categorized as extreme performance art, often include strange bodily actions. Patty Chang, for example, does not see her pieces as political acts, she sees them as sculptures. “ Many performance artists incorporate costume into their work as yet another extension of media boundaries” (Rush 331-341). One particular artist, Claude Cahun, was doing performance art in the 1930s, however, the photos weren’t discovered to be performance art pieces until the 1990s. “ Lesbian, Jew, lovers with her half-sister, the artist Suzanne Malherbe, self-portraitist, provocateur, Cahun made a career of photographing herself in costumes that allowed for multiple identities” (Rush 331-341).

Claude Wampler created a performance piece that held the intention of toying with time. “ Performance art, usually time-based, becomes timeless in the realm of cyberspace...Performance art, which some critics trace to the virulent gestures used by Jackson Pollock in making his paintings, has radically influenced all forms of contemporary art, from video art to conceptual art to multimedia installations. It has placed the person and the body of the artist center-stage, and allowed a sense of self-mocking and playfulness to infiltrate a field often bent on the rigors of form and function” (Rush 331-341).

Performance pieces and fashion shows display an extraordinary amount of similarities. Fashion shows are in fact performances. According to *The Greatest Show on Earth: A Look at Contemporary Fashion Shows and Their*

Relationship to Performance Art, there are multiple types of performances involved in fashion exhibitions. The first is a spectacle. “ There are four main components of the spectacle show that can be manipulated by the designer to great effect. These are the type of model, the location, the theme, and the finale.” (Duggan 243-270) Spectacle fashion shows are more like a theatre performance without a solid plot; they still have the goal of marketing a product. Alexander McQueen and Gianni Versace were some of the first designers to shock the fashion world and the press with their unconventional methods of fashion performance and shows.

Spectacles also focus more on themes than the average fashion show. A theme can be very abstracted or it can be blatant, lending to the overall environment of the show. Spectacles also focus very much on the finales of the shows.

The finales are generally supposed to shock the audience or make a memorable impression in some way. The spectacle shows place the designers in a combination celebrity and artist status. They develop a reputation through their performance pieces. (Duggan 243-270). Next is substance shows. The next subject the article addresses is science fashion. Science fashion focuses on the materials and construction of the garments, as well as the technology behind making the fashion.

“ The incorporation of process in science designers’ shows and techniques reflects the importance of experimentation” (Duggan 243-270). Watanabe and Miyake are two predominant science designers. Miyake searches for new interpretations of fabric and ways to transform the construction. As a result,

he has earned a name in the art world. (Duggan 243-270). Structure design, the next type of fashion show, focuses on just that: the structure of the clothing.

The shows are seen as a “ necessary evil” and are as basic as possible so as not to take attention away from the construction of the actual garments. “ The structure designer finds three-dimensional form to be most representative of ideas” (Duggan 243-270). Margiela and Rei Kawakubo are the discussed structure designers. “ Margiela’s patrons consider their purchases to be more akin to art collecting than to shopping sprees” (Duggan 243-270). Not only do these designers focus on structure and construction, they also focus on deconstruction in certain cases. The final design type is statement. “ Statement designers create environments and presentations that reflect confrontational ideas and messages” (Duggan 243-270). A large emphasis is placed on how the clothes are perceived.

Some statement designers are Susan Cianciolo, Miguel Adrover and Elena Bajo. Often times, statement design shows are controversial and incorporate aspects or even garments of other more mainstream designers. Statement designers are not so much concerned with offending or scaring the audience that would be the buyers or press.

Statement designers are more concerned with getting their point across, even if that means making a few sacrifices. (Duggan 243-270). A particular artist that can be meshed into multiple artistic fields is Robert Kushner. His career shows us that a fine artist is a fine artist, no matter what type of art they are interested in at the time. Robert Kushner is best known for his style

as a painter. However, he dealt with performance and fashion for a short time earlier in his career. “Kushner’s years of working off the wall and on the figure coincided with the development of conceptually based performance art in the 1970s” (Morris and Meyers-Kingsley 311-330). He began his art career in the 1960s, where the article body begins, with the stance that the idea of a project was more important than the object or project itself.

The 60s were largely surrounded by counter culture and conceptual art, giving Kushner inspiration for his fashion inspired performance art. The Black Power movement had an influence on Kushner as well as Amy Goldin, a New York critic and painter. “Goldin became Kushner’s intellectual ally, encouraging his burgeoning interest in writing about art, and acting as a sounding board for the ideas he would develop about his own work” (Morris and Meyers-Kingsley 311-330). He incorporated his ability to crochet as a child into his conceptual pieces later in his life. He saw crocheting as a sort of gender-role reversal. He received a negative backfire to the crocheting during his days as a student at USCS. He described the pieces as “neo-tribal frou frou” (Morris and Meyers-Kingsley 311-330).

“The idea that a free-flowing interpretation of gender roles could be produced simply by swapping and intermeshing gender signifiers was very important to Kushner’s development. Just as the activity of crocheting became a sly, yet powerfully charged indictment of stereotypes and gender roles, Kushner’s costumes would become a site for questioning, spoofing and critiquing the cultural signifiers of clothing and body decoration...Kushner was interested in creating a dialogue by seduction rather than confrontation

or didacticism. As his costumes developed, the artist increasingly reacted against what he perceived as the dour and pedantic nature of Conceptual Art” (Morris and Meyers-Kingsley 311-330). Kushner spent the summer of 1970 in New York where he first attempted to combine sculpture, clothing, and performance.

He began working with clothing and curiosity led him to try new things with the structural elements of clothing. When he decided to document his items, he went in a non-traditional direction and shot the pictures in a way that resembled a fashion show and photo shoot. Kushner rebelled against many other performance artists of his time by not being confrontational with his work. His costumes, as he called his pieces, were also different from many conceptual pieces of the time. They were fun and witty, something the conceptual world was not used to. During his shows, he announced the pieces as odd names that often times had societal or historical references, forcing the audience to associate the pieces with certain meanings.

In 1972, Kushner introduced a new medium to his art. He began working with food as a material to make costumes. In multiple shows, he invited the audience to eat the food off of the models. “ In 1973 Kushner entered a new phase of his career that featured the influence of haute couture on his costume works and a consolidation of his performative aesthetic practice” (Morris and Meyers-Kingsley 311-330).

He became greatly influenced by Balenciaga and Poiret, presenting a line, the Winter and Spring Line, of costumes made in homage to Balenciaga. He then went on to create the New York Hat Line, a line of hats, and the Persian

Line, a line that incorporated painted fabrics. “ Both before and after the performance the costumes were displayed on the walls of the gallery as paintings. ‘ I liked the idea that this painting, which hung on the wall and had its own internal order, could come off the wall and become a swirling, moving form’” (Morris and Meyers-Kingsley 311-330). If there were ever a single fashion designer to be categorized as producing fine art, it would be Alexander McQueen.

McQueen was known for his theatrical shows that were both personal and emotional. It says something about McQueen that the Gala is holding an exhibition in honor of him so soon after his death. McQueen first gained recognition with his graduation collection inspired by Jack the Ripper. “ With breathtaking speed, McQueen was welcomed into the fashion establishment” (Givhan 36-41). McQueen was different from other designers in many ways. “ Sometimes, McQueen would rip apart his own work, reusing the fabric for the next collection. He came of age during a recession and was never a snob about materials, happily incorporating mussel shells plucked from the refuse of a local restaurant and straw beach mats spied during a holiday at the shore” (Givhan 36-41).

McQueen came from a working class family and never succumbed to the posh world of fashion that surrounded him. “ His clothes reflected a cold realism about life’s unfairness, its cruelties, and inevitable end. And his audiences were drawn to the beauty that emerged from that angst” (Givhan 121-126). “ McQueen offered a clear-eyed vision of the harshness of life that,

perhaps, only the working poor-or those from truly meager circumstances-are honest enough to acknowledge” (Givhan 121-126).

Museums today are beginning to show fashion as contemporary art. An example is the sister design team, Kate and Laura Mulleavy, behind Rodarte. The sisters weren’t trained in fashion design, however they have the ability to create fashion lines that rival others.

They “ identify with their pieces as art objects” (Fensom 62-71). Unlike most others, Rodarte create their pieces as sculpture to be supported by the body, rather than being made to fit the body. Some of their runway shows have been engineered to appeal to the art and museum sense rather than the fashion sense.

It was created so that viewers could see the pieces as sculptures in the round. In addition, The Gala held an exhibition, Savage Beauty, celebrating Alexander McQueen’s career and contribution to fashion and the avant-garde. The show, a tribute to McQueen, includes work from his entire career. It also addresses some of the designer’s inspirations and influences, for example the Romanticism movement. The production, which took place at the Met, attempted to mirror the over-the-top and artistic environments that McQueen created for his shows (Fensom 62-71).

The exhibition was one of the most famous and heavily trafficked in the museums history. Alexander McQueen’s designs were unique, they “ weren’t clothes that influenced the wardrobes of ordinary people” (Givhan 52-54). Similar to Robert Kushner, Sonia Delauney, predominantly a painter,

explored the world of fashion and had an exhibition in the National Design Museum: “ Color Moves: Art & Fashion”. The garments are “ extensions of her painting” (Fensom 62-71).

Delauney’s presentation is different from that of what most museum-goers are used to seeing. The exhibition “ In Fashion: High Style” also combines art and fashion. The show presents “ fashion’s past, present and future by exhibiting pieces from the museum’s extensive archives, garments on loan from today’s top designers and design houses, and creations by up and coming students at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York” (Fensom 62-71). The inspiration for the exhibition came from the museum’s discovery of garments from as far back as the 17th century.

The exhibition also received influence from Christian Siriano and Project Runway, developing a contest aspect of the show.” Is the art world using fashion as a way to get more bodies into museums? Or is it that, in the words of Virginia Woolf, “ nothing thicker than a knife blade” separates the visionaries of fashion and art, and thus finally designers are taking their rightful place in museum galleries?” (Fensom 62-71). “ We can regard clothes then in two ways: from the point of view of their functional aspect we evaluate them according to those superlative qualities that enable them to fulfill their multiple functions of keeping us warm, giving us erotic appeal, adorning us, etc., but we can equally regard them as beautiful objects of aesthetic contemplation by disregarding the “ concept” under which they fall and therefore ignoring their functional dimension. They could be (as indeed they are) objects of admiration in a museum” (Miller 25-40).