

Beyond beyond fashion

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There is a trick of my writing teacher: When we finish reading an essay, first he asks: "What is it about?" We answer, then he asks: "If that's not what the essay is about, then what is it about?" So we answer again, striving to squeeze out every drop of intelligence out of our brain cells. Repetitively, after we are willingly tortured by this same question for three more rounds, the essence of the essay shows up. This was exactly the same feeling I received from the exhibition Charles James: Beyond Fashion, displayed by the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of

Art. Throughout the exhibition, I was asked this question over and over again: If fashion is not what the exhibition is about, then what? Started from Maya and lasting until August 10, the special exhibition of Costume Institute of Metropolitan Museum presents the audience signature pieces of Charles James, an Anglo fashion designer who was active during the post-WWW 20th century in America. The exhibition is held in the special exhibition galleries on the Museum's first floor and The Costume Institute's Anna Winter Costume Center on the ground floor, including one small adjunct hall showing documents.

Fifteen evening ball gowns and about fifty ready-to-wears are displayed. With intricate costumes, James first of all stood out as a king of fabric sculptor without crown beyond the simple definition of a fashion designer who made clothes that fit in the trend. The costumes were indeed "amazing"---- quoting the most commonly used word of the visitors. James' original spiral cut, almost seamless design and the free draping technique are still not nearly comparable in the present day.

They were not just fashion, but sculptures that go around human body with full artistry and could stand the test of pure aesthetic examination. However, if the costumes were examined even beyond their tags of "fashion" and beyond their sculptural appearances, the intention of these designs was actually in some degree provoking, if we examine the quotes of James that were written on the walls of the halls. A quote of James revealed that his ideal of fashion was largely sexual. "The feminine figure," he believed, was "intrinsically wrong".

Thereby he claimed, "All my seams have meaning, they emphasize something about the body." In this way, he strived to "perfect" the female body, however destroying the natural beauty of female form at the same time. As a result, the innate motive beyond the fashion appearance of these designs was sexism aesthetics of the traditional malpractice, which should have been eliminated a long time ago. James' fastidious and male-centric aesthetic of female figure beyond his ability as an artist was further revealed by details in his designs. In the actual practice, James overemphasized the female parts.

First, the tops gathered into sharp and pointing horns. This design was made possible by darts of the gowns' tops following the traditional Rococo corset, which once made the teenage girls and young wives' waistlines tiny but at the same time cruelly took away many of their lives. At the same time, the bottoms of gowns spread widely. Either the gowns had big volume of piled-up drapes on the hip, or they were supported directly by two bustles, which

was also a typical classic masculine aesthetic that addressed female's ability of bearing kids.

Overall, James' costumes remade a women's body into a funnel shape. In addition, the bosoms were preferably shaped as cones, which presented women lasciviously. Even in the Victorian times, this male-dominant esthetics was giggly controversial for these characteristics defined females simply attractive in the way of a reproduction and bearing machine. In the post World War II America, after the liberation of female body brought by the 'H' dresses, this Victorian renaissance was a recess that brought female back into the prison of clothes.

Rather, in today's aspect, these aesthetics of female body are morbid. For females, it is the blood and tears in females' costume history. These characteristics, as " beautiful" as some might consider, are dross of the Victorian culture that should never be reused to improve the figure or even hinted in a modern design. I have to say, peeking into the motive of the designer, I saw an egocentric though man who are arrogant in the way he examining females. Finally, the end of the exhibition explored what truly was beyond this fashion designer Charles James explored even deeper.

Beyond a fashion godfather, a king of fabric sculpturing, and a self-involved and orthodox masculine artist, the documentary hall showed James as a person. Traditional mannequins and sketches were shown. While at the meantime, the document room also showed the video clips of James kissing his finale model on her cheek before going on the runway, and an important list of celebrities and artists typed by James that James would like to design

for. The tone of the list was playful, ironic and effusive. There were as well glowing critics, basically eulogies.

In this room, though most people do not linger in it, the most interesting information what the artist was available, and it gave anyone who wanted to look deeper into the motive and inspiration of him a lucid answer: genially eccentric, Charles James' boldness and arrogance toward there led to his unceasing pursuit of perfection and the exploration of impossibility, which explained his surprising designs and the elaborate way of fabricating the costumes. As an exhibition of the Metropolitan museum, there were some commendable displaying methods in this exhibition indeed.

The exhibition started with a theatrical opening. At the entrance, the world darkened down, and with the wall showing the name of the exhibition and a classic walking mannequin (a woman-shape body model) of James, the bright outer world and the dark inside world were clearly vided. There was as if a magical twilight moment, indicating the arrival of something brilliant in the darkness. After the prologue, I was almost brought into Sesame's studio on 699 Madison Street by muslin samples of his gowns posing around his famous " butterfly' sofa, recreating the scene of the studio and the salon of James.

Inside the hall, the gowns were arranged in a spiral shape, going around his best- known masterpiece: Clover Leaf Ball Gown 1953. The x-ray analysis as well as the animation simulator explained the inner structure of the clothes by showing the involutes plastic bones and complicated drapes in the layers of fabric. The application of newtechnologytreated fashion so scientifically

----as if a real piece of architecture----that it gave even the most general audience a chance to think about the materialist word " fashion" in a whole new way.

On the pads that showed the information of exhibits, a few hints about this sexual intentions of James' designs by showing the costumes of inspiration from the Victorian time, without explaining the underlying meaning of the original design. Though implicit about the word " sexual", Hess pictures purposefully gave the audience a clue to the intention but still left them room to think that what was truly beyond fashion beside the artsy structure, allowing their own interpretation.

Deliberately, the exposition of the clothes revealed the museum's respect to the master James, for his elaborate effort paid beneath the fabric.

Furthermore, the exhibition's respect was also to the audience, as the museum brought fashion back to the ground, accessible to a general audience, while it respect the individual thinking by leading the audience to think about what was truly beyond cushion instead of giving out a definite answer. Still, compare to the art value of the exhibits, the display of the exhibition was fairly not a highlight.

The lighting in the main halls was a disaster. Firstly, the semi-dark lighting environment in the black hall was a click. Comparing to other costume exhibitions at the Met Museum, this technique was so widely used that this trick did not tell anything about the artist. It was even anti-characteristic. James had a preference for dark colors. However, the semi darkness created a hostile environment for the audience to see the details. Especially since

flash was not allowed, without a professional camera, I could not capture any details of the dark coats and gowns beside their silhouettes.

And since the photos could not be used as long-term documents, the educational function of the museum in this aspect was largely sacrificed. Additionally, the semi-darkness also brought a sense of heaviness to the costumes. To illustrate, one of the best-known gown called "Swan" was named for the lightness of the peplum, which was composed of six layers of delicate chiffon. Nonetheless, with the lighting, I did not see the eighteens at all because the semi-dark casting light could not go through and light up the costume like natural light.

Therefore, what I saw was an impenetrable broom instead of the airy dress, which was not influenced by gravity. Overall, the display was mismatched with the costumes, even though there were few novel techniques applied. The masterpieces were as if sunk in a Jar platitude. The title Beyond Fashion made me feel confused and enthralled when I first stepped in that dark hall, yet I felt illuminated and preoccupied when I stepped back to the bright outer world. The exhibition successfully pushed one to think about the essence beyond appearance by presenting the costumes in different layers and angles.

An audience could feel the question of what was beyond fashion throughout the exhibition. The magic would not happen until the very end, where one could confidently give out his/her own answer, like the answer to fifth round of questioning of my writing teacher. As for me, beyond fashion, beyond structure, beyond male chauvinism and beyond all his drama, I saw an aloof,

fastidious, nostalgic, self- involved, narcissistic yet incredibly serious and genius about fashion soul of this master, this man.