

THE STATUS OF FASHION: TOWARDS AN AUTONOMOUS EXISTENCE

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## **Abstract**

The debate on if fashion can be considered art has been a topic of discussion for many years now. This MRP looks at reasons and factors that explain the greater acceptance of fashion as a form of art despite the disputed opinions on that question. While some scholars stressed what fashion can share with art, such as aesthetic qualities or strong conceptual frameworks, others pointed out the commercial implications of fashion to discredit its artistic potential or its presence in museums. Through an analysis of selected works from contemporary designers Viktor & Rolf, Alexander McQueen, and Hussein Chalayan, an examination of the phenomenon of the popularity of fashion exhibitions in art museums, and a study of the way the museum sees fashion through their collecting policies and curators' opinions, this research clarifies why fashion gained a higher status in the Western culture despite its uneven reception in academia and the art world.

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## Introduction

Diana Vreeland, in an interview with the art critic Lori Simmons Zelenko in 1981, asserted that "fashion is not art" (Zelenko 88). Since the beginning of the twentieth century, museums have held fashion exhibitions, but most have been of historic costume. However, when the first important retrospective of a living designer (Yves Saint-Laurent) was held in 1983 by Diana Vreeland at the Costume Institute of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, it marked a new tendency of museums to exhibit contemporary fashion (Steele, "Museum" 12). Despite the fact that she did not consider fashion an art form, Vreeland's exhibition paved the way for an increasing number of fashion exhibitions hosted by art museums and engendered a debate on the nature of fashion and its relationship to art. In 2011 and 2012, several important exhibitions presented contemporary fashion designers, such as *Alexander McQueen—Savage Beauty* and *Schiaparelli & Prada—Impossible Conversations* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *La planète mode de Jean-Paul Gaultier* at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal, and *Hussein Chalayan, récits de mode* at Le Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.

Scholars of costume history have noted this growing trend. Sung Bok Kim in her 1998 article "Is Fashion Art?" mentions exhibitions—such as *Fashion and Surrealism* in 1987 at the Museum at FIT or *Art-to-Wear Exhibition* in 1995 during the Kwangju Biennale in South Korea—that addressed the relation between art and fashion (52). In an article that is part of a thematic issue about fashion curation in *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, Valerie Steele discussed the exhibitions *Gianni Versace* at the Design Laboratory of the Fashion Institute of Technology in 1992, *Giorgio*

*Armani* at the Guggenheim Museum in 2000, and *Vivienne Westwood* at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London in 2004, as evidence of this trend to give academic consideration to contemporary fashion in the museum context (“Museum” 15-19). Although fashion is part of an industry, it is increasingly accepted and recognized as a legitimate form of art that has its place in museums.

Not only has contemporary fashion surfaced at museums during the past few decades, but it also has received an increased interest from the academic world. Indeed, in the 1990s and 2000s, new publications and university programs were dedicated to fashion studies. The first issue of *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* was published in 1997, followed by *Textile: The Journal of Cloth & Culture* in 2003. In addition, graduate degrees in the field of fashion studies have multiplied, especially in the last decade. In 2000, the London College of Fashion started a masters program in History and Culture of Fashion and launched a graduate program in Fashion Curation four years later. New masters programs in fashion studies at Ryerson University in Toronto and Parsons the New School for Design in New York, inaugurated in 2010, also illustrate this phenomenon. Nevertheless, fashion is not universally recognized as an artistic field. Important actors in the curatorial, fashion and art worlds have stated their position against this trend.

This research project looks at the ongoing debate concerning fashion's status, and the shift that occurred, which now favors fashion as an artistic and autonomous domain of creation. More particularly, I examine the reasons and factors that clarify this strong inclination towards the recognition of some kinds of fashion as an art form, despite valid arguments against that position. This research explores textual and visual materials that



explain the fairly new status granted to fashion and the reasons for its appearance and growing recognition during the last thirty years. I employ the term “status” here to talk about fashion's position within the cultural and artistic world. The word “autonomy”, for its part, refers to self-determination and self-sufficiency in relation to traditional media such as painting and sculpture. It pertains to the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of fashion as a discipline and the embracing of its nature and identity as a whole. Most importantly, “fashion” will be used to refer to designers' creations that qualify as “high-fashion”. In its broader sense, fashion is in trend mass-produced goods, haute couture, and high-level ready-to-wear that includes, but is not limited to, the creations presented twice yearly during the Fashion Week events in New York, London, Milan and Paris. However, for the purpose of this study, the term “fashion” will be used in reference to haute couture and high-quality ready-to-wear creations only.

With the objective of understanding the reasons and factors for the acceptance of fashion as an art form, this project relies on a qualitative methodology. I use art history methods informed by a visual culture approach. Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey note in the introduction of *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations* that: visual culture “offers the prospect of an interdisciplinary dialogue, one that is more concerned with the relevance of contemporary values for academic study than with the myth of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake” (xvii). A visual culture approach allows for a broader scope of studies and interests. W.J.T Mitchell, professor of English and art history at the University of Chicago also suggested in a 1995 *Art Bulletin* article that art history perhaps should “expand its horizons” (542). He then explained how visual culture could affect art history:

On the one hand, visual culture looks like an ‘outsider’ to art history, opening out the larger field of vernacular images, media and everyday visual practices in which a ‘visual art’ tradition is situated, and raising the question of the difference between high and low culture, visual art versus visual culture. On the other hand, visual culture may look like a deep ‘insider’ to art history’s traditional focus on the sensuous and semiotic peculiarity of the visual. (542)

This way of using and applying art history’s thinking and methods corresponds to the aims of this research. The framework of visual culture, which encompasses a broader spectrum of objects and images than traditional art history, allows for visual and textual analysis of fashion material. Although this project does not treat mass-market fashion but focuses on the high-end fashion, it looks at material diffused through popular media such as television, magazines, and the Internet. Whether it is through advertising campaigns, photo-shoots, editorials, or news reports, high-end fashion reaches the viewers through images. Thus, despite the exclusion of mainstream fashion, this MRP still addresses popular culture, which is the interest of visual culture

The framework within which the analysis and reflection were made is also informed by architect Robert Venturi’s “Gentle Manifesto” (1965). He famously wrote: "I prefer 'both-and' to 'either-or', black and white, and sometimes gray, to black or white. Contradictory relationships express tension and give vitality" (18). His statement is at the start of postmodern theory, which acknowledges the blurring of the division between “high” and “low” culture. From the mid 1960s onward, the increasingly permeable boundaries differentiating “true” art from other fields of creativity allowed changes in the way fashion is conceived by designers and received by the public and the critics. I employ this merging of artistic and popular culture as a foundation for the analytic process for exploring the research question.

My MRP does not answer the question of whether or not fashion is art, but it identifies key elements that explain the propensity for accepting fashion as art. It reveals the reasons that allowed fashion to evolve towards a more autonomous status.

Chapter 1: Art and Fashion's Relationship: Historical and Theoretical Context discusses the origins of the renewed interest for fashion as art from historical and theoretical standpoints. It covers a selection of examples of the intersection between fashion and art, the recent theoretical development on the relationship of fashion and art, as well as writings about the nature of art.

Then, Chapter 2: Case Study: Viktor & Rolf, Alexander McQueen and Hussein Chalayan provides three visual and textual analyses of selected works of fashion by each designer. It examines the ways in which these designers contribute to the critics' and viewers' appreciation of fashion as art.

Chapter 3: The Commercial Reality considers the commercial aspect of the fashion industry through the three case study designers and possible effect of financial factors on fashion's entry into the art museum.

Lastly, Chapter 4: The Pivotal Role of Museums examines more closely the influence of museums, especially art museums, on fashion's change of status. It will discuss collecting policies and mission statements, as well as important curators' opinions on the topic.

## **Chapter 1: Art and Fashion's Relationship: Historical and Theoretical Context**

Modern art, with its goals of breaking down artistic hierarchies and joining art with daily life, resulted in a new interest in artistic fashion in the late nineteenth century. The acceptance of fashion as an art form has its roots in this period, as artists and couturiers exchanged ideas and collaborated in ways that illustrate the strong yet complicated relationship between fashion and art. Examining selected examples of artists and designers with a practice that transcended the distinction between art and fashion contextualizes the renewed interest in the intersection of fashion and art in recent years.

For example, the couturier Charles Frederick Worth (1825-1895) actively constructed his identity to present himself as an artist (Taine 174-175; Carette 38, 69-170). While Worth created unique luxury clothing, he also established his business in the new and growing ready-to-wear industry where original models are adapted for selling in department stores at lower prices and on a larger scale (Steele, "Fashion" 14). Inside this particular context, where haute couture appeared at the same time that a democratized and industrialized fashion was developing, Worth contributed greatly to the idea that couture can be seen as art. He did so by emphasizing his need to be inspired in order to create, by fashioning his physical appearance after the painter Rembrandt (Figure 1), and by popularizing the use of clothing labels, which had on them his literal signature in cursive writing. In other words, he disseminated the idea that like a painter he needed inspiration to create, signed his works, and dressed like one of the most famous European artists (Steele, "Fashion" 15; Taine 175). However, the precedent he created for artistic fashion was merely based on the image he constructed of himself. His actual designs, for the most part not particularly innovative, did not nourish the idea that fashion can be art.

After Worth came another major figure of modern fashion: Paul Poiret (1879-1944). Like Worth, he carefully constructed his identity as an artist rather than a designer. He purposely distanced himself from the commercial aspect of his profession and denied pursuing all forms of advertisement and commercial strategies to sell his work (“Paul Poiret”). He presented himself as an artist and an aristocrat far from commercial preoccupations. Whether it was to announce his salon’s change of address or for a catalogue, Poiret, notes design historian Nancy Troy, “made every effort to present that publicity in a form that would be construed as art” (Troy, “Couture” 52). Indeed, throughout his career, the couturier separated the commercial aspect of fashion from his creative work in order to affiliate himself with art discourse. Following the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture’s tradition of the seventeenth century, art was not to be mixed with commerce (Troy, “Minaret” 129). Hence Paul Poiret and other designers like Worth sought to distance themselves from commerce in order to be closer to art. Although Poiret made a mark with more innovative designs than Worth, they both approached the idea of fashion as art like a marketing strategy to enhance the value of their names and promote their work as cultural capital.

Elsa Schiaparelli (1890-1973) is another contributor to a rapprochement between fashion and art. Like her predecessors Worth and Poiret, she saw herself as an artist and designers and artists of her time, such as Cristóbal Balenciaga and Anaïs Nin, acknowledged her as such (Blum 125). Not only did she see her work as one of invention and creation like sculpture, but also she maintained relationships with various artists of her milieu, which resulted in creative collaborations (Schiaparelli 69). One of the most significant of these partnerships was with the Surrealist painter Salvador Dalí. This

relationship, based on mutual influence and teamwork, bolstered her status as designer and artist. Unlike Worth and Poiret, Schiaparelli's relationship to art was based on genuine interest and collaborations.

If throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century some couturiers have attempted to bring together fashion and art, some important painters and sculptors of the turn-of-the-century also extended their practice to fashion, building a bridge between dressmaking, painting, and sculpture. Henry Van de Velde (1863-1957) started his career as a painter in 1890s Brussels. Rapidly, he switched his interest to architecture and design that was inspired by the English Arts and Crafts movement, specifically by John Ruskin and William Morris' writings. Like them, he aspired to change the world by breaking down the boundaries between art and life. To him, fashion was one component of a total work of art, which extended to every aspect of life from architecture to furniture, wallpaper, cutlery and fashion (Stern 11). Therefore, clothes were seen as an equally important artistic endeavour, on the same level as architecture, painting, or furniture design. Van de Velde pursued beauty and positioned himself strongly against the ever changing trends in fashion, which he saw as immoral, delusive, and frivolous. Fashion was to him mostly led by commercial interests (van de Velde 126). His intentions were directed towards the creation of fashion as a lasting work of art (131). On that topic, he said in 1900: "From now on, shows of women's clothing will take their place among art exhibitions. Undoubtedly, we will begin to see clothing exhibited sometimes next to painting and sculptures, as has recently been the case with other works of applied arts" (126). Van de Velde definitely believed that fashion deserved a higher degree of recognition among other arts.

The Viennese Wiener Werkstätte studios in the 1910s had some of its members undertaking fashion projects. Guided by the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* or total work of art, they were interested in experimenting with textile and fashion (Mackrell 109-110). Thus artists like Josef Hoffmann (1870-1956) and Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) designed dresses and jewellery. They created fashion as part of their art practice, whether it was in architecture and design (Hoffmann) or painting (Klimt). Their work also inspired fashion designers, such as Paul Poiret and Emilie Flöge (Mackrell 110). This type of work was inscribed in the nineteenth-century dress reform movements of Artistic Dress and the Aesthetic Movement, which advocated non-conformism and had a limited clientele (Hoffmann 122-124; Cunningham 169-173). Although they had their supporters, they were for the most part the artistic avant-garde. Thus, the influence of artistic dress did not reach the majority.

An example stemming from the abstract art movement is Sonia Delaunay (1885-1979). First recognized as a painter, she also devoted time and thought to fashion. Delaunay, who was interested in colour dynamics in her paintings, designed fabrics for silk-makers of Lyons. This work allowed her to extend her colour experiments on fabric and clothing (Delaunay 96). Even though she achieved some success with her fashion, Delaunay, like the others, never truly integrated into the mainstream fashion industry.

These examples drawn from the fashion and the art world show that as early as the mid-nineteenth century, fashion and art intermingled. There was a desire on the part of couturiers to demonstrate that fashion can be art and should be considered as such. At the same time painters, architects, and designers showed interest in fashion. Although this short summary illustrates significant bonds between the two worlds, it also reveals that

the enthusiasm for fashion came partly from artists who had a practice in the decorative arts, which were considered the minor arts. Naturally, artists involved in this field could more easily see an artistic potential in fashion. This observation illuminates the gap that separated fashion from “high” art, even in the modern period when fashion and art came closer together. From the beginning of ready-to-wear and haute couture, the status of fashion was debated. Despite a circle of people who defended the artistic nature of fashion, it was not acknowledged as such by the majority.

The question of whether fashion could be art was a subject of interest throughout Modernism and it did not fade in the latter part of the twentieth century. Particularly since the end of the 1990s, different authors pondered the question of the relationship of fashion to art. Their writings help to grasp the controversial nature of this question. The following review summarizes the different standpoints on the topic. By looking at fashion criticism, Sung Bok Kim's 1998 essay, “Is Fashion Art?” reveals that authors who take fashion as a subject use very similar concepts, vocabulary, and methods to write about fashion and contemporary art. Fashion is often considered for its aesthetic qualities and looked at for the underlying content it can convey, much like contemporary art. She concludes "that fashion can be discussed and examined as a cultural artifact similar to art, [and] that fashion has become a recognizable subject within the postmodern art world as a result of broadened conceptions of fashion and art" (69-70). Almost ten years later, Sanda Miller tackled this question again in "Fashion as Art; Is Fashion Art?" (2007). Miller's study relies on an exploration of the various definitions of art, as well as on Kant's philosophical writing on aesthetics (25-26). Like Kim, she brings to attention the importance of the aesthetic experience that can accompany items of dress. Art critic



Michael Boodro, discards the "fashion is art" thesis, basing his argument on the fact that fashion is commercially led (120). His article, published in *Art News* in 1990, examines the relationship of art with fashion and accepts some commonalities between the two fields. However, his conclusion rejects fashion as art on the basis of its commercial and ephemeral nature (127).

Other authors considered the question by looking at the interaction between art, culture, commerce, and fashion. Germano Celant acknowledged this dialogue in the catalogue that accompanied the first Florence Biennale in 1996. He compared fashion to photography, which was not initially considered an artistic medium. From the moment of its invention in the 1830s, seventy years passed until photography started to be recognized as an art form that deserved to be exhibited in museums. While he did not mean to imply that fashion is an art form, Celant wanted to highlight and showcase the complexity of fashion as a medium of expression and creativity (Celant, "Looking at Art"). More recently, Melissa Taylor discussed ideas regarding the status of fashion in her 2005 article, "Culture Transition: Fashion's Cultural Dialogue between Commerce and Art." She considers the different standpoints that emphasize the ubiquitous commercial aspect of fashion, as well as its common ground with fine art and high culture. She stresses the idea that "fashion finds itself located across both commerce and art, and now seems to be entering into a new cultural dialogue of previously opposing cultural contexts" (446). In 1999, fashion and costume curator Richard Martin made a case for the Dutch designers Viktor & Rolf as practicing artists. He explored the dialogue they maintain between fashion and art and insisted on the conceptual value of their creations. He concluded by proposing that fashion and art might be indivisible, and

qualified Viktor & Rolf's work of "high art and/or high fashion" (Martin, "Viktor & Rolf" 120). Ginger Gregg Duggan, a contemporary art curator, looked at the relationship between fashion and art from the perspective of the fashion show. She asserts that since the end of the 1990s, fashion shows have taken different approaches that are reminiscent of performance art. Through five categories, she draws parallels between specific performance art references and fashion shows. By doing so, the author illuminates what she calls "the recent blurring of the boundaries that separate fashion and art" (268).

Fashion curators N.J Stevenson and Valerie Steele pointed out in their writings the problems that can ensue from partnership between museums and contemporary fashion brands. Indeed, they call attention to the danger of an exhibition becoming a marketing strategy directed to investors, magazines, and advertisers to the detriment of accurate and independent information (Steele, "Museum" 17; Stevenson 225). The authors favour a cautious and critical attitude towards fashion and its place in museums. Current literature thus shows divided opinions on fashion's status from the perspectives of designers, critics, and curators.

The debate about fashion as art is rooted in questions about the nature of art. The nineteenth and the twentieth centuries witnessed an ongoing dispute about what is art. The different positions on what constitutes a work of art establish several arguments used in the debate about whether fashion is art.

Roy Harris, Professor of General Linguistics at the University of Oxford, synthesizes the debate around three main existing theories in *The Great Debate About Art* (2010). The first of these theories, institutionalism, asserts that institutions such as museums, academics or publishers are the ones to approve or promote something as a

work of art (15-16). Another perspective, idiocentrism, argues that art can be anything, and that anyone can decide what is art. Thus, emphasis is put on individuals and their own perceptions (21-22). Finally, conceptualism is another way to define art. Under this perspective, the creator does not even need to produce a material object, because the idea is the only thing that matters. The concept imagined by the artist is the only essential component to make art (28).

Karol Berger in the preface of his book *A Theory of Art* addresses the evolution of art into a more autonomous discipline. He explains that once the artist started to work for a wider audience and no longer for specific patrons, he or she developed a higher degree of autonomy, which provided him or her with the opportunity to make art that embodied his own values and vision (6). Berger argues that this is the start of a modern definition of art of which he notes, "the goals of its producers are internal to the practices of the various arts themselves, and not imposed on them from without"(5). From that point on, art was less directed towards functional purposes and more focused on internal matters such as the aesthetic (5). However, the aesthetic criterion is not sufficient to define art according to philosophy professor Noël Carroll. In an article in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Carroll presents the idea of "interpretative play" as an important characteristic of a work of art (60). The author explains that an object of art should have as an attribute the potential for viewers' analysis and interpretation (60-61). The literature thus shows that there is no consensus on what constitutes a work of art.

The recent resurgence of the debate surrounding fashion and art stems from the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Artists such as Josef Hoffmann and Sonia Delaunay, in addition to fashion designers like Paul Poiret and Elsa Schiaparelli created

significant precedents that provided a fertile ground for contemporary creators. All of these questions regarding the nature of fashion and art, as well as the attempted answers, lay the foundations for a revaluation and a better understanding of contemporary fashion.

## **Chapter 2: Case Study: Viktor & Rolf, Alexander McQueen, and Hussein Chalayan**

### **Viktor & Rolf**

In 1992, Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren graduated from the Arnhem Academy of Art and Design's Fashion Department in the Netherlands. A year later they won the first prize at the Salon Européen des Jeunes Stylistes in Hyères with an experimental collection exploring ideas of layering and deformation of the silhouette. Before they presented their first official couture collection in 1998, the designers presented their creations in art galleries and museums as installations. Then, from 1998, the duo produced couture collections twice a year until they began their ready-to-wear business in 2000. Most of their couture work was sold to museums (Horsting and Snoeren, "Frankel" 31) and was designed for the purpose of museum exhibition. Horsting states: "We never considered our couture collections as wearable options, however, even though we paid extreme attention to fit, details and technical excellence – we hope. If a piece or a collection was finished, that was it for us. We considered them as sculptural pieces" (Horsting and Snoeren, "Frankel" 31). Their collections were always marked by strong concepts and ideas that supported their creations. And so it was not by chance that their career started in the haute couture world—a very exclusive and select club within which experimenting is well accepted, since the primary goal is not a commercial one. Although haute couture became a marketing tool to promote the image of luxury and quality of the couture houses, it is not directly interested in mass market and global sales (Kawamura "Fashion Culture in France"). It aims at the most elite clientele and offers the opportunity to take fashion to the most extravagant level. Considering that, it was the perfect

environment for the Dutch duo to work at the frontier of art and fashion and to make a name for themselves, which would be useful once they entered the ready-to-wear market. Thus, haute couture gave them the opportunity to explore fashion with almost no limits and to build a reputation that helped them to launch their ready-to-wear line (Horsting and Snoeren, “Frankel” 31).

The freedom they experienced in the haute couture world stimulated a dialogue between art and fashion that started to germinate when they were students in the Netherlands. Viktor and Rolf recall how they were encouraged “to question every aspect of design” (Snoeren in Horsting and Snoeren, “Frankel” 27). Talking to Susannah Frankel about their education at the Arnhem Academy of Art and Design, they noted, “a conceptual approach to fashion was *bon ton* at that time in our group. It was a trend in general” (Snoeren in Horsting and Snoeren, “Frankel” 27). Ever since their graduation, this aspect of their training never left their creative process and they carried with them this desire to “produce a garment and an idea” (Horsting and Snoeren in “Viktor and Rolf” 4:00). For Viktor and Rolf, there is no problem with being “commercial and conceptual at the same time” (Snoeren in Horsting and Snoeren, “The Talks”) and it is even at the foundation of their creative process. They enjoy working with opposites (Horsting and Snoeren, “Frankel” 32) which somewhat explains their constant endeavour to bring together art and fashion while never assuming that they are the same. The duo explains:

We want the fashion to be judged as fashion, and it has to function as such. But on top of that we personally like to express more through our work than the evolution of a style or a way of dressing. We are constantly facing the challenge of finding the balance where the medium—that is clothes, fashion—does not get in the way of the message, but still has a right of existence in itself. We are torn between hope that we can stretch the medium and mould it into something we

would like it to be—a means of expression beyond style—and exasperation that there are limits that we must accept, and that we are working within a system that we have to conform to, and at times really want to conform to (Horsting and Snoeren in Horsting and Snoeren, “Frankel” 30).

Altogether, their approach to fashion design earned them a status that is beyond the one of fashion designer, closer to that of the artist (Martin, “Viktor & Rolf” 120).

Considering Viktor and Rolf’s particular take on fashion, one that nurtures the relationship between fashion and art, their work represents an interesting case for this study. The autumn/winter 1999-2000 haute couture collection entitled *Russian Doll* will be the object of the following analysis. Presented in Paris on the occasion of Couture Fashion Week, the *Russian Doll* collection, also known as the *Babushka* collection, is Viktor and Rolf’s last couture collection.<sup>1</sup>

In a dark room lighted by two spots on the ground, one model, Maggie Rizer, arrives and steps onto the stage. She wears a short sleeved, jute mini-dress. Viktor and Rolf themselves follow her, dressed in black like two stage technicians, and help her to climb on a small round platform (Figure 2). They put her in the flat shoes placed on the podium, which starts to rotate, showing the expressionless model to the audience. When the platform stops turning, the two designers come back with a second garment and carefully dress Rizer with it. Once the platform starts its motion again, the public sees a tailored, short dress made of jute and cotton with a lace appliqué that ornaments the dress from top to bottom (Figure 3). A decorative bow is placed on the bottom left front side of the garment, corresponding to the other bow placed on the right sleeve. The presentation

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<sup>1</sup> Following their last couture collection, the duo transported their practice to ready-to-wear. This anticipated and well prepared move marked the beginning of a successful career in a more commercial sphere of fashion.

continues with a succession of seven additional layers of dresses, all added onto the model by the designers.

As the table stops turning for the second time, Viktor and Rolf come back with the third layer they put on top of what the model is already wearing (Figure 4). It is a flared, mid-length dress with an empire waist, three-quarter sleeves, angular shoulders, and a turtleneck. While one sleeve is straight, the other stands out by its flared cut. The fabric is a mix of jute and Swarovski glass crystals, which gives it a sparkling look. A piece of the same fabric is used as a ribbon like appliqué on the bottom left front side of the dress. The fourth piece added on the model is a long turtleneck dress with an empire waist (Figure 5). It is made of jute and decorated with paisley motifs embroidered and beaded. The sleeves, cut just above the wrists, are wide and have raised shoulder caps. The fifth garment is a sleeveless frock coat that complements the previous dress, since it is made of the same material and completes the partial pattern of paisley motifs of the previous dress (Figure 6). With this additional layer, the dress becomes fully covered with beaded and embroidered motifs. When perfectly aligned together the two layers become like one dress.

The duo then arrived with the sixth part of the collection, which is divided into two elements (Figure 7). The first is a long, silk satin dress with bright pink, orange, and purple flower motifs. The tiered and voluminous skirt, the long, puffy sleeves, and the bow on the neck give the outfit a look that falls between princess and peasant. A long, jute and silk sleeveless vest is superimposed over that dress. It has the same floral motif but in tones of bright yellow, green, blue, and purple. A sparkling jute strip decorates the edges of the vest, which has a belt on the waistline that fixes the vest to the dress. The



following layer is a long jute coat with a padded turtleneck (Figure 8). The top half of the coat is ornamented with coloured, floral lace appliqué from the waistline up to the collar, including the sleeves. Viktor and Rolf also added two bracelets made of beads and heart- and cross-shaped charms. At this point, the audience can barely see the model's face or her hands.

The eighth layer brought by the duo is an even larger and longer sparkling jute coat, reminiscent of a cassock (Figure 9). The padded shoulders and the very high neckline accentuate the massive volume of textiles in which the model is wrapped. The ninth and final piece is a long cape that definitely encases the model in the multiple layers of dress she is wearing (Figure 10). It is yet again made of jute and has on the right front side a jute rose as a decorative element. Once the model made her last spin on the platform, Viktor and Rolf returned one last time to place a flower garland at her feet, which made her look even more like a statue. Then, the lights were turned off to signal the end of the performance. The audience had witnessed the re-composition of a Russian doll. One layer at a time, the designers closed the Russian doll back into its "original" arrangement.

There are several elements of the *Russian Doll* collection that affiliate it with fine art as well as fashion. First, Viktor and Rolf created this collection with one foot in the art world and the other in the fashion world: the collection was presented during Couture Fashion Week among works from other fashion designers. Second, Viktor and Rolf had an agreement with Mark Wilson, curator of the Groninger Museum in the Netherlands, who remunerated the duo and promised to buy a selection of their work for the museum's collection (Duggan 254). In fact, the entire *Russian Doll* collection was acquired by the

Groninger Museum in 2000, not long after its presentation to the public. Thus Viktor and Rolf created the *Babushka* collection for the fashion world and the art world at the same time. Additionally, other components of the collection contribute to the association of art and fashion.

The materials used for the collection are interesting given their contrast. Most of the collection is made of jute, an obviously modest material that is rarely or never seen in fashion. Despite the austere fabric, they created garments that look precious, partly due to the use of rich embroidery, beading and ornaments, as well as the occasional use of silk. The unusual combination of materials makes the collection stand out from what is normally seen in fashion shows, even in haute couture, which denotes a desire to explore unknown territory.

The shape of the garments from the collection also merits examination. From the third layer onwards, each piece of dress has massive volumes and exaggerated silhouettes that make the clothes almost unwearable, and that sets the collection apart from the modern Western way of dressing. The garments' impracticality—and unusual materials—make them impossible to put into production to enter the fashion system. Moreover, the beading, embroidery, and lace work only reassert what the haute couture appellation<sup>2</sup> already indicates: these garments are all hand-made as unique and original pieces.

In addition to the garments themselves, the way they were presented to the audience is also revealing. To begin with, the presentation went against almost every

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<sup>2</sup> Haute couture is a legally protected appellation. Companies who get this label are meticulously chosen every year by a commission sitting at the Ministry of Industry in Paris according to precise criteria such as the number of employees and the proportion of hand-work included in their collections (Kawamura; "Federation").

code of the fashion show. A single model standing on a turning platform, waiting for multiple layers of clothes to be added on her by the designers themselves, is far from the typical parade of women on the catwalk, who showcase the collection one garment after the other. Their presence onstage as well as the staging of the show—reminiscent of a ritualistic ceremony—is comparable to the performance art of the 1960s and 1970s (Duggan 252). It also suggests the conceptual value of the collection, as every action and movement is well thought-out and contributes to building the interpretative potential for the viewers.

To sum up, the unusual use of materials, the non-functionality of the clothes, the high level of craftsmanship, the dramatic presentation of the collection, and the fact that the collection was sold to an art museum instead of produced for consumers to buy are all factors that contribute the idea that fashion is art.

### **Alexander McQueen**

From the very beginning of his career as a designer, Alexander McQueen proposed garments to the fashion community that were out of the ordinary. He always challenged people's vision of fashion in different ways, either by provoking them with unusual designs or shocking them with theatrical shows. He thus earned his title: 'bad boy of British fashion' (Frankel 16). His solid training, from Savile Row, to Italy, to Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design (Bolton, Frankel and Blanks 18-19) provided him with the necessary tools to create his own fashion brand. In fact, McQueen, who was always led by his desire to express himself and to push fashion's limits in order to arouse the viewers' interest and emotions, used the freedom his own label got him to

do so. Throughout his career, it became his signature to disturb and question his viewers' assumptions on various topics such as the body, beauty, nature, and history. Fashion has always been for McQueen a medium used to translate his feelings and vision of life, and communicate it to an audience. He stated, "For me, what I do is an artistic expression which is channeled through me. Fashion is just the medium" (qtd. in Bolton, Frankel and Blanks 92). He aimed "to expose what is going on in the outside world into the fashion world" (McQueen in McQueen, 4:00).

Despite McQueen's commitment to approach fashion differently and use it as an artistic medium, he also participated in the business of fashion. While his eccentric and theatrical fashion shows promoted his brand to buyers and fashion magazine editors, they have also were an integral part of his creative process, which is attested to not only by his own words but also by his close collaborators (Bolton, Frankel and Blanks 24). The designer said in 2003: "I need inspiration. I need something to fuel my imagination and the shows are what spur me on, make me excited about what I'm doing. [...] I do it for the people who see the pictures in the press afterwards, in newspapers and in magazines. I design the shows as stills and I think that if you look at those stills they tell the whole story" (qtd. in Bolton, Frankel and Blanks 24). Thus, despite the fact that he does understand the functioning of the fashion business very well and uses his inclination for controversy and theatricality to his advantage, Alexander McQueen is first and foremost interested in the communicative and artistic potential of fashion as a medium.

In October 2002, during the spring/summer 2003 Fashion Week, McQueen showed his latest ready-to-wear collection: *Irere*. The venue was filled with 2500 people looking at a square stage and a screen of the same size in the background ("Alexander

McQueen” 13:30). Plunged into dark, the audience viewed a video projection (directed by John Maybury) showing underwater images and listened to the sound of waves. As the music started, the video showed a woman falling into the water as the models started walking. This was the first segment of three that constitute the show. Each portion of the show had a different atmosphere created by the clothes, the makeup, the hair, the music and the video projection. By doing so, McQueen created a narrative within which his clothes take form, making them become part of a wider work and concept. McQueen tells the audience a story about a shipwreck, after which the victims arrive on a foreign land and slowly adapt to this new environment. The three segments of the show represent this transformation (“Alexander McQueen” 13:50).

Among the last looks of the first segment was a spectacular long silk gown entitled *Oyster*, which was acquired in 2003 by the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Figure 11). The dress is made of a tailored corset that covers the torso and forms the support for the gown. Over this corset are added strips of sand-coloured silk that create shoulder straps that reach to a skirt constructed of silk tiers. The mermaid-shaped skirt is an asymmetrical volume composed by a multitude of ruffled layers, which look like feathers or a seashell’s surface—a visual reference to the name of the dress. As a whole, the gown is a flowing and delicate ensemble that seemed to float on the model.

This gown, and the fashion show where it was originally shown, presents a number of parallels with art. Like Viktor & Rolf’s *Russian Doll* collection, the garment’s shape and material are treated in an atypical manner, outside what is usually expected of an evening gown. The gown is a combination of two opposite characteristics: the tailored

and structured corset and the wispy surface layers. It is an asymmetrical and deconstructed shape that appears to be hanging by a thread. The form conveys extreme fragility that suggests a garment that is in reality unwearable. Furthermore, as the designer mentioned in an interview, it was a technical feat to come to this result: “all of the dresses were cutting around, so it was kind of complicated and technical to do but we pulled it off” (“Alexander McQueen” 15:20). This relates to the exclusive character of the dress and reinforces the idea of a unique object.

The distressed look of the dress, and the associated video projection of a woman drowning and entangled in her clothes, evokes dismay and death—two themes or feelings that usually do not accompany an evening gown, since it is usually made to be worn at festive and glamorous occasions. The way McQueen plays with form, shape, and conventions shows that his approach to fashion goes beyond the aesthetically pleasing garment that has strong sales potential. He flouts expectations regarding what an evening gown is, how it should be made, and what it should evoke in its wearers and viewers. Likewise, McQueen chose a noble material, silk, and worked it in a way so that it appears old and frayed. Once again, he found a way to circumvent conventions and create a nonconformist gown starting from a formal type of dress and the most luxurious material.

The show was also a very important element to placing the *Oyster* gown into a different category than mere fashion. The show’s three segments are like three acts of a play; the video projection and the music are also elements that bring theatricality and drama to the presentation. The audio-visual context that surrounded the clothes helped viewers to make sense of what they saw. These factors impelled the viewers to interpret

what they saw, making the clothes into more than fashion. Instead, they were presented as objects that bear ideas and create meaning.

As it is the case with Viktor & Rolf's *Babushka* collection, the *Oyster* dress is characterized by an experimental use of materials, an unconventional design, advanced technical knowledge of clothing construction and sewing, and its acquisition by an art museum soon after its first public presentation. These elements, with McQueen's holistic approach that integrated the clothes and the fashion show to communicate ideas and feelings to the viewers, are evidence that supports the fashion is art thesis.

### **Hussein Chalayan**

Hussein Chalayan was born in 1970 in Nicosia, capital of the Turkish island of Cyprus. From a young age, the divorce of his parents forced him to live his childhood between London and Cyprus, something that strongly influenced his work as a designer (Violette 23). In 1989, he returned to London to attend the Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design's fashion program from which he graduated in 1993. His graduation collection, *The Tangent Flows*, earned him attention, notably from the luxury fashion store Browns. The clothes were scattered with iron filings and then buried. They were later removed from the ground for presentation. This whole process was based on Chalayan's reflection on the dichotomy of spirit and matter (Violette 29). This collection showed that the designer's particular methodology was already informed by highly conceptual ideas that pushed fashion's boundaries and conventions.

Chalayan started to show collections under his own label as soon as he left school. Opportunities and financial considerations also led him to get involved with other brands

such as TSE Cashmere and Puma. At the same time, he also worked within the context of art institutions through solo exhibits of his work in fashion or for specific events, such as his film *Absent Presence* presented at the 2005 Venice Biennale. Throughout his career Chalayan has always worked with an interdisciplinary approach, connecting fashion design and clothes to architecture, science, technology, ethnography, performance and video. This variety of interests echoes Chalayan's design process. He said in interview: "I work in a very evolutionary way, that [...] one thing leads to another. [...] Through the work, I want to discover new things. [...] It's just more and more important to try to go beyond what's out there and challenge yourself and really trying to challenge the meaning of clothes" ("Hussein Chalayan" 2:40). Indeed, he approaches fashion as a medium that helps him to reflect on different concepts and ideas that he then develops into something concrete (Black 245). The ideas and reflections on various topics are always the starting point of Chalayan's work. He explained in 2001: "I work with ideas that move me first and I analyse them and the design process comes. And I think it is after that that I want to share it with people" ("Hussein Chalayan" 18:43).

Despite his experimental and conceptual vision of fashion, Chalayan acknowledges the reality of the industry that is necessary for a designer to pursue his work. He knows and accepts the importance of the business side of fashion, which is necessary for him—and others—to materialize and diffuse his ideas. Chalayan explains that he has to balance his creative desires with commercial realities in order to keep working and creating clothes (Black 250). Talking to Sarah Mower in one of the many conversations they have had throughout the years he said: "The way I look at fashion, I treat it as a world science" (qtd. in Mower 48). These words encapsulate Chalayan's



vision of fashion characterized by interdisciplinarity. He is able to connect fashion to anything that is part of his environment, whether it is art, business, science or technology.

For his spring/summer 2004 collection Hussein Chalayan was inspired yet again by his Cypriot origins and the history of his country. He presented the results of his work during ready-to-wear Paris Fashion Week in October 2003. Unlike the designer's earlier spectacular or theatrical shows,<sup>3</sup> the presentation of *Temporal Meditations* was rather simple. The short and almost squared catwalk was divided at the third of its length by a large screen showing a photograph of a deserted airport with a plane parked on the tarmac. Under the plane was placed a table with two empty chairs. Although it was not screened at the fashion show, this picture is actually a still photograph from a short film directed by Chalayan. He made it in the process of creating the collection and it explores issues of migration and identity (Chalayan "Arts Projects"). The show started with the lights slowly turning on and the sounds of traditional Cypriot music. The tempo was slow and thus imposed an unhurried pace on the models, who calmly made their way along the catwalk. Their hair and make-up were simple. The spare staging focused the audience on the clothes. Nevertheless, the decor and the music contributed in creating an atmosphere, one that transported the viewers into Chalayan's thought process. The collection evolved from plain colors and materials, mostly neutral colors such as beige, black, brown, and white with occasional delicate flowery motifs, to the last section that showed more elaborate fabrics that seem to have Hawaiian-style prints.

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<sup>3</sup> Chalayan is well known for his shows that often includes elements of surprise or theatricality that draw attention on him. For example, the *Before Minus Now* show for Spring/Summer 2000 collection included a dress that changed form on stage through a remote control activated by a little boy. The following year, for the *Ventriloquy* presentation, models smashed sugar-glass skirts worn by their fellow models on stage.

The dress that is of interest here was found in the show's final segment (Figure 12). The piece, acquired in 2003 by Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean (Mudam) in Luxembourg, is a short cotton strapless dress with an off-the-shoulder neckline. A wide and voluminous ruffle goes down and across the front of the dress until it encircles the hem at the back. The body of the dress is ruched close to the body. Combined with the colorful print of the fabric, it looks like typical resort wear with nothing more to it.

A close examination of the dress, however, connects it to art. First, the textile print reveals a very interesting aspect of the collection. What looks like a fun Hawaiian print is, in fact, composed of scenes from the sixteenth-century battle between the Ottomans and the Venetians transposed onto the modern beaches of Nicosia filled with holiday resorts. This reference to Cyprus' violent past marked by war is not the only element related to Chalayan's heritage that informed the dress and the collection.

While working on the creation of the collection, Chalayan teamed up with a genetic anthropologist who completed a DNA test on the designer to discover his genetic makeup from those of the various ethnic groups that populate Cyprus. Finding out that he has Viking genes, as well as the most common European genetic marker, prompted Chalayan to ponder over the importance of identity in relation to geography and cultural origins. He concluded, "what's interesting is not where you came from [...] but the story of how you got there" (qtd. in Mower 46). This statement applies to his methodology as well as his personal story. The intellectual process he goes through before he creates clothes is actually the essence of his work.

The DNA test not only inspired Chalayan to contemplate his cultural heritage, but also it directed his formal research in terms of the aesthetic of the collection, and

particularly for the dress analyzed in this essay. The wrapping and the ruffles, for example, were inspired by the shape of a DNA strand. Although the wraparound flounce is quite impressive in terms of size and proportions, it is nonetheless a wearable dress. In this case, the impracticality of the garment is not a criterion that brings this work closer to art—although certainly Chalayan has offered a number of unwearable pieces in his career. Nonetheless, the function of the dress goes beyond the need to be clothed or to have a certain style. It functions as one part of a larger thought process that Chalayan wished to explore. The designer explained: “It is important for me to spread out the idea that the wearer can absorb, and that people can absorb in different ways” (“Hussein Chalayan” 27:45). The dress is split between its expected utilitarian role and the less obvious purpose as a tool for reflection. In essence, it is a canvas that allows Chalayan to explore an idea and materialize the result of his thoughts.

This complex and reflexive creative process goes beyond fashion and clothes. The interpretative potential offered by the presentation and the unique custom-made printed fabric illustrates how a certain type of fashion is capable of being considered art.

The close examination of the three designers and their selected creations brings out common traits that match some of the main characteristics mentioned in the first chapter about what is art. The *Babushka* collection, the *Oyster* dress and the *Temporal Meditations* dress all fit in the institutionalism theory. Indeed, the three works received the art world’s approbation by being purchased by art museums immediately after their public presentation.

Conceptualism, another artistic quality, is present in these three works. Although our case study includes actual objects that were produced, the concepts underlying them

stand out and mark their difference from commercial fashion. These ideas that inform the garments all stem from the designers' personal vision and their desire to express it through clothes.

This expressiveness is an element emphasized by Karoll Berger, who finds that there is an expressive autonomy acquired by the craftsmen who then became artists (5). Interestingly enough, all three creators gave titles to their collections—and in McQueen's case to specific garments. This detail emphasizes the importance of the personal expression underlying the work. Thus, the intellectual and the aesthetic are equally important as the functional.

Noël Carroll's concept of interpretative play also appears as a common characteristic of the three examples (60). Indeed, each designer offered works that call for interpretation by the viewers. The three creations go beyond what is expected of usual garments in terms of function and materials and invite the viewers to decode their meanings.

Finally, the three garments share a fifth common element: the complexity of execution. Whether it is with Viktor & Rolf's embroidery and beading, McQueen's rendering of silk, or Chalayan's narrative fabric, the three works demonstrate a high level of craftsmanship. Although it is no longer a criterion for art (Harris 4; Danto 7; Warburton 40), virtuosity does influence the other factors that are decisive when the distinction is made between what is and what is not art. The advanced technical skills provide the designers with the ability to transform abstract ideas into material objects. The mastery of their craft is what allows them to go beyond conventions and expectations. Their craft then becomes the tool whereby they express ideas, visions, and

feelings, which convey meaning to the viewers. Finally, this level of technical excellence and originality evoke a sense of exclusivity; the handmade, unique pieces prompt an association with art while distancing themselves from the mass-produced, market-driven, and functional notion of fashion.

### Chapter 3: The Commercial Reality

A more in-depth look at the commercial side of the case study designers is helpful to grasp the challenges that come up when one steps outside of the usual boundaries of fashion and into artistic practice. When looking at Viktor & Rolf, Alexander McQueen, and Hussein Chalayan's careers through a business lens, one realizes that they all have a similar trajectory in terms of their commercial success. All four designers started with unconventional and/or experimental collections that earned them critical acclaim. Subsequently, they all knew their share of financial difficulties before realizing commercial success.

Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren, as mentioned in Chapter 2, started off in haute couture. Before they made the move to ready-to-wear, their success was made more of respect than of money. In June 1999, the designers told the *New York Times*' Cathy Horyn that since they had started to officially show their work during Paris fashion week in 1997, they had yet to sell a single garment to a client. Furthermore, since they graduated from school in 1992, they lived "on a mix of government grants, museum sales and good will" (qtd. in Horyn). However, the same year, Snoeren told *Vogue* in an interview: "We have the same dream as Calvin Klein, only we want to realize it on our own terms" (qtd. in Cooper 354). It was always part of Viktor & Rolf's identity as a brand and as designers to completely intertwine fashion, art, and business. What is observable, however, is that their more conceptual and artistic work was never profitable. Still, they managed to survive financially until they entered the more commercial realm of fashion. In 2000 they started to present and sell ready-to-wear, in 2005 they launched their first fragrance, and in the following year they opened their first store in Milan and

collaborated with H&M for a capsule collection. In 2008, the company sold a percentage of their business to Diesel executive Renzo Rosso in order to gain more financial power.

Thus, as soon as they got involved in more commercial practices, such as the development of a perfume and the sale of more wearable clothes, Viktor & Rolf obtained financial success. An interesting question to ponder is whether they did it to the detriment of the artistic qualities of their work. Yet Viktor & Rolf's singular vision of fashion, which completely engages the conceptual with the commercial, by all accounts managed to produce meaningful ready-to-wear collections. Examples of this successful synthesis are the *Bluescreen* collection and the more recent *Fashion Show* collection.<sup>4</sup> When asked in a 2011 interview if art and commerce is a contradiction Snoeren responded, "No, but it's a challenge. It's a challenge to do something that works in both worlds" (Horsting and Snoeren, "The Talks"). Although fashion shows present garments that are often—especially in Viktor & Rolf's case—more extravagant and spectacular versions of what is actually going to be on sale in stores (Duggan 249), they also can showcase the artistic potential of designers. Consequently, Viktor & Rolf had to find the appropriate channels to express both commercial and conceptual qualities. It is evident, however, their conceptual and artistic fashion was not on its own financially viable. The fact is that Horsting and Snoeren—although it was never an ethical issue for them—had to branch out into more mainstream products such as a perfume and a capsule collection for H&M

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<sup>4</sup> The Dutch designers tackled the idea of ephemera in fashion in the *Bluescreen* collection. They used the bluescreen technology usually employed in cinema, to transform momentarily a complete outfit or a part of it, by juxtaposing moving images to the blue silhouette. In the *Fashion Show* collection, each model was transformed into a fashion show, wearing a structure with light spots, to which the clothes were attached, thus creating the illusion that they were hanging from it. Viktor & Rolf used the *mise en abyme* process to comment on the importance of the spectacle in the present fashion world.

in order to keep their business alive and to continue working as designers for their own label.

Although Alexander McQueen worked within haute couture during his experience as Givenchy's creative director, he had always created ready-to-wear collections for his eponymous label. His first professional fashion show was presented in 1994, and it took him more than a decade—not until February 2008—to achieve profitability (Conti, “Profitable” 17). During this period, McQueen took steps similar to those of Viktor & Rolf towards financial stability. In 1997 American Express began sponsoring McQueen's runway shows and in 2000 McQueen struck a deal with the Gucci group (PPR), who bought a controlling stake in the company while leaving the creative control to McQueen. This financial backing helped the company to grow commercially. As a demonstration of this growth, a first fragrance was launched in 2003. Moreover, that year McQueen's three stores ran above expectations and the sales doubled (Rohwedder). In June 2006, McQueen launched a second, lower-priced line: McQ.

McQueen, like Viktor & Rolf, had to adopt more commercial strategies such as partnering up with a big financial backer and branching out beyond the luxury market with lower priced lines and perfumes. This is how the company made it through the lean years and became profitable. Despite the need to adapt to the business side of fashion in order to survive, McQueen also kept the daring attitude that characterized his career's debut alive. In fact, it is worth noting that his commercial growth coincides with the *Irere* collection that included the *Oyster* dress analyzed in chapter 2. This link tells us that McQueen succeeded to a certain extent in allying commerciality and art. Nonetheless, it



appears that without the use of commercial tactics it would have been difficult, if not impossible to offer the type of fashion that made him a designer-artist.

Hussein Chalayan, as was already noted, was first recognized through his experimental, graduating collection from St. Martins. Almost instantly, he earned the respect of the fashion world for creating intelligent and idea driven clothes. Yet again, as it was the case with Viktor & Rolf and McQueen, Chalayan's success was based more on esteem than profit. In fact, in January 2001, he had to file for voluntary liquidation of his company, Cartesia Ltd. This happened despite collaborations with Topshop and TSE and receiving the title of Designer of the Year in 1999 and 2000. This sale did not keep him from pursuing his career; in May of that same year he signed a licensing deal with the Italian apparel manufacturer GIBO' Co S.P.A., which allowed him to keep producing collections. At the same time, he directed short films, presented exhibits in museums, and received a grant for an artist's residency at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Ohio—a first for a fashion designer. Then he sold a majority share of his label to Puma AG, which helped him to keep his business afloat and even expand it (Conti, “Chalayan”). Although no details were disclosed on the nature of the deal, Chalayan was able to buy back the majority stake of his company from Puma (Marsh). In June 2011, Chalayan announced that from Spring 2012 onward, his main label would be known as Chalayan, deleting his first name from the brand. A month later he launched his first fragrance, and in September of the same year, he launched a diffusion line called the Grey Line.

The evolution of Chalayan's commercial success is interesting considering the fact that he clearly struggled to keep his business alive, even while receiving marks of respect and support from both the fashion and art worlds. In 2013, after two decades in

the fashion business, Chalayan apparently decided to separate his artistic practice from his fashion career. After years of effort to keep his business afloat, Chalayan took a more commercial direction with the decision of partnering with Puma, the name change, and the perfume. Moreover, his website now separates his regular collections from his art projects, which formerly were combined. His website's placement of the *Temporal Meditations* collection is a good example of this new division: the short film, from which a still photograph was used as a background for the fashion show of that collection, is under the "art projects" category, whereas the collection itself is under the "past collections" tab. The same thing happened to the *Remote Control* dress that is part of the *Echoform* collection in 1999. The piece, which was originally presented as a fashion artifact, ended up identified as an art project. Furthermore, Chalayan seems to have increasingly tamed his experimental style in his ready-to-wear collections. This change is observable starting in 2010, the same time when he bought back his company from Puma before taking a more commercial turn. It seems that Chalayan made a decision to create a clear division between fashion and art in his practice. Looking at his journey in fashion, which was not without financial challenges, Chalayan may have made this split so that the fashion would be more profitable, while his art could be freed from commercial constraints.

Melissa Taylor reiterated Ginger Gregg Duggan's words when she wrote that "viewers are challenged to confront competing definitions of form by asking: which is the actual dress—the dress, the idea of the dress, or the image of the dress" (Duggan 262, M. Taylor 447). Taylor added, "it is in the nature of this cultural phenomenon, in which images preside over reality, that the designer can be a commercial failure, yet attract

critical acclaim in creative terms” (M. Taylor 447). The situation described by Taylor corresponds to Viktor & Rolf, Alexander McQueen, and Hussein Chalayan’s challenges towards the commerciality of their work, especially in the beginning of their careers. With garments that have a strong conceptual focus, such as the case study pieces, their commercial potential on a larger scale seems to decrease. Although it was mentioned in chapter 2 that the visibility brought by spectacular and/or unconventional creations extends to clothes intended for a more commercial life, the analysis of these three careers indicates that artistic fashion has not proven to be commercially successful. Despite the respect from critics and the public, these kinds of designs are insufficient to provide a financially viable career for their creators. This observation certainly explains the need for designers to participate in more commercial strategies, therefore engaging in a dialogue with fashion, art, and commerce.

The number and importance of fashion exhibitions have increased in recent years. Fashion exhibits hosted by art museums have also increased in number and so has their popularity (Steele, “Museum” 8). Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren maintain an enduring relationship with museums and galleries since this is where they started their career. They note: “We like that it’s so democratic in a museum. Everybody can go and enjoy what you’ve made, and a fashion show is for three hundred people, you know. It’s for a lucky few. A museum is a chance to bring your work to a bigger audience” (Snoeren in “The Talks”). Indeed, with *The House of Viktor and Rolf* at the Barbican—their biggest exhibition so far—over 42 000 people viewed the designers’ work (Barbican 16). Although he did not have the same history with museums as Viktor & Rolf, Alexander McQueen definitely left a mark in the history of fashion and museum with the 2011

posthumous exhibition *Savage Beauty* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The museum had its eighth largest audience ever with a total of 664 000 visitors (Wilson). Obviously, the fact the exhibit took place shortly after his death created hype around his legacy and partly explains the impressive number. Hussein Chalayan, like Viktor & Rolf, has had a lasting relationship with museums and galleries that have welcomed him throughout his career. Among other shows, he received the honour of having three solo exhibitions: the first in 2005, the second in 2009, and again in 2011. His 2009 retrospective opened at the Design Museum of London had over 65 000 visitors (Sharpe and Stoilas, “2009” 29). And when it traveled to the Istanbul Modern, more than 178 000 people attended the exhibition (Stoilas 24).

The number of fashion exhibitions; the variety of locations, including art museums; and the respectable, sometimes exceptional, attendance figures indicate that fashion exhibitions are obtaining growing success and attention. The three examples of this case study are part of this trend. Beyond promoting the legitimacy of fashion in art museums, the accessibility of the exhibits allows a greater number of people to see the designers’ work and gives the designers the opportunity to reach wider audiences. That precious visibility can translate into economic gains and cultural capital for the designers. Melissa Taylor confirms this twofold effect: “the significance of such exhibitions are, as such, commercially beneficial to the designer, in attaching the value system of the museum in which their garments are shown” (M. Taylor 455).

The popularity of fashion exhibitions, especially those hosted by art museums, generates polarized opinions (Steele, “Museum” 8). Nonetheless, they have undeniably contributed to the acceptance of fashion as a form of art. One of the reasons that brought

fashion in the museum is the crowds it attracts. Val Williams, in her article about fashion photography and the museum, made observations that can be applied to fashion in general. She suggests that museums took advantage of the wide audience that fashion photography drew, which brought in significant income impossible for these establishments to ignore (216-217). The economic motives that play a role in bringing fashion to the museum, which contributed to fashion's change of status, are also important reasons why some critics and academics defend the position that fashion is not art. Thus, the commercial aspect for which fashion is condemned is also one of the factors that has given it a place in the museum, therefore helping to change the status of fashion.

## **Chapter 4: The Pivotal Role of Museums**

In this fourth and last chapter, I examine more closely the impact that museums have had on fashion's change of status. Its entry in the museum realm—especially in the art museum—has been instrumental in the shift of perception towards the value of fashion in relation to “high” art. By looking at collecting policies of selected museums and by reviewing curator's standpoints on the question, this chapter investigates the role of museums in fashion's status.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York (MMA) was founded in 1870 “for the purpose of establishing and maintaining [...] a Museum and library of art, of encouraging and developing the study of fine arts, and the application of arts to manufacture and practical life, of advancing the general knowledge of kindred subjects, and, to that end, of furnishing popular instruction” (The Metropolitan Museum of Art). In 2000, that mission statement was reaffirmed by the museum and it was added that the MMA's mission is also to “stimulate appreciation for and advance knowledge of works of art that collectively represent the broadest spectrum of human achievement at the highest level of quality” (The Metropolitan Museum of Art). In addition to these statements, acquiring “exceptional works of art” should be the basic principle guiding the curators' work (The Metropolitan Museum of Art). In the MMA's original mission statement, it is stated that the “application of arts to manufacture and practical life” are of interest to the institution. It also makes mention of “kindred subjects” as something central to their mission. Moreover, in the update made in 2000, collecting and showing “the broadest spectrum of human achievement” (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) is mentioned as being part of the MMA's duty. The words used to explain the museum's

mission and interests presaged the importance that fashion has taken in past years and reveal how despite some curator's and critics' opinions, fashion can be interpreted as deserving of a space in the museum. Indeed, the MMA's mission and collecting policy are not positioned against the inclusion of fashion. In fact, there seems to be enough latitude to rightfully include fashion inside its walls. However, it is interesting to note that fashion did not make their entry to the MMA before 1946 when the Museum of Costume Art merged with the MMA, and it did not benefit from a full-fledged curatorial department until 1959. More recently in 2002, a group called Friends of The Costume Institute was created to support and promote the department's collecting and operations. As it is stated on their website, the group's purpose is to promote fashion as an art form and incite the study of fashion as a serious academic field (The Metropolitan Museum of Art). Thus, fashion's full integration to the MMA is fairly recent.

The Groninger Museum, founded in 1894, originally showed mostly works of art that represent the history and culture of the Groningen region. This collection policy expanded in the 1920s to include modern art and today, with the acquisition of contemporary art. To describe their collection and what guides their acquisitions, the museum states that they "tend towards work transcending the borders between art, fashion and design" (Groninger). Their mission statement updated in 2009 is rather vague describing the museum as "colorful and extrovert", "aiming at a wide audience", and "hoping to amaze and astound visitors and prompt them towards an opinion" (Groninger). Although the Dutch museum's original collecting policy was doubtless different from its current practice, it definitely evolved towards the postmodern quality of inclusiveness. The use of the word "transcending" clearly expresses the desire for open-

mindedness to all forms of creative activities. According to their collecting principle, fashion seems to be on an equal footing with fine arts.

From the outset, the Musée d'art moderne du Luxembourg (Mudam) is different from the two previous institutions because it is much more recent : it was founded in 1998. The museum focuses on contemporary art and attempts to include a variety of disciplines coming from around in the world. According to the Mudam, their “collection bares witness to contemporary creation in all its technical and aesthetic forms, while remaining open to every other artistic discipline: painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, as well as design, fashion, graphic design and new media are all put on show” (Mudam). As is the case with the Groninger, the Mudam does not discriminate between more traditional museum material, such as painting and sculpture, and other forms of creative practice, such as fashion.

These three art museums' collecting policies and mission statements denote the same openness and acceptance of fashion as a form worthy of entering the museum's doors. The three collecting policies use different terms, yet they all convey the same idea: fashion has the same cultural weight and interest as painting, sculpture, or any other “high” art.

Working from these premises are museum curators. If some museums such as the three aforementioned have missions and collecting policies that facilitate fashion's inclusion and exhibition, it is not enough to settle the debate on fashion's place in museums, for curators are the gatekeepers to these museum collections. The question of whether fashion has its place in (art) museums and whether it should be considered as art is a controversial topic on which not all curators share the same opinion. Among the most



important curators that have participated in this debate, very few took a clear position stating that fashion is art. The late Richard Martin, curator of The Costume Institute of the MMA, reiterated more than once the idea that fashion clearly has the potential to be considered as art (Martin, “Charismatic” 91; Martin, “Gianni” 100; Martin, “Viktor & Rolf” 120).

More than a decade later, chief curator of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Nathalie Bondil made her position clear that fashion is art, at the occasion of the opening of *The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk* (Bondil; Teitelbaum). She claimed: “I think that it is our duty at the museum to open other doors. If you don’t have this critical look, if you don’t give people the tools to understand another way to consider the aesthetic of fashion, I think that you haven’t done your job” (Bondil). Although more predictable because of her involvement with an institution that promotes decorative arts with which fashion is more easily associated, and a country which reveres couture as an art form, Pamela Golbin curator at Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris said in a 2010 interview with Valerie Steele that “fashion, *like all other arts*, has its place within a museum gallery.” She added that, “there is no contradiction between fashion as industry and art” (qtd. in Steele, “Fashion” 15)."

On the other side of the question, Valerie Steele, chief curator of The Museum at The Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), and Claire Wilcox, curator at the Victoria & Albert Museum, both assert that fashion is not art, but acknowledge its place in museums. While Steele considers that fashion will be able to be recognized as art when there will be a true critical consensus that she believes does not exist at the moment (“Fashion” 23), Wilcox cannot see fashion as something other than a “high craft at its best” (Sudjic 3).

Between these unequivocal positions, most curators have more ambiguous opinions. Harold Koda, curator in charge of the Costume Institute of the MMA, said that “not all fashion is art” (Koda), suggesting that some fashion could be considered as art. More surely, Koda advocates for the relevance of fashion in the museum and the role that the curator might play in legitimating the work of fashion designers as art. For Matthew Teitelbaum, director of the Art Gallery of Ontario, the debate is more focused on the mission of a particular institution and its own expertise, as well as the quality of an object, outside of the debate of whether it should be considered art or not. Moreover, he brings up the idea that the designer’s intention is something that should be considered when evaluating if something is art. It should be taken into account whether the creator thinks of his own work as art (Teitelbaum). In other words, he does not reject the idea that fashion could be art, but he questions whether it has its place in *his* museum, and what kind of creative works can and should be considered as art.

Like Teitelbaum, Fiona Anderson, senior curator at the National Museum of Scotland, directs the conversation towards fashion in the museum and the way it is approached and how the commercial and entertainment aspects can be balanced with academic and educational values. Building on Charles Saumarez Smith’s text on the new museology, Anderson argues for an acknowledgement of the commercial side of fashion, which is part of the contextualization of objects, a fundamental feature of intelligent fashion conservation and exhibition according to both authors (Anderson 374-75).

In sum, curators’ standpoints on that topic are various. Not many of them are prompt to acknowledge fashion as a form of art without any form of moderation or limitation. However, all of the curators discussed accept that fashion can have a place in

museums; yet most of them have reservations about how it should be done and what it can imply regarding the status of fashion. An analysis of the curators' standpoints, combined with other writings on the topic by other curators, reveals two main pitfalls for fashion to avoid if it is to be taken seriously and benefit from the same cultural status and value as art: unethical relationships to commercialism and intellectual laxity.

Fashion exhibitions are crowd-pleasers. The flow of visitors they bring to museums cannot be ignored for obvious financial reasons. More visitors mean more money to institutions that are chronically underfunded. Margee Hume summarizes the issue in her 2011 article about museum's marketing strategies:

The museum sector is shifting toward the need for marketing and increased financial returns, and this is driven at the behest of those organizations behind museum funding. The changing pressures on museum management have led to the conflict in primacy of museum function. Pressure appears with the instruction to museums to demonstrate that they deliver value for money (74).

Museums now have to prove their relevance through numbers and economical success. Popular success has become as important as their education and conservation missions. Fashion exhibitions are not only economically compelling because of the crowds they attract, they also offer financial support from corporate sponsors in the fashion industry. Curators Valerie Steele and N. J. Stevenson, as well as professor John Potvin, voice their concerns about the association of museums and contemporary fashion brands. Stevenson, Steele and Potvin all refer to the 2000 Armani exhibition, for which Armani made an important donation to the Guggenheim museum that hosted the event, which was reported shortly after the exhibition announcement. This type of financial support was criticized because of ethical concerns (Stevenson 225; Steele, "Museum" 17; Potvin 48). Potvin adds that it was for Armani an important marketing coup that served the brand's

image and compromised the museum and its mission to educate visitors on modern art (52). Stevenson and Steele also give the 2005 Chanel exhibition at the Costume Institute as an example of a problematic partnership between a brand that is currently in business and a museum wishing to stage a popular exhibition. They call attention to the danger of an exhibition becoming a marketing strategy directed to investors, magazines and advertisers, to the detriment of accurate and independent information (Stevenson 225; Steele, "Museum" 17).

The other danger mentioned by curators and critics regarding contemporary fashion in the museum is its lack of intellectual rigour. This second worry is sometimes due to the influence that corporate sponsors can have over the elaboration of an exhibition. Their generous contributions can come in the way of the objectivity of museums, an effect that is intensified when these sponsors are directly or closely related to the subject of the show. It becomes problematic when corporate brands take control of the message conveyed by an exhibition (Stevenson 225; Steele, "Museum" 17; L. Taylor 289). This circumstance usually results in accusations towards museums and sponsors, pointing to the fact that museums in these situations become instruments of marketing to serve commercial purposes that benefit the companies. Curators may rightly feel that museums fail their educational role because of market-driven preoccupations.

The proximity with sponsors or simply too important commercial concerns can give rise to a lack of critical distance detrimental to the museum and give influence to those who think that fashion does not have its place in museum as a serious subject or as a form of art. This fear concerns especially living designers and the exhibitions that have questionable partnerships with sponsors. Yet again, the Armani and the Chanel

exhibitions are cited as problematic. Both exhibits were criticized for turning the museum galleries into retail spaces (Steele, “Museum” 20; Potvin 52).

Another fear in relation to intellectual rigour expressed by curators is the lack of contextualization of the subject and the objects on view, especially when dealing with contemporary fashion. Curators pointed out the fact that existing fashion brands exhibited in museums too often lack relevant and useful information that would enrich the exhibition’s content and allow it to move away from the glamour and commercial values associated with fashion (Stevenson 225-226; Potvin 48). When contextualized properly, curators seem to think that fashion—including contemporary fashion—can be a subject worthy of the museum and the art museum.

All in all, the fears and drawbacks concerning fashion’s place in museums illuminate not only the complexity of the debate, but also fashion’s contentious nature. Despite the varied opinions on the topic, several curators admit that fashion’s presence in the museum gives it more relevance, recognition, and respect, at least from the public’s perspective (Koda; Steele, “Fashion” 13). Steele, Koda, and Lou Taylor all agree to say that artifacts such as clothing (fashion) take on a new dimension when moved into the museum, and particularly in the art museum. The institution implies some sort of approval and the object finds itself automatically closer to the “high” art status by being accepted into those walls (L. Taylor 281). Despite the postmodernist context within which the lines between “high” and “low” culture are blurred, the museum as an institution still holds power and authority, or at least a symbolic value that indeed influences the perception of fashion’s status. About the notions of discourse, power and knowledge, Michel Foucault wrote: “each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general

politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true [...] truth is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media)"(132-32). Foucault directs our attention to the still existing influence of the discourse on art promoted by museums and curators. These cultural institutions are recognized and accepted as bastions of culture and art, and therefore they play a role in the legitimization of what can be considered as such.

## **Conclusion**

This research project identified reasons that explain the shift in fashion's status. In the past thirty years, fashion has acquired a more autonomous position that allowed this creative field to enter the museum and to be deemed an art form. The historical and theoretical context favoured the reemergence of the debate on fashion's nature. The likes of Paul Poiret, Josef Hoffmann, and Sonia Delaunay all created precedents that allowed the implantation of the idea that fashion and art can be considered on an equal footing. Theoretical writings on fashion and art also illuminate the debated nature of that topic as well as many possible angles to look at the issue.

Viktor & Rolf, Alexander McQueen, and Hussein Chalayan are three contemporary examples that embody most of the reasons and factors for the public, scholars, and critics to look at fashion as an art form. With the strong conceptual frameworks underlying a good part of their creations, the high level of craftsmanship, and their particular relationship with art museums, these three creators nourish the autonomous status of fashion.

The exploration of the commercial reality of the three case studies and of museums shed light not only on the financial untenability of artistic designs, but also on the popular success of fashion exhibitions. It also revealed the complexity of the dual nature of fashion, which after all can hardly be disconnected from economic considerations. This dynamic benefits both fashion and museums. Indeed, museums played a significant role in fashion's change of status. Despite cautious opinions on how fashion should be presented and integrated in the museum, most curators acknowledge its relevance within their walls.

Looking at the findings of this research project, there is at the heart of fashion's change of status a change in perception. The nature of fashion has not altered drastically in the past thirty years, but the way we look at it has. The cultural context shaped by postmodernism allowed us to see fashion differently and made it possible to increase its acceptance as a field of creation as important as art. At the same time, "high" art lost its role of cultural leader. It is no longer seen as the only relevant form of artistic creation, nor the only marker of our cultural identity. The recent *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion, 1970-1990* exhibition held at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London displayed the complexity and pluralism that are characteristic of postmodernism. With the diversity of creative media and styles exhibited, the show embodied the absence or lessening of hierarchy in the cultural realm. From architecture to design, fashion and music, the rules that used to rank various media have disappeared. Glen Adamson, head of research department at the Victoria & Albert Museum and Jane Pavitt, professor at the Royal College of Art in London comment: "In its years of emergence, postmodernism lived up to its ambition to replace a homogenous visual language with a plurality of competing ideas and styles" (32). The mix of styles, and the combining of popular culture with "high" art, slowly but surely changed the way we perceive and judge culture. These important changes provided the necessary cultural context for fashion to be appreciated and seen differently.

In a postmodern society centered on capitalist preoccupations, fashion, with its assumed double nature (commercial and artistic), now resonates more with the viewers than "high" art. In *Aesthetic Theory*, published posthumously in 1970, Theodor Adorno made the claim that fashion captures the reality of a consumer society. He observed,



“Fashion is art’s permanent confession that it is not what it claims to be. For its indiscreet betrayals fashion is as hated as it is a powerful force in the system; its double character is a blatant symptom of its antinomy. Fashion cannot be separated from art as neatly as would suit bourgeois art religion” (398). Adorno points out to the fact that like fashion, art was never separate from the market and commercial concerns. This observation, although considered by Adorno a negative feature of the culture industry, now supports fashion’s value and legitimacy in the museum. Adorno’s point also expresses how the cultural hierarchy that used to place art above fashion no longer—and never did—prevail.

The commercialization of culture identified by Adorno leads to areas for further research on the topic of the relationship of fashion to art. For example, a material culture approach based on the study of actual garments would certainly bring useful information to the debate. Looking at objects would provide more evidence of the technical and material quality of the garments. The close reading of these works would indeed tell more about the design, shape and construction, which would enrich the interpretation of the garments. This knowledge could illuminate the intentions behind the designer’s aesthetic and fabrication choices, which are important to understanding meaning and signification.

As well, research on mass-market and fast fashion in the postmodern context would deepen the understanding of fashion’s new status. The availability of low-priced clothes that follow the high-fashion trends and aesthetics may be a factor in creating a greater awareness to fashion’s creative and artistic value from the consumers’ perspective, thus contributing to the evolution of fashion’s status.

To conclude, this research project sheds light on key aspects of this multi-dimensional discussion on fashion and art. I would also suggest that the progression

towards an increased acceptance and even an embracing of fashion's double nature will certainly be a decisive factor in the resolution of the question of whether or not fashion should be considered art. No matter where readers stand on that debate, the previous pages certainly give material to reflect on the significance and role of fashion in our postmodern society.

## Appendix: Figures



Fig. 1. Nadar, *Worth the Artist* (1892)



Fig. 2. Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren, *Russian Doll-First Preparation* (1999)



Fig. 3. Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren, *Russian Doll-Second Preparation* (1999)



Fig. 4. Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren, *Russian Doll-Third Preparation* (1999)



Fig. 5. Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren, *Russian Doll-Fourth Preparation* (1999)



Fig. 6. Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren, *Russian Doll-Fifth Preparation* (1999)



Fig. 7. Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren, *Russian Doll-Sixth Preparation* (1999)



Fig. 8. Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren, *Russian Doll-Seventh Preparation* (1999)



Fig. 9. Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren, *Russian Doll-Eighth Preparation* (1999)



Fig. 10. Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren, *Russian Doll-Ninth Preparation* (1999)



Fig. 11. Alexander McQueen, *Oyster dress* (2003)



Fig. 12. Hussein Chalayan, *Temporal Meditations* collection dress (2004)

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