Squeezing In and Zipping Up:

Canada's Involvement in the late 20th and 21st Century Trend of Fashion Exhibition

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis discusses the development of 20th century fashion within the space of Canadian museums. I argue that while Canada has the means to conceive groundbreaking exhibitions of 20th century dress, the absence of costume collections in Canadian fine art museums and the lack of collaboration between human history and fine art representatives have inhibited Canada's contribution to the evolving multi-disciplinary trend of fashion exhibitions. By analyzing the evolution of dress history and exhibitions on an international scale, I study the differentiation offered by Valerie Stele between the antiquarian costume exhibit and the modern 20th century fashion exhibition largely influenced by the likes of Diana Vreeland and Cecile Beaton. After an analysis on the history of dress collection and exhibition in Canadian museums, I completed two case studies on *Golden Age of Couture: Paris London 1947-1957* hosted at the Musée National des Beaux Arts du Québec and *Elite Elegance: Couture Fashion in the 1950s* conceived at the Royal Ontario Museum. A comparison is then made between these two exhibitions, coming from fine art and human history institutions respectively, between the realities of hosting and conceiving a dress exhibition, the reception of sponsorship, and the use of supplementary material.

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No one can see inside, visitors never see inside of anything in a museums [yet] all the insides of things and all the details of things are what make you feel good in them and what makes the clothes the way they are, so perfect.

-Alexandra Palmer, Nora E. Vaughan Fashion Costume Curator

As fashion is credible in both human history and art museums while maintaining a leading role in our macro economy, it has managed to circumvent categorization, empowering itself in multiple disciplines but confounding the public and aggravating scholars along the way. Fashion has since carved itself a place in the museum world and has further established itself as museum worthy by appealing to the modern interest in the artistic value of pop culture and the decorative arts. Recent dress exhibitions in fine arts and historical museums have attempted to reexamine fashion with a wider lens, to release it from the commercial stigma of mass media. Since fashion does not fit into any distinct disciplinary field the critical analysis of the historical and aesthetic perspectives can be challenging. The values of fine art and history museums can also clash, even if the museum is mindful of the particularly diverse audience a fashion exhibition attracts. In Canada, the small size of costume collections and limited number of fashion exhibitions intensifies this problem. As couture fashion exhibitions have become prominent in the leading art centers of the world, Canada has been slowly contributing to this trend, albeit with minimal resources and little community support. My thesis is an analysis of costume exhibitions in Canada with a particular focus on the Royal Ontario Museum's (ROM) *Elite Elegance: Couture Fashion in the 1950s* (2002-2003) and the Musée National des Beaux-Arts de Québec's (MNBAQ) hosted exhibition *Golden Age of Couture: London Paris 1947-1957,* (2010). I argue that while Canada has the means to conceive

groundbreaking exhibitions of 20th century dress, as is seen in New York, Paris and London, the absence of costume collections in Canadian fine art museums and the lack of collaboration between human history and fine art museum representatives has inhibited Canada's contribution to the evolving multi-disciplinary trend of fashion exhibitions.

As dress history is a relatively new field of study, I begin my thesis with a brief discussion on the history of the study of dress and then consider the collection of dress in the museum space, which began in the mid to late 19th century. From there, I present the development of the modern fashion exhibition coming to fruition in the 1970s with the eccentric curatorial work of Diana Vreeland, former editor of *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue*. The introduction of the modern fashion exhibition lays the groundwork for my examination of where and how Canadian museums became involved in this 20th and 21st century trend. Looking at Canadian costume collections and exhibitions throughout the 1900s until today makes it evident how little Canadian collectors have been involved in this kind of endeavor. Despite the lack of this resource, Canada has hosted some influential exhibitions that have won prestigious international awards, all of which, however, came from human history museums. I then present two case studies, one on the ROM's *Elite Elegance* and the other on the MNBAQ's *Golden Age of Couture*, in order to compare what stylistic elements raised these two shows to the standards of the modern fashion exhibition. Finally, as *Elite Elegance* was conceived by a Canadian museum and *Golden Age of Couture* traveled from the prestigious Victoria and Albert in London, an analysis on conceiving versus hosting fashion exhibitions, the realities of sponsorship and the importance of knowing your audience, conclude the thesis.

Short History on the Collection of Dress

Up until the mid 19th century, dress was neglected as both an art form and as material evidence. The only exception is the very small amount of literature on dress that emerged during the Renaissance, echoing the birth of the individual, and the few collections of royal and court dress, which survived as heirlooms and were not studied until the latter half of the 19th century.[1] If dress was collected at all, it would be to expose "the age and quality of [its] embroidery or because of the quality of the fabric's manufacture" not because of the costume itself.[2] There was, of course, an interest in all things non-Western and so we do see anthropological collections that acted as evidence for colonial purposes – in other words, as treasures. The end of the 18th and first half of the 19th century saw the opening of museums all over the Western map, although none seemed interested in collecting contemporary dress.[3]

By the 1850s, European peasant dress was collected as a way of strengthening social nationalism and a couple of artist collections survived which were used as reference for historical paintings, although these are few and far between.[4] Taylor suggests that an earlier interest in fabrics and textiles rather than dress could be related to women's fashion "not yet being 'manufactured' at a ready to wear level" although she

[1] Lou Taylor, *Establishing Dress History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 5. Taylor provides a wealth of information on the history of dress literature, the collection of dress throughout Western history, and dress collections within Western museums.
[2] Taylor, *Establishing Dress History*, 110.
[3] Taylor, *Establishing Dress History*, 106.
[4] For more on the collection of peasant dress see Taylor, "Establishing collections of European peasant and regional dress" *Establishing Dress History.*

leaves it at that.[5] I would like to suggest that the birth of ready-made clothing and the department store in the 1850s was most likely a large element in the development of museum dress collections. With a rising middle class, ready-made clothing became increasingly popular and dress was appreciated as a complete entity rather than as a product of several crafts, as it had been earlier. While tailors were always important, dressmaking was appreciated more as a collaborative effort, with an equal importance placed on the textile production, including the weavers, printers and embroiderers. With ready-made clothing, however, clients were no longer involved in the manufacturing process, making the final product a designer's artwork and what the client appreciates the most. The inclusion of dress within museums did not happen immediately after ready-made clothing but it instilled the idea of clothing being the product of a design. Moreover, the department store highlighted the similarities between themselves and museums. With the invention of the department store came the birth of browsing, which had never been the case before the creation of ready-made clothing. The department store also developed the window display, which quickly evolved as an important form of advertising. Both browsing and displays are major characteristics of museums and while I am not suggesting department stores gave birth to the modern museum, they did, whether directly or indirectly, confer the similarities between clothing and other objects displayed in museums.

There were other factors that also brought dress into the museum, including its connection to textiles, which has long been accepted as a craft. However, the Arts and Crafts Movement rejected contemporary fashion because of its market driven nature and,

[5] Taylor, "Doing the Laundry?: A Reassessment of Object-based Dress History," in *Fashion Theory* 2, no.4 (December 1998): 340.

in effect, its lack of quality workmanship. In 1910, William Richard Lethaby, a pioneer of the English Arts and Crafts Movement and a founder of the Art Workers Guild, edited a series of books called the *The Artistic Craft Series of Technical Handbooks*. He did have a section on costume which was prefaced with the recommendation that contemporary dressmakers interpret this handbook as a suggestion on how to better their skills and be included as a craft because the only dress worthy of inclusion is costume or specifically commissioned works that respect the tradition of fine tailoring, embroidery, jewelry and button commissioning, lace making, and so on.

> Although the present volume is cast into the form of a history, it is also intended to be a book of suggestions; and the hope is held that modern dress-makers may refer to it as much as, or more than, those who are interested in dress from the historical point of view.[6]

This rejection by the Arts and Crafts Movement has allowed fashion designers to align themselves with the fine art notion of creator as genius, carving themselves a comfortable spot in the art museum by the mid 20th century. Moreover, with the birth of French haute couture and the strong national pride that accompanied it, it is no wonder that France, the world's leading art center in the late 19th and early 20th century, promoted the artistic quality of contemporary dress. It was in Paris at the Exposition Universelle of 1900 that the first successful fashion exhibition was held, including both historical costume and contemporary couture.[7] From then on, more and more dress departments opened and

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[6] William Richard Lethaby, "Preface" in *Dress Design: An Account of Costume For Artists and Dressmakers*, ed. Talbot Hughes (London: Sir I. Pitman & sons, ltd., 1920) xvi-xvii.

[7] Valerie Steele, "Museum Quality: The Rise of the Fashion Exhibition," Fashion Theory 12, no.1 (March 2008): 9.

fashion exhibitions took place, although the themes were often historic and the design was always chronological.

Diana Vreeland (1903-1989) is often attributed with the birth of the modern fashion exhibition. Former editor of Vogue and Special Consultant for seventeen years at the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where she worked until her death in 1989, Vreeland is known to have had a vanguard approach to curating. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), notes that Vreeland was known to convey the *experience* of fashion through her exhibitions, which was so often lost in the commonly antiquarian and chronological costume exhibitions of the time.[8] Vreeland's shows brought life back into the clothes. She came up with themes that had never before been done and added her own flare to every exhibition, disregarding concerns for "authenticity". Her designs were highly theatrical; she introduced stylized mannequins and induced a multi-sensory reaction from the visitors through the use of smell and sound. She did all this, however, at the expense of historical accuracy. Alexandra Palmer notes that her "selections were not based on a 'scientific' criteria, nor the use of catalog cards; decisions were purely based on visual impact".[9] Vreeland selected accessories, for example, based on how complementary they were to the outfit. This inevitably posed problems with labeling. But rather than having a label identifying it as a contemporary creation, it would simply be omitted entirely, left for the audience to logically deduce its ambivalence to the historical costume.[10] Why, then, would an acclaimed institution like the Metropolitan Museum of Art employ Vreeland?

[8] Steele, "Museum Quality," 10.
[9] Alexandra Palmer, "Untouchable: Creating Desire and Knowledge in Museum Costume and Textile Exhibitions," Fashion Theory 12, no.1 (March 2008): 42.
[10] Palmer, "Untouchable," 47.

As Eleanor Dwight puts it, "she would get a lot of people to open their trunks".[11] This was similarly how Cecil Beaton, Vreeland's contemporary who was instigating a similar artistic revolution on the other side of the pond, became a curatorial consultant at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London. As he was a high-end fashion photographer, he brought to the V&A "the most significant couture garments" in the collection.[12] Dwight goes on to note, "it soon became clear, however, that [Vreeland] would also orchestrate the exhibitions in a new way, and that they would be the number one priority".[13]

Vreeland's famous quote, "I'm a great believer in vulgarity – if it's got vitality. A little bad taste is like a nice splash of paprika," is telling of her curatorial style.[14] In both *The Manchu Dragon: Costumes of China* (1980-1981) and *The Glory of Russian Costume* (1976), Yves Saint Laurent's new scent *Opium* and Chanel's revived perfume *Cuir de la Russie* saturated the galleries, respectively. As Valerie Steele points out, the presence of opium in China is a result of Western colonial forces, making Vreeland's inappropriate choice of scent "seem like a cruel joke".[15] In contrast, *Cuir de la Russie* was a scent launched in 1924, seven years after the Russian Revolution, a time when many Russians immigrated to France and their culture became very fashionable and

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[11] Diana Vreeland in Eleanor Dwight, *Diana Vreeland* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher Inc, 2002), 209.
[12] Mark Jones, "Forward," in *The Golden Age of Couture: Paris London 1947-57*, ed. Claire Wilcox (London: V&A Publications, 2007), 9.
[13] Dwight, 209.
[14] Diana Vreeland, *D.V.*, George Plimpton and Christopher Hemphill, Eds. (New York: Da Capo Press, 2003), 22.
[15] Steele, "Museum Quality," 11.

appreciated.[16] It was crassly noted in *Vogue*, "recent unpleasantness in Russia has at least called attention to the charm of its native costume".[17] Russian immigrants came to represent the ideals of the twenties – strength, perseverance and individuality - at least amongst the bohemian types, like Coco Chanel (1883-1971). This perfume, therefore, represents the alliance between French and Russian cultures, an interesting symbolism considering it was the first Russian costume exhibition in America. While Vreeland, more often than not, was academically and intellectually vulgar in her attempt at creating a more grandiose exhibition display, her paprika stirred up debate and attracted an audience that would launch an international interest in fashion exhibitions.

Harold Koda, who at one time assisted Vreeland on several exhibitions and is now curator-in-chief at the Costume Institute, argues that Vreeland was "ahead of her time" and that she pushed the evolution of exhibition display into what we know today.[18] For example, in *The Glory of Russian Costume*, three consulting curators from Russia, or the Soviet Union at the time, worked with Vreeland and Stella Blum, curator at the Costume Institute, on the exhibition. At this time form mannequins - the headless malleable mannequins you often see at dressmakers - were used in the Soviet Union but Vreeland insisted on full-bodied blood red mannequins with green and blue Dynel braids.[19] While the hair was quickly vetoed, she did indeed have her red mannequins, undoubtedly referring to the red five-pointed star, a strong Soviet symbol adopted from Russian

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[16] Victoria Robinson, "Vintage Perfume: Chanel's Cuire de la Russie," *Suit101*, http://www.suite101.com/content/chanels-cuir-de-russie-the-story-of-a-scent-a140311 (accessed 24 Oct. 2010).
[17] Jane Mulvagh, *Vogue History of 20th Century Fashion* (London: Viking, 1988), 63.
[18] Steele, "Museum Quality," 14.
[19] George W.S. Trow and Natacha Stewart, "Talk Comment," The New Yorker (Decmber 20th 1976): 27.

history. The exhibit focused on all social levels of Russian dress from the 1700s until the 1900s. This kind of underlining symbolism was not often seen in art exhibits, let alone costume exhibitions. Harold Koda suggests that while stylistic additions were interpreted too literally during Vreeland's lifetime, the contemporary museum visitor is far more visual and in need of less explanation than before, a theory supported by Steele.[20]

The seventies and eighties witnessed the birth of the curator as artist and Vreeland was quick on bringing that style to costume exhibitions. Coming from the fast paced world of editing and fashion magazines, she understood how the culture of fashion was as important as and arguably more attractive than the clothing itself. She also knew that the human body and other exterior factors are necessary in completing a dress. Steele notes that "if fashion is a 'living' phenomenon – contemporary, constantly changing, etc. – then a museum of fashion is *ipso facto* a cemetery for 'dead' clothes".[21] Many 20th century designers have altered their tailoring styles in order to accommodate these external properties. For example, Charles Worth's studio had very bright lighting, assimilating daylight for his daytime dresses, while Yves Saint Laurent only worked on live models, a technique that has since become somewhat of a norm. Due to strict conservation policies within the museum space, live models and intense lighting are out of the question, leaving us with an antiquarian costume display of static mannequins in dimly lit rooms. While these factors could not be altered, Vreeland thought outside of the box and brought an exaggerated experience of fashion to the museum, a style that has since caught on internationally and evolved intellectually.

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[20] Steele, "Museum Quality," 14.
[21] Valerie Steele, "A Museum of Fashion is more than a Clothes-Bag," in Fashion Theory 2, no. 4 (December 1998): 334.

When the *Vreelandesque* style first emerged, an influx of fashion exhibitions took place over the following twenty years, particularly in art institutions. With the flash of some money, designers attempted to push the boundaries and see just how far museums would allow them to go. The Costume Institute's 1983 show *Yves Saint Laurent 25 Years of Design* was the first exhibition on a living designer and the trigger for this influx of blockbuster fashion exhibitions, and the widespread academic debate on the cultural, artistic and museological authenticity and integrity these types of shows challenged. Because of the controversy it caused, the Metropolitan banned shows on living designers, although what ensued were historical designer exhibitions co-organized and sponsored by the current designer of the couture house and including items from the contemporary collections. These blockbuster exhibitions forced museologists and academics to questions the boundaries between education and entertainment in the museum space. There was obviously a need to find a comfortable union between the two in order to save the museum from corporate ownership while enticing the crowds these shows attracted. A more detailed discussion on sponsorship will come later, but what should be underlined here is that while designer shows became slightly too corporate in the last two decades of the 20th century, brought on undoubtedly by Diana Vreeland's whimsical treatment of historical fashion, they laid the groundwork for and instigated scholars to organize shows that would be aesthetically appealing, while remaining true to the civic and cultural duties of a museum.[22] Interestingly, however, the recent conception of dress history places fashion in an ambiguous position within the departmental structure of a museum. This is

[22] Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010), i.
For more on the corporate ownership of museums at the end of the 20th century, see Paul Werner, *Museum, Inc: Inside the Global Art World* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2005).

where fashion, similar to other contemporary non-traditional art forms, stands alone museologically; a lack of formal categorization enables these art forms to develop within multiple fields.

By the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century, it became clear that museums were undergoing serious changes once again. Audiences became increasingly difficult to attract and so museums began branching out of their historical mandate to include new disciplines or focus more resources on older ones. Costume is one of those disciplines that attract large crowds, predominantly when it includes contemporary dress, but it is also one of the most expensive departments to establish and maintain. Museums that house dress collections often acquired them when the museum was first established and this is most often in human history museums. It is rare for these museums, or the few devoted strictly to dress, to travel their exhibitions or collections because of high costs, excessive use of museum resources, constant exposure to light and other harmful conditions. With the rise in popularity of dress exhibitions, art museums have been hosting shows that have traveled from designer archives and foundations. The curators of these collections target art institutions in particular in an attempt at glorifying the designer and the couture house. What has ended up happening is the establishment of fashion as art in art institutions and fashion as material evidence in human history museums, especially when focusing on 20th century dress. Naturally, fashion as material culture can lead to a more antiquarian exhibition, almost ethnographic in display, particularly when they are competing with art institutions supported by corporate fashion houses. Both approaches, however, are essential in the development of dress history yet

audience and corporate support is significantly inclined towards fashion as art, problematically for historically based dress collections.

Canadian Dress Collections and Exhibitions

This is particularly the case in Canada, as there are a small handful of costume collections in human history museums but not a single one in an art museum. As textiles have a longer and more established museological history, they are more commonly found than dress in museums internationally. Canada is not an exception to this rule. While there are several museums with textile collections, only a few museums have costume, and fewer still have 20th century dress. Those that do rarely have their own galleries, nor are they devoted to its development, maintenance and presentation. The exceptions are the Royal Ontario Museum, the McCord Museum of Canadian History, the Costume Museum of Canada, the Textile Museum of Canada, The Bata Shoe Museum and the Musée du Costume et du Textile du Québec. The Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull and the Musée de la Civilization in Quebec City have small 20th century costume collections but do not have a department devoted to them. The Textile Museum of Canada is ethnologically focused and collects predominantly rural or ceremonial clothing. Their interest is far more related to the textiles than the costume itself. The Bata Shoe Museum, although world class, only collects shoes and the Costume Museum of Canada and the Musée du Costume et du Textile du Québec have not had the funding and specialized staff to host any major exhibitions or document their collections professionally. We are left with the Patricia Harris Gallery of Textiles and Costume at the Royal Ontario Museum and the McCord's Costume and Textiles department, two world class collections that are extensively researched and documented, run by two leading

international dress historians, Alexandra Palmer from the ROM and Cynthia Cooper from the McCord.

The McCord and the ROM are, arguably, the only two Canadian museums with 20th century costume collections that have been able to move beyond the antiquarian displays Vreeland freed New York from in the late seventies. There have been a handful of exhibitions that travelled to Canadian fine art museums from larger institutions, which often have bigger budgets to work with and can, in effect, organize blockbuster shows. These include *Pierre Cardin: Past Present Future* from the Victoria , *Yves Saint Laurent, Style* from the Fondations Pierre Bergé-Yves Saint Laurent in Paris and *Golden Age of Couture: Paris London 1947-1957,* also from the V&A. While these exhibitions were not conceived in Canada, they have raised the public standard on what should be expected aesthetically from a fashion exhibition and, therefore, they play an important role in the development of dress display in Canadian museums. As Vreeland famously said, "the trouble with this country is that they want to give the public what it wants. Well, the public wants what it can get, and it's up to the museum to teach them what to want".[23] That being said, the entertaining quality of fashion is there, albeit expensive to display; it is the educational component that museums should feel obliged to convey. Beyond a general lack of costume collections, Palmer notes that Canadian dress exhibitions are rarely accompanied by publications, although those that are "have contributed to the seminal documentation and analysis of historical Canadian dress".[24] Palmer similarly

[23] Dwight, 85.
[24] Alexandra Palmer, "Introduction," in *Fashion: A Canadian Perspective*, ed. Alexandra Palmer (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 5. This text also includes a detailed list of Canadian collections, exhibitions and publications on dress.

notes that Canadian collections and exhibitions have to be criticized subjectively as "Canada's not the US, it's not New York; nothing is New York".[25]

Despite its minimal resources, Canada has had several groundbreaking exhibitions. In fact, under Cynthia Cooper's curatorial eye, the McCord Museum has won the Richard Martin Award for Excellence in the Exhibition of Costume twice: in 2003 for *Clothes Make the MAN* and then again in 2009 for *Reveal or Conceal?* This prestigious award has never been won more than once, as the McCord proudly announces in a press release. "No other museum in Canada has won it. No other museum in the world has won it twice – not even the Metropolitan Museum of Art!"[26] When asked about the balancing act as a history museum organizing costume exhibitions in a city where an art museum has also been known to host shows, Cooper notes that her "quest here at the McCord is to reconcile costume in history museums. […] Fine art museums may have something to learn from what we are doing".[27]

Both design and fine art museums have models that costume can easily fit into. History museums, Cooper argues, are inventing them as they go.[28] *Yves Saint Laurent, Style,* conceived in 2008 by the Fondations Pierre Bergé –Yves Saint Laurent (YSL) in partnership with the Fine Art Museum of San Francisco and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts - was a glamorous show, boasting over one hundred and fifty costumed mannequins, with a selection of five YSL illustrations, a looping video of a fashion show

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[25] Alexandra Palmer, personal interview with the author, Toronto, ON, August 25th, 2010.
[26] McCord Museum, "Reveal or Conceal! Wins Prestigious International Exhibition Award," press release (June 11th, 2009): accessed October 6th 2010, www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/pdf/PR/PR_Prix_**Richard**_**Martin**_EN.pdf.
[27] Cynthia Cooper, telephone interview with author, October 12th, 2010.
[28] Cooper, telephone interview with author

and a documentary on the designer. Naturally, the conception of this show was treated art historically, glorifying the designer as genius. According to Diane Charbonneau, curator of Contemporary Decorative Arts at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and host curator for *Yves Saint Laurent, Style*, the show received only positive criticism, based mainly on aesthetic value.[29] While that is fine, a show that does not receive criticism, in some form or another, generally means an audience without something to debate. The YSL show was organized traditionally. It was relatively chronological, although it was primarily divided up thematically based on several of YSL's hallmark styles and famous collections. While it was the first retrospective spanning his entire forty year career and even though a third of the pieces had never before been exhibited, the content itself was factual and did not explore any underlining issues that would have brought it from a merely aesthetic exhibition to one which added to the scholarship of dress history.

It should, however, be given credit as there have only been a few fashion exhibitions in Canada focusing on one particular designer. The first of which was *Pierre Cardin: past present future,* which travelled to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in the Spring of 1991. Assuming the Canadian audience would not have had exposure to haute couture exhibitions, *Yves Saint Laurent, Style* was very informative about the designer's life, achievements and feats in fashion history, and, through his work, the show broadly introduced haute couture beyond its Hollywood glitz. Including sections devoted to art and fashion, non-western influences on designs, gender interpretations and sketchwork, *Yves Saint Laurent, Style* incorporated pertinent and common subjects explored through 20th century couture. *Pierre Cardin: past present future*, was a chronological look at each

[29] Diane Charbonneau, telephone interview with author, October 7th, 2010.

decade of Cardin's career from 1950 to 1990 with a final room devoted to his evening wear and ball gowns. Both exhibitions were retrospectives, the differences lay mainly in the style of each designer. The nature of Yves Saint Laurent's work is telling of the changing times and, in effect, are comprehensive examples for haute couture as a whole.

Following the success of *Yves Saint Laurent, Style*, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA) has continued to host fashion exhibitions, one in 2010 entitled *Denis Gagnon Shows All* and another in 2011 entitled *The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk*, both of which are one-man shows. Suzy Menkes, acclaimed fashion reporter for over twenty years at the International Herald Tribune, adequately stated in 2007 that "maybe it is time to go back to the historical approach and dare to be didactic, so that museum fashion is less of a designer love fest and more a learning curve".[30] Similarly, Mark Federman notes that "fashion exhibits in art museums allow designers to remake their histories".[31] Because of the recent interest in the scholarship of fashion, biographies and one-man shows have been very popular, however, as several scholars have suggested, perhaps it is time to move on and create more of a dialogue and debate in the field. This trend has begun in many of the leading fashion cities. At The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), for example, there is currently a show entitled *Japan Fashion Now* (2010-2011) where the influence of 1980s Japanese fashion on Western dress is analyzed. While the Royal Ontario Museum and the McCord Museum have made great strides in the development of Canadian

[30] Suzy Menkes, "Museum Integrity vs. Designer Control," in the International Herald Tribune (26th February 2007): 9-10.
[31] Mark Federman, "McLuhan Lectures 2005 – June 8 – Alexandra Palmer – Fashion," *What is the (Next) Message? Blog*: accessed November 2, 2010, http://whatisthemessage.blogspot.com/2005/07/mcluhan-lectures-2005-june-8-alexandra.html.

fashion exhibitions, fine art museums have the potential to exhibit an entirely different kind of show, one not being any better than the other but differing in perspective and furthering scholarship. There are no future fashion exhibitions on the MMFA's calendar as of yet, but it will be interesting to see if the museum will continue developing their new found interest in fashion or if this string of shows was simply a fabulous marketing strategy.[32]

The fine art inclusion of glamorous haute couture displays and one-man designer shows is what launched the 1970s interest in fashion exhibitions, beginning with Diana Vreeland's *The World of Balenciaga* (1973) and Cecil Beaton's *Fashion: An Anthology* (1971). Museums have since been searching for a comfortable middle ground where the entertaining and attractive quality of fashion can channel education and innovative research. Exhibitions of the kind have been increasingly common and successful in the 21st century. While the MMFA has yet to organize a fashion exhibition accompanied by innovative and progressive research, other Canadian museums have organized and hosted several shows on 20th century dress that have been both entertaining and educational. Palmer briefly describes several of these in the introduction to her book entitled *Fashion: A Canadian Perspective*, including *Modesty to Mod* , *Souffir pour Être Belle, Panache, 200 Years of the Fashionable Woman, Mode et Collection,* as well as *Au Courant: Contemporary Canadian Fashion*, alongside Cynthia Cooper's *Clothes Make the MAN*

[32] I would like to think that the recent showing of fashion exhibitions at the MMFA is very much thanks to current director Nathalie Bondil who has made great strides in modernizing the museum, however, without the development of a dress collection, the MMFA will never significantly contribute to the scholarship of dress history and I doubt such an acquisition will ever be made.

and *Reveal and Conceal*?[33] Two exhibitions will act as case studies for the rest of this thesis as they are representative of the modern fashion exhibition, balancing the need for education and entertainment. They are the ROM's *Elite Elegance: Couture Fashion in the 1900s*, and the V&A's traveling exhibition *Golden Age of Couture: Paris London 1947-1957* that was hosted at the MNBAQ. Coming from a human history and fine art museums respectively, they are comparative models and thus comprehensive examples of Canada's involvement and evolution in the 20th and 21st century trend of fashion exhibitions.

Elite Elegance: Couture Fashion in the 1950s

Alexandra Palmer curated *Elite Elegance*, which showed from November 2002 until May 2003. The exhibition is derived from her PhD research and is based almost entirely on the ROM's collection. Having worked on contract at the ROM prior to her doctoral studies, Palmer's knowledge of the collection initiated her research. Noticing an increasing amount of garments that had been altered throughout their lifetime, Palmer began questioning the popular association of female frivolity and haute couture as well as the belief that museums only collect pristine models.[34] Based largely on oral history, she met with and interviewed many Torontonian socialites, whose names she gathered from donor lists at the ROM. Subsequently, Palmer created strong relationships with these women and their families who were thrilled to have their stories documented. Once Palmer finished her dissertation and began working at the ROM, she brought with her many donated garments. Palmer notes that:

[33] Alexandra Palmer, "Introduction," 5.
[34] Alexandra Palmer, *Couture & Commerce: The Transatlantic Fashion Trade in the 1950s* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2001): 5.

> It may not be the most ravishing example of haute couture - it's not a fine art collection in that way, neither is the ROM a fine art museum - I think I can fairly confidently say that it is the best documented anywhere, in terms of a cohesive collection of haute couture.[35]

Based on her dissertation research and the exhibition, Palmer published a book entitled *Couture & Commerce: The Transatlantic Fashion Trade in the 1950s*, although it is very much an entity of its own and not an exhibition catalogue. In it, Palmer documents "the mid-century couture trade in Toronto" investigating "this fascinating era of haute couture and the lifestyles of those who wore the clothes".[36] The exhibition *Elite Elegance*, similarly, was as much about the lifestyle that accompanied Canadian haute couture as it was about the clothing itself.

> Within the story line I wanted to select a range of garments by the great couturiers represented in the ROM collection, as well the women who donated them and who were the leading socialites—in effect, the dresses represented the women themselves.[37]

Brilliantly organized, Palmer managed to incorporate the glamour of haute couture within a sociocultural context, factually building on an unexplored portion of Canadian dress history while stimulating the viewer by conveying the humanitarian experience of fashion. She did this largely through the use of supplementary material, which will be investigated shortly. Moreover, Palmer explored the technical aspect of haute couture, teaching the public about dressmaking, textiles and tailoring and focusing on the techniques different designers would use, eventually becoming their trademarks. All the while, she treated the clothing as museological artifacts, explaining, through photographs

[35] Palmer, personal interview with the author
[36] Palmer, *Couture & Commerce*, 12.
[37] Alexandra Palmer, "Untouchable: Creating Desire and Knowledge in Museum Costume and Textile Exhibitions," Fashion Theory 12, no.1 (March 2008): 22.

and text panels, issues of conservation and the process of montage, which, Palmer notes, the viewers were equally interested in.[38]

Very well aware that her exhibition would be compared to "the latest retail emporiums," the display was particularly tasteful in a minimalist, elegant manner.[39] The exhibition was broadly divided into two sections, with subdivisions. It began by introducing the audience to Dior's New Look, the epitome of 1950s fashion, with an adjoining section on the Paris atelier. The second half of the exhibition was more of a socio-cultural analysis of the clothing, analyzing where the designs were worn and what that information imparts about upper class Torontonian women of the fifties. Walking into the exhibit, the first gallery unveils the modest eloquence of the show with just one example of a Dior evening gown from his second collection in 1947 (fig.1). The only other object in the room is an extremely large gold-framed black and white photograph leaning against the wall. The image is of a model wearing the same dress that is on display, with slight discrepancies in style. While the model is wearing a strapless gown and most likely a size zero, the Canadian example is approximately a size ten and has been altered to cover one shoulder, often referred to as the "cold shoulder" look, appealing to a more modest and practical clientele. The juxtaposition of the image and the gown immediately highlights the difference between Canadian and European fashions, a recurring theme throughout the show. The eloquent simplicity of the room is further achieved through the matching tones in the dress and the room colour. The gown is in coral pink with a crimson train; while the wall is also two toned, the shades are slightly darker.

[38] Palmer, "Untouchable," 52.
[39] Palmer, "Untouchable," 50.

After being introduced to one haute couture Dior gown from 1947, Palmer then leads the viewer through a hallway with displays on both the right and left hand sides that emphasize the structure and technique of the 1950s New Look (fig. 2 & 3). Decorated almost like an atelier, with bamboo flooring, ceiling height wainscoting and folding room dividers, some of the items were on simple dress forms while others lay on wooden tables and a chair. The right hand exhibit displayed the various parts of four different dresses, one Balenciaga and three Dior designs. A couple of the forms displayed the bodices of two gowns while another was adorned in a sarong style skirt. On the table lay examples of the 1950s use "of inner corsetry, multiple petticoats, and padding".[40] The left hand exhibit displayed examples of "*toiles*, designs made up in muslin and *patrons à papiers*, paper patterns".[41] In North America there was a far larger market for bonded models of haute couture designs than there was for the originals themselves. The bonded models were reproductions copied exactly from the designs and patterns of the couture house but sold at a far more affordable price. The practice of replicating couture designs and selling them off the rack would eventually lead to the production of ready-to-wear couture clothing.[42] Palmer was the first and only dress historian to study this phenomenon in Canada and its display is one-of-a-kind. The exhibit included one form, dressed in a muslin toile of a Jeanne Lanvin-Castillo's *Borghese* from 1958 (fig. 3). Muslin is made of a plain cotton weave, which, in this case, acted as an example of what the final product

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[40] Museum label for Yves Saint Laurent for Christian Dior, Allegro, Toronto, Royal Ontario Museum, *Elite Elegance: Couture Fashion in the 1900s*, curated by Alexandra Palmer, 23 November 2002 – 4 May 2003.

[41] Palmer, *Couture & Commerce*, 135.
For a comprehensive description of the history and practice of reproducing haute couture, see Alexandra Palmer's *Couture & Commerce*.

[42] Palmer, *Couture & Commerce*, 135.

should look like, minus the desired fabric and detailing. Inside this model are "swatches of the interlinings, linings, and orange damask from which the original model was made".[43] While the interior of this coat was not visible, a label including several photographs accompanied it (fig. 4). On the table lay another example of a Jeanne Lanvin-Castillo toile for his design called *Jessica,* also from 1958, but this one was open, revealing the swatches and the original black wool the coat was made of. Alongside the toile lay a "nine-piece paper pattern for a late 1950s winter coat called *Croisière*, by Christian Dior".[44] Construction and technique is what makes haute couture stand apart from other dressmaking, and, arguably, what makes it museum worthy. It is often, however, overlooked in exhibitions as it is not particularly aesthetically pleasing or attention grabbing. In the first half of the exhibition, Palmer managed to introduce the basics of dressmaking in a very coherent and engaging way, effectively educating the audience with just enough information before she launched them into the rest of the exhibition where over sixty mannequins and a selection of accessories awaited the viewer.

The second half of the exhibit was devoted to examples of Canadian-owned haute couture and the lifestyles led by the women who wore them. It began with an example of pre and post war designs, one by the acclaimed French wartime designer Robert Piguet and the other an example of Christian Dior's "New Look" (fig. 5). Once the two styles were introduced, Palmer then unveils the Torontonian female socialite from the fifties, beginning with an example of a wedding gown, as that would often be "the moment when

[43] Palmer, *Couture & Commerce*, 136.
[44] Museum label for Christian Dior, Croisière, Toronto, Royal Ontario Museum, *Elite Elegance: Couture Fashion in the 1900s*, curated by Alexandra Palmer, 23 November 2002 – 4 May 2003.

women began to wear couture" (fig. 6).[45] The rest of the exhibition had an emphasis on the wearer, a story that accompanied the clothes. Following the wedding dress, there was a section on suits and coats, entitled "Meetings, Luncheons, and Teas" (fig. 7). The extensive labeling system included a short description about either the designer or the wearer and a quote suitable for the item pulled from newspapers, fashion magazines and etiquette books. Boasting examples of Balenciaga's trademark collars, Madame Grès' perfection in cutting and draping, Chanel's use of knit jersey and loose woven wool, and Jacques Fath's detailing and adaptation of men's tailoring in women's clothing, other examples showcased appropriate wear for air travel, second marriages, and how certain popular styles in the early post-war years were sought after in lieu of Dior's New Look. In the backdrop, a film vignette of suits and coats animated the static forms on display.

A small section devoted to the exclusive relationship between the Canadian high-end department store Holt Renfrew and Christian Dior followed "Meetings, Luncheons and Teas" and included six forms (fig. 8). A small television screened the CBC footage from when Dior came to Canada and a window display to the right of the dresses showcased photographs "and gifts from Christian Dior to Alvin Walker, the President of Holt Renfrew, as well as [Alvin Walker's] medal of the Legion d'Honneur".[46] In 1951, Walker approached Dior with a business proposal: if Dior would sign over exclusive Canadian purchasing rights of all Dior designs, the department store, in return, would guarantee "annual minimum sales".[47] Walker's support of Dior and success in

[45] Palmer, "Untouchable," 51.
[46] Palmer, "Untouchable," 52.
[47] Palmer, *Couture & Commerce*, 119.

maintaining the designer's prestige amongst Canadian clientele gained him knighthood in France with the Legion d'Honneur.[48]

The following section was titled "After Five" and was divided on either side of the room (fig. 9 & 10). On the right hand side, four little black dresses were displayed and the left was a more colourful selection of cocktail wear. This separation, again, was a commentary on the lifestyles these women led. Come cocktail hour, a woman would have to be properly dressed for the evening, however, if they had an event afterwards, their dress would have to be equally appropriate. The little black dress would generally be the safest bet, although *Vogue* 1951, would disagree as the magazine was quoted on one of the exhibition labels for a Pierre Balmain ball gown:

> You think black is safe? It can be heady stuff. If you choose it just to be safe – don't! Black, worn by the knowing Woman in Black, can be her most!!! costume. It takes serious wearing.[49]

With her extensive labeling, Palmer endeared the audience to the clothing by including anecdotes from nights the clothing was worn. For example, on the label for a black 1956 Balenciaga cocktail dress, Palmer wrote of how the owner, Rose Torno, wore it "to a dinner-dance on shipboard where her partner's vigor caused the delicate lace to tear at the back. It was beautifully mended by her maid".[50] Alongside the text there is an up-close photograph of the mended area (fig. 11). Palmer's technique of including detailed

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[48] Palmer, *Couture & Commerce*, 120.
[49] Museum label for Pierre Balmain, Untitled, Toronto, Royal Ontario Museum, *Elite Elegance: Couture Fashion in the 1900s*, curated by Alexandra Palmer, 23 November 2002 – 4 May 2003.
[50] Museum label for Balenciaga, Untitled, Toronto, Royal Ontario Museum, *Elite Elegance: Couture Fashion in the 1900s*, curated by Alexandra Palmer, 23 November 2002 – 4 May 2003.

photographs of the fabric and interior parts of the garment imparts information about the technical processes of dressmaking while not exhausting the audience with lengthy technical descriptions. This is probably the most successful part of the exhibition. Palmer notes: "no one can see inside, visitors never see inside of anything in a museums [yet] all the insides of things and all the details of things are what make you feel good in them and what makes the clothes the way they are, so perfect".[51]

The last section entitled "Grand Occasions" included the most amount of personal information about the wearer, where she bought it, where it was worn and the alterations that were made (fig. 12). There are only three instances where the owners are not mentioned in the labels, but their Canadian connection was either very relevant or they were exemplary models created by designers popular in Canada. Naturally, it is easier to trace the history of a ball gown than of a cocktail dress, suit or coat as they are often bought for one particular occasion and if worn multiple times, the events tend to be memorable. These histories, most of which Palmer gathered through interviews with the wearers themselves or their families, offer personal insight into the consumption of haute couture in Canada. Palmer notes that it would be rare for her to acquire an haute couture piece today since gathering personal stories associated with the items is not really possible anymore. "It is kind of a closed book now," she explained, "because it's out of their hands, it's an age thing".[52]

The only other costume collection in Canada that places as much importance on the provenance of their artifacts is the McCord Museum, which does not, in fact, have an

[51] Palmer, personal interview with the author.
[52] Palmer, personal interview with the author.

acquisition budget, and will only accept donations that have an accompanying story with Canadian roots. This is largely what makes both the McCord and the ROM the only two Canadian museums with such strong costume departments. Palmer's ability to bring life back into these clothes is partly due to the personal stories she has gathered as well as her incorporation of supplementary material such as film and quotations, a technique proposed early in the 20th century with the development of costume exhibitions. What makes *Elite Elegance* an exceptional example of a successful modern fashion exhibition is that she conveyed the luxurious experience of fashion, imparted the necessary historical facts and dressmaking techniques, while developing scholarship in the field of dress history. *Elite Elegance* was at the cutting-edge of fashion exhibitions at the turn of the twentieth century and groundbreaking in Canada. Unfortunately, as Palmer stated, "most of my colleagues didn't see it, in fact, pretty much all of them," and so it has received little to no attention.[53] It would be fair to say, however, that it was the first Canadian fashion exhibition that escaped the tropes of antiquarianism, followed immediately after by Cooper's *Clothes Make the MAN.*

Golden Age of Couture: London Paris 1947-1957

Due to the absence of costume collections in Canadian fine art museums, there have been few 20th century fashion exhibitions, and fewer still that successfully balanced the entertaining and educational quality museums should foster. In the winter of 2010, from the 4th of February through to the 24th of April, the Musée National des Beaux-Arts

[53] Palmer, personal interview with the author.
The most likely reason for Palmer's colleagues' lack of attendance was that Canada had never produced a fashion exhibition that added to any dress scholarship prior to *Elite Elegance*.

de Québec (MNBAQ) hosted a 20th century couture exhibition that was a first of its kind in a Canadian fine art museum. *Golden Age of Couture*, curated by Claire Wilcox, senior curator of twentieth-century and contemporary fashion at the V&A, has been traveling since it left London in January 2008. From the V&A it traveled to the Bendigo Art Gallery in Bendigo, Australia, after which it was exhibited at the Hong Kong Heritage Museum in Hong Kong, then the MNBAQ, and finally it came to a close at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville, Tennessee. The tour was planned to end at the Museum Sheffield, in Sheffield, England, a partner institution to the V&A, but because of budget cuts and the high costs of hosting a costume exhibit, it was cancelled.[54] *Golden Age of Couture* made it to four continents and was exhibited for a total of sixteen months, an incredibly long distance to travel and amount of time for a costume exhibit to be on display. Perhaps the fact that the exhibition marks the sixtieth anniversary of Dior's "New Look" is partly why it traveled so far, although the distance and frequency with which it has been exhibited is nearly exclusive to the V&A. The museum has a long history of traveling exhibitions and is one of the few museums with a costume department that actively tours both its collection and its shows as costume is one of the most demanding museological objects to collect, let alone exhibit and tour. The only other institution that has significantly traveled their collection is The Kyoto Costume Institute, however, the frequency at which exhibitions are organized is far less than the V&A.

[54] "Top Fashion Exhibition Takes the Impact of Cuts," *Sheffield Telegraph*, October 7th 2010, accessed July 8th 2011, http://www.sheffieldtelegraph.co.uk/news/local/top_fashion_exhibition_takes_the_impact_of_cuts_1_1890803.

The V&A was founded in 1852 after the success of the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace the year before. Originally named the Museum of Manufactures in Malborough House at the Mall, it moved to its current location and was renamed the South Kensington Museum in 1857. In 1899, a new building was added, which would include the main façade and entrance, and was renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum, in memory of the Queen and Prince's lifelong devotion to the museum.[55] The first directors, Sir Henry Cole and Richard Redgrave, were interested in fabrics, the former believing it to be "examples of 'worthy' manufactures" while the later was "passionately involved with exposing the iniquities of the sweated dressmaking trades". Inevitably, "elegant dress" was not collected at this point in history, although textiles were and there was a general interest in dress, which laid the foundation stones for the future collection.[56] The South Kensington Museum developed largely on the premise that a design museum could educate the working class and "inspire British designers and manufacturers".[57] The impact of the industrial revolution and how it was going to change art and design was obvious and the British were intent on leading the world towards the future. In order to fulfill such a mandate, they traveled their collection spreading national knowledge and earning international acclaim. For the first half of the century, however, they only toured small display cases exhibiting inexpensive artifacts, such as ceramics

[55] The Victoria & Albert Museum, "A Brief History of the Museum": accessed November 16th 2010, http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/periods_styles/features/history/brief_history/index.html.
[56] Taylor, *Establishing Dress History*, 108.
[57] The Victoria & Albert Museum, "A Brief History of the Museum"

and textiles.[58] The second half of the century is when the V&A witnessed great changes to their mandate, developing into the world's leading 20th century design museum it is today. Peter Floud, director of the Circulation Department from 1947 to 1960, lobbied for larger traveling exhibitions and a focus on 19th and 20th century acquisitions. Costume was still not actively collected at this time as it "was deemed too wide a field to collect and too difficult to display."[59] There was one large donation as early as 1913, however, which was accompanied by the museum's first costume catalogue.[60]

The Isham collection, which is made up of Talbot Hughe's private collection, the English genre painter from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, was donated by Harrods department store. Interestingly, Harrods offered the museum articles from its contemporary collection at the same time, but were turned down, as modern items were not yet collected.[61] It was a very early marketing strategy on Harrods' part, who, nonetheless, organized an exhibition of the collection, which took place before it was handed over to the museum and included contemporary designs.[62] This sponsorship technique, very much a part of fashion exhibitions today, I will discuss further on.

It was only in 1975 that the V&A's mandate on costume significantly changed. The new director, Roy Strong, closed the Circulation Department and allocated a large

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[58] Christopher Wilk, "Collecting the Twentieth Century," *A Grand Design: the history of the Victoria and Albert Museum:* accessed November 16th 2010, http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1159_grand_design/essay-collecting-the_new.html.
[59] Wilk.
[60] Taylor, *Establishing Dress History*, 114.
[61] Ironically, the year following this offer, the museum's policy changed, accepting a few examples of 'modern craft and manufactures'.
For more on the Isham collection and donation see Taylor, *Establishing Dress History*, 114-119.
[62] Taylor, *Establishing Dress History*, 116.

budget for the acquisition of artifacts made after 1920. "In 1979, after well over a hundred years of exclusion, the name of the Textile Department was finally 'at last changed to include dress.'"[63] Since then, the V&A has been the model for balancing the educational and entertaining quality of fashion exhibition. They have been the leaders in the field of dress history, employing some of the most respected dress historians, generating a large number of publications through their Research Department, and organizing groundbreaking exhibitions made accessible to a far wider audience than any other costume museum because of the large amount of resources allocated to media, such as exhibition websites, and their devotion to traveling exhibitions. *Golden Age of Couture*, for example, is not the first modern fashion exhibition to offer a retrospective of couture in the glamorous fifties as we saw with *Elite Elegance.* There have also been many designer retrospectives on couturiers who designed throughout the Golden Age, inevitably becoming the focus of the exhibition. But the fact that *Golden Age of Couture* traveled so extensively and touched upon so many relevant themes of couture makes it a comprehensive model of the modern fashion exhibition.

Golden Age of Couture was a particularly large exhibition, boasting more than one hundred dresses and at least a hundred more accessories, photographs and other supplementary material. At the MNBAQ, the exhibition was broadly divided into three main galleries. The first was an introduction to the Golden Age and the world of couture, the following was a look at fashion photography and cocktail dresses and the final gallery was devoted to ball gowns and Dior's legacy, which consisted of an ensemble by John Galliano, the contemporary head designer of the couture house. The first gallery included

[63] Taylor, *Establishing Dress History*, 122.

the most information, separated into fifteen subdivisions displayed in their own cases or on their own platforms. The exhibition begins with a brief introduction to the Golden Age with two examples of tailoring, a Dior from Paris and a Donéllan from London (fig.13). The premise of the exhibition is set: 1950s couture from two leading yet rivaling fashion cities. The "controversial pretext" of *Golden Age of Couture* has been emphasized as an attempt at placing "London couture from the 'Golden Era' on par with that of Paris".[64]

The exhibition continues with a section entitled "Post-War designs and the Théâtre de la Mode" consisting of four dolls adorned in post-war Paris couture. As haute couture had lost its international visibility during the war, the Chambre Syndicale organized an exhibition of over 200 dolls dressed in French designs, an attempt at reinvigorating the interest in haute couture. This exhibition was called the Théâtre de la Mode and travelled throughout Europe and then to New York and San Francisco (fig.14).[65] They remain very popular objects, owned by the Maryhill Museum of Art in Washington, travelling internationally, several at a time.

The following section consisted of eight examples of the New Look, five by Dior and three by the London couturier Hardy Amies. These three sections constituted the first gallery at the V&A but were grouped together with several other themes at the MNBAQ. Separated into eleven display cases in displays and one larger open aired platform, the

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[64] Shine Anthony-Dharan, "The Golden Age of Couture: Paris and London 1947-1957," Cultural Kiosk: The European Magazine of Arts, Culture and Ideas Worldwide (6 January 2008): accessed November 17, 2010, http://www.culturekiosque.com/art/exhibiti/couture115.html.

[65] Claire Wilcox, "Dior's Golden Age: the Renaissance of Couture," in the *Golden Age of Couture: Paris and London 1947-1957*, ed. Claire Wilcox (London: V&A Publications, 2007), 37.

section entitled "The World of Couture" shared the space of the first gallery. The eleven displays were thematically divided and included: 'London tailoring', 'Paris dressmaking', embroidery, textiles, ready-to-wear, 'Lady Alexandra, a couture client', Zémire, Underwear, Balenciaga, 'Boutique and accessories' and Miss Virginia Lachasse. The amount of technical and theoretical information included in this section is truly astounding: from how undergarments were constructed and often built into the actual garment; to how "textile manufacturers exerted a powerful influence on the output of fashion houses"; how the use of embroidery would significantly alter the value and design of a dress; the economic importance of accessory and perfume licensing for the survival of couture; and examples of ready-to-wear fashion in all its manifestations, including lines made by the couture house, bonded models and copies made from a toile, which Palmer examined in *Elite Elegance*.[66] Moreover, the use of oral histories not only offered a firsthand sociological account of commissioning and acquiring couture in the fifties, but it also described how it felt to wear these intricately made clothes. The interviews were with several women who had a firsthand experience with couture houses as well as other contemporaries who worked closely with designers including the likes of Princess Galitzine, Lady Alexandra and Percy Savage, among others. Once the groundwork was laid for a general appreciation of couture both aesthetically and technically, the audience was introduced to eighteen examples of tailored ensembles made by leading French and English designers, including Cristóbal Balciaga, Coco Chanel, Christian Dior, Hubert de Givenchy, Jean Dessès, Digby Morton, Charles Creed,

[66] "107. (42) Cavanagh. Evening dress. (No.48)" The Victoria and Albert Museum, Transcribed Audio Guide for *The Golden Age of Couture: Paris and London 1947-1957*, pg. 8.

Ronald Paterson, Lachasse and Jacques Fath. While this gallery was very appealing and well designed, the V&A's design was far more creative, undoubtedly due to a higher budget and sponsorship from Dior. Each section in 'The World of Couture', except for tailoring which was in its own gallery, was in a similarly large rectangular display case but at the V&A they were covered with enormous black and white vinyl, printed with images of English and French architecture on the outside or room interiors on the inside. What was created were little thematic period rooms that placed the objects within an appropriate setting. For example, in the embroidery display case, the backdrop was of a workshop, while in the section entitled 'Lady Alexandra, a couture client', the setting would appear to be a woman's dressing room. The section on 'Paris dressmaking' was decorated on the outside and the inside with images of quintessential French architecture while Dior's Zémir gown is placed in a grandiose room surrounded by large staircases, a chandelier, high ceilings, intricate moldings and black and white tiled floors. The entire room, dimly lit, as all costume exhibitions must be, is washed over in the flickering images of Hollywood movies and fashion shows as well as blue and pink streaming lights, a style prevalent throughout the show.

The second gallery at the MNBAQ was devoted to 'photography and illustration' as well as 'Cocktail and Early Evening dresses'. The room design effectively enlivened both the garments and the photography through their juxtaposition. The photography was mounted along the walls on both sides of the room, while the dresses were in a large display case that split the gallery into two corridor shaped spaces. The static nature of the clothing was brought to life by the movement and setting in the photography while the ethereal two-dimensional world of fashion photography became tangible with the

presence of the dresses. Moreover, chairs were set up between the transparent display case and the photography, giving the audience the chance to absorb the display in its entirety. At the V&A, these two sections were separated into their own galleries, the paper work treated very much as its own entity in the fashion world rather than part of the entire experience. The dresses were in a display cabinet that lined one side of a long, narrow corridor, leaving little room for the audience to stop and appreciate the dresses. This section was far better designed at the MNBAQ than at the V&A and proved to be the biggest success for the show in Quebec City. During multiple visits, I noticed how audience members would sit in this gallery for the longest periods of time, taking in all the dresses and photography.

The final gallery consisted of twenty-eight gowns in ten display cases that were scattered throughout the room. The gallery was cramped between these awkwardly placed cases and the visitors making their way through the maze like space. Inside each display, the gowns were loosely organized by pattern or colour, a design suggested by the V&A that Paul Bourassa, host curator at the MNBAQ, was not fond of.[67] He would have preferred to see a sort of harmony created between differing colours and patterns. While most of the dresses were on simple black or white headless models there was one awkward life-like mannequin wearing an identical Givenchy cape to the one Audrey Hepburn wore in the 1957 classic film *Funny Face.* The headed mannequin was completed with perfectly coifed hair and makeup that looked eerily similar to Hepburn. There were, in fact, two life-like mannequins in the exhibition; the other was in gallery two, juxtaposed with a famous photograph by Richard Avedon (fig. 15 & 16). The

[67] Paul Bourassa, personal interview with author (author's transcription), August 27th, 2010.

mannequin was in the same pose as model Suzy Parker, wearing the same evening gown and adorned with a similar hairdo. Perhaps it is a matter of preference, but these life-like mannequins were the only part of the show where the antiquarian feeling of costume exhibitions resonated, almost like it would in a wax museum.

The MNBAQ was able to accommodate the entire exhibition, although some articles did not travel, most likely due to conservation purposes rather than space constraint.[68] The only exception is in the final section where the MNBAQ had one example of a contemporary Galliano while the V&A had three (Fig. 17). The one exhibited in Quebec was also a different example than the three in London; this difference, however, was a question of marketing, sponsorship and cost.

The techniques of organizing and displaying dress exhibitions have been a large part of dress scholarship since the turn of the nineteenth century but have significantly evolved and been proactively practiced since the late 1900s. Between working with corporate sponsorship, dealing with relevant issues involved with traveling dress exhibits, and by using appropriate supplementary educational and entertainment material to overcome the antiquarian feel of costume displays, *Golden Age of Couture* is the epitome of the 20th century fashion exhibition. With far more limited resources than the V&A, *Elite Elegance* similarly embodies the quintessential 20th century fashion exhibition as it copes with conservation and budget constraints so prevalent in the conception of costume exhibitions. It offered new scholarship to the field of dress history and used appropriate supplementary material in order to balance both education and entertainment. The high cost of costume exhibits, sponsorship, demanding levels of preservation and

[68] Bourassa, personal interview with author.

conservation, issues with traveling exhibits, overcoming the antiquarian costume display, using supplementary material and knowing your audience are all predominant characteristics of costume exhibitions that manifest and are treated differently by history and fine art institutions. These characteristics will now be discussed in two case studies: *Golden Age of Couture* and *Elite Elegance*.

On Sponsorship

As Viktor & Rolf stated, "the media breathes life into fashion" but in return money breathes life into the media, which is equally true for an art museum as it is for a fashion magazine. The names these institutions promote are often well established since a significant amount of money is required to compete. Dior, for example, funds a large amount of art exhibitions, including *Golden Age of Couture* and *Elite Elegance*, although they often prefer to be called promotional partners, a term that only seems to differentiate itself in legal fine print.

Paul Werner, art historian turned critic after years of museum work, stresses in his book "Museum, Inc. Inside the Global Art World" that it is time to face reality. To "…sweep away the barriers between what the museum was and what it claimed to be, between the charade of democracy and the reality of authority, between the fantasy that the museum stood above the free market and the reality that it was an integral part of it, between disinterested interest and interested interest".[69] Fashion museums are as interested in aligning themselves with the leading names in the industry as these companies are interested in reaping the benefits of a museum's social and cultural prosperity. One of the earliest cases in dress history where a business attempted to use the

[69] Werner, 24

museum space as a marketing tool was with Harrod's donation of Talbot Hughes' private collection, discussed earlier on. While the English department store offered to include a selection of contemporary designs, the proposal was quickly declined by the museum to the great dismay of future dress historians. Harrod's nonetheless hosted an exhibition of the collection before handing it over to the V&A where they did include a section on popular dress.[70]

As historians have learned the value of collecting and studying contemporary dress, museums have increasingly partnered with design houses and department stores to host exhibitions, although these partnerships have often been received negatively by the public and press. While the collaborations continue, museums have been far more careful with how these relationships are perceived. The Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is a perfect example of this. Their annual gala, which began in 1948, is known as The Party of Year and marks the opening of their spring bi-annual exhibition. The event is organized by a board whose members are mostly industry officials and the guest list is selective. Anna Wintour, editor-in-chief of Vogue since 1988, has co-chaired the event for eight years, and the list of her partners are equally impressive, including Oprah Winfrey, Nicole Kidman, Stella McCartney, Marc Jacobs, Kate Moss and Justin Timberlake.[71] The mutual benefits of this event are clear – firstly, it is The Costume Institute's primary form of fund-raising, making up a large part of its private operating budget. Secondly, the media this event attracts is positive for both the

[70] For more information on the donation of Talbot Hughes' private collection to the V&A, see Taylor, *Establishing Dress History*, 116.
[71] Melissa Whitworth, "Countdown to the Met Ball 2011", The Telegraph, April 28th 2011, accessed July 8th 2011, http://fashion.telegraph.co.uk/news-features/TMG8479245/Countdown-to-the-Met-Ball-2011.html.

museum and the designers, the latter being portrayed as cultured and beyond the frivolous stereotypes often attributed to fashion and the former deemed impressive enough to attract the leading fashionistas of the world. Moreover, this form of sponsorship can hide under the radar of art critics and the public who may criticize corporate sponsored exhibitions as being cultural sellouts, after all, the argument would go, how could the subject of an exhibition also be an objective sponsor? The famous situation with the Chanel exhibition at The Costume Institute in 1999 is an example of how the artistic vision of designer and curator clashed, resulting in a six-year postponement of the show. Karl Lagerfeld, known to have a particularly strong artistic voice, was not interested in a historical exhibition, but he rather wanted to see original Chanel's juxtaposed alongside contemporary artists.[72] Neither curator nor designer wanted to back down until the unfortunate and untimely death of Richard Martin, curator of The Costume Institute, resulted in the indefinite postponement of the show. A substantial donation was immediately pulled by Chanel, inevitably resulting in negative press towards both the museum and the designer, an unfortunate situation considering how careful The Costume Institute had been with their chosen partnerships after the YSL situation in '83.[73] A Chanel exhibition did take place in 2005, again, to the negative criticism of the press. Lagerfeld's contemporary designs were juxtaposed alongside originals, live bait for a case against corporate sponsorship and thematic influence. As Steele duly notes, however, "one could hardly expect Dior to fund a Chanel exhibition!"[74]

[72] Steele, "Museum Quality," 17.
[73] Steele, "Museum Quality," 17.
[74] Steele, "Museum Quality," 13.

In many situations corporate sponsorship does work out. *AngloMania: Tradition and Transgression in British Fashion*, for example, took place at The Costume Institute in 2006. The exhibition boasted several examples of Vivienne Westwood and Alexander McQueen but was sponsored by Burberry, fittingly as the brand thrives on its British identity. In the case of *Golden Age of Couture*, Dior was one of two promotional partners; quite naturally as the year 2007 marked both the opening of the exhibition and the sixtieth anniversary of Dior's New Look, which was the premise of the show. The partnership was not particularly apparent, however, there were three contemporary Galliano's at the V&A with additional rotating examples in each host institution.[75] The inclusion of a contemporary design is often the tell tale sign of a promotional partnership between museum and couture house. Dior similarly supported *Elite Elegance* as stated on the exhibition's promotional flyers. Again, this was a fitting choice as the exhibited items were primarily examples of Dior's or models based on his New Look. The show similarly ended with an example of a Galliano that was replaced by a second example four months into the exhibition (fig. 18). Palmer noted the rotation was to adhere to conservation policies set forth by the house of Dior.[76]

The inclusion of contemporary designs is controversial. Often labeled "Legacy", this section of an exhibit automatically awards the current designer the status of museum quality, insuring the posterity of the brand though cultural affluence. Simultaneously, however, haute couture designs are almost always museum quality. As Claire Wilcox noted, haute couture is not a means to monetary success. In fact, the designer will most likely lose money in an haute couture line. The designs themselves are barely worn and

[75] Bourassa, personal interview with author.
[76] Palmer, personal interview with the author.

are made either on commission, which is rare, or for the runway, which will then be archived or handed over to a museum.[77] It is the designers chance to be creative without inhibition. The difficulty is, these young new designers appear, on the surface, to have bought their way into the museum, rather than earned it like their predecessors, and museums are accused of selling out.

There appears to be a very negative stereotype around corporate partnerships and, moreover, an uneven balance between the institutions that receive corporate support. Fashion industries appear to sponsor fine art museums more commonly and generously than historical institutions. The difference between *Elite Elegance* and *Golden Age of Couture* is an example of this. While the V&A is not a fine art institution it is more geared towards the arts than the ROM with its historical mandate. Granted, the international prestige of the V&A alone will attract larger sponsors and more sponsorship, but *Elite Elegance*, a truly groundbreaking exhibition in Canadian dress history, did not have enough money for either an exhibition catalogue or to have the show travel. The Dior sponsors did not completely recognize the quality and originality of the research presented through *Elite Elegance*, otherwise, funding might have been higher.

On Hosting versus Conceiving Dress Exhibitions

The lack of support Palmer's exhibition received is undoubtedly attributed to Canada's international obscurity in the field of dress history. This is not to say that Canada has not been involved, for as we have seen with *Reveal and Conceal* at the McCord Museum we have some leading dress historians who have won internationally

[77] Claire Wilcox, "The Legacy of Couture," in *Golden Age of Couture: Paris and London 1947-1957*, ed. Claire Wilcox (London: V&A Publications, 2007), 211.

acclaimed disciplinary awards based on Canadian collections and history. This was, however, done completely without sponsorship, a feat deserving the utmost recognition. When asked about sponsorship opportunities for the exhibit, Cooper noted that most museums would kill to have such support and while in an ideal world she would prefer to work without sponsors, if the opportunity presented itself, she would have taken it, noting that it is especially difficult for Canadian museums to attain sponsorship.[78] Canada's lack of dress collections, particularly in fine art museums, has inhibited further development of Canadian dress history and our involvement with the larger international trend of fashion exhibits. Corporate sponsors from the fashion industry tend to be more attracted to fine art institutions, perhaps because of the audience they attract or the aesthetic and artistic curatorial style they embody. Canada's complete lack of dress collections in fine art museums is undoubtedly detrimental to our recognition on the international scene. Our fine art institutions are obviously interested in dress exhibitions, as several have hosted large traveling shows, but without our own collections, the scholarship is never truly credited to Canada.

Concurrently, one has to wonder whether the modesty of Canadian dress history may not captivate an audience in the way blockbuster shows do. Alexandra Palmer's *Au Courant*, for example, which took place at the ROM from April 1997 until January 1998, showcased over forty Canadian designers. She selected examples that were not necessarily "attention-grabbing designs", and couturiers who were not "the current most creative or celebrated designers" but rather the exhibit showcased "modern Canadian fashion as a sophisticated, mature design form, as well as a successful commercial

[78] Cooper, telephone interview with author.

endeavor".[79] It received little to no attention then or now and did not attract the crowds. Palmer blames this disinterest on "the fashion world and the press [being] more concerned about who was 'in' and 'out'. A celebrity 'fashion as art' format is much easier to promote than an interest in the successful range of established Canadian fashion companies".[80]

While some scholars have accused blockbuster exhibitions of being "puritanical" and lacking in "moral and aesthetic value," others believe these exhibitions have the capacity to be both educational and entertaining.[81]

> I have to admit that I, along with many others, have greatly enjoyed all of the recent brand blockbusters for their polished bravura, from the Guggenheim/Royal Academy Armani, through to the Met's Chanel (and my sense is that these offered a much more complex and satisfying interpretation of the value underlying the brands and their relation to historical context than some critics have allowed).[82]

Balancing education and entertainment can be difficult, particularly with a field such as dress. Valerie Steele notes how easy it is for fashion exhibitions to be laden either with "musty antiquarianism" or "superficial glitz".[83] Canadian dress exhibitions can be labeled, more often than not, as antiquarian since Canadian history is frequently perceived as not particularly glamorous. The Costume Museum of Canada is a perfect example of this, where the period room settings and life-like mannequins are eerily reminiscent of a wax museum. *Elite Elegance*, however, escaped the tropes of antiquarianism, celebrating the aesthetic beauty of fancy frocks but simultaneously

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[79] Palmer, personal interview with the author; "Au Courant, contemporary Canadian Fashion: Royal Ontario Museum, 19 April 1997 to 4 January 1998 (Supplement to Flare)" Flare 19, no.4 (April 1997): Insert.
[80] Palmer, "Introduction", 6.
[81] Breward on Deborah Silverman, "Between the Museum and the Academy: Fashion Research and its Constituencies," Fashion Theory 12, no.1 (March 2008): 91.
[82] Breward, 91-92.
[83] Steele, "A Museum of Fashion is more than a Clothes-Bag," 334.

adding original Canadian scholarship to the field of dress history. Examples by famous 1950s designers attracted the crowds, but Palmer's inclusion of arduous topics displayed in clear and interesting ways was the true success of the exhibit. If the show had traveled, it would undoubtedly have inspired and benefited the future of Canadian dress history. Unfortunately, it remained at the ROM and the attention it has received has been minimal.

The benefits of traveling an exhibition are immense. In most cases, this is where a show earns the largest amount of money as host institutions pay high rental fees. Unfortunately, this is not often the case with fashion exhibitions as the cost involved with the maintenance and display of dress is enormous. Neither the hosts nor the creators financially benefit from such a partnership. It is for this reason few fashion collections travel but those that do tend to be sponsored and have entrance fees, resulting, inevitably, in public criticism. Problematically, the costs associated with dress exhibitions are astronomical and not at all obvious. Firstly, collecting dress requires a specialized storage area and conservation staff. If a museum shares its operating budget with several departments, it is uncommon that enough money will be allotted for all the required resources on top of the demanding exhibition costs. Palmer notes that this severely inhibits the development of the ROM's costume department, particularly when competing with institutions like the Museum at FIT, which is solely a fashion museum, and The Costume Institute, which, as mentioned earlier, runs on a private operating budget from the Metropolitan.[84] The preservation of a costume collection alone is an endless and very costly project as so many exterior factors severely damage textiles,

[84] Palmer, personal interview with the author.

including dirt, dust and stains, dampness, humidity, extreme heat, lack of air, most lighting, insects, and untrained handling of garments.[85] Anne Buck, an early dress historian and the first Keeper of the Gallery of English Costume, spent her retirement writing best practice guides to costume collections.[86] She notes that there have been practical reasons for the neglect of costumes in museums stating that when a costume is acquired, it's not ready for exhibition like silver, glass or furniture is. She notes that "its preservation means constant care and attention; its presentation must always be imperfect".[87] Moreover, there are time restrictions on how long an item can be out on exhibition for, followed by a certain amount of conservation and a long storage period. The International Council of Museums has a best practice guide for costume, although museums often make their own decisions. At the McCord, for example, every month an item is exhibited, a year of conservation and storage is required.[88] This fact alone makes traveling an exhibit very costly for the home institution. Moreover, the host museum would probably not have the human or material resources necessary to hold a dress exhibition, unless they happen to have a costume department. The home institution, therefore, will send trained staff to supervise the installation and dismantling of the exhibit, a policy at the V&A, for example. *Golden Age of Couture* traveled to Quebec completely ready for display, packed in crates containing pre-padded and dressed mannequins. Four members of the V&A staff nonetheless came to unpack the crates and

[85] Anne Buck, "Costume," in *Handbook for Museum Curators*, Part D, Section 3 (London: The Museum Association, 1958), 9.
[86] Lou Taylor, *Establishing Dress History*, 61.
[87] Buck, 4.
[88] Cooper, telephone interview with author.

set up the exhibit, including a technician, a restorer and two messengers, a costly process particularly since the exhibit traveled to five museums across the globe.[89]

Host institutions without costume departments will similarly incur high costs alongside the basic rental agreement. For example, clothing is often exhibited in specialized glass casing to protect the textiles form dust and shifting temperatures. Most museums will own smaller cases but they will not necessarily be large enough for clothing. The MNBAQ is renowned for their decorative arts collection and were fortunate to have large tempered display cases for statues and other similarly large and fragile artifacts. They did not, however, have enough and were obliged by contract to purchase more. Paul Bourassa noted that this was a very significant cost for the museum, particularly because they would probably not use the new cases in the future. Fortunately, the Frist Center in Nashville was in a similar situation and bought the new cases from the MNBAQ, renting the original ones as well.[90]

Other costs the MNBAQ incurred were the French translations of the catalogue as well as all press material, labels and audio guides, which is not only expensive but a very delicate process as well. Traveling an exhibit internationally is prone to cultural misinterpretation, which is exactly what happened in Quebec. Originally titled *Golden Age of Couture*, after much deliberation, the MNBAQ renamed it *Golden Age of Haute Couture*.

> L'esprit francophone, parler juste de couture ça n'a pas la même résonance que de parler de la haute couture donc je pense qu'on voulait donner le signal que c'était la haute gamme.[91]

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[89] Paul Bourassa, personal interview with author.
[90] Paul Bourassa, personal interview with author.
[91] Paul Bourassa, personal interview with author.

While Paul Bourassa is referencing francophone people in general, I would imagine this is more accurate for Quebec francophones. If the exhibit had traveled to France, it would have received considerable criticism for defining the entire show as an haute couture exhibit. Without approval from the Chambre Syndicale in Paris, a design house cannot call itself haute couture and by doing so, one is disrespecting the authority of the association. I, by no means, am insinuating that this was the intent of the MNBAQ or that the museum should even be criticized for its decision. Considering the minimal amount of dress exhibitions in Canadian museums, the manipulation of the title was probably very beneficial in attracting a larger audience and in conveying shortly and concisely the prominence of the included designers, but it was a decision based on cultural interpretations. An entire dissertation could be written on how *Golden Age of Couture* developed as it traveled from country to country. When a show has the ability to travel the results can be invaluable, putting on view items that a person may only be able to see once in their life, but also building on and developing the original idea.

Museum mandates will often affect the exhibition design. The more an exhibition of this multi-disciplinary nature travels, the more it is interpreted and the theme developed. As a fine art institution, the MNBAQ, for example, made a point of treating the clothing and photographs as works of art and separating the material evidence as just that.

> Ça c'est la partie générale qu'on a adopté, de séparer les oeuvres d'art et les documents. Parce-ce que, évidemment, présenter une exposition de mode dans un musée de beaux-arts c'est différent que dans un musée d'art décorative et musée d'histoire.[92]

[92] Paul Bourassa, personal interview with author.

Fashion photography, for example, was featured in both *Elite Elegance* and *Golden Age of Couture* as were magazine and newspaper clippings, but the manner in which they were used highlighted both museum mandates. In *Elite Elegance*, the minimal fashion photography included was meant as physical historical evidence to the dress on display. It also acted in a similar way to the period rooms, as an aesthetically pleasing addition, but it was not exhibited as an art historical object. The fashion photography in *Golden Age of Couture* was treated as art by every institution that hosted the show, often given a gallery space of its own and hung neatly on the walls. At the MNBAQ, the combination of photography displayed in a fine art manner and dress displayed like statues in a decorative art museum enhanced the artistic atmosphere of the entire exhibit. Other supplementary material similarly demonstrated the directive of both institutions. The film footage in *Elite Elegance*, for example, looped on a wall behind the clothing, while the film at the MNBAQ was placed in a separate room entirely, away from the works of art. Moreover, in the viewer's comment sheets for *Elite Elegance,* there was a general disappointment with the lack of mirrors or a three hundred and sixty degree view of the garments.[93] On the other hand, Palmer had the interior of the items photographed, displaying dressmaking techniques viewers are otherwise not aware of. She included these pictures as well as accompanying information on the labels. *Golden Age of Couture*, on the other hand, had mirrors behind the items, allowing for a less obstructed view, however, the only information on dressmaking techniques was included in the first section. The labeling was also done in a traditional fine art manner, with just the catalogue information of the dresses and the photographs.

[93] The Royal Ontario Museum Archives, Visitor Comments Sheets for *Elite Elegance: Couture Fashion in the 1950s*.

Every museum can add their own touch, particularly influenced by the institutions expertise and experiences. Moreover, host museums can create additional dialogues. The MNBAQ went as far as creating a dialogue between simultaneously showing exhibits. *Barbie et la Mode: 1959-1966* was a light and fun addition to *Golden Age of Couture,* and showcased Barbies from the fifties and sixties, dressed in clothing inspired by the same Golden Age designers. One display was a replica of Cecil Beaton's famous photograph of Christian Dior's house models from 1957, which was used in the catalogue as a spread for the forward (fig. 19).[94]

While the MNBAQ created their own exhibition display, it had to be approved before hand and while it was for the most part, the V&A strongly suggested revision on a couple of decisions. Firstly, the curators at the MNBAQ did not find the life-like mannequins aesthetically pleasing; however, they had to be kept for best practice purposes. Every mannequin in a costume exhibit has to be tailored to the outfit, which is a long process. Not only was the MNBAQ missing the equipment or expertise to alter the shape of the forms, they did not have spare mannequins either. The only part of the display that the V&A recommended changing was the final room of ball gowns. Paul Bourassa organized it by designer, creating, in his opinion, a harmony between the contrasting colours and patterns. What the V&A recommended was a systematic organization of those colours and patterns, a suggestion that was adopted by Bourassa to avoid further conflict.[95] The final point of contention between home and host institution was the legacy section, which the MNBAQ thought was irrelevant to the success of the

[94] Claire Wilcox, ed., *The Golden Age of Couture: Paris London 1947-57*, (London: V&A Publications, 2007), 8.
[95] Paul Bourassa, personal interview with author.

exhibit. Bourassa noted that they tried to eliminate the Galliano, particularly because the show did not have any chronological evolution to the twenty-first century and it seemed out of place. The V&A did design a large chronological timeline that insistently led the viewer from the fifties to the millennium, but the MNBAQ opted not to use it. The inclusion of contemporary styles when they do not necessarily fit into the development of the show raises the debated on corporate sponsorship and the integrity of the museum but perhaps we should be more tolerant to contemporary styles tacked at the end of an exhibit, for the rest of the show would otherwise not have been possible.

While *Golden Age of Couture* was a success in Quebec, attracting a lot of media attention and large crowds, the exhibition had no Canadian content and does not add to the history of dress in Canada. Granted, it did put fashion exhibitions in the spotlight within an art museum in a Canadian context and will probably inspire future shows, acting as a model to others. Still, I believe it is vital to this history that exhibitions of Canadian dress are supported and especially travel – something which has yet to happen in Canada. *Elite Elegance* would have been an excellent choice for a traveling exhibition of this kind – appealing to more than just a local, national audience as the show touched upon international themes while focusing on Canadian history. Interestingly, when asked where Palmer would have liked to see the show travel, other Canadian cities were not on her list, instead she hoped for the United States. There, it would have competed with some of the leading costume institutions and, in spite of its minimal sponsorship, *Elite Elegance* would have been a good contender for other international exhibitions and that has much to do with how Palmer styled the exhibit in the 20th century fashion, overcoming issues of antiquarianism by borrowing more effervescent techniques

developed by Diana Vreeland but also by including informative supplementary material that educates and emphasizes the personal side of clothing.

On Supplementary Material

Palmer argues that privately owned shows, such as ones funded by corporations or organized by private archives, have raised the bar for museum-owned fashion exhibitions.[96] It has required curators to push the boundaries of exhibition display and thematic conception in order to compete at the corporate level. Borrowing aesthetic techniques from blockbuster shows is a good starting point. Some of Vreeland's highly unconventional styles have become the norm for fashion exhibitions today. For example, in both *Elite Elegance* and *Golden Age of Couture,* stylized mannequins were used.[97] Palmer went as far as using music, a technique, she admits, is not her favourite as it can distract the audience from the actual show.[98] In fact, she does not even like background sound from film or interview clips. Scent seems to be one of the few Vreelandisms that has yet to catch on. While fun and whimsical techniques are effective in grabbing the attention of an audience, it is only temporary and what makes an exhibit successful is how memorable it is, how much you will think about it afterwards.

The use of supplementary material has proven to be the oldest and most effective way of organizing successful fashion exhibitions that are both educational and entertaining. Peter McNeil, acclaimed author and professor of fashion studies at Stockholm University, argues that it is the dress historian's responsibility to find a

[96] Palmer, "Untouchable," 50.
[97] For a history of the mannequin and its effects on museum display, see Lou Taylor, "Artefact-based approaches: Display and Interpretation," in *The Study of Dress History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).
[98] Palmer, personal interview with the author.

comfortable medium between the entertaining quality of blockbuster shows and the educational necessity to establish dress history as a scholarly field.[99] McNeil also notes how delicate dress can be to display as the audience will often "personalize and internalize exhibits of popular culture". [100] It is natural to feel knowledgeable in a field that infiltrates our lives in so many ways but, in reality, few people truly understand what makes high fashion quality fashion. A curator has to impart information that can often be very technical, and they have to do so without being overly analytical, and simultaneously allow the viewer to apply the knowledge they have on the subject. While this can be difficult, it also means that the curator and audience have a common language – because clothing can be personalized, the experience of fashion can be relayed without too much difficulty. Palmer explained, for example, that she unexpectedly received visitor feedback from men who said the exhibit brought back old and fond memories of their mothers and sisters.[101]

In order to exercise the common language between curator and audience, techniques can be applied to trigger a person's thoughts. For example, period rooms create a welcoming space in which the audience can envision themselves. McNeil argues that AngloMania was a successful example of this as it managed to relay the experience of late twentieth century English fashion in an authentic and educational manner. The theme was to express how deeply-rooted English traditions affected late twentieth century English fashion. Koda achieved this by placing mannequins dressed in 1980s and 1990s apparel throughout the 18th century English period rooms, The Annie Laurie

[99] Peter McNeil, "'We're Not in the Fashion Business': Fashion in the Museum and the Academy," in Fashion Theory 12, no. 1 (March 2008): 68.
[100] McNeil, 67.
[101] Palmer, personal interview with the author.

Aitken Galleries, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a technique proposed by Anne Buck in her handbook on costume. The first sections of both *Elite Elegance* and *Golden Age of Couture* used period rooms to display the more technical aspects of dress. As we saw earlier, in *Golden Age of Couture,* the section entitled "Embroidery" was styled like a workshop and the section on "Lady Alexandra: a Couture Client" was designed like a woman's dressing room. In *Elite Elegance*, we saw how the second rooms, where Palmer successfully educated the audience on bonded models and toile copies, were designed like ateliers. Learning about the more technical aspects of dress is more effective when you can relate to it. Seeing a room that you can envision yourself in and having examples of the items at each stage of production makes the clothing more tangible to the visitor. Period rooms liven up sections that may have more difficulty retaining the visitors' attention, but sections that are crucial to understanding and furthering the study of dress. Buck notes, however, that a curator must be careful the décor does not overpower the garments themselves, otherwise the theme of the exhibit is lost.

Buck was also an early advocate of looking beyond a purely chronological curatorial approach, of including supplementary material such as fashion-plates, fashion journals, photographs, paper patterns, illustrated trade catalogues, dolls, and "in museums of art, the collections of prints and drawings".[102] While all these suggestions may seem obvious today, it took nearly twenty years before they became common practice. Since then, dress historians have begun to develop theories on the use of supplementary material and object-based research. Among the most substantial of these are Lou Taylor's comprehensive two-volume book on dress, *Establishing Dress History* and *The Study of*

[102] Buck, 26.

Dress History.[103] In it, she advocates the use of supplementary material, such as oral history, literary sources, paintings, drawings, cartoons, photography, film and ethnographical studies, but warns of the inconsistencies in using each one. While both *Elite Elegance* and *Golden Age of Couture* used all of this material, the most effective, in my opinion, for both exhibits was the use of oral history.

As dress is so intimately related to the wearer, oral history is often included as research material in an exhibition, be it fine art or historical. By using people's personal stories, the clothing takes on an entirely new meaning to the audience. All of a sudden, it becomes human and tangible. In *Elite Elegance*, for example, Palmer would include recorded or transcribed clips, inviting the viewer into the personal lives of Toronto's elite. Hearing a story firsthand is more emotionally effective, particularly in the case of dress since clothing is almost always kept for the memories they hold. As *Elite Elegance* was the first haute couture exhibition on Canadian women, the information and stories Palmer gathered are invaluable to the future of Canadian dress history since most of the women she interviewed are no longer alive and the stories can no longer be collected first hand. Similarly, in *Golden Age of Couture*, Princess Galitzine and Lady Alexandra were some of the few who were interviewed and spoke of their first hand experiences with couture houses and designers, as well as their experiences with fittings, modeling the gowns or wearing them to events. Having stories accompany the technical sections, such

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[103] Christopher Breward did write a detailed history of fashion and culture where he touched upon the study of dress history. See Christopher Breward, *The Culture of Fashion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).
Lou Taylor, *The Study of Dress History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).
Lou Taylor, *Establishing Dress History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

as tailoring, dressmaking, embroidery, textiles and underwear, is an alternate form of explanation that some people can relate to more. For example, reading that a 'waspie', otherwise known as a mini-corset, is particularly uncomfortable and inconvenient is different than hearing first hand the experience of wearing these items.

> Not so much constricting, but quite heavy to swing around in. And in the Salon it was so tightly packed with little gold chairs […] you had to weave in and your great dresses would be swinging and knocking into people [laughs] – quite heavy.[104]

While oral history can be highly affective as accompanying material to dress, one has to be wary about the information gathered for several reasons. Firstly, Taylor borrows Samuel and Thompson's theory of 'selective amnesia' to explain the biggest problem with oral history.[105] It is natural to have your guard up when inviting the public into your personal space and this is what happens with oral history, whether consciously or not. Secondly, as with interviews, the storyteller may want to revise or have a say in the exhibition layout as a curator may interpret their stories inaccurately. Clothing is so personal that donors may be more reluctant to share the details of its history and viewers tend to be subjective towards both the clothing and the original owner. It is for this reason that oral history should be accompanied by additional supplementary material, less subjective in character.

Conclusion

Supplementary material, be it at historical or fine art institutions, is meant to guide the viewer through the exhibit. Palmer states that

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[104] "111. Princess Galitzine. Waspie. (No.86)" The Victoria and Albert Museum, Transcribed Audio Guide for *The Golden Age of Couture: Paris and London 1947-1957*, pg. 12.
[105] Taylor, *The Study of Dress History*, 260.

> What I'm interested in doing is having people come out with something else, or something they didn't think about or *look* at something in a different way, which is what the images do, they help guide the eye because people don't know how to look and they don't know where to look.[106]

What makes dress exhibitions more difficult for viewers to experience in the way the curators intend, and this comes back to McNeil's theory on the personalization and internalization of exhibitions of popular culture, is that an audience will naturally observe and interpret dress subjectively. Attendance was never as high at the Metropolitan as when Vreeland joined The Costume Institute and conceived several highly entertaining fashion exhibitions. Similarly, you still hear people raving about *Golden Age of Couture* at the MNBAQ or, to look a bit further into the past, the YSL exhibit in Montreal, although, interestingly, *Elite Elegance* has received minimal to no scholarly or press coverage in the past nine years, except articles written by Alexandra Palmer herself. While it appears the collaboration between the couture house and museum was larger in the fine art institutions than at the ROM, leading to a more grandiose advertising campaign and exhibition budget, it is also worth noting that the target audience is different at fine art institutions than history museums. Considering the lack of costume collections in Canadian fine art institutions, but the public interest in fashion exhibitions, there is an obvious need for collaboration between Canadian fine art and history museums. Dress history is a relatively new field of study as we saw at the beginning of this thesis and popular dress itself really only existed in the 1850s with the birth of ready-made clothing. It was well after that that museums even began developing contemporary dress collections and so the few Canadian museums with dress collections have been collecting as long as most other countries. The ROM's original collection, for example,

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[106] Palmer, personal interview with the author.

included textiles, unsurprisingly as the Eaton family was one of the founding members of the ROM.[107] Canada has both conceived and hosted 20th century fashion exhibitions that compete with the likes of Diana Vreeland and Cecil Beaton. Our well-researched and documented collections may be few and far between and only exist in history museum but they are world class. With an increased interest in dress exhibitions by our fine art institutions, which we have seen with an influx of hosted shows in the past four years, it is time for a collaboration. While Canada has the means to conceive groundbreaking exhibitions of 20th century dress, the talent of many local couture designers and the interest of a public, the absence of costume collections in Canadian fine art museums and the lack of collaboration between human history and fine art museum representatives, has inhibited Canada's contribution to the evolving multi-disciplinary trend of fashion exhibitions. The academic study of Canadian art only began forty years ago. The time has come to examine our own fashion history, to develop a larger community of scholars dedicated to this field and a wider public interest in the subject. We have the minds of some leading dress historians, the collections that can compete at international levels and the eyes and ears of an eager audience; it is time to develop our interest, hone our skills and assert Canada's authoritative position in this emerging field.

[107] The Royal Ontario Museum, "Our History": accessed March 10th 2011, http://www.rom.on.ca/about/history/eaton.php.

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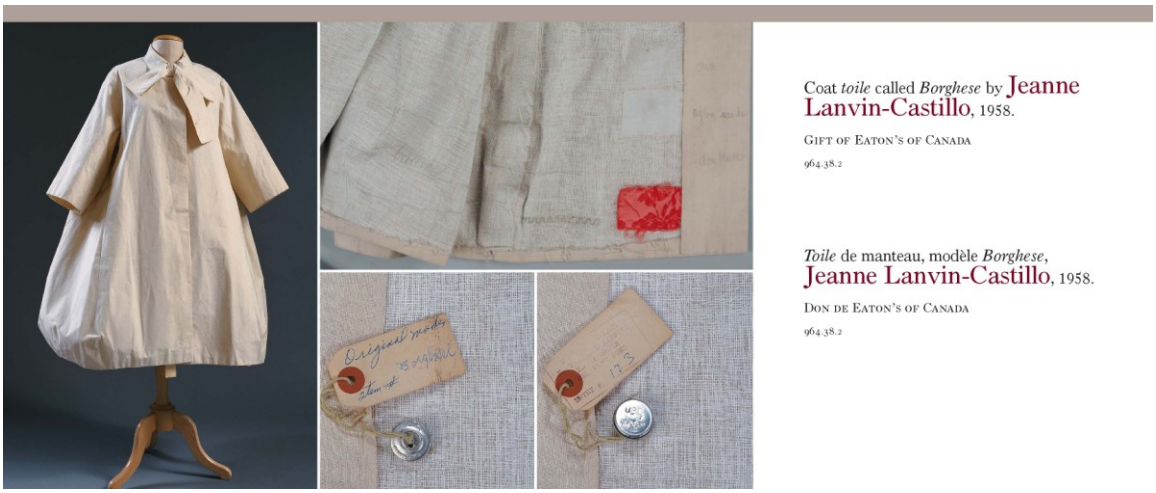

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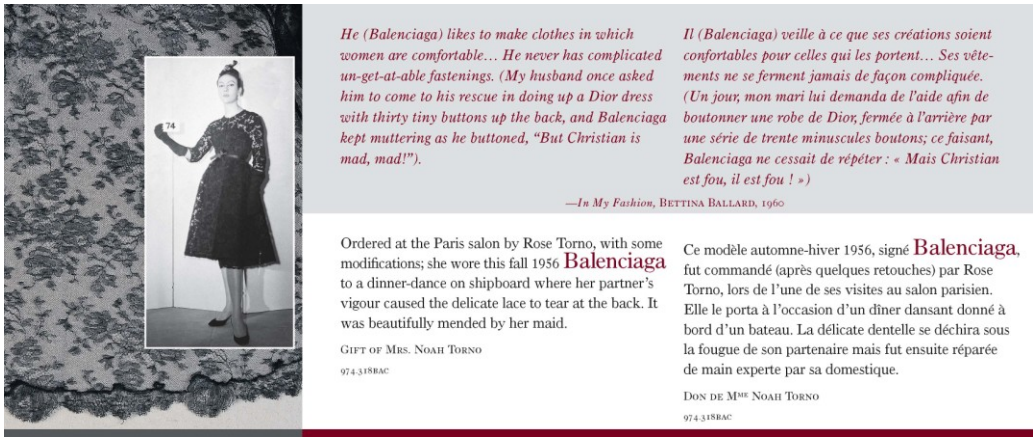

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