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## A change of clothing

By Anne Hollander

The current show at the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, which can be seen until the end of August, is another demonstration of Diana Vreeland's method of raising clothes-consciousness as an aspect of museum-going. It is an excellent device, borrowed from the domain of fashion, to shift the costume exhibits at least once a year; the public learns to watch for new exhibits when the current ones, dazzling as they may be, start to pall a bit. To appear to best advantage, clothes require changing. The memory of last year's great display of Russian garments is all the more potent because the experience was transitory. We could not have continued to appreciate all those gold-laced *svyats* quite so intensely had they stayed with us another year.

Now we have a show entitled "Vanity Fair", consisting entirely of what might be called personal rather than national treasures. Vreeland has made an idiosyncratic selection from the Costume Institute's own vast storehouse of clothes and accessories, following only her own inclination in their choice and display. As usual, all the mannequins are brilliantly abstract and unhuman—head-headed or blue-haired, sometimes green or purple, often gold all over. The title is somewhat misleading; there is very little vanity and only one or two suggestions of a fair. But there is much luxury from all quarters of the globe (not Russia: enough is enough), and objects from different epochs showing recurrent themes despite very different concepts of elegance.

In certain respects, fashion

In certain respects, fashion operated two hundred years ago very much as it does now, despite the great gap that is supposed to separate mass-production and meretriciousness from the creation of unique, handwrought artifacts to individual order. For example, the first room has a clothes rack on which hang more than forty gentlemen's waistcoats from the latter eighteenth century. All are white or silver, all have floral patterns embroidered in delicate colours. Behind, mounted on the wall in overlapping layers, are more and more variations on the same theme from the same period—and these are only a selection from one museum's holdings. A white waistcoat with flowers worked in colours was clearly the look of the moment, and no amount of individual taste and personally designed hand-work could permit radical deviation from the mode while it prevailed.

Another abiding theme of modern modishness appears in a display of cashmere and paisley shawls which have been used to make fitted garments. There are some 1860s dresses and a 1960s man's lounge suit made of cut-up shawls, with a group of uncut shawls draped as a backdrop. Western fashion has often succumbed to the imperialist impulse to cut up and tailor veils, plaids, shawls and saris, or any lengths of fabric carefully woven to a certain size and shape to form the draped garments of another culture or another century.

There are some nineteenth-century tartan outfits near the paisley ones; another example of the same thing. Fashionably cut and fitted tartan garments were originally made out of Scottish plaids and kilts; later the popularity of the patterns was such that tartan fabrics were woven in bolts especially for the making of fitted clothes. The same thing happened with paisley patterns. Meanwhile we still cut up shawls and saris to make coats, trousers and dresses as if a length of fabric could not be a garment by itself without some imposition of the tailor's art.

The first room in the show has some sumptuous Middle and Near Eastern clothes draped and sashed on the dummies so as to swamp and conceal the figure, and embellished

with metal belts, coin headresses and heavy necklaces. This raw use of fabric is quite contrary to the main traditions of Western elegance in dress but "Oriental splendour" requires that many rich stuffs overlap in what seems like formless and undisciplined profusion: draped veils over loose robes over loose tunics over loose trousers. Those dozens of subtly cut and embroidered waistcoats on the other side of the same room display by contrast the Western creative will at work, orderly, intense, the hand subduing and forcing the stuff to conform to a clearly focused vision of a dressed human shape.

The case that has the waistcoats also has a rack of more than forty eighteenth-century gentlemen's coats. These are more various in colour and cut than the waistcoats and cover a longer span of time. Again the sheer numbers in the exhibit have their own staggering effect. Such antique coats, made of delicate fabrics and elaborately trimmed, are usually displayed singly or on mannequins in small isolated groups, so that each example may show off its individual qualities. Here, however, we have what looks like the contents of a stockroom—dozens of coats uniformly racked up hanger after hanger, each representing hours of thought, care and labour devoted to rare materials, but together forming a massive testimony to the amount of male elegance possible during one brief period of civilized history.

Yet another case in this same introductory room is indeed set out like a shop window displaying the traditional stuff of sartorial frivolity: shoes, fans, gloves, parasols, and that crucial object the corset, here appearing in the character of a fashion accessory. Numbers are again important to the effect of this group. There are six feather fans, all exactly alike; a dozen different parasols, all of them lace; a dozen all exactly alike; a dozen undergarments, all of them lace; a dozen corsets, all of different shapes, all different colours; fifty individual shoes from four centuries, all elaborately wrought. All these things are displayed in close ranks and tight rows. Another rack, hung with Indian brocade, men's coats of the nineteenth century, includes a feathered costume recently made by Yves St Laurent for Pauline de Rothschild to wear at a fancy-dress ball. In true Vreeland style, East meets West and then meets Now, and everything is made to glitter together blending as it confronts the dazzled eye.

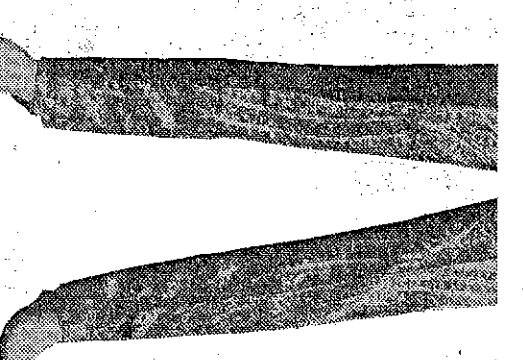
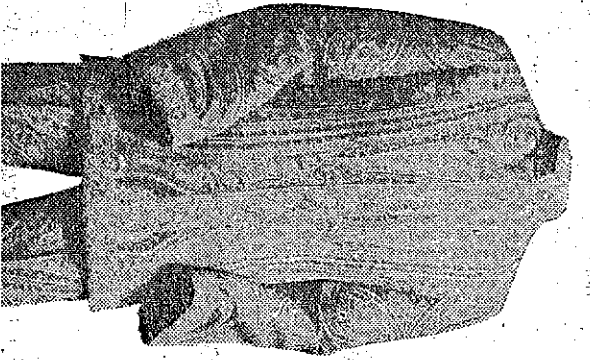
The exhibition has nothing to do with vanity. However empty-headed or shallow-hearted the actual owners of these extraordinary objects may have been, their personal vanity has no relevance to the enduring beauty of these fragile treasures. As centuries pass, a lace shoe embroidered with pearls remains a monument to its designer and maker, not to the idle lady who ordered it.

There is nothing frivolous, for example, about the spare and dignified Chinese garments once belonging to Madame Wellington Koo. They are a study in formal restraint, even though they are made of brilliant satin and covered in embroidery. Other objects year toward the bizarre, in particular the Argentine *penitents*. These are enormous decorative tortoiseshell combs, apparently worn by the ladies of Buenos Aires only about 1830. They stood at least a foot above the head and spread much more than that from side to side, causing problems in the street and no end of ridicule in popular cartoons, just like the crinolines of later days. These grotesque adornments are displayed on mannequins in period dress, to show the striking effect they had with the balloon sleeves and demure flat shoes of the date.

Mounted like a row of exquisite plates, on the wall in one corner above eye level hangs a row of little evening over-bodices by various designers of the 1960s. Each is differently and delicately filled, strangled or encrusted, just below strands an Indian bride's spangled and encrusted sari from 1907, and the gown's tunic to match. On the

platform in front of these is the one truly vain show of the lot—a family group of three tacky costumes, vaguely Spanish, vaguely 1630, again designed by Yves St Laurent for a recent fancy-dress ball. They are all cheap fabric and tinsel trim, like inferior wax-work costumes or Christmas shop-window stuff. They would disgrace a fancy dress ball of Edwardian days, and they are a nasty contrast to the honest glitter of the clothes behind them.

In these first two rooms, the walls and platform forming the background for the gaudy hodge-podge are covered in vivid striped fabric reminiscent of Middle Eastern tents and the overall effect is a careful suggestion of bazaars full of heterogeneous stuff for sale. The satin corsets and embroidered waistcoats



Lounge suit, reverse side out, made from a paisley shawl of the last century, by Cartier, Milan, 1964: an exhibit in "Vanity Fair" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

huddle comfortably together under this bright awning right next to Albanian tunics and Chinese robes, like *souvlaki* and pizza sharing a tent with doughnuts and hamburgers at a summer carnival. If you are not afraid of indigestion, it all looks good enough to eat at once, since everything tastes equally wonderful.

But the next room makes a breathtaking coup de théâtre. We are suddenly in a huge boudoir, with the walls and platforms covered in pale flowered cretonne and a central pavilion draped like the alcove for a bed. And filling the room, nothing but a great cloud of white lace garments threaded with coloured silk ribbon. Worn by dozens of pastel mannequins, while linen and lawn and lace insertion appear in every conceivable kind of arrangement. Most of these confections are actual underwear, but many are clothes designed to suggest the look of underwear, as the disposition of the exhibits insists—shows. Snowy, leaf-gowns,

morning gowns and summer dresses pointedly share the stage with snowy chemises, camisoles, nighties and drawers. The sea of white froth is brilliantly set off by the bright ribbons, here freshly provided by the exhibitors.

It is interesting that with one or two exceptions the whole assortment of lacy *désolable* dates from after 1880. Up through the first half of the nineteenth century, most underwear was plain and erotically uninteresting. These examples all date from later on, when feminine underwear had established itself as a conveyor of deliciously forbidden thrills, both for the wearer, presumably, and for the lucky male observer. And startlingly, in the centre of the room inside the draped alcove, appears a single suit of armour—one potent knight among the hundred undressed damsels. He is anachronistically there to show the effect, so common in the seventeenth century, of a lace *jabot* falling over a metal breastplate—but his bulky menacing presence is a stroke of genius in that frilly room.

Another room has a group of women's riding habits, crisp adaptations of masculine haberdashery of the kind women have traditionally used for sportswear. Ever since the sixteenth century women have enjoyed being dashingly dressed like men above the waist while staying safe in skirts below. This group offers a nice range of examples. Elsewhere there are more indications of the power of fashion: ensembles from different dress-makers in different cities may nevertheless be uncannily similar. There are three pale bell-shaped ball-dresses from 1965-67, all with lace trim on draped, self-fabric corseages with ruching; there are several similarly constructed visiting dresses from 1870-73, each one of silk faille in a single strong colour, each trimmed in fringe. On the other hand, to illustrate the individual vision of a great couturier, as

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much vivid nineteenth-century gear appears a totally black mourning costume from around 1876. It is complete with heavy veils fore and aft and there is not a trace of sheen on the fabric nor is any skin exposed. The appearance in society of a woman dressed in this way must have been electrifying, and in the case of a young widow with fair hair and a slim waist, quite erotic. Total black for The Little Ones was at least occasionally *de rigueur* and there is an interesting tiny, sooty child's dress from 1844.

There is much more to see in this instructive show, although not all the exhibits have equal impact. The standard of showmanship has been set so very high that it cannot uniformly be met. Some exquisite objects fail to make an impact here although they might show to much better advantage in a more sober and less demanding milieu. Ms Vreeland seems to like her own century best, with the nineteenth next, and anything before the eighteenth tends to escape her creative perception and evocate talents. The two Spanish court dresses for children dating from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries look a bit forlorn on their bald mannequins, and it seems wrong to put around their necks the same kind of glassy fake jewelled crosses that adorn the St Laurent horrors in the other room. These little clothes are very old. Their metal embroideries are dimmed as much by the hugeness of intervening social change as by the force of time. They resist the actually modern sense of fashion which has otherwise been so consistently and well applied in all these rooms; they escape the unifying gaze which may appropriately encompass and jumble together all finery which dates, however variously, from the Enlightenment and after.