

Per Spook. A fashion exhibition

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Abstract:

In 2006 The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design in Oslo showed the exhibition “Per Spook. A Norwegian Fashion Designer in Paris” (fig. 1). It was the first time we staged a large exhibition focusing on just one fashion designer. This article will introduce you to the working process, to the exhibition itself, and to how our visitors received it.

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Introduction

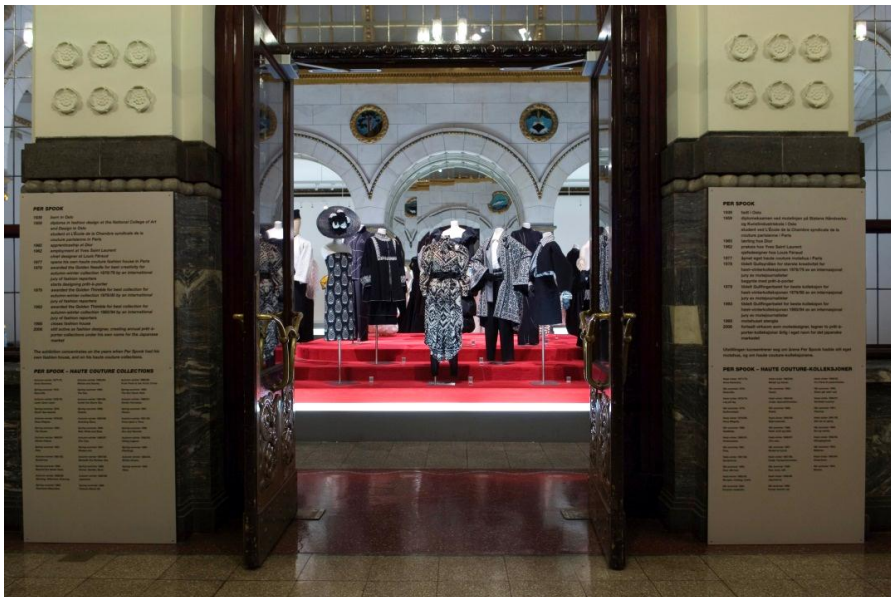


Fig. 1: Entrance to the exhibition “Per Spook. A Norwegian Fashion Designer in Paris”. The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo 2006. Photo: Børre Høstland. The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design.

Starting with Per Spook he was born in Oslo in 1939 and moved to Paris in 1959 after completing his diploma in fashion design. Having gained experience at the fashion houses of Dior and Yves Saint Laurent, he got the job as chief designer at Louis Féraud in 1962. In 1977 he set up a fashion house under his own name and on two occasions his collections received the highest honors the French fashion scene can offer: the Golden Thimble for best haute couture collection in 1979 and 1993. In 1995 his establishment in Paris closed its doors. He continued however as a fashion designer until 2009 creating annual prêt-à-porter collections under his own name for the Japanese market.

Challenges

What challenges did we meet during the working process? Initially there were practical challenges. Per Spook lives in Paris and only visits Norway for his holidays. In 2002, when we started to discuss an eventual exhibition, he kept his archive and collection of about 200 haute couture outfits in a remote barn on the Norwegian countryside, accessible during spring and autumn only. Consequently a longer stretch of time than normal was needed for the initial designer interviews and registration of the collection in order to do further planning.

When we in the end transferred the selected 120 outfits to the museum, we had to address a new challenge: how to secure not only space to store the outfits and the busts bought for the occasion, but also working space for our three conservators and their helpers. The solution was to move the exhibition from the intended venue, the Museum of Decorative Arts and Design, to the larger Museum of Modern Art, both since 2003 incorporated in the new National Museum.

So much for practical challenges, I will now turn to the challenge of working with a living designer. We knew by experience that conflicts of interests could arise between designers and museums when it comes to making exhibitions, and were a bit anxious at the prospect of working with a man who had been in the forefront of fashion. For us independence was crucial, at the same time we needed his help from start to end. Our fear of disagreement was luckily unfounded. Per Spook gave us totally free hands, but was there for us if we needed him as a discussion partner. We selected the main themes for the exhibition and the outfits to go with them, but he supplied us with an idea that became the focus point of the exhibition.

Exhibition themes



Fig. 2: "Per Spook. A Norwegian Fashion Designer in Paris". The studio.
Photo: Børre Høstland. The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design.

For Per Spook the creative process was always more interesting than the final collection. That is why he suggested we should recreate his studio at the fashion house in Avenue George V (fig. 2). Focusing on the process was a new approach for us. However, we were excited about the idea and so was our exhibition designer, a well-known theatre scenographer whose contribution to the exhibition was of vital importance. On display in the studio were costumes, drawings and other items from the 1989/90 autumn-winter collection called "From Paris to the Arctic Circle" (fig. 3).



Fig. 3: “Per Spook. A Norwegian Fashion Designer in Paris”. One of the studio walls.
Photo: Børre Høstland. The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design.

It gave us a perfect starting point to talk to the visitors about haute couture, about creativity, about how Per Spook and his staff worked preparing the seasonal collections, etc. Like in the fashion house where the studio was the center of activity, the reconstructed studio became the exhibition center around which the other themes evolved.



Fig. 4: “Per Spook. A Norwegian Fashion Designer in Paris”. Video showing the autumn-winter collection 1989/90.
Photo: Børre Høstland. The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design.

Our quest for interesting and relevant exhibition themes was a great challenge. Studying videos from almost all of Per Spook’s fashion shows in Paris it soon became clear that the preserved outfits could not fully do justice to his creativity. We therefore decided that videos showing entire collections and parts of collections had to play an important part of the exhibition (fig. 4).



Fig. 5: “Per Spook. A Norwegian Fashion Designer in Paris”. The “Black and white” theme. Photo: Børre Høstland. The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design.

The main themes chosen in the end evolved from what the preserved costumes could tell about Per Spook as a fashion designer. “Black and white” showed outfits from almost all of his collections (fig. 5). Through this theme, visitors could follow changing trends as well as a range of recognizable elements that recurred throughout his collections, such as simple, user-friendly cuts, original fabric designs and accessories, and sometimes features inspired by Norwegian traditions.



Fig. 6: “Per Spook. A Norwegian Fashion Designer in Paris”. A section of the “Graphic patterns” theme. Photo: Børre Høstland. The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design.

“Graphic Patterns” focused on Per Spook’s characteristic printed patterns (fig. 6). Spook designed nearly all the patterned fabrics in his collections. Variation was crucial. A particular pattern would never occur in identical form in two costumes from the same collection, colors, size and details would be varied.



Fig. 7: “Per Spook. A Norwegian Fashion Designer in Paris”. A section of the “Colour and pattern” theme. Photo: Børre Høstland. The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design.

“Color and Pattern” focused on his use of colors and embroideries (fig. 7).



Fig. 8: “Per Spook. A Norwegian Fashion Designer in Paris”. A section of the “Nordic inspiration” theme. Photo: Børre Høstland. The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design

“Nordic inspiration” showed how Per Spook occasionally made references to Norway and Scandinavia in his collections. The focus was partly on knitted garments (fig. 8), one of Per Spook’s hallmarks as a fashion designer, partly on how he used the costumes of the Sami as inspiration in 1989 (fig. 9).



Fig. 9: "Per Spook. A Norwegian Fashion Designer in Paris". A section of the "Nordic inspiration" theme. Photo: Børre Høstland. The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design.

Results

The exhibition made an impact on people and attracted 40 000 visitors, more than any of the other 18 temporary exhibitions at the National Museum that year. The visitors were of all ages, mostly women, but more men than usual, maybe because Per Spook himself is a man. Why was it popular with the visitors? Per Spook and his fascinating haute couture clothes naturally contributed the most. The fruitful collaboration between Per Spook, the museum staff and the exhibition designer was also of vital importance. The exhibition concept with the studio as the focus of attention was a lucky chance, and the extensive use of videos gave a unique insight into the designer's creativity. Events and a large educational program attracted many people. It included thematic guided tours in Norwegian, English and French, talks, interviews with Per Spook and other Norwegian fashion designers, concerts, workshops where young people could use their own creativity to make clothes on small wooden mannequins, exercises for school children, and more.

Evaluation

Despite the success, could we have done anything better? Definitely yes. The "Black and white" podium was too crowded. We should have "killed our darlings" and selected fewer outfits for that theme. We reduced the number of outfits in 2008 when the exhibition was on display at KODE, Bergen Art Museum, and it was an improvement. I never felt quite happy about the "Color and Pattern" theme. In Per Spook's collections each garment was important not just as an individual work, but as an element in a totality. Creating new contexts by placing outfits from different collections side by side almost felt like violating Per Spook's original ideas. However, principally the exhibition functioned well. It ended well too with a generous donation to the museum. Per Spook allowed us to choose 20 outfits for our fashion collection, now on display at the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design in Oslo.

Reference

Per Spook. Norsk motedesigner i Paris. Nasjonalmuseet for kunst, arkitektur og design, Oslo 2006. ISBN 82-8154-016-8.