

## **Design Issues: Fashion Exhibitions and Scholarship at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**

Michelle Finamore

Penny Vinik Curator of Fashion Arts, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

### **Abstract**

The presentation addresses how three costume exhibitions at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston incorporate design scholarship and interdisciplinary studies in an approach that links the exhibition topics with an array of popular and academic interests.

The 2013/14 exhibition *Think Pink* explored the social and cultural meanings of the color pink from the eighteenth century through the present and is a good case study of how design scholarship can inform a museum exhibition in a way that is approachable to the general public. The idea that color is gendered is certainly not a new one in design scholarship, but it is not one that has not been explored through museum objects. This cross-disciplinary exhibition, which attracted 89,000 visitors, used paintings, prints, objects, fashion, and jewelry to tell its story. Public reception and press attention was positive and widespread, helped along by the changes related to gay rights and ideas of gender fluidity that are percolating in popular culture.

The 2014/15 *Hollywood Glamour: Fashion and Jewelry from the Silver Screen* was a co-curated exhibition and included varied media to address the more scholarly concept of how glamour is a constructed ideal. The exhibition examined concepts such as the screen image versus reality, the differences between fashion and costume, and the seemingly endless appeal of Hollywood escapism (evident in the 102,000 visitors over a six month run). The wall labels incorporated these themes and also used the interactivity of objects, imagery, and moving images to make scholarly points in a fashion that engages the visitor.

The presentation will then briefly address a future exhibition *on Fashion and Technology* that will open in 2016 and examine how the curators are making abstract concepts and complex technological processes easily understandable to a general audience.

Contents: Introduction / Think Pink / Hollywood Glamour: Fashion and Jewelry from the Silver Screen / Future exhibitions / Exhibition dates / References

### **Introduction**

This presentation addresses three exhibitions at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston to explore questions such as: how can we incorporate design scholarship and draw from interdisciplinary studies to address costume? What are the sources? And how does one balance appealing to a popular audience while offering something more meaningful?

### **Think Pink**

I'd like to start with my 2013 exhibition *Think Pink* which explored the social and cultural meanings of the color pink from the eighteenth century to the present – what was the design scholarship behind this? There were two books published in the mid-1990s: *The Gendered Object* edited by Pat Kirkham and *As Long as it's Pink* by Penny Sparke. The idea that color is a gendered construct is certainly not new in design scholarship and one that I explored for my

Ph.D. work at Bard Graduate Center: Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture over twelve years ago, but it is not one that has been explored through museum objects on a very large scale. There are, of course, many more recent books and articles about the subject, but there is often a bit of lag time before these concepts enter popular culture. The idea of color as gendered is particularly compelling right now because of gay rights and ideas of gender fluidity that are percolating in the zeitgeist.

So how does a curator apply these concepts to a museum exhibition? And how do we use objects to tell that story? I felt it was easier to tell that story in an interdisciplinary way and working in an encyclopedic art museum made that possible. I mined the Museum of Fine Arts collections for paintings, objects, prints, postcards, fashion and jewelry related to the subject. I thought it was important to present the origins of the word pink and how its meaning changed over time. *Figure 1* I also wanted to illustrate how gender associations changed over time, as well as include more practical aspects of that history – like how the color was actually produced and how developments in dye technology changed the range of colors achieved.



Figure 1: Overall Gallery View of Think Pink Photograph © 2016 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

To backtrack a bit, a donation of a selection of Evelyn Lauder’s wardrobe was the inspiration for the exhibition. Lauder, who spearheaded the Pink Ribbon campaign for breast cancer, had quite a bit of pink in her wardrobe. Lauder and her colleague Alexandra Penney were instrumental in creating this new association; they chose pink as signature color specifically because it is connected with femininity. What I hoped to make clear in the exhibition is what was the source of that association? What is the color’s history? I had a limited amount of space (one gallery) but wanted to be certain to make interesting juxtapositions that might communicate the ideas even if people didn’t read the labels.



Figure 2: *Two Children with Dog*, Unknown American, 1780-1800 and Man's formal suit, France, 1770–80 Photograph © 2016 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Objects such as those illustrated above helped to drive the idea home. I started with the story of the word “pink” and its historical roots in the flower the pink, or carnation. *Figure 2* The exhibition also included a late eighteenth/early nineteenth century portrait of two children with shaved heads both wearing dresses (one pink one blue) and posed the question: do these look like boys or girls? *Figure 2* What are the signs that indicate that? The exhibition also included literary references to help connect visitors to particular times in history when the color pink started to be gendered:

**Man’s suit**

United States, 2013

**Ralph Lauren** (American, founded 1967)

Wool twill suit, cotton plain weave shirt, taffeta tie, nubuck shoes

This suit was made for Hamish Bowles, *Vogue’s* international editor-at-large. The ensemble copies the pink suit worn by Robert Redford (also by Ralph Lauren) in the 1974 film version of *The Great Gatsby*. In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s book, the suit’s pinkness signifies Gatsby’s questionable past and perceived lack of respectability. (“An Oxford man!...Like hell he is! He wears a pink suit.”) Today, men’s dress is being redefined as society embraces more fluid ideas of gender and color.

Hamish Bowles

The apotheosis of pink and femininity is undoubtedly a post-World War II color phenomenon. Although I was not able to secure my ideal object to illustrate this – the 1956 Dodge La Femme that came in two shades of pink with rose-patterned upholstery and matching fashion accessories – with a fashion collection, I could readily include Christian Dior's New Look. So I selected a New Look silk taffeta suit and a beautiful pink rose-patterned evening gown to illustrate the “women flowers” that Dior sent down the runway in 1947. The color pink has enduring associations with femininity even today and the exhibition provided the opportunity for a joint acquisition with the MFA's Prints, Drawings and Photographs department: *SeoWoo and Her Pink Things*, 2006 by JeongMee Yoon Series – a photographer who documented the massive volume of pink objects that make up contemporary girls' lives.

Press coverage of *Think Pink* was excellent, even without a devoted advertising campaign, and I discovered that the issue was particularly resonant given the positive response to the exhibition, which was seen by 89,000 visitors. I was particularly proud of National Public Radio (NPR) interview with Susan Stamberg who stumbled onto the show and was taken by the gender issues. Were the ideas communicated? I think they were, although in hindsight I would have made some tweaks to the exhibition organization and changed a few of the objects if I could. The visitors who came on the exhibition tours or to lectures probably got the most out of the exhibition but I did receive many notes, emails, and interviews by college students that showed it struck a nerve. *Figure 3*



Figure 3: Overall view of Think Pink Gallery Photograph © 2016 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

## Hollywood Glamour: Fashion and Jewelry from the Silver Screen

*Hollywood Glamour: Fashion and Jewelry from the Silver Screen* was a very different exhibition that I co- curated with my colleague Emily Stoehrer. I was determined to add some depth to what could be perceived as a “fluff” show and so thought about issues such as haptic sensation, semiotics, and the idea of “glamour” as a constructed ideal. To achieve this, we had an interdisciplinary exhibition that juxtaposed the real garments with the image on the screen, photography, jewelry, and design sketches. *Figure 4*



Figure 4: Overall view of Hollywood Glamour exhibition  
Photograph © 2016 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

We tried to highlight the differences between Hollywood image and reality, perhaps best expressed in Joan Crawford quoted as saying: “I never go out of the house unless I look like Joan Crawford the movie star. If you want the girl next door, go next door.” We addressed how the very material of these dresses contributed to this construct of glamour and luxury e.g. the metallic lamés made of real gold and silver were a corollary to the fabulous real jewels worn by the stars.

Language, like fashion, brings together the imaginary and the real. Thinking about how these ideas of glamour and sheer luxury are communicated through specific words was also addressed e.g. the simple but effective use of the word platinum for Jean Harlow’s hair. The haptic sensation associated with these dresses was also worth pointing out; many which were made of lush satin and fur and contributed to sensual nature of these dresses on the screen. This idea of questioning the reality versus the image – how does it appear on the screen, in real life, and in photographs – was also a point we hoped would be communicated. Many visitors

commented on the size of the mannequins and how small and petite these starlets really were, challenging this larger-than-life ideal that appears on the screen.

The press was quite good with local and international coverage including NPR and the Canadian *The Globe and Mail* which did a lengthy article comparing how Hollywood of the past with our celebrity-obsessed culture right now. It was interesting to follow the comments some of which were scathing in terms of “who cares what these stars wear?” and yet, in all, the exhibition attracted 102,000 visitors proving that we still, and always will, suffer from a love/hate relationship with fashion and fame.

## **Future exhibitions**

Our next exhibition at the MFA Boston is a collaboration between myself and fellow curators Pam Parmal and Lauren Whitley. Called *#techstyle*, it is an overview of the current state of fashion and technology. In a world in which technology and images of new technology are changing so fast, how do you put together an exhibition that will still be current by the time it opens? And how do we present the subject in a way that is readily understood by visitors? In thinking about the subject, concepts that arose in my mind were: the real world vs. the virtual, nature vs. science, the avatar vs. the real person, the world of two dimensions vs. the world of three dimensions, and the future of fashion. What I am showing you today may propose more questions than I can answer and have not written the label copy yet so we are still grappling with many of these issues.

The biggest challenge here will be how to make complex technological processes understandable to a general audience and how do we briefly address the recent history of the subject including seminal designers such as Hussein Chalayan. On a more practical level, how do we exhibit contemporary fashion on static mannequins and include all of the video we would like to include?

This prevalence of how the internet and increased access to fashion images and the effect on the way designers design needed to be addressed. Rei Kawakubo in her August/Winter 2012 Collection directly confronted the idea of the flat and commented on how the world of instagram and social media has changed our experience of fashion, saying that “the future is two-dimensional.” Issey Miyake, who we all know has also been at the forefront of this fashion/tech nexus, created his 1 325 collection as a true collaboration between a mathematician and an engineer using computer algorithms to design a 2D object that pops into a 3D garment. How is this conceived and how to explain it? Our solution is to have both the flat and the 3D garment on display as well as an image of it unfurling.

In terms of new production processes, artists like Noa Raviv use the very patterns of the computer design process as a design element in the garment. In the digital age, these hidden codes are very much a part of our life and many artists are grappling with making that visible. Digital printing must be addressed as it has profoundly affected the way designers design. Mary Katrantzou is one of the most successful proponents of this, with hyper-colorization and patterns that are beautifully integrated into the construction of the garment. 3D printing, which is currently revolutionizing the fashion world, will be addressed in the “Production” gallery too, and the MFA’s Iris Van Herpen/Neri Oxman dress *Anthaxoa* actually provided the much inspiration for the exhibition as it captured the amazing synergy between the two industries in 2013.

Our section on performance will address how garments interact with the wearer, the body, the environment or with the viewer/spectator in fascinating ways. Ying Gao’s *Incertitudes* ensemble

that reacts to voice and The Unseen's remarkable garments with their color changing dye that react to light, air pressure, and heat. Another Iris Van Herpen piece done in conjunction with SHOWstudio in London is a fascinating piece that blurs the lines between fashion/technology, the body/dress, and 2-D vs. 3-D as well. We will also include some objects that will be interactive and we are commissioning the next phase of London-based Cute Circuit's twitter dress – which visitors will be able to tweet and send computer animations to its LED screen-embedded fabric.

And much of the rest remains to be seen!



Figure 5: Overall view of introductory gallery of #techstyle featuring work of Alexander McQueen, Nick Knight for SHOWstudio, and Issey Miyake on loan from SHOWstudio, Phillipa Horan, and Liana Krupp. Photograph © 2016 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

### Exhibition dates

- *Think Pink*, October 3, 2013 – May 26, 2014
- *Hollywood Glamour, Fashion and Jewelry from the Silver Screen*, September 9, 2014 – March 8, 2015
- *#techstyle*, March 6 – July 10, 2016

### References

Atkinson, Nathalie. February 20, 2015. 'Preserving Hollywood glamour – one costume at a time'. In *The Globe and Mail*. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/fashion-and-beauty/fashion/preserving-hollywood-glamour-one-costume-at-a-time/article23074041/>

### Details of objects in the Illustrations

#### Figure 1 Overall Gallery View Think Pink

##### *Dianthus floribus solitariis*

Plate 24 in John Edwards (English, 1742–1815), *The British Herbal*, London, 1770

Etching and engraving, hand-colored

Bequest of George P. Dike—Elita R. Dike Collection, 1969 69.142

**Sewing case with pin cushion**

United States (New England), 1790

Silk plain weave, wool, linen, embroidered with gilt wrapped thread and silk

Gift of Mrs. Edward Jackson Holmes, 1954 54.1345

**Doll's dress, robe à la française**

Europe, 1750–90

Silk plain weave (taffeta)

The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 1943 43.1772a-b

**Stomacher**

Europe, 1700–30

Silk plain weave embroidered with silk and metallic thread and trimmed with braid

The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 1943 43.1924

Photograph © 2016 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

**Figure 2****Man's formal suit**

France, 1770–80

Silk plain weave, silk satin, embroidered with silk

The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 1943 43.1667a-b

**Two Children with Dog**

Unknown American, 1780-1800

Oil on canvas

Gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch, 1980 1980.433

Photograph © 2016 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

**Figure 3 Overall view of Think Pink Gallery including:****Man's suit**

United States, 2013

**Ralph Lauren** (American, founded 1967)

Wool twill suit, cotton plain weave shirt, taffeta tie, nubuck shoes

Hamish Bowles

**Evening dress**

France, summer 1939

Designed by **Elsa Schiaparelli** (Italian, active in France, 1890–1973)

Fabric by **Ducharne**

Silk twill weave with satin and moiré stripe

Frank B. Bemis Fund, John H. and Ernestine A. Payne Fund, Arthur Tracy Cabot Fund, Otis Norcross Fund, William E. Nickerson Fund, and Edwin E. Jack Fund, 2009 2009.5027.1-2



**Evening dress**

United States, pre-fall 2010

Designed by **Oscar de la Renta** (American, born in the Dominican Republic in 1932)

Synthetic net, ombré dyed and embroidered with chiffon ribbon, sequins and beads

The Evelyn H. Lauder Fashion Collection—Gift of Leonard A. Lauder, 2013 2013.707

**Evening dress**

United States, 2009–10

Designed by **Naeem Khan** (Indian, born in 1958)

Silk plain weave, nylon net, embroidered with mylar and silver sequins

The Evelyn H. Lauder Fashion Collection—Gift of Leonard A. Lauder, 2013 2013.772.1-2

**Jumpsuit**

United States, 2013

Designed by **Isabel Toledo** (American, born in Cuba in 1961)

Silk organdie

Gift of Ruben and Isabel Toledo, 2013

**Figure 4 Overall view of Hollywood Glamour exhibition showing**

Dresses by Travis Banton, Adrian, and Coco Chanel and jewelry by Trabert & Hoeffler, Inc.—Mauboussin, Paul Flato and Verger Frerers. Lenders to the exhibition include Hamish Bowles Collection, John Davey, Drexel University, FIDM, Susan Kaplan, Neil Lane, Karen Rotenberg, and Fred and Jean Sharf.

Photograph © 2016 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

**Figure 5 Overall view of introductory gallery of #techstyle featuring work of Alexander McQueen, Nick Knight for SHOWstudio, and Issey Miyake on loan from SHOWstudio, Phillipa Horan, and Liana Krupp.**

Photograph © 2016 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston