

from mood board to museum

With a bumper crop of exhibitions, fashion is fast becoming art. By Baey Shi Chen

Up until the last day of *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty*, queues snaked far along the New York City sidewalk. The inconvenience was a small price to pay for a glimpse of the late designer's work. The exhibition, which drew over 660,000 visitors, became the eighth biggest show for the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET). Response was so overwhelming that its run was even extended.

Also honoured recently was Jean Paul Gaultier, whose 35-year oeuvre was the theme of a showcase titled *Jean Paul Gaultier: From The Catwalk To The Sidewalk* at Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. It will embark on an international tour after that, with stops in Dallas, San Francisco, Madrid and Rotterdam.

In other high-profile exhibitions across the world this year, subjects included couture classicist Madame Grès, avant-gardé whiz Hussein Chalayan and milliner Stephen Jones. Style icon Daphne Guinness also released a selection of couture pieces from her exquisite wardrobe for display at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology. From the popular and critical reception these events have garnered, it's apparent that fashion is now increasingly regarded as serious art.

It all began in the Noughties, when luxury flagships sought to combine design and retail. Notable examples include the Prada Epicenter in New York and the Louis Vuitton and Hermès stores in Tokyo – designed by the likes of Jun Aoki and Pritzker Architecture Prize laureates Rem Koolhaas and Renzo Piano. At home, on the Marina Bay Promenade, stands

the Louis Vuitton Island Maison, the newest addition to a line of progressive boutiques.

And to further portray themselves as arbiters of fine taste, cutting-edge structures by luxury labels, such as the Prada Transformer – also by Koolhaas – and the Chanel Travelling Pavilion by Zaha Hadid, now host art exhibitions and cultural events too.

STATE OF THE ART

Fashion as art and culture is not a novel concept: Established institutions such as Victoria & Albert Museum in London, Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, and MET have celebrated fashion as an artistic discipline and sociological influence for years.

Still, fashion remains a fairly niche genre – and an issue that divides cultural critics. Many feel that exhibiting fashion in museums gives it undeserved credibility, given its inherently commercial and disposable nature. Tyler Green, who edits the influential blog *Modern Art Notes*, charged: “They are gate-turning shows rather than scholarly investigating shows that you would expect from a mature museum.”

The astonishing success of McQueen's exhibition has managed to disprove this. Obviously, the designer's tragic suicide and the fact that the Duchess of Cambridge donned a McQueen gown for her wedding contributed to the extraordinary popularity.

For Andrew Bolton, who curated the exhibition, however, it was the highly artistic and complex nature of McQueen's work that sold the tickets. “He was a wonderful

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craftsman, but he was also an artist who challenged us and tapped into our desires and fears,” he said.

“I think people will not only see how beautifully these clothes were made but also realise that fashion isn’t just about wearability and functionality – it’s also about telling a story and engaging deeply with ideas about identity, gender, race or class.”

Setting fashion in a socio-cultural milieu was also a major driving force behind the Gaultier exhibition. “I wanted to create an exhibition on Jean Paul Gaultier more than any other couturier because of his great humanity,” explained Nathalie Bondil, director and chief curator at Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

“Beyond the technical virtuosity resulting from exceptional expertise in the various

skills involved in haute couture, an unbridled imagination and ground-breaking artistic collaborations, he offers an open-minded vision of society, a crazy, sensitive, funny, sassy world in which everyone can assert his or her own identity, a world without discrimination, a unique ‘fusion couture.’ Beneath Jean Paul Gaultier’s wit and irreverence lies a true generosity of spirit and a very powerful message for society.”

In 2010, the National Museum of Singapore also paid tribute to the designer’s intricate stage costumes with *Christian Lacroix: The Costumier*, while a retrospective on couturier Valentino Garavani’s work opened at Resorts World Sentosa earlier this year. According to Olga Iserlis, director of co-organiser Twise, it offered “a glimpse into Valentino’s own

creative genius as well as his major influence on shaping the fashion industry while making women look beautiful and feel like a movie star over the past 50 years”.

Increasing acknowledgement of fashion’s cultural and artistic significance has encouraged luxury brands to chronicle their heritage and *savoir faire* with their own museums. In conjunction with its 90th anniversary celebrations, Italian stalwart Gucci launched the Gucci Museo. Situated in Florence at Palazzo della Mercanzia, it houses a permanent exhibition of its history and icons as well as art and retail spaces, culminating in a multi-layered experience.

Eventually, whether you support or oppose the concept of fashion as art, you will appreciate the accessibility, and the fascination and discovery it brings.