MAGAZINE

How the Delayed Opening of *About Time* Created an Opportunity for the Met

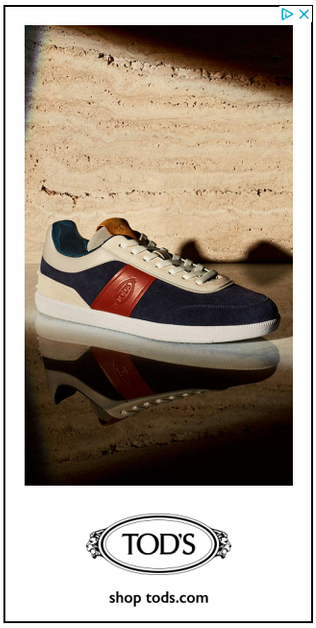
BY ANDREW BOLTON
September 25, 2020

In this Victorian riding habit (left), from American outfitter Frederick Loeser & Co., circa 1897, a pinched waist expands into bulbous hips. Its shape is mimicked in this woolen suit (right) from Victor Joris, 1968. *Fashion Editor: Hamish Bowles.* Photographed by Ethan James Green, *Vogue*, November 2020

As "About Time: Fashion and Duration" was preparing to open on October 29, Andrew Bolton, the Wendy Yu Curator in Charge of The Costume Institute at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, spoke to Hamish Bowles about his process of reflection and re-curation.

TO BE HONEST, it's been wonderful to revisit "About Time"—a luxury that I've never had in any previous exhibition. As I have said, I wanted to stage an exhibition that was a meditation on fashion and temporality—drawing out the tensions between change and endurance, transience and permanence, ephemerality and persistence. Originally the idea was to create two timelines: a linear chronology of fashion from 1870 to 2020, celebrating the Met's 150th anniversary and focusing on the fleeting and fugitive rhythm of fashion. The second timeline—the "interventions"—would represent a series of nonsequential counterchronologies, like knots or folds in time, exploring the interconnectedness of history, the past, and the present.

Yves Saint Laurent for Christian Dior's "Chicago" mink and crocodile jacket from fall 1960 (left) is paired with a similar jacket (right) from Maison Margiela Artisanal by John Galliano's spring 2020 collection. Credit: Photo: Courtesy of the Met Museum/Nicholas Alan Cope (left) Gorunway.com (right)



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The linear timeline would be all black silhouettes, and the cyclical timeline white. But this really limited the curation and always frustrated me. So I decided to make the whole curation black, and it's so much stronger. You now make the comparisons between the pairings immediately.

Es Devlin's exhibition design had already been set. It was basically two enormous clocks with garments placed in between the ticks—meaning there are markings that look like the minutes of a clock, and within each minute there would be a pairing, the first representing the sweeping history of fashion and the second the more fragmented chronology. But I often build in my constant changes of mind (much to the chagrin of my colleagues!), and the design allowed me to change anything right to the last minute.

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So there were opportunities to revisit parts that I felt weren't working. We had this incredible mid-1890s American raincoat with exaggerated gigot sleeves, for instance, which I have now paired with a coat from J.W. Anderson's fall 2020 collection. It's now such a strong juxtaposition—stronger than it was. We also have one of John Galliano's repurposed looks from the Maison Margiela Artisanal spring 2020 collection, which I've paired with Saint Laurent's "Chicago" mink and crocodile jacket from his fall 1960 collection for Christian Dior that we acquired several years ago.

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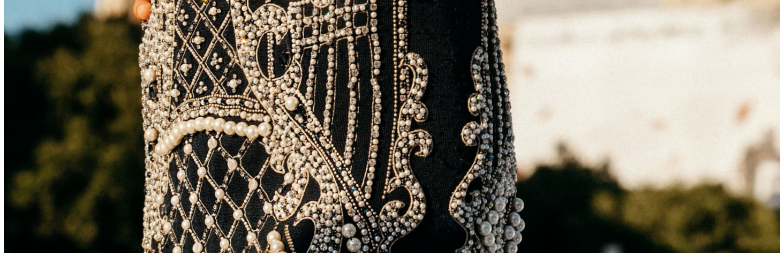

A recently acquired shift dress from Patrick Kelly from the '80s will be paired this pearl-encrusted dress by Olivier Rousteing for Balmain, which was shown in 2012 and again at fall 2020 couture. Photo: Gorunway.com

I also wanted to include more designers that weren't so well known and maybe had been written out of fashion history. So I paired a Frederick Loeser & Co. riding habit from circa 1897 with a Victor Joris suit from 1968 that Baby Jane Holzer had given us. We were researching Joris as we wrote the label, but he served as assistant to both Dior and Balmain.

The bigger change to the curation was really a direct response to Black Lives Matter. When I first worked on the curation, I wasn't as focused on issues of race and ethnicity or gender and sexuality. It was purely aesthetic: I was looking at changes in silhouettes from 1870 through to the present and creating the strongest juxtapositions with the "interventions." But with the social-justice movements of this spring and summer, I looked at the curation and knew I wanted to include more Black, indigenous, people-of-color designers. BLM has made me reflect on fashion curation more generally and the need to create new, more inclusive definitions. I think that we need to readdress the misperception that fashion is exclusively Western, and we need to construct more diverse fashion histories and narratives. This is something that I'm thinking about for future shows; every decision that I make going forward has to be informed by race and ethnicity and gender and sexuality. The awareness can't go away; this is a lifelong commitment.

An early iteration of the little black dress from the Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel, ca. 1927 (left), takes on a more literal meaning in this garment (right) from Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh, 2018. Photographed by Ethan James Green, *Vogue*, November 2020

Initially, in one pairing, for example, I had Chanel's iconic little black dress from ca. 1927 with a rather literal copy by Norell from 1965. But I'd always had Virgil Abloh's "Little Black Dress" in the back of my mind: equally as strong but more ironic. And I wanted very much for Stephen Burrows to be part of the '70s group, but we had nothing of his in the collection that was black; it was all his signature color blocking, so I spent months scouring eBay, 1stDibs, Etsy, and I managed to find two black dresses that I bought for the museum. Out of the two, I decided to include a piece with his trademark lettuce edging finished with red topstitching. That led me to pair him with Lamine Kouyate of XULY.Bët, who also finishes his garments with red topstitching. It's become one of my favorite comparisons in the show, and I would never have made the connection without pushing myself to think about things differently.

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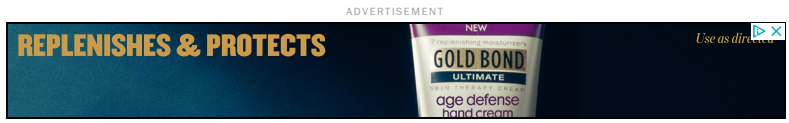


We didn't have a lot of Patrick Kelly in the collection, and I found on Etsy one of his '80s black shift dresses with faux pearls in a heart motif that I'm pairing with a piece by Olivier Rousteing for Balmain, a black dress completely encrusted with pearls, designed in 2012 and shown again as part of his recent fall 2020 couture collection. I'm a huge fan of Shayne Oliver—I think he's such a talented and thoughtful designer. I've included a spring 2015 Hood By Air ensemble with a piece from Helmut Lang's spring 2003 collection, which I thought made sense because of Shayne's admiration of Helmut Lang and his brief tenure at the label.

In light of recent events, it's important to readdress what traditionally have been fashion's defining characteristics—luxury, power, class, ephemerality, obsolescence. I hope the show helps us reflect on these encoded ideologies and encourages us to raise important questions for the industry.

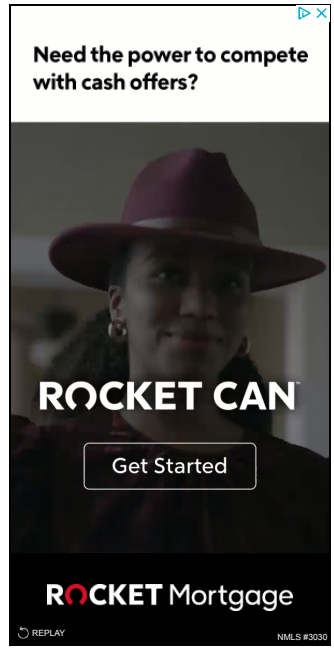
This spring 2015 look from Shayne Oliver's Hood By Air show is being paired with an ensemble from Helmut Lang's spring 2003 collection. Photo: Gorunway.com

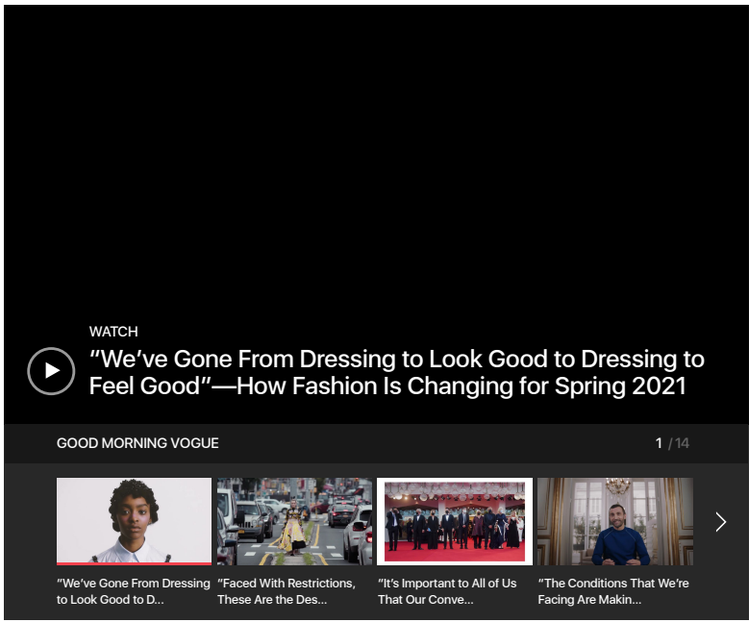
I'd love to revisit the catalog in a second edition—it had already been printed before these changes were made—because I've never had the luxury of curating a show that I feel is this close to my ideal. Part of the show's mission was to highlight our collection—but it's also allowed me to see what gaps we have and the work we need to do to make our collection more diverse and inclusive.

In practical terms it has been a challenge: We're working with a very skeletal staff, and the collections team is rotating their time in the office due to health and safety measures, so progress is slow. But that has allowed me the space to think. The downside, however, was not having access to the objects while the museum was closed—not actually seeing the pieces and getting a full sense of the cut, the finishing, the construction. That's been really difficult. I was allowed back in the museum on July 4, and it was just wonderful to look at the objects again.

A gigot-sleeved raincoat from 1895 (left) is newly paired with a coat from J.W. Anderson's fall 2020 collection (right). Photo: Courtesy of the Met Museum/Nicholas Alan Cope (left) Gorunway.com (right)

Since all the garments in the exhibition will be black, I thought it would be good to end the show with something else: a white garment. I've chosen a dress from Viktor & Rolf's spring 2020 haute couture collection, which is made from upcycled swatches in a patchwork design—an apposite metaphor for the future of fashion with its emphasis on community and sustainability. The dress will be shown floating in an "infinity box" surrounded by a tornado of swatches (inspired by the artist E. V. Day's "Exploding Couture" series from 1999-2002), like a weather-worn phoenix rising from the ashes.





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