

First Monday in May Exhibition Analysis
Buf 3310: Contemporary Design and Luxury Markets
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Fashion exhibitions have emerged as a potent medium for bridging the gap between fashion, art, and the public. They foster a deeper appreciation for fashion as a legitimate art form. These exhibitions often include historical garments, providing a contextualized view of fashion within historical, social, and artistic narratives. The immersive and theatrical nature of these exhibitions encourages visitors to experience fashion in multisensory, intellectual, and emotional ways, similar to how they would interact with other art forms. By positioning fashion in the same institutional spaces as traditional art, curators emphasize the aesthetic and cultural significance of clothing, moving it beyond its commercial associations and into the realm of artistic expression. This repositioning enables audiences to engage with garments in ways that emphasize their craftsmanship, creativity, and cultural relevance.

Fashion exhibitions encompass both contemporary and historical pieces, demonstrating the continuity of design principles and themes throughout history. This fusion of past and present emphasizes fashion's enduring significance as an artistic medium and a social commentary. By making fashion accessible to a broad audience, these exhibitions allow the public to engage with high fashion garments that would otherwise be limited to exclusive runways or private collections. Fashion exhibitions serve as a crucial bridge between fashion, art, and the public, transforming garments into artworks and fostering spaces for cultural discourse. They challenge conventional perceptions of fashion, encouraging a deeper appreciation of its dual role as an artistic and societal force. These exhibitions invite the public to participate in fashion as an evolving art form, continuously influenced by historical references and contemporary technology. Additionally, fashion exhibitions facilitate cultural dialogues that connect the public with broader social, political, and historical contexts.

Cultural institutions play a pivotal role in fostering a deeper understanding of fashion and art by offering platforms that merge historical context, artistic interpretation, and public engagement. The documentary reveals the trials and tribulations involved with the preparation and execution of the *China: Through the Looking Glass* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, viewers are provided with a front-row seat to the intricate process of elevating fashion into the realm of high art. This documentary showcases how museums like the Met not only preserve fashion's legacy but also present it as an essential form of artistic expression capable of provoking thought, dialogue, and reflection within society. Through exhibitions, fashion is examined in a way that reveals its cultural and historical significance. One of the primary roles of cultural institutions is to position fashion alongside other revered art forms, such as painting, sculpture, and architecture. Andrew Bolton, the lead curator, intentionally juxtaposes haute couture with traditional Chinese art, thereby opening up a conversation about cultural appropriation, influence, and exchange ("First Monday in May," 2016). This curatorial choice encourages viewers to engage with fashion beyond surface-level aesthetics and consider the historical and cultural implications behind the designs. Cultural institutions like the Met encourage critical analysis and reflection through the curation of fashion exhibitions that challenge traditional boundaries and provoke cultural conversations. In doing so, the exhibitions act as intermediaries that connect fashion with broader societal narratives, prompting a more profound appreciation and understanding of fashion's artistic and cultural dimensions.

The Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art has played a pivotal role in elevating fashion's status. For instance, *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* (2011) showcased fashion's

ability to convey complex emotions and ideas surrounding identity, cultural commentary, and politics, intertwining them with avant-garde aesthetics, similar to traditional art forms like painting or sculptures (Alexander McQueen, 2018). The exhibition was so successful it traveled to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 2015. (First Monday in May, 2016) It was the first time it was publicly seen as an art form. Curators often design these exhibitions to reflect and respond to contemporary cultural issues, using fashion as a lens to examine identity, politics, and society. Exhibitions like *China: Through the Looking Glass* explore the impact of Chinese aesthetics on Western fashion and China's centuries-long influence on the fashion world (*China: Through the Looking Glass*, 2015). Through exhibitions, fashion is recognized not only as a commercial enterprise, but also as a significant and dynamic art form that shapes, and is shaped by, the cultural landscape.

Andrew Bolton, in 2015, was announced as the next head of the costume institute. (First Monday in May, 2016) His innovative and thought-provoking approach to curating fashion merges the worlds of art and fashion, elevating fashion to the level of fine art and creating an experience that is both aesthetically pleasing and intellectually stimulating. As Bolton stated in the documentary "First Monday in May," there are still individuals within the museum who hold a traditional view of art and dismiss fashion as a legitimate art form. (First Monday in May, 2016) Mr. Bolton's curatorial expertise lies in his ability to engage all the senses, immersing visitors in a multisensory experience. His strength is his ability to create exhibitions that are both visually stunning and conceptually rich, answering the perennial question, "Is fashion art?," with a resounding "yes." (Brookins, 2024) In his upcoming exhibition *Sleeping Beauties: Reawakening Fashion*, curated from the 33,000 pieces in the institute's collection, with a 250-piece exhibition exploring the notions of fragility and femininity. (Brookins, 2024) Anna spoke in the documentary and stated, "it is rare to find someone so creative that they can change the way you look at an artform (First Monday in May, 2016)."

Bolton guarantees that his exhibitions not only display the aesthetic appeal of fashion but also evoke the historical and artistic context of each piece. Bolton's innovative vision is deeply appreciated by his peers, including Anna Wintour, who credits him with making fashion history contemporary and relevant. (Brookins, 2024) Wintour told *The Hollywood Reporter* that "Andrew's great gift is not only his ability to engage us with fascinating narratives through his exhibitions, but that he has this extraordinary way of giving fashion's history contemporary relevance. So many times he'll mention an idea, a thought, an intuition about the curatorial approach to a show, only for me to then see it emerge in the culture. His way of looking at the past always has one eye to the future." (Brookins, 2024) His unique talent for recontextualizing the past with a progressive perspective renders his exhibitions both enduringly relevant and visionary.

Mr. Bolton's curatorial endeavors consistently redefine the boundaries of fashion, art, and culture, fostering dialogues that transcend the confines of the museum. His collaboration with designer Thom Browne further elevates his work, as their reciprocal influence elevates his curatorial choices. Together, they form a formidable fashion alliance, engaging in intuitive and abstract discussions on art and fashion that contribute to the intellectual depth of Mr. Bolton's exhibitions. The cultural impact of their partnership is profound, as they collectively contribute to shifting public perception of fashion from mere attire to a recognized form of high art. Their

combined influence not only shapes the trajectory of contemporary fashion but also deepens the public's appreciation of fashion as an integral component of cultural history and artistic expression.

Thom Browne and Andrew Bolton share a unique synergy in their respective fields, combining fashion and curatorial expertise to shape and influence the cultural dialogue surrounding fashion as art. Both men are renowned for their ability to challenge and redefine the boundaries of fashion: Browne through his avant-garde tailoring and designs (Dacre, 2024), and Bolton through his curatorial work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute (First Monday in May, 2016). Browne and Bolton exemplify the power of collaboration between fashion design and curation as they continue to push the boundaries of how fashion is viewed, consumed, and appreciated, solidifying its role as a key player in both the artistic and cultural landscapes. Together, their contributions highlight the intersection of fashion, art, and culture, underscoring the significance of fashion as a powerful medium of artistic and cultural expression. For both Browne and Bolton, fashion is not simply about aesthetics—it's about creating a dialogue that resonates with contemporary issues while also honoring the artistic and historical contexts from which fashion emerges. (Brookins, 2024) Through their individual and collaborative efforts, Browne and Bolton have become central figures in the ongoing conversation about fashion's place within the broader art world. Both use their platforms to challenge norms and elevate fashion as a vehicle for cultural critique and artistic innovation. Browne and Bolton both emphasize the importance of storytelling in fashion, whether through exhibitions or runway shows.

Thom Browne's influence lies in his ability to transform traditional notions of tailoring, creating a style that merges classic silhouettes with an offbeat, avant-garde twist. His gender-neutral designs, characterized by cropped jackets, kilts, and ankle-grazing trousers, have become iconic, bringing an intellectual edge to menswear and womenswear alike (Dacre, 2024). His commitment to quality and detail reflects his understanding of fashion as an art form that endures over time, a sentiment echoed by Bolton, whose exhibitions have continually reinforced the idea that fashion is worthy of serious cultural and intellectual consideration. Browne's work often blurs the lines between fashion and performance art, with his runway shows featuring theatrical, narrative-driven presentations that engage audiences on a deeper cultural level (Dacre, 2024). This approach mirrors Bolton's curatorial style, where fashion exhibitions are designed not only to showcase garments but also to provoke thought and discussion about broader cultural themes such as gender, identity, and historical continuity. Browne's collections often tell a story—such as his recent homage to the Olympics, where he recast sportswear classics as wearable pieces of art, or his ongoing exploration of uniformity and individualism (Dacre, 2024).

In the documentary *The First Monday in May*, we see how cultural institutions are crucial in expanding the audience for fashion as an art form and fostering a deeper understanding of fashion and art. Through thoughtful curation, public engagement, and the elevation of fashion within the art world, these institutions create spaces for critical examination and appreciation of fashion as a cultural and artistic force. By bridging the gap between the public, fashion, and art, they cultivate an enriched cultural dialogue that recognizes fashion's role in shaping and reflecting the human experience. The annual Met Gala, featured prominently in *The First Monday in May*, serves not only as a fundraising event but also as a public spectacle that brings

fashion into the global spotlight. By hosting such high-profile events, cultural institutions democratize access to fashion exhibitions, making them accessible to the public and fostering a dialogue between art, fashion, and the public. It attracts a diverse array of celebrities, artists, and influencers, thereby drawing public attention to the Costume Institute's exhibitions and encouraging broader engagement with fashion. The blending of high culture and popular culture, as seen in the gala's mix of Hollywood stars and historic art, exemplifies how institutions can shape public perceptions and broaden the appreciation of fashion as an influential art form. The First Monday in May highlights the meticulous effort that goes into curating an exhibition, with Bolton and his team striving to represent the complexity of Chinese cultural influences in Western fashion without reducing it to mere exoticism.

The exhibition consisted mostly of three periods of Chinese history: Imperial China, Nationalist China, and the People's Republic of China (China: Through the Looking Glass, 2015). The Costume Institute decided to partner with the Asian department to honor the heritage and provide context that was missing from the artistry of fashion design. Bolton hired a milliner named Stephen Jones to create headpieces for all the garments, adding another layer to the immersive experience of the exhibition (China: Through the Looking Glass, 2015). China Through the Looking Glass featured 5,000 to 6,000 couture items and one of the most comprehensive collections of Asian art in the Western Hemisphere (First Monday in May, 2016). Anna Wintour raised \$120 million dollars for the Costume Department, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors (First Monday in May, 2016). Bolton stated, "Many people have a superficial understanding of fashion; they underestimate the power of clothes to tell stories (First Monday in May, 2016)." Bolton also stated, "As the definition of art is becoming more elastic, we are no longer bound by the nineteenth-century categories of applied art (First Monday in May, 2016)." Overcoming the difficulty of political debates between the Costume Institute and the Asian Art Department, Bolton successfully created one of the biggest exhibitions the Met has done.

China Through the Looking Glass was a collaboration between the Costume Institute and the Asian Art Department, revealing "images of China in the Western vision (First Monday in May, 2016)." Bolton explained that the exhibition examines the impact of Chinese aesthetics on Western fashion (First Monday in May, 2016). He clarified that Through the Looking Glass was based on the novel Alice in Wonderland (China: Through the Looking Glass, 2015). He further explained that part of the exhibition attempts to untangle different layers of meaning and exchange. Bolton commented, "In the exhibition's approach, Chinese designers tend to be inspired by two overarching themes: Chinese history and cinema." Cinema played a key role in the exhibition, acting as a mediator between the fashion of the Western designers and Chinese artifacts consisting of art and garments (China: Through the Looking Glass, 2015).

Anna May Wong was a famous Chinese figure of the 1930s cinema, playing the role of the orientalized femme fatale. She represented this fabricated character, embracing the stereotypes of the "Dragon Lady" and "Lotus Blossom" (First Monday in May, 2016). Andrew Bolton claims that Anna Wong was never truly embraced by either culture, possibly due to these stereotypes from both cultures (First Monday in May, 2016). Ms. Wong's characters represented a figure to project these foreign fears and sexual desires for the unknown. Andrew Bolton stated that he referenced the cinema and used it to "tease out the complexities and dangers (First Monday in May, 2016)."

John Galliano, the previous creative director of Christian Dior and current creative director of Maison Margiela, took a lot of inspiration from China for his spring 2003 collection for Dior (First Monday in May, 2016). When asked by Bolton about his inspiration from China for the collection, Galliano spoke of it as a visionary dream, a fantasy. Galliano's inspiration came from breathing life into a fictional character, creating a dream. Galliano continued to explain his vision as an artist explains their art, their creation. Galliano said that when he fantasized about the imagery of China, it gave him an alluring sense of mystery and danger. He further explained, "I paint a picture of who she is, how she looks by candlelight; I express my emotions through the cut." The designer divulged, "It is easy to seem like the connection is inauthentic, but creating helps me escape... the creative process is my meditation (First Monday in May, 2016)."

The exhibition galleries consist of different themes reflecting Chinese culture. Bernardo Bertolucci's film "The Last Emperor" opens the exhibition; at the end and center of the hallway is displayed a festival robe worn by the last emperor when he was four (China: Through the Looking Glass, 2015). Bolton said that embedded in imperial robes were subtle symbols representing royalty and that they were recognized by twelve imperial signs or symbols (China: Through the Looking Glass, 2015). He also stated that typically, designers gravitated toward the imperial robes for inspiration (China: Through the Looking Glass, 2015), as designers like Guo Pei have found renewed inspiration from these same garments. The exhibition was intentionally created to invoke thought and to question how and if the West has taken advantage of the East, and if they still misunderstand China.

The Apfel Gallery focuses on a dress from China that was introduced in the 1920s called the Qipao. The Qipao was heavily inspired by the imperial robe but incorporated Western tailoring techniques (China: Through the Looking Glass, 2015). Bolton explained that the Qipao was originally a symbol of modernity and emancipation (China: Through the Looking Glass, 2015). The Qipao was similarly freeing, like the flapper dress of the 1920s (China: Through the Looking Glass, 2015). Guo Pei recognized this same dress design as she broke away from a renovated Qipao, which was a popular look at the time, before creating her own brand. (Guo Pei on Redefining China's Own Bridalwear, 2022)

One of the galleries was dedicated to blue and white porcelain. Bolton explained that blue and white porcelain originated in China and was exported to the West in the 16th century. The willow pattern porcelain was so popular, it was readapted by the Chinese craftsmen (China: Through the Looking Glass, 2015). One of the galleries was dedicated to the art of calligraphy, featuring a dress from Dior covered in calligraphy. As appealing as the garment is, the dress is actually inscribed with a poem about the author being ill and having a stomachache (China: Through the Looking Glass, 2015).

One of the galleries was entirely covered in de Gournay wallpaper and focused on Chinese silk. On the silk were motifs that similarly appeared on the Chinese-inspired wallpaper (China: Through the Looking Glass, 2015). The room also featured a painted silk dress from Balenciaga and an Alexander McQueen directly inspired by de Gournay (China: Through the Looking Glass, 2015). Another gallery also dedicated to motifs highlighted High Chinoiserie: Chinese figures

with Chinese botany and landscapes (China: Through the Looking Glass, 2015). Bolton expanded beyond clothing by featuring a gallery focused on perfumes, showing that some of the most famous perfumes were Asian-inspired. Saint Laurent romanticized and exoticized Chinese culture, finding inspiration from opium wars and dens; creating the "Opium" perfume (China: Through the Looking Glass, 2015). The exhibition was also upstairs.

The "after court" room focused on Chinese Opera consisted of Dior dresses created by John Galliano inspired by the Peking Opera and the Queen Mother of England (China: Through the Looking Glass, 2015). It also had two recycled opera costumes by Maison Martin Margiela from the 1930s (China: Through the Looking Glass, 2015). The Weber galleries had Chinese decorative art "dating back to the Neolithic Period," stated Andrew Bolton (China: Through the Looking Glass, 2015). It contained artifacts like Tang dynasty mirrors, Han figures, and Neolithic pottery. The small Buddha gallery, debated in the documentary, was reserved for Guo Pei's. Leaving the gallery, featured Mao's Suit, a political icon and leader before his passing (China: Through the Looking Glass, 2015).

In conclusion, fashion exhibitions serve as a formidable medium for reshaping public perception of fashion, transforming garments into artworks that stimulate intellectual and cultural engagement. Through the careful curation of historical and contemporary pieces, these exhibitions elevate fashion to the realm of fine art, providing insights into its social, political, and artistic significance. Curators such as Andrew Bolton play a pivotal role in merging fashion with other esteemed art forms, encouraging audiences to perceive fashion not merely as commercial attire, but as a dynamic, evolving art form that mirrors and influences cultural narratives. By fostering dialogue between fashion, art, and the public, these exhibitions challenge conventional boundaries and invite critical reflection on fashion's role within the broader cultural landscape.

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