

The Cultural Impact of Fashion Exhibitions in "The First Monday in May" Fashion

Documentary

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The history of exhibitions was mainly known for art pieces like paintings, architecture, and sculpture. In the art world, decorative arts, costumes, and fashion were looked down upon. As more exhibitions focus on garments, it is safe to say we can compare the importance of history and fashion. They go beyond runways and clothing, diving into the depths of culture, art, history, and societal evolution. "The First Monday in May," a fashion documentary directed by Andrew Rossi, takes us behind the scenes of the annual Met Gala and the preparation of the accompanying Costume Institute exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "The First Monday in May" follows the creation of "China: Through the Looking Glass," the most attended fashion exhibition in the history of The Costume Institute at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the 2015 Met Gala, the star-studded fundraiser. In this essay, we will delve into how fashion exhibitions, as exemplified by the Met Gala and its associated documentary, influence culture and society, offering insights into the dynamics of fashion, art, and identity.

Fashion exhibitions serve as a mirror reflecting the culture and society of their time. The Met Gala, known as the "Super Bowl of Fashion," is an exemplar of this phenomenon. Through this event, the Costume Institute at the Met Museum has the opportunity to explore themes that are not only culturally relevant but also often sensitive. For instance, the Met Gala's 2015 theme "China: Through the Looking Glass" opened a dialogue about Orientalism, cultural appropriation, and the impact of Western perceptions of Chinese culture. Fashion exhibitions, like this one, provide a platform for designers to redefine cultural narratives and promote conversations around cultural sensitivity.



Fashion exhibitions offer a visual and artistic language that transcends words. The Met Gala's Costume Institute exhibition featured in "The First Monday in May" displays garments and accessories that not only embody the history of fashion but also convey the essence of the cultural, social, and political climate of the time. As mentioned in "The First Monday in May," Thomas Campbell explained his experience as the curator of decorative arts, costume, and

fashion. Fashion exhibitions serve as a showcase of fashion history, trends, and artistic expressions. The costumes themselves are artistic masterpieces, and the exhibition's curation tells a story that goes beyond fabric and stitching. When John Galliano was interviewed, he explained he looked for inspiration in China because "I think it was that sense of mystery and danger... It was a fantasized.... vision of China." It is not new for professionals in the fashion industry to recognize the superficial understanding of fashion outsiders may have, but people devalue the power of clothes to tell stories or to speak to people. This documentary shows how curators, designers, and artists collaborate to create an immersive experience that transcends fashion and becomes art.



Fashion exhibitions have the power to challenge and expand the narrative of cultural representation and diversity. The Met Gala, through its themes and exhibitions, has showcased the diversity of global cultures, shedding light on the rich tapestry of fashion from different corners of the world. To quote Koda, "The Met Gala was the invention of this small group of fashion professionals." To create this event once a year, Anna Wintour would throw a major party where the rich and famous can attend to fundraise for their yearly operating budget. This shows how the people that fashion over the years has funded itself like a community full of diverse individuals who speak the same language through textiles and dyes. "The Met Gala is a celebration of a multi-cultural moment. Pop and fine art mix in the Metropolitan Museum... you can have an acting icon next to a musical icon, next to a political icon. It was like a giant aquarium on that night," said Andre Leon Talley. There should be a clear understanding of how differently American culture will perceive the exhibition compared to how Chinese people will perceive the exhibition; it lies in how the art and history are properly presented. The documentary highlights the efforts made to celebrate diverse identities and cultures, thereby influencing mainstream fashion to become more inclusive and representative of different perspectives.

Fashion exhibitions are essential in preserving and educating the public about the history of fashion. The Met Gala, for instance, often explores historical fashion eras, designers, and movements. By doing so, it ensures that fashion history is not forgotten but rather celebrated. The exhibition “China through the looking glass” can be analyzed through different viewpoints. As much as it is beneficial to preserve and share culture, it must be handled with the utmost respect and sensitivity. “The curators in the Asian Art Department were worried about the topics the exhibition was addressing. It opened debates about colonialism, orientalism, which can be interpreted as being racist (Andrew Bolton).” The documentary "The First Monday in May" offers an inside look at the meticulous efforts made by curators, historians, and conservationists to preserve and present these historical artifacts to the public. “So many designers reference China through the films of the 30s. it’s the China that is the stereotype. And I want to sort of deconstruct those stereotypes,” said Andrew Bolton. As the team put together the biggest Exhibition they have ever done, the conversation of telling China's stories properly keeps circling back to avoid unwanted controversy. In this way, fashion exhibitions bridge the past and the present, serving as educational tools for future generations.



Fashion exhibitions can shape cultural and societal trends. The Met Gala, as depicted in the documentary, has a profound influence on fashion trends. The way the Met Gala works is major brands buy tables to then invite A-B list socialites to dress and represent the brand/theme. The dresses and ensembles worn by celebrities at the gala quickly become fashion statements that are emulated and celebrated. “It's not a commercial consideration. It's a culture consideration.” Anna Wintour adds, “I don’t pretend to be a fashion historian, but I think fashion should be recognized.” This, in turn, influences the broader fashion industry, as designers and brands take cues from the gala's red carpet looks. The documentary effectively illustrates how the Met Gala is not just a social event but a trend-setting spectacle that influences the way we dress and perceive fashion.

Fashion exhibitions empower individuals to express their identity. The Met Gala, as seen in the documentary, has often celebrated and embraced gender diversity, self-expression, and individuality. "I remember seeing people on the streets thinking how they looked like they'd arrived from another planet, but also how brave they were. I was impressed by the power of fashion to confront gender and sexuality," said Andrew Bolton. Fashion through time has always been a form of expression and making power statements when it comes to self-identity, politics, or societal norms. "I think that fashion is supposed to represent what's happening in society, politically, economically." In today's society, many things can trigger certain events or a group of people. It is important when we use fashion as a form of power and identity, we dive into who we are and what that represents. As much as fashion can change over time, the individual person can decide to change with it or stick to one identity. The themes and exhibitions provide a platform for attendees to express their unique interpretations of fashion and culture. This empowerment transcends the event itself and influences how individuals relate to fashion, breaking down traditional gender norms and encouraging self-expression.



Fashion documentaries, like "The First Monday in May," play a crucial role in magnifying the cultural impact of fashion exhibitions. They offer an immersive and behind-the-scenes look at the preparation, design, and execution of these exhibitions. Through the lens of a documentary, viewers gain a deeper understanding of the cultural, artistic, and societal

significance of fashion. This medium allows for a broader audience to appreciate and engage with fashion exhibitions, sparking discussions about their cultural impact.

Fashion exhibitions, as exemplified by the Met Gala and showcased in "The First Monday in May," transcend the realm of clothing and accessories. They offer a multifaceted exploration of culture, art, history, and societal evolution. These exhibitions influence culture and society by reflecting, shaping, and celebrating diversity, identity, and the evolving trends in fashion. Fashion documentaries, in turn, amplify the cultural impact of these exhibitions, allowing a broader audience to engage with and appreciate the artistry and significance of fashion. The Met Gala, as an iconic example, stands as a testament to the cultural power of fashion exhibitions, revealing the profound influence they have on our society and how they continue to shape our understanding of fashion, culture, and identity. In a world that is constantly evolving, fashion exhibitions serve as timeless anchors that connect us to our past, while also inspiring us to embrace and celebrate the future.

Citation

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