

PERIODICO

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Paul Poiret, dubbed “The King of Fashion,” was one of the first twentieth-century couturiers to exploit the position of “artist” explicitly. Determined to depart from the antiquated role of dressmaker, Poiret understood fashion to be the production of experience, anticipating the looming economy of “lifestyle.” On top of interiors, perfumes, model muses, and signed diffusion lines, his most evocative attempt of the auratic were the relational reinventions of the fashion show. Poiret experimented with turning fashion shows into elaborate participatory affairs. His most famous event, “The Thousand and Second Night” (1911), took the form of a staged soirée in the garden of his atelier, where three hundred guests arrived adorned in his new modish (and appropriative) “Persian” dress. If they failed to do so, he would dress them in his own latest designs of the same theme. Poiret’s party behaved more as a happening than runway, where costume, participation, and improvisation were designed to shape collective experience. Rather than autonomous articles of clothing, Poiret’s simulated realities were hinged between surreal performance and highly attuned public-relations tactics. His exploratory runways echo a remarkable similarity to the “experimental” designers of today, from the theatrical dramaturgy of Alexander McQueen to the relational presentations by BLESS.

A series of eight “replicas” of the Paul Poiret ensemble exhibited in *Passageways: On Fashion’s Runway* at Kunsthalle Bern were made by designer Chantal Kirby. Mimicking several couture techniques from the 1910s, Kirby employed strict geometric cutting where a single warp thread is removed to find the exact grain line. In doing so, Kirby engineered perfect rectangles of cloth. Interior stays above the bust were then used to secure the seemingly flat garments to the body. Using various fabrications from silk velvet to metallic linen to toile calico, and through different dyes and treatments that achieved an array of golds that reminisce on Poiret’s famously rich and often jarring colours, the Poiret costume was reimagined several times. Found clumps of “vintage” jewellery from thrift stores were also stitched together as stand-ins for the opulent jewels Poiret used, like the scarab beetle seen in the original exhibited outfit.

The fashion runway, as well as being a formal medium of presentation, also operates as a kind of time portal, where the rapid ephemerality of modernity is captured in the formaldehyde of seasonal style. In this way, fashion has the ability to forge a strange dialectical image, as Walter Benjamin understood it, where time is distorted through the flash of recognition between the present and past, conjuring new critical constellations. They test the uncanny allegory for the passage of history as labyrinthine time that folds back onto itself. As a style of dress vanishes into the exiled démodé, our willingness to be sartorial requires revising. But in this “revising,” fashion always arrives with quotations of its prior selves. Motifs and themes of previous periods are recycled from the refuse of progress and made proximate to each other. This discontinuous upheaval of the past into the present expresses our eternal reworking of history. Fashion-time then is not simply a series of chronological temporalities, but an audacious conception of a history of ideas that breaches the continuum. This series of commissioned replicas rewrite new histories of dress as a suspension of this fashion-time, worn here on model Brit d’Argaville in the archives of Kunsthalle Bern.

The original 1914 “Queen of Sheba” Paul Poiret ensemble appears at Kunsthalle Bern courtesy of the Martin Kamer collection.





KASPAR MÜLLER

MITCHELL ANDERSON

ANNA-SOPHIE BERGER

ANNA KHACHIYAN

DANIEL HORN

AMY LIEN AND ENZO CAMACHO

BERNHARD HEGGLIN

CHANTAL KIRBY AND MATTHEW LINDE

HEJI SHIN, JOHN MILLER,

EMANUEL ROSSETTI,

CALLA HENKEL AND MAX PITEGOFF

