



'In America: An Anthology of Fashion' Dresses Up the Metropolitan Museum

The second part of the Met's American fashion show attempts to display historical fashion tied to a precarious national identity

M BY MATTHEW LINDE IN OPINION | 14 JUN 22



'In America' – the first ever serial show to be held at the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York – recently opened its sequel edition, 'An Anthology of Fashion'. Featuring predominately early 19th to mid-20th-century dressmakers and designers, whom the curator Andrew Bolton, in a video exhibition tour, describes as 'forgotten' and 'overlooked', the show purports a 'more nuanced and less monolithic' historical groundwork for a national fashion. While last year's edition – a dull, cryogenic display of modern America's best and brightest – remains entombed in the Institute's basement Anna Wintour Costume Center, the 2022 edition has been airlifted to the Met's American Wing period rooms to marvellous effect. Coordinated by a series of elaborate tableaux curated by nine film directors and punctuated by seven 'case studies' (vitrines detailing important design junctures), the exhibit provokes a historical diversification of American fashion: explicitly, its bipolar European identity crisis, the creative dawning of the eponymous designer and an African-American contribution.

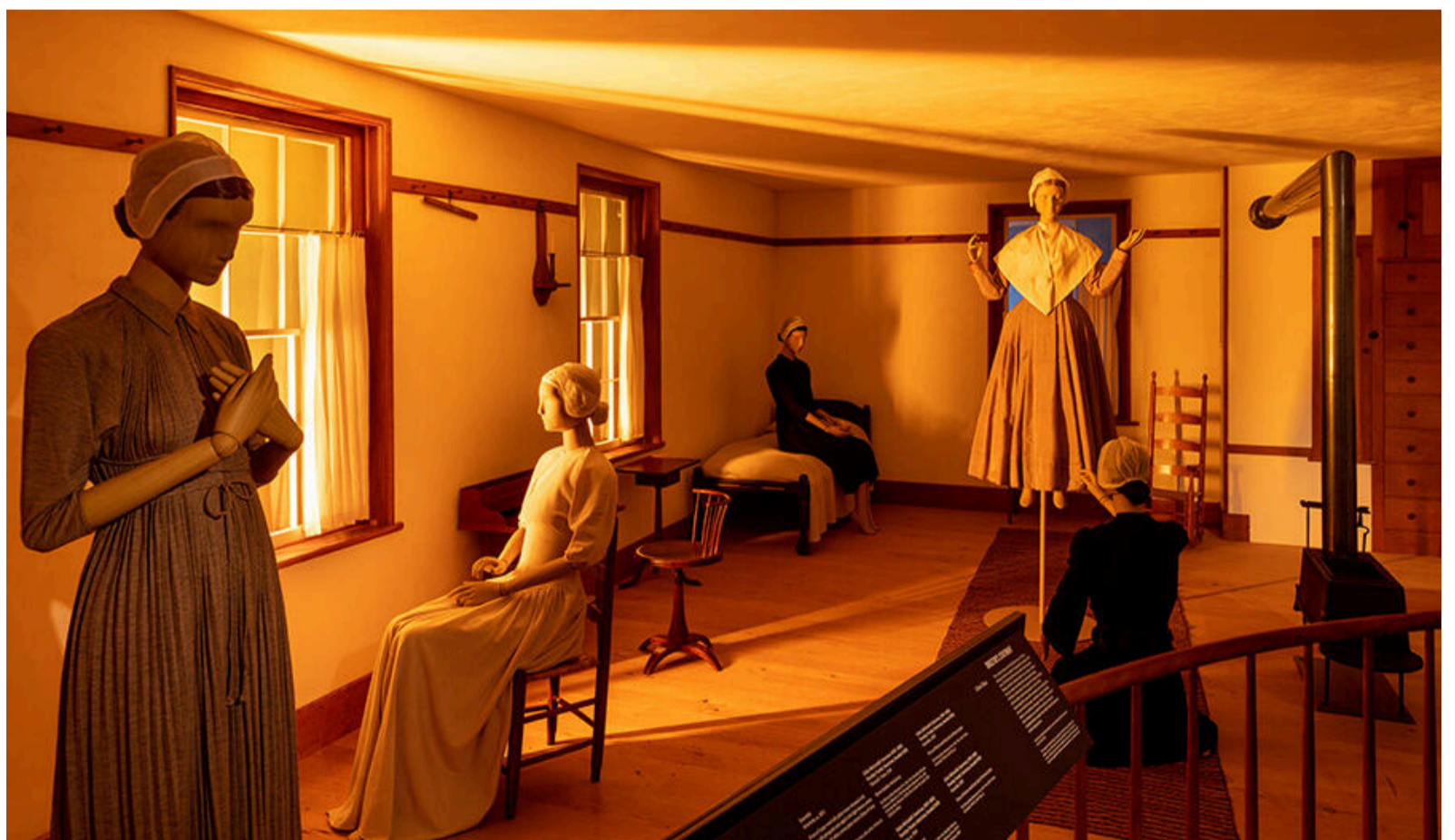
This two-parter completes a trifecta with another two rich exhibitions by the Costume Institute, 'Dangerous Liaisons' in 2004 and 'AngloMania' in 2006, which hijacked the Met's French and English period rooms respectively. This flavour of historic tableaux vivants returns to earlier Met decorative art shows of the 1950s and '60s, such as 'Costume: Period Rooms Re-Occupied in Style' in 1963, as well as to some of the earliest achievements of costume exhibits: the 18th-century waxwork museums and displays of royal effigies. Forfeiting precepts of scenic verisimilitude, however, the period contexts explored in these series have increasingly goaded newer relations of animation – particularly those canonized during ex-*Vogue* editor-in-chief Diana Vreeland's tenure at the Institute: cinematic overexposure and anachronistic arrangement. The result is a moreish melodrama.



McKim, Mead & White Stair Hall staged by Sofia Coppola, 2022, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Courtesy and photograph: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

The most striking vignette – by filmmaker Chloé Zhao – is in the 1835 Shaker Retiring Room. Drenched in warm western light against stoic wooden furnishings, Claire McCardell dresses radiate monastic simplicity. Amid her mid-century monochromatic woollen frocks, an 1870 taupe shirtwaist shaker dress with ivory mantle appears to levitate in rapture. The ash wooden mannequins with articulated arms bear muted contours of facial and hand features. Looking like a Cathy Wilkes installation, the uchronic scene expresses the interwar period of American departure from ornate French fashions. Especially poignant is McCardell's wool and rabbit hair jersey 'wedding dress' – 'a romantic but practical wedding gown for a wartime bride', per the wall label – harmonizing modernist utility as eerily millenarian.

The two Gilded Age rooms curated by Sofia Coppola see five period-appropriate ensembles by immigrated European dressmakers. A faced-away mannequin wearing an 1888 Franziska Noll Gross overdress commands attention to the frothy bustle of deep purple, ornate, ciselé velvet, accented by gold lamé and black seed beads. Equally delicious are the mannequins' soggy, cystic faces, created by artists Rachel Feinstein and John Currin; the distracting features resembling cartoon caricatures of wealthy degenerates by 19th-century political satirists. The Institute's more identifiable, spectacular, high glam erupts in Tom Ford's room, depicting fashion history's 1973 Battle of Versailles, a mediatized catwalk that pits American ready-to-wear designers against Paris couturiers. Here, metallic mannequins fence off in acrobatic bullet time, against the backdrop of John Vanderlyn's 1819 panoramic painting of Versailles. While the mirrored amphitheatre makes referring designs to their didactics difficult, this isn't the time for such pedantry. 'This is Sparta!' on poppers.



Shaker Retiring Room staged by Chloé Zhao, 2022, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Courtesy and photograph: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

The animatronic carousel of ‘unsung heroes’ doesn’t always spin, though. Exciting as it is to finally see Elizabeth Hawes represented, her graphic and witty designs appear unjustly saturnine in the 1859 Gothic Revival Library staged by Janicza Bravo. Martin Scorsese directs Charles James’s architectural ballgowns (including the iconic pink silk faille and copper silk shantung 1953 Clover Leaf) in a Frank Lloyd Wright living room after party – a magnificent technicolour *noir*. But is James (the subject of the 2014 Met gala and exhibit) really a designer ‘relegated to a footnote in the annals of fashion history’ as Bolton said in his preview remarks? Or is this museological reappraisal designed to ‘rescue’ him from an otherwise ‘monolithic’ capture? Who cares? The scene finishes with a lone male mannequin wearing Helen Uffner Vintage Clothing psychotically peering in from the wing’s exterior service hallway.



Frank Lloyd Wright Room staged by Martin Scorsese, 2022, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Courtesy and photograph: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

For those visitors lost in the fantastic frippery, the ‘case study’ vitrines deliver academic relief. Hosted in the entrance are two flat-lays of Brooks Brothers coats, dated 1865 and 1857–65. The first was worn by Lincoln during his second inauguration and assassination – its fractured remnants the result of a custodian rationing the lining out as mementoes – the other, a piece of livery worn by an unidentified enslaved man. The display’s sartorial disjuncture stirs brief *jetztzeit*. After this rare reveal, Lincoln’s black broadcloth will return to its dark, museum storage for five years; the protocols of conservation performing our enduring messianic relationship to clothing. A vitrine in a following room displays an 1861 pared-back Victorian dress in ivory silk taffeta peppered with purple flower brocades, worn by Mary Todd Lincoln, whose provenance reads ‘Probably Elizabeth Keckly’, a luminary African-American dressmaker and the First Lady’s personal modiste. And, while other vitrines are equally arresting, everything competes with neighbouring tableaux, prompting a curatorial information overflow that only inoculates the viewer from the tragedy and transformation of history.



Vanderlyn Panorama staged by Tom Ford, 2022, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Courtesy and photograph: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

The anthological approach, to which the exhibition's subtitle refers, is a reoccurring trope in fashion curation. Is its mode of raconteur non-sequiturs suitable, however, for an explication of an Empire's fashion? Then again, to return to Vreeland, if her revisionist innovation was editorializing museal artefacts to better reflect the present, perhaps Bolton's 'Anthology' follows suit. Not putatively across the sumptuous directorial vignettes, but via the exhibit's historical rebrand envisioned by a contemporary vogue of inclusion and diversity. In this sense, Bolton reverts to yet another fashion exhibition canon: the 19th-century world fairs. At these grand expositions, the commercial development of fashion display promoted nationalistic supremacy. With its show sponsored by Instagram and Condé Nast, America's chief cultural institution pursues this imperative today through the lofty promise of an ambiguous pluralism.

Main Image: Title Wall for 'In America: An Anthology of Fashion' in the American Wing's Charles Engelhard Court, 2022, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Courtesy and photograph: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

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