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The Met Costume Institute:
Evolution, Metamorphosis, and Cultural Phenomenon

Shelby Kanski

Honors Project
2022

Introduction

The Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute, a renowned historic costume collection, has now turned into a representation of mainstream pop culture due to its synonymy with the Met Gala and its exhibitions. What started out in humble origins as the wardrobe of a community theater in the early 1900s (Koda & Glasscock, 2014) has transformed into a global cultural phenomenon, hailed as the preeminent fashion museum of the world (Bowles, 2020). The metamorphosis from operating as a modest dress artifact collection into a current rotation of spectacular thematic exhibitions publicized by the Met Gala, the Costume Institute's "Party of the Year" (Friedman, 2021), did not occur overnight. Whether used as the setting for a blockbuster film such as *Ocean's 8* or associated with being the "Oscars of the East Coast" (Friedman, 2021), the Met Costume Institute's Gala has taken center stage as a cultural reference point. In order to understand this divergence, the evolution of the Met Costume Institute, the metamorphosis of the Met Gala, and the Costume Institute as a cultural phenomenon need to be evaluated and interpreted.

The traction that this museum and its annual gala have gained over the years can speak for itself; the *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination* exhibition from 2018 attracted more than 1.65 million visitors, making it the Met's most visited exhibition to date (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018). Even without the physical attendance at the Costume Institute's thematic exhibitions, the "Met Gala" has become a household phrase, recognized by many in our society. However, when asking someone about the purpose and significance of the Met Gala, few to none know that it is a charitable fundraiser for the Met Costume Institute (The Costume Institute, 2022). Currently, there is a lack of literature published on the complexity of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute and the varying connections between the Gala, *Vogue*, and its cultural influence. Although there is publicity in magazines, newspaper articles, and social media outlets on the history of the Met Gala, its grandeur, and its importance in the art and fashion world, there is no mention of the cultural phenomenon it has turned into, and the reasons why this may be. There is a need to understand how this particular costume museum and its Gala has earned the attention of the world and remained in the spotlight since the 1990s. Examining the Met Costume Institute's and the Met Gala's history and significance, as well as the influencing cultural factors of its relation to *Vogue* and celebrity culture, will help in better understanding this connection.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute: Evolution

History

What first began as just an idea by two sisters has since evolved into a staple in the art and museum world: The Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute. Having a humble beginning, this “collection” was the product of Irene and Alice Lewisohn’s vision in the early 1900s. Starting as a wardrobe of a community theater in the Lower East Side Manhattan Settlement House, this range of costume was used in the productions of the ambitious sisters (Koda & Glassock, 2014). Known in 1915 as the Neighborhood Playhouse, as part of the Henry Street Settlement House, it became recognized as one of the first original off-Broadway theaters in New York City (Koda & Glassock, 2014). Even though the Costume Institute collection’s origins are in theater, its ties to the art world were still strong as it was an expression of Idealism in the Settlement Movement, as explained by Koda and Glassock (2014). The joining of Aline Bernstein to this movement generated a shift in this once stagnant costume collection.

By the time the 1920s arrived, Irene Lewisohn’s collection had grown so extensively and was increasingly valued for its rarity that she began to gather support for what was to become a costume museum (Koda & Glassock, 2014). Her dreams turned to reality when in 1937, a temporary exhibition of primarily Lewisohn’s collection was displayed at the newly established Museum of Costume Art (Koda & Glassock, 2014). Koda and Glassock found that the original purpose behind this idea was to interest and engage American fashion designers and 7th Avenue in the study of historic dress (2014). This purpose parallels today’s Met Costume Institute exhibition, *In America: A Lexicon of Fashion*, which takes on and reflects this exact ideology, which will be discussed later on.

The collection grew simultaneously with the interest, number of visitors, and attention that was garnered around the exhibits. The collection’s fifth year anniversary in 1942 marked a historic time as over 5,000 objects were acquired and over 50,000 visitors had since been in attendance at the Museum (Koda & Glassock, 2014). This rapidly increasing success was the catalyst for a change in scenery for the costume collection, as there was less room for both the collection and management. Their relocation in 1943 coincided with opportune plans in the making, as the collection was rechristened as the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum

of Art (Koda & Glassock, 2014). Since 1943, the Costume Institute's collection has expanded to contain over 33,000 objects that are representative of seven countries of fashionable dress for men, women, and children dating from the 15th century to the present (The Costume Institute, 2022). This expansion also includes a state of the art costume conservation laboratory, a study and storage facility to house the combined holdings of the Costume Institute and the Brooklyn Museum, and one of the world's leading fashion libraries named for the sister that started it all: The Irene Lewisohn Costume Reference Library (The Costume Institute, 2022).

As seen on the Costume Institute online website and gallery, the Brooklyn Museum's Costume Collection is available for display and viewing since it has been brought in as part of the Met Costume Institute. In 2009, the Brooklyn Museum transferred its own well-known collection over to the Costume Institute to contribute towards its "world-class collection," in exchange for the Met providing care of the collection and permanent access for the Brooklyn Museum's exhibition needs (Reeder, 2010). As Reeder illustrated, although this collection is a part of the Met Costume Institute, it still remains on its own as a separate entity (2010). These combined collections now comprise the most comprehensive costume collection in the world, which include Charles James material and the world's leading holdings of nineteenth to mid-twentieth century American fashion (The Costume Institute, 2022). This collaborative effort comes together to offer viewers an unrivaled timeline of primarily Western fashion history, and its collection only continues to grow.

Over the years, the success of the Costume Institute can be attributed to the many visionaries who came along, just as it started with its founder Irene Lewisohn. One of the contributors to the Institute's success in the early days was Eleanor Lambert. A supporter of the Costume Institute since its 1937 birth, Lambert acted as the publicity agent for the newly formed executive committee at the Institute (Koda & Glassock, 2014). As she also shared the founder's conviction that fashion was an art form, and deserved to be seen as such, she pioneered the "Party of the Year" in 1948, an annual fundraiser now known as the Met Gala (Koda & Glassock, 2014). Another decisive time for the Costume Institute, known as the Vreeland Era, resulted in a transition of how exhibitions were both displayed and viewed. In 1972, the Costume Institute's director Thomas Hoving appointed Diana Vreeland as a special consultant, who was previously an editor at *Vogue* (Koda & Glassock, 2014).

Marking this as the first transition of “seriousness and scholarship” to “entertainment and theater” (Koda & Glassock, 2014, p. 27), Hoving was hopeful of Vreeland’s presence to turn the Institute’s exhibitions into blockbuster productions, which he had introduced to other departments of the Met. This divergence from the staid, academic direction that the Costume Institute had dabbled in for so long was not met without opposition. Vreeland was seen as another visionary, though more gregarious than her former counterparts, and was set to establish a consistent exhibition style that leaned more towards the theatrical. Creating a “naturalistic” exhibition style, Vreeland showcased the dress artifacts in a timeless manner, removing the strict use of hair, makeup, and contextual elements (Koda & Glassock, 2014). This style remained constant throughout the Met Costume Institute’s exhibitions up until her death in 1989, when it evolved into the eras of Martin, Koda, and Bolton.

After Vreeland’s departure, Richard Martin became the curator-in-charge, with Harold Koda serving as associate curator. Before joining the Costume Institute, Martin and Koda were previously curators at FIT (Steele, 2008). The most notable change brought about by Martin was having the Costume Institute implement a cycle of thematically varied installations (Koda & Glassock, 2014). This differed from the Met’s previous method of having one collection that constantly rotated its work, which was only based on a fixed theme. Martin figured this change would be advantageous because it would highlight different portions of the collection and the subjects of the exhibitions could generate a renewed interest three times a year (Koda & Glassock, 2014). This reasoning alleviated the fear of not having sufficient interest for visitors to return if the Institute only provided one “permanent” exhibition (Koda & Glassock, 2014, p. 30). Richard Martin was a pioneer in the art world, as his successful blend of contemporary ideas and knowledge of art history brought more attention and interest to the Met (Welters, 2020). The intellectual conversations that stemmed from his exhibitions made his work impactful, motivating the Costume Society of America to create the “Richard Martin Exhibition Award” (Welters, 2020). Not only did his influence play a major role in getting people to take fashion seriously as an art form, he also acted as an inspiring mentor who encouraged many future scholars and curators, including Harold Koda (Steele, 2008).

Collaborating closely with Martin throughout the 1990s, Koda eventually succeeded Martin to become the Institute’s curator in charge in 2000 (Steele, 2008; Koda & Glassock, 2014). Koda has a longstanding history of working with the Costume Institute. Prior to his role in

2000, Koda worked alongside Diana Vreeland as an assistant on several exhibitions both before and while he was also curating at FIT (Steele, 2008). Koda had been exposed to numerous curators in charge at the Costume Institute before he took the helm, which provided him with experience and perspective to carry over during his era. Koda produced his first solo exhibition at the Institute in 2001, *Extreme Beauty*, which focused on the relationship between the body and clothes (Steele, 2008). Koda's defining curatorial style at the Costume Institute was marked by his concentration on the more visual and aesthetic aspects of the subject, with a strong component of "shock value" (Steele, 2008, p. 26). Koda oversaw numerous notable exhibits in his 16 years as curator at the Institute, such as *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty*, one of the top 10 most attended exhibitions in the Met's history (Welters, 2020). Harold Koda's curation saw peak numbers in attendance for the exhibitions displayed at the Costume Institute, which was only surpassed by the exhibition of his successor, Andrew Bolton (Welters, 2020).

Joining the Costume Institute in 2002 as an Associate Curator, Andrew Bolton has since become widely recognized for having directed some of the most groundbreaking and innovative fashion exhibitions in the Museum's history (Business of Fashion, 2022). He spent 9 years at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London before he came to New York City, where he eventually became the Curator in Charge in 2015 (Pogrebin, 2015). Bolton's knowledge, passion, and vision for fashion in museums is transcendent; some of his most noteworthy Costume Institute exhibitions to date are *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* (2011), *China: Through the Looking Glass* (2015), and *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination* (2018). A celebrated curator, Bolton is listed as one of the BoF 500, the definitive professional index of the people shaping the \$2.4 trillion fashion industry (Business of Fashion, 2022). His award for the "Best Design Show" by the International Association of Art Critics (Business of Fashion, 2022) demonstrates how the bonds between fashion and art are being further cemented by the curators that work to bring them together. These curators in charge at the Costume Institute have each left their distinctive mark over the years, with their legacies evolving and growing in significance with each exhibition that comes to pass.

Significance

As the Costume Institute Benefit, known as the Met Gala, is the Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute's main source of funding, it is integral to the Institute itself (The Costume

Institute, 2022). This annual charitable event is the direct provider of funds for the Costume Institute's extensive exhibitions, new acquisition ventures, and overall improvements (The Costume Institute, 2022). Along with the Gala, the Museum established The Friends of the Costume Institute in 2002, a group formed for the purpose of directly supporting the Institute's exhibition, conservation, acquisition, and publication programs (The Costume Institute, 2022). The Costume Institute website outlines the purpose of The Friends Group as supporting the theoretical and historical understanding of dress, advancing the idea of fashion as an art form and the studying of fashion as a serious academic discipline (2022). The interconnectivity of art and fashion has been a longstanding debate not only in the art and fashion communities, but for the Met as well.

In 1967, the Met devoted an issue of its *Bulletin* to the debate about the connections between art, fashion, and beauty with a range of disciplines weighing in on the discussion (Petrov, 2019). However, this debate has been argued prior to 1967, but this time marks the understanding that there is a connection. From Diana Vreeland's curated exhibitions on Yves Saint Laurent (1973) and Cristobal Balenciaga (1983), to more recent examples such as Alexander McQueen (2011) at the Costume Institute exemplify the designer retrospective, moving beyond the monographic exhibitions of painters and sculptors (Petrov, 2019). The showing of fashion in art museums operates beyond the antiquated displays of the main art mediums. Fashion has been displayed as art, and more. Petrov highlighted that when fashion and dress artifacts enter a museum collection or are exhibited in a gallery, it immediately endows "art-like qualities" to the objects (2019, p. 92). As soon as outmoded dress became a visual marker of historical difference, there was a lobby for a greater preservation and presentation of historical fashion by practitioners in decorative, fine, applied, and performing arts (Petrov, 2019). Historic textiles and clothing provide artists, designers, and visionaries with inspiration for further works of "art" to be produced, which supports the significance of fashion in art and art in fashion.

The Met Gala: Metamorphosis in the 21st Century

History of the Met Gala

Champion of the American fashion industry and American designers, Eleanor Lambert had an illustrative part in the origins of the Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute and

its annual charity fundraiser, the Met Gala. When it came to breaking new ground in the fashion industry, Lambert could easily be found at the forefront of these movements in the early 1900s. Along with the Met Gala, she was responsible for introducing the International Best Dressed List after taking over the French version during WWII, as well as the twice-yearly fashion weeks that put together individual designers into one show for the ease of journalism (Koda & Glassock, 2014). Eleanor Lambert is credited with bringing forth some of the absolute mainstays in the international fashion industry: The Met Gala, The Best Dressed List, and Fashion Weeks. Her legacy continues to remain prevalent in both fashion and society, with her original “Party of the Year” (Koda & Glassock, 2014) fundraiser that has morphed into the grandiose event that it is today.

Introduced in 1948 as a midnight supper that changed locations, this brainchild of Eleanor Lambert began as a publicity event (The Costume Institute, 2022). The Met Gala, also known as the Met Costume Institute Benefit, provides funding to the specific areas for the department’s exhibitions, acquisitions, and capital improvements (The Costume Institute, 2022). It typically takes place every May to celebrate the opening of the spring exhibition. Over the years through changing leadership and co-chairs, the gala has become one of the most visible and successful charity events in New York City. Although well-known names have graced the event as co-chairs throughout the 20th century, such as Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and Patricia Taylor Buckley, it wasn’t until the mid-1990s that the image of the Gala began to shift. Under the leadership of Trustee and co-chair Anna Wintour, the Met Gala transformed into a pivotal event in mainstream culture and society, drawing attendees from the worlds of fashion, film, music, business, society, and sports. The Artistic Director of Condé Nast and Editor-in-Chief of *Vogue*, Anna Wintour, has remained as the co-chair since 1995 (excluding 1996 and 1998) (The Costume Institute, 2022).

Anna Wintour articulated, “The opening Gala is our once-a-year chance to raise enough funds to secure an expansive future for what’s now considered the preeminent fashion museum in the world” (Bowles, 2020, p. 8). What started out as upscale dinner parties with tickets going for as low as \$50 has revolutionized with tickets selling for around \$30,000 (Welters, 2020). Last year, it has been reported that tickets were priced at \$35,000 with tables ranging from \$200,000-\$300,000 (Friedman, 2021). The transformation from where the Met Gala began, to where it is today, is phenomenal. As previously stated, not only has the Gala been dubbed as “The Party of

the Year,” it has gathered other unofficial monikers as well, such as “The Oscars of the East Coast” (Friedman, 2021). These nicknames are a result of the star-studded red-carpet event that gets televised and reported on across all industries. Furthermore, the event is used as a form of advertisement for designers to showcase their creations on the best of celebrity culture. There is a dress code for the Gala, themed to match the annual exhibition, with designers in attendance dressing celebrities accordingly under their brand (Friedman, 2021). This gains publicity and advertisement for the opening exhibition, the Gala, the designer, and the celebrity. However, it has been found in recent years that the focus has shifted from the charity event itself and focused more on the celebrity circus instead. The late André Leon Talley commented on this grand affair, claiming the Gala to be “An evening when designers, models, and Hollywood stars convene in the year’s most over-the-top looks” (Ward & Allaire, 2021). Spectators look forward to the first Monday in May not to see the reveal of the new Costume Institute exhibition, but to view the extravagant, radical, and cutting-edge designer looks worn by the rich and famous.

Exhibitions

Over the years, the Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute has put on truly remarkable exhibitions that work to merge the spheres of high fashion, cultural dress artifacts, fashion academia, and the public at large. The Met Gala marks the opening night of the exhibitions and sets the theme. However, the exhibitions also hold importance in their own right as a separate entity. In understanding the factors that influence the connection between the Met Costume Institute and its Gala, the examination of the exhibitions that these institutions are centered around is necessary. Three Costume Institute exhibitions will be evaluated, *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* (2011), *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination* (2018), and *In America: A Lexicon of Fashion* (2021). Focusing on these three specific exhibitions will provide insight on how their dramatic displays captured and provoked the public’s interest, and the implications that result in such displays.

Known as a turning point for the Costume Institute, and more generally for fashion curation in the world, the 2011 *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* exhibition earned greater visibility and respect for fashion curation (Brooke, 2018). The exhibition, organized by the Costume Institute and curated by Andrew Bolton, celebrated the late Alexander McQueen’s extraordinary contributions to fashion (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2022). McQueen’s

expansion on the understanding of fashion as a conceptual expression of culture, politics, and identity was constituted in his most iconic designs displayed at this exhibit (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2022). The exhibition featured approximately one hundred ensembles and seventy accessories that spanned McQueen's prolific nineteen-year career (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2022). His signature designs, including the "bumster" trouser, the kimono jacket, and the three-point "origami" frockcoat, were on view (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2022). Although his creations were the main attraction of the exhibition, the theatrical elements of this exhibit were what drew the public in. Bolton's aim for this exhibition was to get to the soul of the McQueen creativity, which was the "dark side of the romantic movement" and the prim Victoriana era (Menkes, 2011). This darkness was depicted visually, in both the backdrops and the videos that continuously played over the displays from the dramatic and disturbing McQueen runway shows (Menkes, 2011). This exhibition was flawlessly executed by Bolton, reflecting McQueen's imagination, provocative showmanship, and cutting-edge techniques.

The opening for the Gala of the *Savage Beauty* exhibition was promised to be exceptional, despite the "disturbing" exhibits that were displayed (Menkes, 2011). After the exhibition closed, the Met reported that it had attracted 661,509 visitors during its run, placing it among the Museum's top 10 most visited exhibitions at that time (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011). Further, to accommodate the public's extreme interest in *Savage Beauty*, the Museum extended the exhibition by one week, offering special viewings for members during hours when the Museum was normally closed (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011). One potential drawback of *Savage Beauty's* success is the pressure for some institutions to make every exhibition a "blockbuster" (Brooke, 2018). Menkes even commented on the exhibition's theatricality, calling it a "show" (2011). If every topic for a fashion exhibition has to garner widespread appeal, then it could become problematic in the limitation of the dress artifacts able to be shown and the stories told (Brooke, 2018). The Costume Institute's metamorphosis from scholarly and serious to entertaining and sometimes theatrical exhibits has set a precedent that is now expected by the masses. In order to stay relevant and in the public's eye, they have met, and exceeded, this precedent with the exhibitions that have followed *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* in 2011.

In 2018, the Metropolitan Museum of Art experienced its most groundbreaking exhibition to date. *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination* received 1,659,647

visitors during its five-month run, making it the Museum's most visited exhibition which exceeded the prior number one show, *Treasures of Tutankhamun* (1978), which had 1,360,957 visitors (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018). *Heavenly Bodies* was also the largest exhibition that either the Met or the Costume Institute has ever mounted, spanning 60,000 square feet and 25 galleries (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018). An ambitious undertaking, this exhibition was overseen by Andrew Bolton, the Costume Institute's Curator in Charge, in collaboration with the Met's Department of Medieval Art and the Cloisters (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018). Using both the 5th Avenue location and the Cloisters for the exhibition was unusual, as the Costume Institute has never used such a wide range of space before. Not only did this exhibit feature a majority of fashion designers that were raised or educated Catholic, it also had an unprecedented loan of 41+ pieces from the Sacristy of the Sistine Chapel, the Vatican's "repository of treasures" (Bowles, 2020, p. 316). Compared to "regular" Met exhibitions, Brooke highlights that it is a *fashion* exhibition that is most popular (2018). Whether the exhibition's popularity is because of the contents itself, or the controversy surrounding this particular exhibit, is widely speculated.

As it happens with the opening night for the annual exhibitions, the Met Gala set forth a dress code of sorts for guests to adhere to, with room for interpretation. 2018 was no exception, as the guest's dress served as the main talking point of this Gala. From Hamish Bowles' perspective, "Guests at the gala took their cues from the austere habits of nuns and monks or from the visual exuberance of a rich history of Catholic art and ceremony" (2020, p. 318). However, media articles reported a pattern of people calling the theme sacrilegious and offensive to their faith (Friedman, 2018). Although the Vatican had approved of the exhibit and even lent the Met artifacts for the show, some Catholics expressed the viewpoint that the event appropriated their religion into a fashion statement (Friedman, 2018). The controversy may not come from the event and exhibition itself, but rather the celebrity spectacle that was made based on fashion statements. Rhianna's papal costume alone generated entire articles devoted to discussion on her possible cultural appropriation (Greenbaum, 2018). Even though *Heavenly Bodies* is the Met Museum's most widely attended exhibition to this day, there is still speculation if the attraction was due to the meaningful theme, or the controversy that surrounded it.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute has experienced many disruptions during its lifetime, but a global pandemic was the first that resulted in a long-term forced closure

for the museum. In 2020, COVID-19 swept through the world and forced emergency shutdowns of all aspects of normal life, including museums. After a few rocky transitions, the Costume Institute emerged in 2021 with getting back to its in-person exhibitions and Met Gala. *In America: A Lexicon of Fashion* and *In America: An Anthology of Fashion* are a year-long celebration spanning three centuries of fashion in a two-part exploration of all things made in the U.S.A. (Okwodu, 2021). Celebrating the Met Costume Institute's 75th anniversary, this exhibition was curated by Bolton to offer a more nuanced definition of American fashion, instead of focusing on a single, specific concept (Yotka, 2021). Bolton articulated this concept further by noting that with the 104 different pieces on display, it could mean 104 different definitions as each piece has its own expression and emotion (Yotka, 2021).

As language is the core theme of *In America: A Lexicon of Fashion*, Bolton credits the 2020 social-justice movements as the inspiration for his reexamination of the topic of terminology (Okwodu, 2021). Bolton's statement, "There's no art form that addresses the politics of identity more than fashion" (Okwodu, 2021), emphasizes the expansion of the Costume Institute's archives to include more contributions from designers of color and marginalized groups than ever before. When it comes to a theme centered around America, it is hard not to get politics involved. *In America* represents a wide range of beliefs, identities, histories, and emotions that are all centered around something that can bring people together: Clothing. Bolton's purposeful contrast of certain pieces in the exhibition has viewers engage in all aspects of America, even the "uglier bits" as Yotka points out (2021). This exhibition is reaching to be evocative, considering both the essential and emotional aspect of everyday American dress in our lives (Yotka, 2021).

For this research, I had the opportunity to view *In America: A Lexicon of Fashion* during the spring of 2022. When first viewing the exhibition, I examined the upstairs installation before descending down into the actual Anna Wintour Costume Center in the Costume Institute. The main lighted placard expressed the reasoning, ideas, and inspiration behind the exhibit. Unlike the articles that outline Bolton's verbally direct vision (Okwodu, 2021; Yotka, 2021), *In America* seemed to be simply centered around a quote from Jesse Jackson's 1984 speech at the Democratic Convention. The quote listed on the main placard that described the exhibit stated: "America is more like a quilt - many patches, many pieces, many colors, many sizes, all woven and held together by a common thread" (Jesse Jackson, 1984). The description explained that *In*

America's purpose is to give American fashion the same “emotional rhetoric” as European fashion, as the vernacular of American fashion leans in the opposite direction of haute couture. Therefore, this exhibition claims to articulate a “reprised vocabulary” of American fashion based on its expressive qualities.

The physical display of the exhibition was a direct visual representation of the Jesse Jackson patchwork quilt metaphor, as each garment was showcased in a box, with the boxes lined up touching one another. Each box featured one or two American-related designer garments, with “word-bubble” headpieces attached to the top. These headpieces worked in collaboration with the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary, expressing a single word or short phrase that was connected with the garment displayed. These individual words were organized into 12 sections that explored the defining emotional qualities of American fashion nostalgia: Belonging, delight, joy, wonder, affinity, confidence, strength, desire, assurance, comfort, and consciousness. I was able to see and appreciate the exhibition’s reference to a patchwork quilt through its visual assembly and context. However, I thought this word-connection was underwhelming. It was difficult to find the association between the word attached to each vitrine, and the background given on the garment itself. Some were more self-explanatory, as the garment display for the word “cozy” featured an oversized cream knit sweater. Overall, I felt the word connections to be a bit weak, as if the Institute was reaching to find a deeper meaning that wasn’t there. *In America: A Lexicon of Fashion* bleeds into its second part exhibition, *In America: An Anthology of Fashion*. The disconnect accompanying this exhibition continues, as the Institute has changed the garments being displayed and the Met Gala dress code theme is the Gilded Age.

Must See and Be Seen: Cultural Phenomenon

Anna Wintour & *Vogue*

Anna Wintour, the editor of American *Vogue* and the artistic director of Condé Nast, became chairwoman of the Met Gala in 1995 and eventually took over with full leadership of the event in 1999 (Friedman, 2021). By transforming the landscape of the Met Gala from a local societal gathering into a global celebrity power event, Anna Wintour has been instrumental in the Gala’s metamorphosis (Friedman, 2021). President Emerita of the Met Museum, Emily Rafferty, claimed that before Wintour arrived, “It was a very different kind of party [...] It was local

society” (Friedman, 2015). Under Wintour’s reign, the Gala has raised more than \$145 million for the Costume Institute’s operations (Friedman, 2015). As mentioned previously, this has much to do in part with the uptick in pricing for the tickets to the event, from originally \$50 to now around \$35,000. Wintour’s sheer force and ambition has transformed the Gala into one of the biggest, and most well-known, fund-raising events staged by any of the city’s cultural institutions (Friedman, 2015). The contribution that she has made over the years has reflected positively back on her, as the newly renovated Costume Institute in 2014 was christened the “Anna Wintour Costume Center” (Friedman, 2015).

Friedman postulates that Wintour’s aid in connecting *Vogue* to the Met Gala has perhaps strengthened her position as the most powerful person in fashion (2015). It is difficult to find any who would argue with that logic, as Wintour herself has been portrayed in films such as “The Devil Wears Prada” and multiple documentaries as well. The Met Gala may have gradually evolved over time, but Wintour’s involvement revolutionized the entire way it was conducted. She, along with her team, exert significant control over the guest list, the seating plan, the coverage – deciding which reporters are allowed to go where – and even what selected guests will wear (Friedman, 2015). Stating, “I’ve always thought that planning each year’s Gala is a lot like producing a Hollywood blockbuster, from the initial idea, through strategizing, scripting, and casting, to scrutinizing every last detail,” Wintour remarks on just how encompassing her role is (Bowles, 2020, p. 8). Her connection to the Gala and the Institute has served as a source of unprecedented global advertisement for her vision for the fashion industry, as well as maintaining *Vogue*’s relevance in the public’s mind.

Since *Vogue* and the Met Costume Institute joined forces, they’ve learned to successfully play on one another’s strengths and use them to their personal advantage. Wintour views this partnership as a fundamental opportunity to create a conduit between a globally renowned cultural institution and the fashion industry (Bowles, 2020). In this relatively new mixed-media climate, content now seeps across boundaries, with the different forms of media creating new relationships – such as the one between *Vogue* and the Met (Gibson, 2012). Capitalizing on this relationship, *Vogue* began a new special edition magazine on the Met Gala in 2012, which is completely separate from their regular publication. This new climate has been shaped, and even partly inspired, by the culture of the celebrity and the close links that tie it to fashion (Gibson, 2012). Gibson remarks this is where fashion magazines have adapted completely to reflect the

celebrity dominance in the world (2012). Examining *Vogue* in particular, Gibson states that its symbolic global power has little to do with sales figures and more to do with the celebrity status that has been given to Anna Wintour herself (2012). While Wintour was on a mission to incorporate the celebrity world into *Vogue*'s framework, she ended up becoming a fashion icon and celebrity all on her own. This phenomenon proves that there is power in the celebrity as a spectacle, and the culture it has created in recent years.

Celebrity Culture

Anna Wintour's leadership of the Met Gala simultaneously coincided with the shift in *Vogue* covers, from model-centered images to all kinds of celebrities (Friedman, 2015). The 1990s started with three celebrity *Vogue* covers, and by 1998 there were seven celebrity covers, and by 2002 there were ten (Friedman, 2015). Unsentimental about replacing the old notion of models and socialites, Wintour's mix of joining famous names from fashion, film, tech, politics, sports and business has been influential in celebrity culture ideology. When it comes to the Met Gala, the main focus primarily rests on the celebrity looks of the night. For every article on *The New York Times* website that emphasizes the significance and meaning of the Gala and exhibition itself, ten more articles appear on the celebrity carpet fashion of the night (*The New York Times*, 2022). Saying so herself, Anna Wintour remarks on the Gala: "To many people, seeing who attends the gala - and what they're wearing - is the thrill of the evening" (Bowles, 2020, p. 8). It's become a pivotal occasion where movie stars, designers, models, musicians, athletes, and cultural icons come together to celebrate fashion (Bowles, 2020). As the Met Gala is now intertwined with celebrity culture, examining the rise of celebrity culture and its role will help to further understand this connection.

For many young women, "celebrity" and "fashion" are virtually synonymous (Gibson, 2012, p. 3). This interdependency between fashion and celebrity culture has significantly altered the sphere of contemporary fashion. These results from the current celebrity phenomenon have come at the very moment when, it could be argued, cultural theorists have finally succeeded in establishing fashion as a legitimate discipline (Gibson, 2012). Gibson states that this changed relationship is the driving force in the propagation of celebrity culture as a "global, collective, and disturbing obsession" (2012, p. 1). Specifically affected in this phenomenon is the luxury fashion scene, as its resurgence in the 1990s coincided with the escalation of the new phase of

celebrity culture (Gibson, 2012). This simultaneously occurred with Anna Wintour's revamp of *Vogue*, and the introduction of the celebrity face as a mainstay on the cover. Using *Vogue* as the most relevant example, this "new cult of celebrity" (Gibson, 2012, p. 11) has affected and transformed visual culture in all its manifestations. Cultural theorist Hal Foster proposed the notion of "mass witnessing" as the new relationship between private "fantasy" and public "reality" (Gibson, 2012, p. 35) just as contemporary celebrity culture was advancing. When it comes to the Met Gala and *Vogue*, their joining has created the phenomenon of mass witnessing in anticipation of the celebrity designer looks of the evening. The progression of media has also supported this experience, as *Vogue* gains public attention for the Gala through its various social media channels, website, and blogs. By using celebrities as enticement for the public to pay attention to the Met Gala, Wintour has capitalized on this current phenomenon.

Gala & Exhibition Connection

When it comes to the Met Costume Institute and its exhibitions, museum practices are fundamental in understanding the way the Institute operates and how it has gained immense popularity over the years. Compared to more general museum practices, costume exhibits draw on the fashion industry when it comes to staging and the visual performance of exhibition displays (Melchior, 2014). The prominence of fashion in museums is also concerned with the external presence of the museum. This includes building relationships with both new visitors and commercial partners, such as investors, sponsors, and product developers (Melchior, 2014). Exhibiting fashion in museums concerns not only the methods of handling dress, but also the purpose of the museum and its immediate relevance to people and society (Melchior, 2014). As in the case of the Met Costume Institute, the theme of fashion seems to dust off the museum and make it "inviting, dynamic, and attractive" (Melchior, 2014, p. 12). Melchior's statement, "Fashion makes museums appear relevant and appealing to contemporary society" (2014, p. 13), is applicable to the case of the Institute's exhibitions and Gala. The role that Wintour and *Vogue* execute in this equation is crucial, as it provides attention, awareness, and status to the Met Museum and all its relations.

However, this spotlight on fashion in museums can pose problems. Even though fashion gives museums the potential to attract media attention and generate greater visitor numbers and demographics, it also has the potential to question what relevance fashion exhibitions have

beyond entertainment value (Melchior, 2014). Fashion exhibits have the ability to combine knowledge, education, and entertainment to engage visitors on many different levels. Nevertheless, the scholarship of the field must still be guarded and observed, as it cannot remain as a quick fix for front page media coverage (Melchior, 2014), as has happened with the Met Costume Institute. Somewhere over the span of 20+ years, the Met Costume Institute's image has merged to be congruent with the Met Gala. The public has become fixated on the ostentatious celebrity carpet looks of the Gala's opening night, and if they are aware of the exhibition, they only look forward to viewing the famed displays. The scholarly background and significance of such exhibitions has become lost in the array of celebrity and designer glamour.

Compared to the Met's "regular" (Brooke, 2018) exhibitions, the fashion exhibitions are its most popular in the 21st century. However, it wasn't always this way. Observers have explained that fashion has historically been treated as a second-class discipline within the museum, as the Costume Institute is quite literally located in the basement (Brooke, 2018). On top of that, the commercial nature of fashion leads some to dismiss it as an acknowledged art form (Brooke, 2018). Brooke explains that the appeal of fashion in museums has sharpened more so recently due to digital media's democratization of the fashion industry (2018). The Met Gala's metamorphosis of escalating into a spectacle of fashion and celebrity under Wintour's reign may perhaps keep the Costume Institute and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the news (Brooke, 2018). Although the acceptance of digital media's prominence in our society may be the zeitgeist of the times, it is still a deliberate strategy set forth by those such as *Vogue*, Anna Wintour, and the Costume Institute.

Conclusion

The Metropolitan Museum of Art has always been a renowned art museum, and now, with the Costume Institute, it is hailed with superstar status thanks to its annual charity event: The Met Gala. The Met Gala, too, used to be known on a much smaller scale as a dinner party for New York City socialites. Now, it has grown into fashion's biggest global, star-studded event. Diving into the Met Costume Institute's history, exhibitions, and significance, as well as examining the Met Gala's connections to Anna Wintour, *Vogue*, and celebrity culture, provided insight for the reasoning behind the Gala's deviation from the world of staid historic costume to mainstream pop culture. Numerous societal transformations coincided at the same moment, creating a catalyst that pushed the Gala into the public spotlight. These transformations relate to

Anna Wintour's presence, her connection to *Vogue*, and the rise of celebrity and digital media culture.

Anna Wintour took charge of the Met Gala at just the precise moment when celebrity culture was being introduced to the fashion industry, aided by the growing popularity of digital media. The broader public's fascination with celebrity culture brought focus and attention to the Met Gala, and subsequently, to the Met Costume Institute. The Gala is now synonymous with designer high fashion and the spectacle of the celebrity, overshadowing the importance of what the actual Gala stands for: Its fundraising and exhibition opening. This has all directly benefited Anna Wintour and *Vogue*, as they remain the single power that continues to solidify the media circus surrounding the Gala. Anna Wintour's influence and control over the Met Gala shows not only the changes in society, media and philanthropy, but also of her understanding of how a single event could solidify her role as a power broker. It may just seem that these events happened at the right moment in time; however, it was how they were sustained over time that cemented their relevance in society and culture.

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