

EVENTS/CAUSES

Couture houses work to explore Chinese cultural appropriation at The Met

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Evening dress by Roberto Cavalli, fall/winter 2005

By JEN KING

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute is exploring the influences Chinese culture has had on Western high-fashion in a new exhibit opening May 7.

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Titled, "China: Through the Looking Glass," a take on the sequel to Alice in Wonderland, the exhibit juxtaposes couture and avant-garde pieces with Chinese art and cultural artifacts. While many brands focus in on Chinese consumer behavior through social efforts and store openings, this exhibit aims to appraise cultural appropriation in reverse.

"For a lot of brands they have looked eastward now for the last five or six years in a lot of ways," said Avery Booker, partner at [China Luxury Advisors](#), New York. "Obviously, this is not really that new to them because they were certainly looking to Japan for influence in the '80s and to an extent in the '90s.

"I think it's a natural look to emerging markets because they are so much more important to the brands," he said. "I think they're all trying to figure out what's the amount of influences you can work into things while still attracting the Chinese consumers while not

alienating your traditional consumers as well."

Mr. Booker is not affiliated with The Metropolitan Museum of Art, but agreed to comment as an industry expert.

[The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute](#) was unable to respond directly by press deadline.

What we found there

China: Through the Looking Glass will be held in the Met's Chinese Galleries as well as the Anna Wintour Costume Center May 7 through Aug. 16. The museum's Asian Art Wing, which celebrates its centennial this year, is one of the largest collections of Chinese art in the world outside of China with more than 35,000 pieces.

The exhibit is divided into two parts, one that includes three of China's major historical periods – Imperial China, the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China – and a second that focuses on the Empire of Signs. Andrew Bolton, curator of the Costume Institute, and his team worked with the museum's Department of Asian Art to curate fashion pieces that range from the 1700s to today.

Playing off the "topsy-turvy" world of Lewis Carroll's novel "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," Mr. Bolton and Kar Wai, the exhibit's artistic director, aimed to "depict [China's] own fictional universe, albeit one with precise historical and modern references."



Christian Dior for House of Dior – "Quiproquo" cocktail dress, 1951

Mr. Bolton explained at a press preview attended by Women's Wear Daily "that the exhibit will reveal itself through a series of narrative spaces that are constantly being reorganized by free association. As if by magic, the physical distance between East and West, which often seems monolithic and diametrically opposed, diminishes."

Also during the preview, Mr. Wai said it is his hope that the exhibit "instead of reinforcing the differences, will be a chance to bring [the] two cultures together." To explain further, he noted Buddhist scripture that says, "In the sky, there's no distinction from East and West. People make these distinctions in their minds and believe them to be true."



Ralph Lauren, 2011

The exhibit will feature 130 couture and avant-garde fashions side-by-side with examples of Chinese costumes, paintings, films, porcelains and other art. Together these pieces will demonstrate the effect Chinese culture has had on "fashionable imaginations" throughout the centuries.

For example, an 18th-century Chinese festival robe will be paired with an evening gown designed by Tom Ford for Yves Saint Laurent's fall 2004 collection. Also, a 15th-century porcelain jar will be complemented by a Roberto Cavalli evening dress from 2005 with a similar pattern.



Tom Ford for Yves Saint Laurent, fall 2004

Also, The Astor Court will house costumes worn by Chinese opera star Mei Lanfang, the inspiration for John Galliano's spring 2003 couture collection for Christian Dior. Other pieces on display include fashions by Sarah Burton for Alexander McQueen, Jean Paul Gaultier, Marc Jacobs for Louis Vuitton, Dries Van Noten, Giambattista Valli, Jason Wu, Cristóbal Balenciaga, Christian Dior and Coco Chanel.

For the smaller fashion houses such as Alexander McQueen and Balenciaga, their participation will be marked by additional visibility.

"What's interesting is that the parent companies, Kering for example, are really trying to push their smaller brands and trying to market in a lot of ways because Gucci has lost a lot of steam there and this is a really great way to gain some visibility," Mr. Booker said.

"These brands, such as Alexander McQueen and Balenciaga, are becoming quite popular among more sophisticated consumers in China and this will bring them to an even bigger piece of the market," he said. "This is a really smart move in that sense."

Yours and mine

With the rise of the middle class in China, many fashion brands have hosted exhibitions to raise awareness and also pay homage to the influences its designers and founders found in Chinese culture and art.

For example, French label Christian Dior partnered with the Museum of Contemporary Art in Shanghai, China, in an exhibit titled “Esprit Dior” to display brand history in relation to art, fashion, society and culture.

The Esprit Dior exhibit, which ran Sept. 13 to Nov. 10, 2013, explored the haute couture fashions created by Dior throughout its history alongside contemporary works of art by Chinese artists. Showing the connection between cultures allows a brand to engage consumers that may be unfamiliar with the brand ([see story](#)).

Also, Italian fashion brand Fendi hosted its “Un Art Autre” exhibition in Hong Kong to celebrate the brand’s fur making.

The exhibition was to celebrate a new boutique opening in the Landmark shopping center in Hong Kong. Fendi was able to draw attention to the new store with the exhibition, as well as better educated Hong Kongers and visitors about the brand and its history with fur ([see story](#)).

In addition, Spanish leather goods maker Loewe unveiled a touring exhibit in 2014 that stopped solely in cities within China and Spain.

Loewe’s “Fragments of a Story” exhibit, which focused on the turning points in the brand’s history, opened in Hong Kong first on Feb. 27. The brand’s choices of destinations pointed to a strong following in China, as well as the ever-growing importance of the Chinese consumer for luxury brands ([see story](#)).

Even though brands have organized local exhibits within China, it may not be the best way to reach the Chinese consumer given the amount of travel and purchases they make outside of their home country.

"I think its got a lot of importance, but it also reflects the new reality of the luxury market which is that brands realize that so much of the purchases made by their Chinese clients are done outside of China and so much more activity is done outside of China," Mr. Booker said. "In a lot of ways they feel that the core consumer feels a little bit freer outside of China to engage with the brand and enjoy the brand.

"[Also,] I think of it as more natural than a lot of people might because they’re seeing the opportunity for the outside consumer," he said. "This is a way to celebrate that and getting [Chinese consumers] engaged on a more global scale rather than on a local scale in China."

Final Take

Jen King, lead reporer on Luxury Daily, New York

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