

EVENTS/CAUSES

Museum exhibitions must enhance rather than showcase fashion

April 25, 2016



Promotional image for Louis Vuitton's "Volez, Volez, Voyagez"

By FORREST CARDAMENIS

SEOUL, South Korea The equation of fashion and art is a red herring, according to a professor of fashion and museology.

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At the Cond Nast International Luxury Conference, Judith Clark, a University of the Arts London professor and museum curator, discussed the role of the museum in the fashion world. Rather than using museums to reclassify fashion as art, exhibitions should experiment with new ways to enhance the story.

"Exhibition making is a medium in its own right," Ms. Clark said. "By that I mean holistic curating, where there's not such a lopsided importance given to objects as with traditional curating, but instead the space and exhibition prosthetics are given more responsibility to carry the narrative.

"Look at this more subtle legacy of the idea of exhibition making and its experimental opportunities rather than get caught up with the great red herring of the past 20 years, and that is the attempt to reclassify fashion as art."

A new look

Ms. Clark's presentation began as a talk entitled "History of Handbags," which also made its way into a book and an exhibition devoted to the handbag in Seoul, South Korea. The history of the handbag, as Ms. Clark sees it, is also a history of the way people carry possessions, of luxury and of women's relationship to capital.

The exhibition, curated by Ms. Clark and the brainchild of Kenny Park, CEO of handbag supplier Simone, included hundreds of bags across 500 years, and was housed directly above the store. Ms. Clark's goal, aside from assembling handbags, was to provide context.

To situate handbags within a proper background, Ms. Clark took unusual steps commissioning mannequins to go alongside certain purses to provide context. Her challenge, she says, was contextualizing handbags without turning the exhibition into a "history of dress."

The side-by-side of bags and mannequins creates a "parallel history," as Ms. Clark refers to it, and challenges standard exhibition practices in which it is immediately evident where attendees should look.

"There is a complex relationship between museums and business, and what Kenny Park did was very astute, encouraging a different kind of curatorial integrity and ambition within its own terms," Ms. Clark said.

However, a contextual approach is not a one-size-fit-all approach. Exhibitions and museums honoring a brand's heritage or element of design are becoming increasingly common, but each one must have a specific design that enhances and guides the story.

To prove her point, Ms. Clark recounted having the opposite problem when working with Louis Vuitton. An early monogram might anticipate the iconic LV logo, but anybody in the museum space would already be familiar with this story.

The Louis Vuitton exhibition therefore did not require context and history, as visitors would already be familiar with portions of it. Instead, the goal was to play with the material in a different way.

"My goal was not to put together a coherent whole, but to play thematically with the archive, acknowledging the story of the super brand and that any one story would simply not suffice," Ms. Clark said.

As Ms. Clark sees it, the brand's primary quality is the prevalence of change rather than stagnation, a trait that led to her bending the traditional rules. Part of her work involved commissioning a silhouette of a costume that inspired a catwalk piece, "posing questions about the freedom of curators to commission pieces, not only to collect and exhibit them."

Moreover, this propensity of change from the brand led her to not set the pieces of the exhibition in place, but to move them around, allowing new perspectives on the work and history to emerge.

Instead of simply showcasing items for visitors, the design of a museum should prompt questions.

"What is and what is not a commercial exhibition, and does it matter?" Ms. Clark asked. "Does it affect the validity of the exhibition? And are not all exhibits biased?"

"How can we use them to highlight issues that matter to us?" she continued. "Does fashion take on a different meaning when buying is frustrated? Do we have to look at them differently when we know they are not for sale?"

From fashion to art

2016 has already seen a number of big names brands take their products to museums and art fairs.

For example, last month jeweler Van Cleef & Arpels showcased its savoir-faire through an exhibition at The European Fine Art Fair (TEFAF) in Maastricht, Netherlands.

The house returned to the art fair for the 2016 edition, exhibiting a number of heritage and contemporary pieces in the haute joaillerie section. Widely regarded as the leading art show worldwide, TEFAF presented a platform for Van Cleef & Arpels to share its jewels with art enthusiasts ([see story](#)).

Additionally, Yves Saint Laurent will be the subject of two museums, one in Paris and another in Marrakech, Morocco, cities in which the late fashion designer split his time.

Both the Paris and Marrakech museums are being organized by the Fondation Pierre Berg, founded in 2004 to preserve the fashion house and Mr. Saint Laurent's legacy. The Fondation Pierre Berg was established by Pierre Berg, Mr. Saint Laurent's longtime partner and co-founder of the Yves Saint Laurent Couture House, which gives a personal and authentic connection to the designer and subsequent museums ([see story](#)).