

Exhibition Review

Compte rendu d'exposition

MoMu: A Stylish Newcomer in the World of Fashion and Museums

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The dimmed lights fill the visitor with anticipation of treasures. MoMu, the Fashion Museum, Province of Antwerp, officially opened its brand new doors in September 2002 with the claim of being "the first fashion museum in the world."¹ The visitor can only be curious about how MoMu will clothe the concept.

The lights are focused on dressmaker forms swathed in tasteful colour sequences and grouped thematically throughout the large exhibit space. At this point, standing at the threshold, the scene invites the visitor to recall the words of fashion theorist Elizabeth Wilson:

*There is something eerie about a museum of costume. A dusty silence holds still the old gowns in glass cabinets. In the aquatic half light (to preserve the fragile stuffs) the deserted gallery seems haunted. The living observer moves, with a sense of mounting panic, through a world of the dead ... We experience a sense of the uncanny when we gaze at garments that had an intimate relationship with human beings long since gone to their graves...*²

But when we move deeper into MoMu's exhibit hall, it changes our mood. Confronted by the unexpected, we re-orient ourselves. We notice now that the lights are also shining on acid-free cardboard boxes, with plexiglass replacing one of the cardboard surfaces, thereby allowing the visitor to see, as though by x-ray, the treasures stored within. Stacked up, they form horizontal display cases. Lined up and on end, they form modular closet-like walls-cum-display cases. These boxes were once used to store the collection (modern metal units are currently used). Dressmaker forms rather than mannequins serve to display the gowns. They stand atop rough wooden pallets. And so the visitor comes to recognize the space as an

historical reference to what has normally been hidden from view. We are "backstage" — the word also serves as the title of the exhibition catalogue.

The historical archives, the workings of the boardroom, the restoration lab, and the storage depot comprise the exhibition. MoMu's first exhibition conveys the inner workings of a fashion museum with such intelligence, such exquisite taste, and such regionally-specific insight, that the eerie figures are freed from singular reference to "human beings long since gone to their graves," to tell about the modern buzz in the Province of Antwerp. The installation is called "Selection 1." With Belgian hospitality, and pride for a unique idea whose day has come, it reveals the range and depths of MoMu's collections, and the breadth, and innovative scope of MoMu's vision and policies.

*We regard it as a challenge to interpret the MoMu collection as a "living" collection, a work in progress, conceiving of the history of fashion not as a linear continuum but instead as a circular process...What a museum of fashion can offer...is a context in which to place fashion, a place for reflection and analysis...*³

In this museum, the fashion business, fashion scholarship, and fashion archives come together to attest to the infusion of support that the Belgian government has provided during the past thirty years to encourage the development of Antwerp as a European fashion centre. Housed in ModeNatie, the impressively renovated (by Marie-José Van Hee) Hotel Central of past Paris-oriented glory on the fashionable Nationalestraat, it takes its place among "all the forces in Antwerp with an interest in fashion."⁴ Under the same roof the visitor will find the Flanders Fashion Institute (consult www.ffi.be for upcoming fashion events), and the respected Fashion Academy that has turned out Ann Demeulemeester, Walter Van Beirendonck, and Dries van Noten, among many, many others.

The ModeNatie is nestled among their boutiques. This positioning is an important part of what makes MoMu "the first fashion museum in the world" and allows it, together with its partners in the ModeNatie, to participate in a vital way in the happening fashion scene.

The design of the ModeNatie recapitulates the themes of modernity, transparency, and connections. A sign for visitors beside the glass wall of the restoration lab invites the visitor to reflect on the importance of the physical space for conveying the message:

The architecture of the ModeNatie building emanates a sense of openness and transparency. The atrium, the central space with a glass roof, connects all the occupants. Each floor provides access to this central space and offers a different perspective on the building as a whole. Here the visitor observes and is observed. In a sense, the building reflects the attitude MoMu wishes to adopt: openness, and transparency in front of and behind the scenes. In the open restoration workshop, visitors can follow restoration activities and mannequin dressing, and catch a glimpse of items that have been prepared for coming exhibitions...

The display selection and the juxtaposition of exhibits convey a similar message. Works of designers, past and present, are found adjacent thematic arrays of apparel and accessory items, student samplers, innovative fabric designs and technology. The eclectic assemblage defines fashion history as historical accident. MoMu's displays remind the visitor that fashion is happening NOW, on the streets of Antwerp all around the museum, in the current configuration of talented producers/designers and consumers, available technologies, and educational strategies, all thrust together by historical momentum.

MoMu will go its own way, yet it cannot be dissociated from the fashion movement in Antwerp itself. Somewhere in the MoMu collection lies the explanation for the success of Antwerp fashion. Every museum collection has its own character and tells its own story...

writes Linda Loppa, Chief Curator, in the Introduction to *Backstage*.⁵

The museum is new, but like Antwerp's devotion to the textile arts, it has deep social/historical roots. It houses the collection of textiles once stored in Sterckshof castle. After the collection was moved to Vrieselhof castle in Ranst-Oelegem in the 1970s, collecting activities picked up and, in the 1980s, it was allowed to acquire, on permanent loan, the

costume collection (over 2000 items) of the Museum voor Volkskunde. A total of 1239 regularly arranged images of equal size adorn the entry wall to present the visitor with an overview of the "very diverse collection of clothing, lace, embroidery, fabrics and tools for traditional textile processing, mostly from the Southern Netherlands..." (museum sign). Inside, the displays similarly make reference to the museum's history in its local setting. A sublimely embroidered row of dresses from the flapper days were made by the Embroidery Workshop Timmermans (Borduur werkhuis Timmermans). Their presence highlights a skill for which Antwerp continues to be famous. Across the hall, the visitor looks up at the spectacular crochet gowns in artificial silk by Ann Salens. A sign encourages the visitor to note that:

The work of Ann Salens occupies a symbolically important place within the MoMu collection. It represents a turning point towards the success of the present generation of Belgian fashion designers...

In another nook devoted to Dries van Noten and Bernhard Willhelm, curiosity is piqued by the unusual fabrics on display. They result from a joint project with handweavers who utilize traditional Assyrian methods from southeast Turkey. Betet Skara, the weaving workshop, was established in 1999 as an employment project for refugees. Social employment is its primary goal.

Since 1998 priority has been given to the acquisition of work by contemporary Belgian fashion designers. Linda Loppa, Chief Curator, offers insight into this part of her responsibilities. She makes selections using her knowledge and intuition:

First, a garment must move, affect and enchant me. Second, it must tell an interesting tale through its texture or the way it is made, its pattern or its colour composition. Will such items of clothing stand up to the challenge of time? Does the garment relate a personal story about the designer, or his or her state of mind?⁶

In addition to acquiring significant clothing items that have been worn, Linda Loppa visits designers' archival stocks, and purchases at fashion events. The museum has also benefited from the generosity of many designers. As this facet of the museum expands, it will grow into its role as "the first fashion museum in the world." The collection currently numbers some 25 000 items.

Five thousand of those items have so far been photographed in a project to eventually place images of the entire collection online. Already the museum

may be visited virtually at www.momu.be, an informative and user-friendly Web site. But this should only whet the appetite. Every opportunity should be taken to experience this unique institution first hand. The entrance fee is reasonable and private tours are available by special appointment. Signage is easy to read and accessible in English, French and Flemish even to the lay person. The atmosphere is calm and tasteful. Enjoyable hours may be spent in the upstairs well-stocked fashion library (items may not

be loaned), or downstairs in the atrium where designer fashion films are shown back to back. The first MoMu catalogue is available at the Copyright bookstore, downstairs, where the browser will be enticed to linger. Even the technically curious and those of a tactile nature will not be disappointed — touchable fashion reproductions installed at the far end of the exhibition space satisfy those compulsions that inevitably befall the dedicated visitor to institutions of fashion and cloth.

NOTES

1. H. Jacobs, "De klerenkast van de samenleving," *De Gelderlander* (Friday 20 September 2002).
2. Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: Virago, 1985), 1.
3. K. Debo, "The Fashion Museum Backstage," *Het ModeMuseum/The Fashion Museum/Backstage* (Ghent: Ludion, 2002), 11.
4. F. Geudens, "Foreword," *Het ModeMuseum*, 5.
5. Linda Loppa, "Introduction," *Het ModeMuseum*, 7.
6. Loppa, "Collecting," *Het ModeMuseum*, 129.