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Exhibiting Gaultier

by [Semmi W.](#) | Posted November 6, 2013

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Sketch of Madonna's stage costumes for her Blond Ambition World Tour, 1989–90, inkjet print, 11 x 17 in. (27.9 x 43.1 cm). © Jean Paul Gaultier

The time it takes to get over the dizzying effect of the *The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum will not stop you from wanting to go back and visit it again. Nothing can prepare you for it. When it hits you, just remain still; let your mind recoup and reconfigure life before and after. Yes, it really did happen.

When you first land on Gaultier's planet, the arresting display of more than 140 haute couture and ready-to-wear pieces might initially overwhelm you; but do not be intimidated. Gaultier is, after all, a playful but pragmatic surrealist. In his universe, everyone belongs. "He was the first to bring everyone to the catwalk," head curator Thierry-Maxime Loriot explained in an interview with *The Genteel* ahead of the exhibition's opening weekend. "Whatever your age, your size, your colour or your gender [...] everyone is welcome."

The exhibit, first launched at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in 2011, encourages visitors to interact and fully experience the intention behind each design. Mannequins with animated faces greet you - smiling, winking and even singing opera -

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throughout the entire exhibition.

At the entrance, in the vest of an animated mannequin, the respected designer is also there welcoming visitors to the Brooklyn Museum and giving them a personal breakdown of his many inspirations. For Gaultier, this is just one example of his hands-on approach with the exhibition. In order to create the interactive faces, a compilation of videos of friends, celebrities, and Gaultier himself were filmed and projected separately on to each mannequin. The result is eerily breath-taking.

"To have the chance to see these pieces...all those hours of work and craftsmanship...it's just a unique opportunity," says Loriot. "The seamstresses from the atelier spend hours working on [them]...at the museum you can see them up close. [...] And I know some people are not really into fashion, they couldn't really understand the difference between ready-to-wear and haute couture...which is something I tried to show in this collection."

As you move from one room to the next, double-takes become a routine habit. Pieces worn by muses such as androgynous model Andrej Pejic and Naomi Campbell stand before you like sculptures. Whether examining the infamous conical bustier from Madonna's 1990 *Blonde Ambition* tour or a catwalk with rotating mannequins, the exhibition easily feels more like a theatrical spectacle - a show within a show - rather than just another fashion exhibition. Just before the public opening in late October, Gaultier told attendees at the press preview: "I'm very pleased to be here. [...] Never in my life [...] did I imagine that I could be in a museum speaking about my clothes and presenting my work."



Jean Paul Gaultier. Photo by Andy Warhol.



'Dubar' gown from Jean Paul Gaultier's 'Romantic India' women's spring summer haute couture collection of 2000.
Photo by Karl Lagerfeld.

The five rooms also include sketches; iconic photographs by other great artists like Andy Warhol, Richard Avedon and Cindy Sherman; videos of costume work created for films like the *Fifth Element*, and even the torso shaped bottles that symbolise his fragrance empire. However, despite the larger-than-life installations and the breadth of Gaultier's oeuvre being presented, the exhibit should not be interpreted as being a retrospective. In fact, when the former 'Enfant terrible' of fashion was first approached with the idea in 2010, he was a bit apprehensive.

As Gaultier explained to Bennett Marcus to *Vanity Fair* during the opening week of the New York exhibition: "It's very flattering. [...] It's incredible that I am still alive; normally, it's when you are dead that you have something like that, no?...But, but, but, but, when I saw the team in Montreal that came and asked me, I thought, maybe we'll do something, but I want it not to be a funeral. I want it to be an experience, a new adventure."

Instead of placing costumes and installations in chronological order, Loriot brilliantly staged items according to themes - giving visitors a peek into the many

obsessions that define Gaultier's world. Visitors will find the signature Breton striped shirts, punk street wear, and even a music room made especially for the Brooklyn Museum featuring Beth Ditto's corset and floral tulle leotard, Beyoncé's silver jumpsuit and Gaultier's Spring/Summer 2012 'Tribute to Amy Winehouse' collection.

Elsewhere, visitors can walk by mermaids, including the ivory, fish-scale embroidered gown that French actress Marion Cotillard wore to the 2008 Oscars, and BDSM inspired garb under neon-red lights.

More than half a million people have already seen the touring exhibit since it first opened in June 2011. While visitors will surely gain a greater appreciation for Gaultier's impeccable

tailoring, for Nathalie Bondil, director of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Gaultier's genius is rooted in his generosity: "It is a very inclusive vision of beauty...I hope [that] at the end of this exhibition, people will feel happy, will feel included [...] and just be relaxed in front of haute couture", she commented when speaking to *The Genteel*. "It's not a question of intimidation. [...] Fashion is a tool to be yourself...it was the reason why I wanted to have this exhibition. Not just because of the beauty of each dress, but because really he [Gaultier] has this empathy."

Through the exhibit, one can easily see Gaultier's appreciation for human diversity. He is a designer with no formal training; a man who burst onto the fashion scene unafraid to send pregnant women, midgets and men in skirts down the runway. He has spent his entire career melding the street and the catwalk, or rather showing the fashion elite a thing or two about the rest of the world. "I did my profession, because I wanted to be loved. I hope you will love me more," he declared during his visit at the Brooklyn Museum. And love him we do.

The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk is currently on show at the Brooklyn Museum until February 23.

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A design from Jean Paul Gaultier's "French Cancan" women's ready- to-wear fall-winter collection of 1991–92. Photo by Patrice Stable/Jean Paul Gaultier.

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