



Montreal Chic: Institutions of Fashion— Fashions of Institutions

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Abstract

This article examines and contrast the fashion collections at three of Montreal's cultural institutions, the Musée McCord, an urban and historical museum that houses over 18,000 pieces of costume and textile artifacts; the Musée du Costume et du Textile du Québec, which owns and exhibits a collection of 8,000 items worn, collected, and donated by Quebecers and contemporary fashion by Montreal-based designers; and the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal, whose director Nathalie Bondil has made locally produced international fashion exhibitions one of the key points of its curatorial practice since 2008.

Our goal is to show that even though Montreal is not considered a global fashion center like Paris, London, or New York, its fashion history and practices are inevitably tied to its urbanity, rapid modernization, its turbulent history, its vibrant culture, and its unique status as the largest French-speaking and bilingual city in North America. As such, the city fits in well with the other Urban Chic studies, that focus on Berlin and Vienna.

The fashion collections at these institutions reveal insights into the city's cultural history and cosmopolitan trendiness as well. These collections reflect and support Montreal's identity as a cultural center—as the city of jazz, disco, Cirque du Soleil, festivals, etc. The collections reflect the city's social and political history, for example the labor conditions of the manufacturing industries. Finally, these collections tell us what role fashion plays in the everyday lives of people who live and work in this city, and what role fashion dialogues play in the urban imaginary of Montreal.

This article is based on a chapter from our forthcoming book, *Montréal Chic: A Locational History of Montreal Fashion* (Intellect). Following the models of *Berliner Chic: A Locational History of Berlin Fashion* and *Wiener Chic: A Locational History of Vienna Fashion*, *Montréal Chic* approaches fashion as a lens through which urban culture, institutions, scenes, and subcultures can be analyzed and connected.

KEYWORDS: Montreal fashion, museums, fashion exhibitions, fashion networks

Like Berlin and Vienna, the first two cities that make up the Urban Chic series, published by Intellect Press, Montreal is not considered to be a global fashion center like Paris, London, Milan, New York, or Tokyo.¹ Nevertheless, in our quest to define Montreal Chic in our forthcoming book (Intellect), we begin by examining fashion curatorial practices in three Montreal museums, namely, Musée McCord, Musée du Costume et du Textile du Québec (MCTQ), and Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal (MBAM). In this article, we demonstrate the ways in which the traditional roles of these institutions are changing, how these institutions bring together different aspects of culture and fashion, and ultimately how they contribute to what the Montreal-based geographer Norma Rantisi calls a “network of relations” (Rantisi 2011: 261) within Montreal's fashion scene (see Figure 1).² We examine this network in further detail in our book, arguing that Montreal can be seen as a fashion “contact zone” (Pratt 1992: 6–7),³ made up of “persons who often are in close contact with leading creative and progressive elements in the arts, music, sciences, politics and culture generally” (Davis 1992: 198–9). Museums, as we demonstrate in this article, play a key role, continuously propelling this network of relations not only by linking

Figure 1

Montreal Fashion Week,
February 2012, Earl Luigi
design at Exhibit 22.
Photograph: K. Sark.



the institutions and activities of fashion, but also by tying fashion to its cultural institutions.

By looking closely at the collecting and exhibiting practices determined by the museums' mandates, which are guided by explicit or implicit, and often contrasting philosophies regarding the aesthetic, cultural, historical, and social value of fashion artifacts, we provide an overview of Montreal's fashion museum landscape, which until now has been given little attention in academic literature. Since 2008, fashion exhibitions in Montreal museums have gained momentum both in frequency and popularity, bringing audiences into the museums that would previously not have frequented them. We begin our research with these institutions because despite their different curatorial and collecting practices, they house and generate the images, narratives, and artifacts of fashion, thereby bridging the commercial and cultural elements of fashion, and simultaneously making them accessible to wider audiences. Our aim is to uncover the ways in which these institutions contribute to and sustain a strong fashion identity in Montreal, and ultimately manifest the threads and ties that constitute Montreal Chic (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

Montreal Fashion Week,
February 2012, Melissa Nepton
design. Photograph: K. Sark.

Musée McCord

Musée McCord was established by the private collector David Ross McCord (1844–1930) in 1919, and opened to the public in 1921 as a history museum. The museum was closed in 1936, and reopened again in 1971 in the former McGill Student Union Building, designed by the architect Percy E. Nobbs. Because it was conceptualized as a history museum, dedicated to the preservation of Montreal, Quebec, and Canadian heritage, McCord's collecting philosophy in the beginning was thoroughly antiquarian, and this practice applied to collecting fashion as well. In 1956, when McCord director Isabel Dobell officially started its fashion collection, she was following a wider North American movement of building fashion collections in museums, which, according to Cynthia Cooper, the curator of costume and textiles at McCord, began with a merger between the Museum of Costume Art in New York (established in 1937) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET) in 1946.⁴ Several other museums followed in establishing fashion collections: the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1943, the Philadelphia Museum of Art opened a fashion wing in 1947, and Los Angeles County Museum in 1952.⁵

Valerie Steele pointed out that surprisingly little scholarship has been published on the emergence of fashion in museums, “with the exception of Fiona Anderson's seminal essay ‘Museums as Fashion Media’ (2000) and Lou Taylor's book *Establishing Dress History* (2004)” (Steele 2008: 8). While in Europe fashion collections in museums date back to the nineteenth century and the World Expositions in London and Paris, most notably the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), Britain's national museum of decorative arts, which, as Steele noted, has collected clothing since its founding in 1852 (Steele 2008: 8), in North America, the earliest collection dates back to 1915, when the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) was developed out of the Edward C. Blum “Design Laboratory,” which was originally founded at the Brooklyn Museum (Steele 2008: 9). This relatively late admittance of fashion into European and North American museums was examined by Concordia University graduate, Laurie Filgiano, in her MA thesis on Canadian fashion exhibitions, where she states that “until the mid-19th century, dress was neglected as both an art form and as material evidence,” and suggests that it was the beginning of ready-to-wear clothing and the establishment of the department store in the 1850s, with its display windows and browsing customers, that played an important role in the development of museum dress collections (Filgiano 2011: 3–4). We believe that the subsequent cultural wave of establishing fashion collections in North American museums in the 1940s and 1950s can perhaps be explained by the wartime admission of women into the workforce and public spheres. Fashion, as a domain of female labor, consumer practices, and aesthetics also gained

significance in North American museums as women gradually began to dominate the labor and consumer markets. Lou Taylor provides a confirmation for our gendered-based hypothesis through her history of the role of dress within the V&A, in which she notes that the museum has always collected dress, yet only in a minor way until the 1950s. Taylor attributes this to the fact that “in the eyes of male museum staff, fashionable dress still only evoked notions of vulgar commerciality and valueless, ephemeral, feminine style” (Taylor 1998: 341). With more women curators and directors assuming leading roles in the museums in the postwar era, fashion gradually began to be viewed and valued differently. Thus, it took approximately 100 years (since 1852) for fashion to stop being considered “unworthy” (Steele 2008: 9), to stand on par with other decorative and fine arts, and thanks to the postwar changes in labor and consumer practices to be regularly displayed in museums.⁶

Cynthia Cooper explains the peculiarity of McCord’s fashion collection, claiming that “what’s interesting [is that] here in Montreal, it was not the art museum starting a fashion collection, it was a history museum. So this is quite different from other cities in North America.”⁷ McCord’s mandate “to collect things that were Canadian,” was also extended to its fashion collection, which initially was established “to constitute a timeline of fashion, to show how fashion changed.”⁸ But a shift in collecting practices across North American museums reveals the ways in which the initial interest in collecting fashion evolved from an antiquarian approach to an aesthetic one. As Jean Druessedow, the associate curator in charge of the Costume Institute of the MET from 1984 to 1992, explained in 1985, “the philosophy of acquisition [of the MET’s fashion collection] is that of judging each item as a work of art, rather than as representative of specific cultures. For us, the aesthetic elements of a costume are a primary consideration” (Taylor 2004: 191). MET’s collecting philosophy stresses the aesthetic value of fashion and it influenced other institution in their curatorial and collecting practices. In contrast, McCord’s collecting practice differs from that of an art museum. But, significantly, its historical focus does not preclude fashion collecting practice based on both cultural history and aesthetics. As Cooper explains:

David Ross McCord was maybe less concerned with aesthetics, it was more about who did [the fashion item] belong to, what some people would refer to as “original sweat.” So, it’s all about the originality. And with Isabel Dobell, looking at what all the other museums were doing, it was collecting the fashionable, the garments that were beautiful to look at, that represented high fashion at any given time ... The approach throughout those years in the 50s and 60s was that of a history museum but the presentation was that of a decorative arts museum.⁹

Integrating these varying approaches allows McCord to produce exhibitions such as *Reveal or Conceal*,¹⁰ curated by Cooper in 2008–9, which blended local history (through the history and artifacts of a local undergarment manufacturer) with an aesthetically appealing presentation of historical and contemporary dresses and garments from the museum's own collection. Typically, as Valerie Steele has argued, fashion as an applied art is increasingly likely to be showcased in art museums, but in Montreal, McCord serves multiple functions because it owns a historical dress collection, and both produces and hosts fashion exhibitions, thereby practicing what Steele termed the “new” fashion history, “which also places greater emphasis on analyzing the *meanings* of cultural objects and practices” (Steele 2008: 24–5).

McCord's fashion collection is not unique in North America. There is, for example, the National Museum of American History in Washington, DC, which has a dress and accessories collection, and the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto, that has a textile and fashion collection consisting of anthropological artifacts from different cultures and societies. ROM's approach is historical as well, but is not restricted to a national, provincial, regional, nor urban milieu.¹¹ In the Canadian context, McCord's fashion collection differs essentially from that of the ROM, in its cosmopolitan and locational approach. The McCord now owns the largest museum collection of Canadian dress and accessories, consisting of 18,845 items, made and/or worn in Canada and in Montreal since the eighteenth century. In July 2013, the McCord merged with the Stewart Museum (founded in 1955, and located in the arsenal of the British fortified depot on Île Sainte-Hélène), amalgamating its 27,000 artifacts on the history of European presence in New France and North America, including some dresses and accessories from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The fact that McCord, like many Canadian museums, acquires by donation makes it harder to concentrate primarily on an aesthetic approach. As Cooper explains, “through the 1980s, 90s, and 2000s the McCord has always wrestled with this question of what is a history museum. And in fact, there are very few [history museums with fashion collections] that give good examples to follow.”¹² Yet the upside is that the example is also McCord's to invent.¹³ The inherent difficulties in managing a historically influenced mandate together with an aesthetic approach allow McCord to develop its own exhibition practices. McCord overcomes these challenges by narrating and exhibiting Montreal's heritage and authentic stories of local inhabitants and manufacturers, while simultaneously maintaining a competitive edge according to exhibition standards established by other fashion museums, which are usually art museums with different types of fashion collections. For example, in 1989 McCord produced an exhibition on the work of Montreal postwar couturier Marie-Paule Nolin (Palmer 2004: 6). In 2002–3, the exhibition *Clothes Make the MAN*, which

included a section with the wardrobe of former Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, was developed by guest curator Gail Cariou in collaboration with Cynthia Cooper and included the participation of Montreal designer Philippe Dubuc as a spokesperson.¹⁴ The exhibition received the Costume Society of America's Richard Martin Award¹⁵ for Excellence in the Exhibition of Costume, and traveled to the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau in 2003, and then to the Musée de la Civilisation in Quebec City in 2004. In 2009, Cooper's *Reveal or Conceal* exhibition also won the Richard Martin Award.¹⁶ Building on that momentum of successful fashion exhibitions, the following year the museum hosted the exhibition *Dream Weavers—Costumes by Cirque du Soleil*, produced by Cirque du Soleil. To celebrate the museum's 90th anniversary in 2011, the exhibition *90 Treasures, 90 Stories, 90 Years* included artifacts such as the jersey of legendary Canadiens hockey player Maurice Richard (1921–2000),¹⁷ and encouraged the interactive participation of Montreal's most creative minds from various fields, including Montreal fashion designer Joseph Helmer, to reflect upon their favorite artifact in video clips presented via iPod in the exhibition. That same year, the museum announced its partnership with Montreal Fashion Week (MFW), with whom the museum had collaborated on previous occasions in the past. For the following edition of MFW in February 2012, the museum hosted screenings of fashion documentaries, *Cristóbal Balenciaga—Endurance in an Ephemeral World*, by filmmaker Oskar Tejedor, and *Monsieur Hubert de Givenchy*, a film by Karim Zeriahen, with the filmmaker in attendance, thereby bridging the relational networks between the fashion scene and museal institutions.¹⁸ Since 2012, it has become a common practice to attend fashion events at the McCord during MFW (see Figure 3), which brings new audiences into the museum, and simultaneously exposes other museum members and visitors to the artifacts, collections, films, and the culture of fashion.



Figure 3
Montreal Fashion Week,
February 2012, filmmaker
Karim Zeriahen, third from
the left in the front row.
Photograph: K. Sark.

In 2013, McCord opened a new permanent exhibition *Wearing Our Identity—The First Peoples Collection*, which pays tribute to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples through rarely displayed artifacts drawn from McCord's Ethnology and Archaeology collection. While it is not a traditional fashion exhibition, it centers on the dress history of the First Peoples of Canada and how it helped define their rich cultures and identities. It also illustrates the ways in which the McCord constructs historical and educational fashion exhibitions and draws attention to a variety of issues, such as fashion identities, national dress, and the First People's heritage that pertain both to the work of cultural and fashion historians. Simultaneously, the museum hosted a traveling exhibition, *From Philadelphia to Monaco: Grace Kelly—Beyond the Icon*,¹⁹ based on an exhibition produced by the V&A in London, which participates in the new millennium's wave of celebrity fashion exhibitions, and which Lou Taylor briefly describes in *Establishing Dress History* (Taylor 2004: 289–91). Popular interest in celebrities attracts huge crowds to exhibitions, such as *Diana: A Celebration* (at Althorp House and on tour) and *Jacqueline Kennedy: The White House Years—Selections from the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum* (at the MET), that were both popular and commercial successes. While benefiting from international celebrities, museums as cultural institutions can still use these exhibitions to bridge history, culture, fashion scenes, and education through cultural awareness. With the Grace Kelly exhibit, McCord managed to once again link various relational networks with Montreal's history, by featuring the dress Grace Kelly wore to Expo 67, and to its fashion scene, by inviting the designer Jean-Claude Poitras to give a lecture on Grace Kelly's influence on the fashion world at McCord. During the fall edition of Montreal Fashion Week 2013, designers Christian Chenail and Denis Gagnon presented designs inspired by Grace Kelly's style (see Figure 4).²⁰

As Montreal was renegotiating the future of its Fashion Week after Quebec government cut more than half of its funding, as well as its need



Figure 4
Montreal Fashion Week,
September 2013, Flash Mode
event featuring eleven Montreal
designers, at Auberge Saint-
Gabriel in Montreal's Old Port.
Photograph: K. Sark.

for international recognition, Grace Kelly became the international fashion symbol and inspiration that allowed Montreal to push its own imaginaries and regional boundaries, while Musée McCord participated in facilitating this network of relations. Thus, by establishing itself as a key location not only for local and international fashion exhibitions, but also for Montreal's fashion scene, especially during Fashion Week, McCord has managed to move from an antiquarian history museum of its early days to a modern multidisciplinary and multimedia institution that regularly displays and promotes not only the history of Montreal fashion, but also international and local fashion networks. As Laurie Filgiano noted, in Canada, Montreal's Musée McCord and the ROM in Toronto are, arguably, "the only two Canadian museums with 20th-century costume collections that have [also] been able to move beyond the antiquarian displays" (Filgiano 2011: 13–14). We would also like to add the newly relocated Musée du Costume et du Textile du Québec in Montreal to that list.

Musée du Costume et du Textile du Québec

The second, newly reconceptualized institution that owns an important fashion collection and holds fashion exhibitions in Montreal is the Musée du Costume et du Textile du Québec (MCTQ), which was originally established in 1979 in the greater Montreal area as Musée Marsil in Saint Lambert.²¹ Its relocation to the Old Port's Marché Bonsecours in June 2012 placed it strategically within Montreal's cultural and fashion landscape and contact zone.²² Significantly, its establishment in 1979, the same year as the Montréal Museum of Decorative Arts, which was later joined with the Musée des Beaux-Arts, was comparatively late in relation to the other Montreal museums, and points to a renewed interest in Quebec's identity and cultural history at that time. Coincidentally, 1979 was also the year when the V&A in London changed its fashion collecting practice, "after well over a hundred years of exclusion, the name of the Textile Department was finally changed to include dress. Since then, the V&A has been the model for balancing the educational and entertaining quality of fashion exhibition" (Filgiano 2011: 29–30). Perhaps this points to a second wave in the establishment and consolidations of fashion collections in museums, both in North America and Europe. As Lou Taylor reminds us, the 1980s correspond to more open-minded multidisciplinary curatorial approaches and new critical theory (with Elizabeth Wilson and Joanne Entwistle, for example) that would eventually contribute to elevating fashion to be considered a legitimate academic field of study (Taylor 2004: 279).

Musée Marsil had an artistic and historical vocation. Its mission was "to highlight costume, textile and fiber, both as material witnesses of [past and contemporary] civilizations, and as means of artistic

expression” (Baril 2004: 268). Until recently, as Filgiano noted in her thesis, the MCTQ, like many other Canadian museums, has “not had the funding and specialized staff to host any major exhibitions or document their collections professionally” (Filgiano 2011: 11–12). According to Cynthia Cooper, who worked at the Musée Marsil from 1988 to 1998, the museum’s collecting mandate was very general in those years, but its name and programming were reconstituted to reflect its fashion collection in the early 1990s, following a requirement from the Quebec government to make the museum’s mandate more specific. The institution decided on its new name (MCTQ) and focal points on costume and textiles to better reflect its collections.²³ The museum’s relocation to the Old Port in 2012, its first fashion exhibition in the new space that opened in April 2013, as well as its new objective to serve as a research institution for fashion scholars in Montreal,²⁴ have all contributed to the museum’s most recent reconceptualization. Its mission was then broadened to include different perspectives on fashion: patrimonial (with an interest on the interaction between tradition and contemporary discourses), creative (focusing on Quebec’s designers, arts and crafts, as well as cultural workers and creators), international (in an intercultural perspective related to Montreal’s different ethnic communities) and technological (intending to showcase different textile innovations and applications without compromising the aesthetic value). Moreover, its emphasis on French language, Quebec fashion heritage, and Montreal’s contemporary designers make it different from the McCord. Its collection includes over 8,000 items of clothing worn and donated by Quebecers, from the mid-nineteenth century to today, as well as hats, textiles, art, and graphics. The collection features clothes by Quebec fashion icons such as Marielle Fleury, Raoul-Jean Fouré, Marcel Martel, Marie-Paule Nolin, and Michel Robichaud, and hats by Yvette Brillon and Fanny Graddon, among others. Many of the objects carry local store labels like Brisson & Brisson, Henry Morgan, Holt Renfrew, Lily Simon, Simpson, and Windsor Bazaar. Other clothes bear witness to distribution and circulation of international fashion in Quebec, for example, clothes by Cristobal Balenciaga, Pierre Balmain, Pierre Cardin, Christian Dior, and Elsa Schiaparelli (Millen 2004: 268).

The Quebec fashion specialist known as Régor (Roger Lacrose) left his archive to the museum, including a large collection of magazines, books, old fashion journals, and newspapers. As yet, little is known about Régor, except that in the 1940s, the Quebec government commissioned him to establish “traditional” clothing for Quebec, in order “to offer rural clothes and accessories that would be attractive, suitable for our climate and typical for each of the province’s regions.”²⁵ This project was unsuccessful because Quebec had no traditional style of its own, and no institution can impose such a tradition. Despite this failed attempt of establishing traditional attire, Quebec’s vast collection of historical and contemporary dress and fashion make up the collections

of two local museums. In contrast to McCord, the mandate of MCTQ is to “cleverly circulate the know-how (*savoir faire*) regarding clothing and textile, in order to show Quebec’s diversity and cultural wealth. Clothing and textile heritage, ethnology and fashion, conservation, and education are the main focal points of the museum.”²⁶ What particularly distinguishes MCTQ from other Montreal museums that own fashion collections is its dedication to education. The museum offers a wide range of educational activities (guided tours, creative workshops, literary contests, collective exhibitions, performances, and other projects) for families, schools (from high school to university levels), community, and cultural organizations. Since its reconceptualization, MCTQ has taken on the mission to bridge the gap between museum experience and academic learning, between fashion experts and the general public.

The first exhibition, entitled *Tapis rouge: la mode au musée* (*Red Carpet: Fashion at the Museum*), on display between April and October 2013, was conceptualized by the former general director Suzanne Chabot (see Figure 5).²⁷ The exhibition featured vintage pieces by international and local designers, such as Elsa Schiaparelli, Jean Patou, Thierry Mugler, Arnold Scaasi, Christian Dior, and demonstrated Montreal women’s attention to elegance and style. It also showcased recent work of contemporary Montreal-based designers, such as Christian Chenail, Michel Desjardins, Valérie Dumaine, Ying Gao, Joseph Helmer, Jocelyn Picard, Marie Saint Pierre,²⁸ and Tavan & Mitto. Their creations range from *haute couture* to experimental and technologically innovative design. The exhibition is exemplary of the museum curatorial approach in bringing together major highlights from fashion history and present-day innovations and creativity in the world of Montreal fashion. It displays the gradual evolution of the vocabulary of fashion through the multiple examples of dresses from the museum’s collection, created by international and local designers. Furthermore, with the previous exhibitions, such as *Michel Robichaud, couturier: retour sur les années*



Figure 5

Tapis Rouge exhibition at the Musée du Costume et du Textile du Québec featuring designs by Marie Saint Pierre and Christian Chenail, fall 2013. Photograph: K. Sark.

60 (from 1995), and the exhibition *Belle et à la mode: images du 20^e siècle* (from 2000), the museum has demonstrated a strong commitment in showcasing local creativity in design while highlighting Montreal's dynamic fashion industry. MCTQ also bridges local fashion, visual arts, and poetry by curating exhibitions like *De terre et de soie*, intended as a poetic dialogue between artist Nathalie Ducharme's ceramics and the museum's permanent collection of costumes, dresses, and textiles.²⁹ It exhibits its dress collection in unusual places such as shopping centers (Mail Champlain, Eaton Center, Place Ste-Foy), thereby bringing together different threads of the vast local fashion web (commerce, fashion, history, and art). Thus by blending the aesthetic presentation of exceptional dresses with its educational mandate to showcase and make accessible Quebec's fashion and cultural heritage, and by encouraging a dialogue with other museums (especially Musée de la Civilisation du Québec and Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal), the museum consolidates the city's past and present fashion identity, facilitates a network of relations, and contributes to Montreal's fashion contact zone. But unlike McCord, it has yet to establish itself as a key location and player during Montreal Fashion Week and other fashion events and festivals, and to take advantage of its location in the Old Port in a way that not only attracts tourists, but engages the local fashion scene in a more interactive way.

Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal

The third and final institution we examine here is the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal (MBAM), Canada's oldest art museum, originally established in 1847 under the name of Montréal Society of Artists, it became the Art Association of Montréal in 1860. In 1948–9, the association formed a new corporation under its present name. In 1972, it became a semi-public, non-profit institution, largely funded by grants from different government levels. According to its website, its mission is “conserving art for all to share,” as well as “acquiring and promoting the work of Canadian and international artists past and present ... to attract the broadest and most heterogeneous public possible, and to provide that public with firsthand access to a universal artistic heritage.”³⁰ Its collection consists of 36,000 objects—paintings, sculptures, prints, drawings, photographs, and decorative art objects—from antiquity to today. In 2000, the Montréal Museum of Decorative Arts, which was founded by Liliane and David M. Stewart in 1979 (the same year as the MCTQ in its original location in Saint Lambert), merged with MBAM, and provided the museum with an additional fashion and accessories collection, currently amounting to 821 pieces, including one of Denis Gagnon's sculptured zipper dresses.³¹ Boasting one of the highest attendance rates among Canadian museums (more than 760,000 visitors

annually), it is also one of Canada's leading publishers of art books in English and French.

Since 2007, museum director and chief curator, Nathalie Bondil has made fashion, along with music and pop art, a new priority for MBAM. She specifically insisted on producing the museum's own fashion exhibitions, rather than merely hosting them. The first fashion exhibition produced under the new mandate, in collaboration with the Fine Art Museum of San Francisco, was the *Yves Saint Laurent Style* retrospective, conceived by the Fondations Pierre Bergé–Yves Saint Laurent in 2008.³² As Diane Charbonneau, curator of the modern and contemporary decorative arts at MBAM explained, the success of the exhibition increased the museum membership, created momentum for fashion exhibitions in Montreal, facilitated media interactions (the museum invited Quebec designers to the show), and established fashion as a frame to bridge different disciplines and media in the museum.³³ As Laurie Filgiano pointed out, the Yves Saint Laurent exhibition was organized chronologically and divided up thematically based on his famous collections, and:

while it was the first retrospective spanning his entire forty year career and even though a third of the pieces had never before been exhibited, the content itself was factual and did not explore any underlining issues that would have brought it from a merely aesthetic exhibition to one which added to the scholarship of dress history. (Filgiano 2011: 14–15)

The tradition of exhibiting a designer's oeuvre at art museums was established in the 1970s and 1980s and has been documented by Valerie Steele (Steele 2008: 7–30). Filgiano's research reminds us that because fashion designers were originally rejected from the Arts and Crafts Movement, it allowed them to "align themselves with the fine art notion of creator as genius, carving themselves a comfortable spot in the art museum by the mid-20th century" (Filgiano 2011: 5). As many designers since the 1920s transcended the discipline of fashion and spilled into other arts, theatre, and film (Coco Chanel designed costumes for the *Ballets Russes*, Givenchy designed Audrey Hepburn's costumes in Hollywood), they began to be increasingly recognized as artists and their work entered the museums in the form of retrospectives. Pierre Cardin, whose retrospective was first shown at the MET in 1980, then at the V&A in 1990, and at Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal in 1991, stated that, "a couturier is no longer a maker of clothes, but rather a true artist who masters matter, the shapes given to fabrics, and the abstraction of matter in space."³⁴ Steele credits Diana Vreeland, the former editor of *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue*, and Special Consultant at the Costume Institute at the MET, where she worked for seventeen years until her death in 1989, with the beginning of modern

fashion exhibitions, and with taking exhibition practices from an antiquarian and chronological approach to an aesthetically and theatrically entertaining one (Filgiano 2011: 6; Steele 2008: 10). Vreeland was often criticized for her preference of spectacle over historical accuracy or pedagogical value of curatorial practices (Steele 2008: 11). This debate over curatorial values escalated in 1983, when Vreeland curated *Yves Saint Laurent: 25 Years of Design*, at the MET, the first museum exhibition dedicated to the work of a living designer that sparked a controversy over the values of education and entertainment in museums, and caused the MET to ban shows on living designers (Steele 2008: 12). However, as many museums began to change their historical or aesthetic mandates to include new disciplines and to attract new audiences, fashion exhibitions became popular attractions (Filgiano 2011: 11). The curatorial debates and controversies simmered down, the MET lifted its ban, and the curators and critics agreed on the common denominator of fashion exhibitions that are “both beautiful *and* intelligent, entertaining *and* educational” (Steele 2008: 14).

Since the success of the YSL exhibition in 2008, MBAM produced two more original fashion exhibitions, *Denis Gagnon Shows All* in 2010–11 (see Figure 6), and the blockbuster show *The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk* in 2011, which will be touring European and North American museums until 2015. As Filgiano explains:

The benefits of traveling an exhibition are immense. In most cases, this is where a show earns the largest amount of money as host institutions pay high rental fees. Unfortunately, this is not often the case with fashion exhibitions as the cost involved with the maintenance and display of dress is enormous. Neither the hosts nor the creators financially benefit from such a partnership. It is for this reason few fashion collections travel but those that do



Figure 6
Montreal Fashion Week,
September 2012, Denis
Gagnon. Photograph: K. Sark.

tend to be sponsored and have entrance fees, resulting, inevitably, in public criticism. (Filgiano 2011: 43)

Regardless of whether the Jean Paul Gaultier exhibition turns out to be a financial success or not, its export value is high because it provides the MBAM with the kind of exporting prestige traditionally reserved for the MET and the V&A. Such fashion exhibitions not only allot the museum both national and international recognition, but also elevate its production quality on par with that of the MET and the V&A. This makes the MBAM the only Canadian museum that created three consecutive fashion exhibitions produced in Canada in the last few years. It is significant because, as Filgiano explains, “Canada’s lack of dress collections, particularly in fine art museums, has inhibited further development of Canadian dress history and our involvement with the larger international trend of fashion exhibits” (Filgiano 2011: 41). For example, when Alexandra Palmer’s *Au Courant* fashion exhibition at the ROM in 1997–8 showcased over forty Canadian designers, it did not attract the crowds (Filgiano 2011: 42). Filgiano observed that “our fine art institutions are obviously interested in dress exhibitions, as several have hosted large traveling shows, but without our own collections, the scholarship is never truly credited to Canada” (Filgiano 2011: 41). She proposes a closer collaboration between Canadian fine art and history museums (Filgiano 2011: 55). However, it is important to point out that by showcasing Montreal designers like Denis Gagnon, and inviting other local designers to their fashion exhibition openings, the MBAM, like the McCord and MCTQ, participates in the creation and maintenance of the city’s fashion networks. Furthermore, by acquiring Denis Gagnon’s famous zipper dress, the museum is establishing its own contemporary local fashion collection, which in time will also become a historical artifact as well as an aesthetic and decorative one. Having introduced the tradition and experience of producing big and internationally exported fashion blockbuster exhibitions, the MBAM took fashion in Montreal museums to another level, while simultaneously maintaining connections with and integrating local fashion designers into its other exhibitions, such as the 2012 *Tom Wesselmann: Beyond Pop Art* exhibit³⁵ that featured a special display of young local fashion designs inspired by pop art, organized in collaboration with the Festival du Mode & Design, put on by Groupe Sensation Mode, who also used to produce Montreal Fashion Week (see Figure 7). This close collaboration between the art and fashion scenes is undoubtedly contributing to Montreal’s status as a cultural center, and certainly propels its becoming a fashion one as well.

Figure 7

Color Block Party at Musée des Beaux-Arts featuring Montreal designs inspired by pop art, during the Tom Wesselmann exhibition, summer 2012. Photograph: K. Sark.

**Conclusion**

Together the three museums ground the locational history of fashion in Montreal, while simultaneously facilitating dialogues and networks with international fashion icons and systems. Even when exhibiting international designers like Jean Paul Gaultier and Yves Saint Laurent, or fashion icons like Grace Kelly, the museums provide strong local links and sustain both the awareness and the importance of the local fashion industry and history. As such, the museums facilitate and extrapolate the material and cultural manifestations of Montreal Chic by establishing a network of relations with the public, the designers, the industry, and the media. Simultaneously, the museums also benefit from fashion exhibitions in terms of new membership and diverse audiences. These ties between institutions and other actors of the fashion scene and industry are important to each party. Not only do the museums encourage Montrealers' interest in fashion, but they also create and sustain a dialogue around both local and international fashion, and thus contribute to the creation of fashion networks, which few other Canadian cities have. By having their distinct points of focus on Montreal, Quebec, and the international fashion world, there is no evident rivalry or competition between the museums because there is enough space for the different languages and localities that the museums represent within the cultural landscape of the city. Ultimately, the museums demonstrate that there is not only strong fashion awareness but also a strong fashion identity in Montreal, while simultaneously building ties and bridges between the local and global fashion systems. As in Berlin and Vienna, this is largely due to the hard work of many fashion curators, visionary museum directors, and fashion scholars, many of whom (as quoted in this article) are women, who relentlessly dedicate their careers to building stronger ties between fashion and culture. Thus the essence of Montreal Chic, which we explore in greater detail in our forthcoming book, lies in its system of fashion relations, conscious of global fashions and trends, and its ability to combine local and international history, identity, and networks.

Notes

1. For a discussion of global fashion cities, see Gilbert (2000: 14).
2. Norma Rantisi writes, “the identity of a fashion center is constituted not by a particular national style or regional costume, but by the localized capabilities that produce new styles or redefine old ones. Such capabilities include the presence of key industry activities,” as well as “interaction and coordination between industry actors” in what she terms a “network of relations.” Also see Rantisi (2011: 260): “From the perspective of policymakers, fashion contributes to place-branding and the promotion of tourism; it also contributes to defining the aesthetics of place which in turn, can shape the design and marketing of cultural products.”
3. Pratt defines the contact zone as the process “when groups of various cultures come into contact and change the original cultural patterns of either or both groups.” This is not only true of Montreal’s diverse linguistic communities, but its fashion scenes as well.
4. Interview with Cynthia Cooper at the McCord Museum (July 31, 2013).
5. Interview with Cynthia Cooper at the McCord Museum (July 31, 2013).
6. For a detailed history of dress and fashion exhibitions, see Valerie Steele (2008) and Laurie Filgiano (2011).
7. Interview with Cynthia Cooper at the McCord Museum (July 31, 2013).
8. Interview with Cynthia Cooper at the McCord Museum (July 31, 2013).
9. Interview with Cynthia Cooper at the McCord Museum (July 31, 2013).
10. *Reveal or Conceal* exhibition at McCord: <http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/expositions/expositionsXSL.php?lang=1&expoId=47&page=accueil> (accessed September 2013).
11. ROM website: <http://www.rom.on.ca/en/exhibitions-galleries/galleries/world-cultures/patricia-harris-gallery-textiles-costume> (accessed September 2013).
12. Interview with Cynthia Cooper at the McCord Museum (July 31, 2013).
13. Interview with Cynthia Cooper at the McCord Museum (July 31, 2013).
14. For a list of McCord exhibitions since 1997, see: <http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/expositions/expositionsXSL.php?lang=1§ionId=143> (accessed September 2013).
15. The Richard Martin Award for Excellence in the Exhibition of Costume is named for Richard Martin (1947–99), former curator of costume at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Fashion Institute of Technology. Richard Martin was an outstanding scholar,

lecturer, critic, and curator of many critically acclaimed costume exhibitions. Now in its second year, this award recognizes annually up to two institutions for excellence in the exhibition of costume. The McCord Museum is the first institution outside of the USA to win this award. The other Martin Award recipient for 2003 is the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, for their exhibition *Miracles and Mischief: Noh and Kyogen Theater in Japan* (from the McCord Museum press release: <http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/en/info/pressreleases/119n.html>; accessed September 2013).

16. As the museum press release emphasizes, “No other museum in Canada has won it. No other museum in the world has won it twice” (http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/pdf/PR/PR_Prix_Richard_Martin_EN.pdf (accessed September 2013)).
17. Canadiens de Montréal is, among Montreal institutions, a strong vector of identity and one of the team’s nicknames, Sainte-Flanelle (Holy Flannel), shows how sacred a piece of clothing can be for Montrealers.
18. See interview with filmmaker Karim Zeriahem: <http://suitesculturelles.wordpress.com/2012/02/28/monsieur-hubert-de-givanchy-by-karim-zeriahem/> (accessed September 2013).
19. See Grace Kelly exhibition at McCord: <http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/expositions/expositionsXSL.php?lang=1&expoId=89&page=accueil> and <http://suitesculturelles.wordpress.com/2013/08/14/grace-kelly-from-philadelphia-to-monaco-exhibition-at-musee-mccord/> (accessed September 2013).
20. Stella Bruzzi defined the powerful influence that Grace Kelly possessed in the world of fashion, noting that, “she defined her iconic status rather than be defined by it. In this alone, Kelly posed a clandestine threat to men and their adoring eyes, as her femininity anachronistically implied she didn’t exist to please them. A significant component of this power was fashion, or more precisely Kelly’s interest in fashion as an articulation of her independence” (Bruzzi 2000: 207).
21. Maison du Musée Marsil: http://www.marigot.ca/courrier_du_sud/clba18.htm (accessed September 2013).
22. Marché Bonsecours used to host Montreal Fashion Week before it moved to the Arsenal Gallery in 2012. With the establishment of more designer boutiques, such as Denis Gagnon’s flagship store, the Old Port is increasingly becoming one of the key locations of fashion in Montreal.
23. Email correspondence with Cynthia Cooper at McCord Museum (September 16, 2013).
24. See MCTQ website: <http://mctq.org/fr/category/le-musee/mission-et-historique/> (accessed September 2013).
25. Larose dit Regor, Roger, (s. d.) “Le costume régional dans la province de Québec,” Fonds du ministère de l’Industrie et du

- Commerce, Archives nationales du Québec a Québec, boîte 180, dossier “Costume regional” in Hamel (1999).
26. Our translation: “Diffuser avec ingéniosité le savoir-faire en matière de vêtement et de textile pour témoigner de la diversité et de la richesse culturelle au Québec. Patrimoine textile et vestimentaire, ethnologie et mode constituent les axes privilégiés de recherche, de conservation et d’éducation du Musée.” MCTQ website: <http://mctq.org/fr/category/le-musee/mission-et-historique/> (accessed September 2013).
 27. *Tapis Rouge* exhibition: <http://suitesculturelles.wordpress.com/2013/09/14/musee-du-costume-et-du-textile-du-quebec/> (accessed September 2013).
 28. See interview with Marie Saint Pierre: <http://suitesculturelles.wordpress.com/2012/10/01/marie-saint-pierre-25-years-of-montreal-fashion/> (accessed September 2013).
 29. See MCTQ website: <http://mctq.org/fr/category/expositions/passees/> (accessed September 2013).
 30. MBAM website: <http://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/a-propos-du-mbam> (accessed September 2013).
 31. See Denis Gagnon: <http://suitesculturelles.wordpress.com/2010/11/17/denis-gagnon-fashion-in-museums/> (accessed September 2013).
 32. See Jean Paul Gaultier exhibition: <http://suitesculturelles.wordpress.com/2011/09/03/jean-paul-gaultier-a-montreal/> (accessed September 2013).
 33. Interview with Diane Charbonneau at Musée des Beaux-Arts (September 5, 2013).
 34. Quoted on the Musée des Beaux-Arts Info brochure, announcing the Pierre Cardin exhibition in 1991, MBAM archives. Also see: *Pierre Cardin: Past, Present, Future* (1990).
 35. See Tom Wesselmann exhibit: <http://suitesculturelles.wordpress.com/2012/08/02/tom-wesselmann-and-the-art-of-colour/> (accessed September 2013).

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