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**'Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams', Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK, 2 February–1 September 2019**

**Bethan Bide, Textile History, 2019**

There is no denying it, Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams was a triumphant success for the Victoria and Albert Museum, selling out its entire run, and then its extended run, within weeks. While those lucky enough to obtain tickets were faced with long queues for entry, sharp elbows in the gift shop, and difficulty finding a seat in the museum cafe afterwards, after stepping inside, visitors were rewarded by both the awe-inspiring scope and visual spectacle of the exhibition.

Designed by Nathalie Crinière and curated by Oriole Cullen, Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams presented room after room of dazzling couture, showcasing the exceptional skill of designers and ateliers at the top of the Parisian industry. Beginning with the story of Christian Dior himself and his entry into the fashion business, the exhibition proceeded in a broadly chronological order to showcase the work of the designers who led the house following Dior's death in 1957, before culminating in a spectacularly lit 'ballroom' where the past and present were brought together in a triumphant celebration of the House of Dior.

Much of the staging and many of the items on display were familiar to those who saw the first version of the exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, which ran from July 2017 to January 2018 to mark the 70th anniversary of the founding of the House of Dior. But the V&A's reimagining added and innovated, and the museum should be particularly congratulated for providing visitors with sorely needed updates in its more accurate and detailed labelling of the pieces on display. As a result, a number of the historical generalities and inaccuracies that plagued the Paris exhibition – including, perhaps most unfortunately, the incorrect dating of Willy Maywald's ubiquitous photograph of the 'Bar Suit' – were erased. The V&A team also incorporated new items that showcased interesting links between London and the world of Parisian couture in the 'Dior in Britain' room. These provided a particularly welcome addition to the exhibition, bringing fashions to life by connecting them to real people and situations, and in doing so challenging perceptions about what it was like to wear a piece of early Dior (according to novelist and debutante Emma Tennant, surprisingly easy). Seeing the dress worn by Princess Margaret on the occasion of her 21st Birthday – perfectly dressed and lit in the round, revealing stains on the skirt one couldn't help but imagine might have come from a gin cocktail – was undoubtedly one of the highlights of the exhibition.

While the V&A was unable to fully replicate the grandeur of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs' imposing staircases and vaulted ballrooms, clever lighting and sets did wonders to transform its 'black box' Sainsbury Gallery into a utopia of Parisian couture. This visual feast was made possible through collaboration with the Dior brand, who loaned the majority of the items on display. However, while the exhibition would not have been possible without the input of Dior, evidence of the tensions between the curators and Dior were subtly apparent throughout, perhaps nowhere more so than in a single line that obliquely described John Galliano's departure as Dior's creative director as 'controversial'.

These tensions raise difficult questions about the power dynamics between museums and major fashion brands. The objects on display showcased Dior's substantial investment in recent years to build an archive collection through which the brand can control its historical narrative. Indeed, the evolution of the show between Paris and London demonstrates how easy it is to re-write that history; whilst in Paris the exhibition carefully positioned then creative director Raf Simons the natural heir to Dior, via the juxtaposition of his 2012 collection designs and Dior's work from the 1950s, in London the work of his successor Maria Grazia Chiuri was inserted into this role, in spite of the fact her design aesthetic is not such a natural fit for this narrative.

This focus on promoting Dior's various creative directors as the talent that created and sustained the brand ultimately came at the cost of crediting the many other skilled and creative professionals who contributed to Dior's success over the years. Although the exhibition devoted one room to toiles, to showcase the skills of the makers who realised the designers' visions in thread and cloth, no individuals were named or pictured. Pol Baril's 'The Making Of' videos (2019) almost exclusively show anonymous hands at work, erasing the individual faces of the very people they claimed to celebrate. This stands in sharp contrast to efforts made in other museums, such as the Designmuseum Danmark, to name individual ateliers on display labels alongside designers, in order to properly credit their skilled contributions. It also highlights how the metrics that measure the success of fashion exhibitions for museums – namely visitor numbers, press coverage, and social media interaction – are increasingly leading the content of headline fashion exhibitions in the opposite direction from developments in the academic field of fashion history, where there is growing interest in everyday fashions, makers, and business history.

While the curators at the V&A and the Musée des Arts Décoratifs created something truly special by bringing together such a rare and beautiful group of objects and staging them so well, the use of a publicly funded institution as a promotional showcase for a single designer brand inevitably must raise difficult questions about the too-often unacknowledged struggles for authorial control between public institutions and private corporations. Indeed, these aren't new questions – the V&A archives reveal that concerns about the ethics of brand promotion and fashion exhibitions have been debated within the institution as early as their 1958 exhibition *The House of Worth*. But as continued funding challenges remain on the horizon, rendering this type of spectacular, blockbuster fashion exhibition an economic necessity, the boundaries between the museum's role as a site for the dissemination of historical knowledge and a place for the public consumption of heritage branding will continue to challenge visitors and curators alike.