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In America: A Lexicon of Fashion Review

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In America: A Lexicon of Fashion Review

Lacey Minot

In the fascinating universe of haute couture and ready-to-wear, innovation is expressed not only through the evolution of savoir-faire but also through the vocabulary we use: indeed, fashion seduces us through words...

— Roselyne Bachelot¹

How is Fashion ‘Spoken’ in America?

Opening at the end of New York Fashion Week 2021, The Costume Institute’s *In America: A Lexicon of Fashion* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, explores this very line of thought, playing on the expressive power of language and fashion with dictionary precision to propose new modes of thinking, speaking, and feeling fashion. Modelled conceptually upon the quilt, a staple of American folk tradition and a metaphor of diversity, *A Lexicon* attempts to develop a vocabulary of American fashion to match the emotional potential of its European counterpart.

The first of an exhibition in two parts, *A Lexicon*, draws from the multitudes and intricacies of the English language and is divided into twelve evocative themes, as listed on the introductory wall panel before the descent into the Anna Wintour Costume Center: Nostalgia, Belonging, Delight, Assurance, Desire, Strength, Comfort, Confidence, Affinity, Wonder, Joy and Consciousness. These ‘chapters’ are further broken down into a selection of nuanced variables (shades of Desire, for example, include *enchantment* and *allure*), each of which is defined by either a unique ensemble or a small grouping of pieces in dialogue.

One of two singular non-dress exhibits is a silk signature quilt with a ‘tumbling blocks’ pattern, started in 1856 by Adeline Harris Sears. Composed of 360 silk swatches, autographed by her renowned American contemporaries, including ‘eight American presidents (notably Abraham Lincoln), Northern military heroes of the Civil War, antislavery political leaders, and luminaries from the worlds of science,

¹ Roselyne Bachelot, ‘Dire la mode en français’, Ministry of Culture Conference, Paris, 6 October 2021; ‘Dans cet univers fascinant de la haute couture et du prêt-à-porter, l’innovation se traduit non seulement à travers l’évolution des savoir-faire, mais également à travers le vocabulaire utilisé: en effet, la mode nous séduit aussi avec des mots [...]’. Author’s translation.

religion, education, and the arts² and arranged according to similar social and professional spheres, this quilt is essentially a ‘patchwork portrait’ of the era and a gestalt of American potential.

The other exhibits, primarily womenswear, are starkly staged in scrimmed shadow boxes meant to represent patches of a quilt in three dimensions... although given the layout, the resemblance is abstract. The grid and tight, two-way flow of traffic rather remind New York’s intersecting streets and avenues. One hundred or so garments presented in labyrinthine succession in the small Costume Center, filled with seemingly pre-pandemic crowds, makes for an intimate experience—at times too intimate for ‘comfort’.

Part Two, *An Anthology of Fashion’s* (2022) exhibits will be integrated into the Met’s American Wing period rooms in a much more open scenography, similar to that of 2018’s *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination*. This sister section promises to be more spectacular through its storytelling, juxtapositions and breaking of coded spaces. Rather than the immersive experience that has come to define today’s blockbuster exhibitions, *A Lexicon* is like a language primer, making us conversational, both linguistically and emotionally, in American fashion and preparing us for what is to come: it will, in fact, run concurrently with Part Two as of May 2022.

Yet while *A Lexicon’s* scale and relative sobriety may be surprising, given the lavishness of previous Costume Institute shows, the presentation and groupings are harmonious, and the visitor is left with relative freedom to discover and make connections after having entered the main exhibition space. Gazing upon paillette coat linings, ‘pneumatic balloon sleeves’ in bubblegum pink, recycled 1920s beading, annotated denim and falling stars, one finds it difficult to consider the exhibition without using—*feeling*—the very vocabulary it establishes, and for that, we may already consider it a resounding success.

A Lexicon opens on the ground level with Nostalgia and Belonging, not that the principal chapters are evident amongst the groupings of like terms. Each word appears twice per exhibit, first as mannequin headpieces, then defined and elaborated upon through production details and cultural references in the accompanying labels. The twelve defining qualities blend in amongst their variants: they are not offset and do not stand out in bold. In fact, if not for their listing in the introduction, it would be impossible to determine which quality amongst the handful of related terms—which ensemble out of a

² Exhibit label, *In America: A Lexicon of Fashion*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2021.

line of complementary pieces—represents the guiding emotion for any set. This is not to say that there is no distinction amongst the hundred-odd exhibits; on the contrary, such a seamless categorisation allows the visual and emotional aspects of the ensembles to match the lexical properties that the exhibition highlights. The visitor is awash in different discrete moods, but for the most part, unaware of any vocabulary hierarchy.

The precisions are, of course, somewhat arbitrary and sometimes too nuanced to appreciate—particularly with so many exhibits, each with its own definition. Is the difference between Delight (*exuberance, vitality, ebullience*) and Joy (*playfulness, vibrancy, humour, artfulness, spontaneity*) so pronounced as to merit two different categories? How does Belonging (*togetherness, continuity, commemoration, solidarity...*) differ from Affinity (*closeness, camaraderie, kinship, association, fellowship*)? And yet even if the ensembles were all stripped of their markers, one could approximate the groupings, as family resemblances are made evident through colour, cut and material and certain stand-out pieces emote. How could Christopher John Rogers' 2020-21 plaid silk taffeta gown, with its intense berry hues and nine-foot-wide skirt, convey anything *but* Exuberance?

While the themes and their derivations are a reflection of the curator's power as language and sense-maker, *A Lexicon* does not purport to create meaning but to tap into common empathic sensibilities. To look is to imagine wearing, to try an emotion on for size. Assurance (*honesty, freedom, fluency, harmony...*) is a micro-genealogy comprising nine ensembles in gold and camel hues. Claire McCardell's 1943 wraparound dress announces Diane von Furstenberg's 1974 wrap dress, giving way to coats conflating form with function and sequins gradually overtaking evening wear pieces. The visitor can identify with the 'assurance' of being comfortably wrapped or the 'ease' of having one's hands free, thanks to ample pockets. Likewise, there could be no doubt that Yeohlee Teng's blanket-like coat, inspired by Mongolian dress, or The Row's cashmere cocoon denote Comfort (*suppleness, retreat, easefulness, sustentation...*). It is at once disappointing and unsurprising that menswear, menswear-inspired/androgynous looks and male-coded models are ascribed to the traditionally masculine trait of Strength (*resolve, discipline, capability, accomplishment, responsibility*), made all the more apparent by the preponderance of womenswear. Desire (*seductiveness, romance, passion...*) and Wonder

(*naïveté, innocence, sweetness...*) are predictably feminine, all-black tulle and pink flounce. If the flux is at the intersecting heart of language and dress, and if fashion is evolving past discrete menswear and womenswear, innovative takes on masculinity and femininity can certainly go beyond Thom Browne's gender-mixed suits.

Definitions can be limiting. While *A Lexicon* materialises what it means to be *in* and *of* America in a hundred or so terms and ensembles, it also opens with a question under the heading of Belonging. 'Who gets to be American?' asks Nepalese-American designer Prabal Gurun, in his own experience becoming an American citizen, in his activism and, literally, in his clothing. Gurun's emblematic spring/summer 2020 confection, a dress in white cotton poplin, is a study in twists. The cut-out, partially exposed midriff and shoulder reference the draping of a sari. The red-trimmed sash, emblazoned with that perennial debate, calls to mind beauty pageants and the suffrage movement while questioning the very standards that these institutions represent in Americana. There is something formally beautiful and yet slightly subversive about the upturned bouquet tucked into the fold at the waist. Who gets to be American? That is the defining question, not simply in fashion, but in America.

In America: A Lexicon of Fashion is on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from 5 September 2021 to 5 September 2022. *In America: A Lexicon of Fashion* will open on 7 May 2022 and close with Part One in September. A catalogue dedicated to the two-part exhibition will be published in May 2022.

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