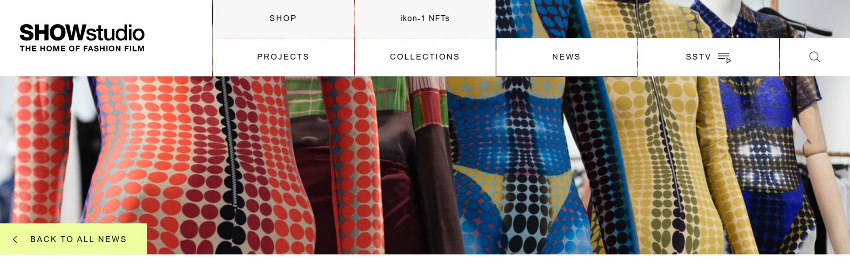

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THE DEVIL'S IN THE RETAIL: ON COMMERCIALISM AND FASHION EXHIBITIONS

BY CYANA MADSEN ON 16 FEBRUARY 2022

Reflecting on Selfridges' *Universe* exhibition, curator and archivist Cyana Madsen considers the shifting landscape of designer exhibitions.

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Visitors enter a low-lit space where sumptuous clothing hangs off carefully dressed mannequins. Artfully directed spotlights bounce off the finer details of the garments, and labels outline the contextualising information about each piece on display. Visitors file slowly through the space, murmuring under their breath as they lean in for a closer look. The final stop on their tour is a shop where merchandise inspired by the show can be purchased; pencils, mugs, perhaps a £350 knitted top?

The exhibition, titled *Universe*, centres on the Space Age fashion designer Paco Rabanne and his contemporary, the Op art pioneer Victor Vasarely. The exhibition is installed on the ground floor of the Selfridges department store on Oxford Street, London. Aluminium scaffolding, a material preferred by the two artists, has been erected around graphic flooring mimicking Vasarely's patterns to create a temporary gallery on the Selfridges shop floor. The purpose-built space houses 55 works by Vasarely and a number of Rabanne's pieces for the duration of the show, including the 12 'Unwearables' from Rabanne's 1966 debut collection.

Born from the desire to show how Vasarely's work inspired the brand Paco Rabanne's current creative director Julien Dossena's S/S 22 designs, *Universe* also puts the work of two key artists of the mid-20th century in dialogue with each other. By positioning the output of two artists who were working independently of each other and yet both expanding the possibilities of their respective mediums in the tumult of post-war France, *Universe* transmits a feeling of the electric possibility of that place and time to the visitor.

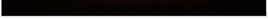
Selfridges 'Universe', photograph Lewis Ronald

This is an intangible feeling Selfridges hopes to translate into stock turnover; part of the full offering of the exhibition includes over 50 shoppable 'pre-loved fashion and lifestyle products using or inspired by Vasarely's design' and the S/S 22 Paco Rabanne collection itself.

This unabashed mixing of the commercial raison d'être of Selfridges with experimental art and design serves a dual purpose: driving footfall by exploiting the undeniable interest and subsequent rise in numbers of fashion exhibitions happening worldwide, and asserting itself through these kind of events as a supporter of creativity and arbiter of fashion expertise.

It is a mix that museums, who have until recently held dominion over both above-mentioned purposes, must be eyeing warily. Although nearly as reliant on funds generated from ticket and tie-in merchandise sales as the retail industry is on their own product turnover, museums must also appear that they *aren't* so. The vulgar commercialism of retail undermines what they ostensibly stand for; being the objective keeper of knowledge, who present exhibitions that can be read as definitive historical texts.

The numbers don't lie, however. The V&A in London, which refers to itself as 'the world's leading museum of art, design and performance' has made monographic exhibitions from fashion designers its showpiece in the past two decades. This reached an apex with the restaging (originating in 2011 at The Met in New York) of *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* in 2015, a show which brought in more than 480,000 visitors to the museum. Those numbers were smashed in 2019 with *Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams*; by the time the exhibition closed, it had 594,994 people through the doors.



Écarlate afternoon dress, Autumn – Winter 1955
Christian Dior Haute Couture collection, Y line.
Photo: © Laziz Hamani

The 2019/20 financial report for the V&A demonstrates the impact of these numbers; £9,260,000 and £8,380,000 in admissions income and trading profits, respectively: these are the kind of profits that keep museum doors open. Undeniably the cost of staging this scale of exhibition is high (*Savage Beauty* cost a cool £3 million) but the V&A had sponsorship from crystal barons Swarovski for both *Designer of Dreams* and *Savage* Beauty to help off-set costs.

Swarovski, of course, has a close working relationship with both Dior and McQueen as per their own sponsor statements on the V&A website. It is a relationship they likely wouldn't want to upset by sponsoring an exhibition with content that might have a negative impact on these design houses. One degree of separation between museum and design house via sponsors is ethically sticky enough, but the production of exhibitions with loans from house archives (as both *Savage Beauty* and *Designer of Dreams* were) signals exhibition content approval from the originating design houses.

This presents a muddied answer to the question of who is best served by monographic exhibitions. Is it the visitor being presented with a multi-faceted and visually well-stocked narrative, as curated by experts in the museum? Is it the museum generating multiple, vital streams of revenue through ticket, merchandise, and tie-in event sales? Or is it the design house cementing their legitimacy historically and academically, through being included in the assumed gatekeeper of knowledge, the museum?

For the visitor who can afford paying a premium (*Designer of Dreams* was a hefty £22 per ticket) the exhibition carries the expectation of a transportive extravaganza; showstopping pieces from legendary runway shows, set pieces that recall the house's most iconic moments, and a sense that the fullest history of a design house is being told. The reality of this task is untenable, not just in cost but scope.

'Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty', © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Plumbing the biographies and psyches of Christian Dior or Alexander McQueen for their every source of inspiration while also examining their output in full would take more than one single exhibition. Necessary concessions are made to an overarching theme, and parts of the story are glossed over or left out. Perhaps this results in a more packageable exhibition with attractive tie-in products (glossy photo books, jewellery, re-issued Alexander McQueen clutches), one that promotes a simplified history of a design house and generates a profit. The museum, in effect, has become a showroom.

From the other end of this union there is now a well-established understanding among design houses, thanks in part to museum-led blockbuster exhibitions, of the value of their history and archives. A prime example of this followed from the massive success of the *Savage Beauty* shows, when in 2019 Alexander McQueen opened an exhibition space on the top floor of their flagship on London's Old Bond Street. Visitors travel through the entirety of the retail space to get to the rotating displays, where a controlled retelling of focused aspects of the history and inspirations behind collections are shared through garments, sketches, and photos. And so, the shop is transformed into a museum.

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This interplay of formats and motivations make the question of whether a monographic exhibition set in a museum is a rigorous telling of history, or a promotional tool for a design house not so cut and dried. Perhaps it is both, a mutually beneficial relationship that allows visitors to pay to participate in a design house's glamorous dream, and museums to fund those less dazzling exhibitions that might otherwise not get in front of an audience.

'There are fewer differences working within museums and a department store than people would love to think - there is a shared care in terms of what is communicated and how,' notes professor Judith Clark, a curator and exhibition maker who has worked across the breadth of fashion archives and exhibition spaces including at the V&A and Selfridges. Clark has a deep understanding of the sometimes conflicting and often symbiotic nature of fashion houses and museum spaces.

'There are the perceived different priorities [commercial vs didactic] but what those assumptions forget is that museums need to survive financially and that department stores want the associated conceptual weight of exhibitions to balance their own image - so there is ever more blurring.' She notes that in her work with Selfridges she felt her 'conceptual project was protected more than in some museum commissions where they wanted the designer's name on the door to increase footfall.'

Ultimately the goal of the exhibition is to serve the audience, no matter the venue or the underlying narrative. Selfridges' *Universe*, perhaps oddly given the commercial surroundings, might give the most bang for their buck to the visitor themselves. Although set in a space with a clear eye for profit, Selfridges main floor is relatively accessible to the wider world. There is no ticket for entrance, no demand of purchase in exchange for viewing the exhibition. It is a show featuring original, beautiful archive pieces. The labels clearly state the dates and origins of each piece. Sure, there isn't much rationalising of why each piece is put next to each other, aside from the stated theme of inspiration and the fact that they look outstanding together. Fellow curators may have my head for this, but I've seen less context provided in more established exhibition spaces.

Put frankly, *Universe* is attractive, informative, and free. In a post-COVID landscape of rising costs of living, limited expendable cash from visitors, and clawbacks on arts funding this may indicate a future for fashion exhibitions. One that is more understanding of the compromises needed to get these creative projects in front of wider audiences and less divided along the false dichotomy of sacred knowledge and profane commerce.

THE FUTURE OF VASARELY

Selfridges 'Universe', photograph Lewis Ronald

Universe is on at Selfridges, London until 27 March, 2022.

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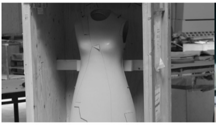

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