

Unravelling Inspirations: The Non-Retrospective of Dries Van Noten

A review of *Dries Van Noten: Inspirations*, Musée de la Mode et du Textile, Les Arts Décoratifs, Paris, 1 March-2 November 2014

By Johanna Zanon

Dries Van Noten: Inspirations seeks to unravel the inspirations behind Belgian designer Dries Van Noten's (b. 1958) fashion creations—through the confrontation of his garments with historic clothing from the museum's collections, and with works of art loaned from diverse institutions. Each display case contains all of the above elements, and these guiding principles are clearly explained in the first room of the exhibition. This tripartite juxtaposition, rare in a museum display, increases the potential for dialogue. By doing so, the exhibition explores fashion's intertextuality and temporality, two key questions in fashion studies today.

The exhibition is divided into over twenty categories of Van Noten's wide-ranging "inspirations," including *Punk, Butterflies, Francis Bacon, The Piano, Gold, Graphic, Bowie/Cocteau/Visconti, Foppish, Iconoclast, Uniform, Camouflage, Beaton, Feathers, Sports Couture, Summer Flowers, Spain/Mexico, Folklore, Marble, Bollywood Orientalism*, and *Power Flower*. Additionally, the last section is dedicated to Van Noten's Fall 2014 collection, inspired by his work on this very exhibition. This allows viewers a glimpse into how the different layers of the creative process inform and correspond to one another, and blur the line between inspiration and end result.

One aspect that was integrated throughout, "inspirations *a posteriori*," further serves to challenge the exhibition timeline. Here, the designer showcases objects he has found in museum collections that he argues could have been at the origin of some of his designs; such as the white felt collar in *Self-Portrait With Masks*, painted by Léon Spilliaert in 1903. Such examples define inspiration as a moving, uninterrupted stream, which goes beyond the traditional causal link between the inspiration source and the inspired result. As the thematic display thus rethinks traditional notions of temporality, Van Noten claims that the exhibition is not a retrospective.



A closer look at the “Butterflies” section, which explores inspiration behind Van Noten’s Spring-Summer 2000 menswear collection, may illuminate several curatorial choices. The label of contents is disjointed, and stylistically resembles at once a telegram, a haiku poem and a recipe:

Youth and beauty. Innocence and experience. Aggressiveness, obsession: a touch of cruelty, Anthony Burgess and Stanley Kubrick: *A Clockwork Orange*. The preciousness of ornament in Flemish Primitive paintings. Flight, insects, the minutia of the natural world. Damien Hirst. Dazzling colours, the lightness of butterflies and kites. Violent death as soon as captive.¹

As they read, visitors experience the pleasure of unravelling, or finding matches between Van Noten’s creations and inspirations – viewing instructions encouraged by the designer himself.

In “Butterflies,” garments from the collection are displayed alongside a bevy of visual sources, including a projection of the film *A Clockwork Orange*, adapted by Stanley Kubrick from a novel by Anthony Burgess – both the film and Van Noten’s collection shared an affinity for the colours white and orange. Other cinematic references in this collection included the make-up worn by models during the catwalk show, also projected, and the baseball bats they carried – props that spoke to the film’s violence, and perhaps also to that of the fashion world, plagued as it is by competition, pressure, and the fear of failure. During the show, the models also famously wore kites on their shoulders, echoing the flutter of the butterfly. Alongside his collection, Van Noten chose to display a 1937 dress by Elsa Schiaparelli with an allover butterfly pattern, and Damien Hirst’s immense *Transgressor* (2007). Hirst’s work, composed of brightly coloured dead butterflies glued to a canvas, is both joyous and frightening. Like these reminders of the ephemeral nature of life and beauty, Van Noten uses butterflies in his work as an ambivalent symbol, with both positive and negative connotations, from freedom to death.

The comparison of clothing and other media, as seen in the *Butterflies* section, can be a stimulating experience for exhibition viewers – however its risks being judged as an easy, reductive curatorial choice. *Picasso and the Masters*, held at Paris’ Grand Palais in 2008, was, for example, strongly criticised for its systematic display of works by Picasso alongside those by ‘masters’ such as Velasquez or Delacroix. It is perhaps to deter similar criticism that Van Noten repeatedly justifies his own aims in the exhibition catalogue and in interviews with curator Pamela Golbin; he asserts, for instance: “I do not work in the manner of a photocopier, who is content with reproducing his influences; my creation process goes further.”²



“Beaton” display, second floor / © Luc Boegly / www.lemonde.fr

Exhibiting historic and contemporary clothing, together with works of art, is indeed a delicate curatorial exercise. Golbin and Van Noten excelled at the task, thanks to their spectacular scenography and lighting that highlighted each object. Christine Delhaye and Ellinoor Bergvelt used the term “visual spectacle” to describe recent theatrical fashion exhibitions in the Netherlands (this genre peaked with *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 2011).³ I would argue that *Dries Van Noten: inspirations* – whose intertextuality is revealed through its aesthetic power – falls in the same category. Yet there is real substance beneath the spectacle, and the exhibition asks questions that are relevant for art and fashion history alike, notably concerning dualities: ephemeral and eternal, nature and culture, feminine and masculine.

Most importantly, the exhibition addresses the question of inspiration and seeks to shed light on the workings of the creative mind, or unravel the mystery of creation. This topic has and continues to

fascinate many commentators in a range of fields, from fashion and art to music and genetics. The journalist Georges Le Fèvre explored the question in fashion, for example, in his book entitled *Au Secours de la couture* (1929).⁴ And the conspiracy of designer-led, premeditated trends has forever fed the imagination of people who do not work in the fashion industry. Today, contemporary audiences' interest in the 'behind the scenes,' as shown by the documentary series **The Day Before**, which films twenty-four hours in a fashion house before the show, attests to a continued curiosity in the creative process. While the exhibition fails to address the House's process of creating a collection from scratch, it does highlight the multiple sources of inspiration, and the constant absorption of the world by the creative people in a fashion house as, **according to Van Noten**, "a humming-bird nourishes itself from a multitude of flowers."⁵ In turn, the visitor enjoys sharing in this kaleidoscope of materials, normally reserved for creators alone.

In conclusion, I would argue that the exhibition succeeded in reaching a wide audience, from specialists who enjoy mulling over obscure references, to those who, through the visual power of the display, can discover objects in a new light. My only criticism concerns the catalogue, which does not offer analytical articles or explanations of the exhibition's somewhat abstract associations. That would have balanced out its actual contents: a biography, an interview with the designer and an article about the private residence of Van Noten. Texts that accompany exhibitions should provide a space to expand discussion, in relation to current scholarly research. In this case the exhibition undoubtedly surpassed the book in terms of scope, research and imagination.

NB. All translations of the French catalogue are the author's, and may thus differ slightly from the English version.

Notes:

1. Golbin, P. ed. (2014) *Dries Van Noten: inspirations*, Paris, Les Arts Décoratifs, p. 53.
2. Ibid., p. 39.
3. Delhay, C. and Bergvelt, E. (2012) "Fashion Exhibitions in the Netherlands: Between Visual Spectacles and Community Outreach", *Fashion Theory* 16, no. 4, pp. 461-492.
4. Le Fèvre, G. (1929) *Au Secours de la couture*, Paris, Baudinière.
5. Golbin, P. ed. (2014), op. cit., p. 43.

Contributor:

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