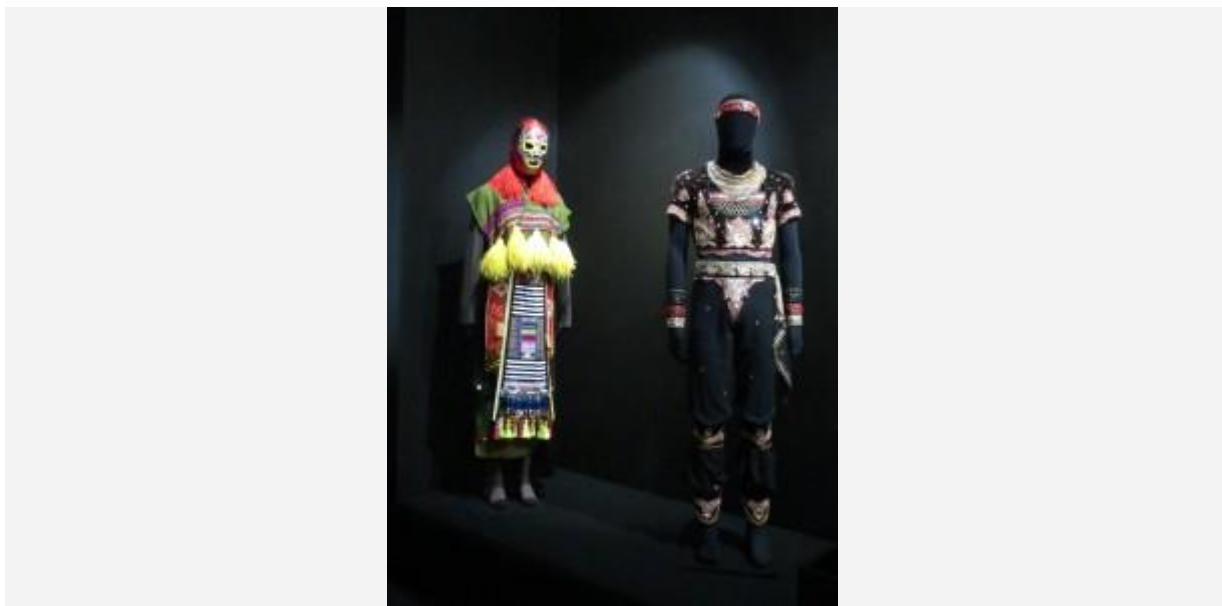


Fragments of Christian Lacroix – two exhibitions examined

A Review of *Hats off! Hats from the Lars Nilsson Collection*, at Hallwylska museet (Stockholm), and *Christian Lacroix et les arts de la scène*, at the Institut national d'histoire de l'art (Paris).

By Johanna Zanon

The aesthetics of fragment, which concerns subjects as varied as literature, philosophy, architecture, and visual arts, questions the concepts of *finito* and *non finito*, part and whole, presence and absence. A cross analysis of two small-scale exhibitions, *Hats off! Hats from the Lars Nilsson Collection* and *Christian Lacroix et les arts de la scène*, currently on view in two different locations, Stockholm's Hallwylska museet and the Institut national d'histoire de l'art (INHA) in Paris, informs these questions in relation to fashion and the work of French couturier Christian Lacroix. Through their specialised focuses, theatre, opera and ballet costumes versus fashion show accessories, both exhibitions shed light on relatively unknown aspects of Christian Lacroix's career that exist at the fringes of the famous high fashion brand that he created in 1987.



“Christian Lacroix et les arts de la scène,” Institut national d'histoire de l'art (INHA), Paris / Johanna Zanon

One objective of *Christian Lacroix et les arts de la scène* is to highlight the cataloguing and digitisation project carried out together by the INHA and the Centre national du costume de scène in Moulins (France), to whom Lacroix donated almost two thousand sketches. Through its display of a wide range of materials, including preliminary drawings, costumes, and videos, the exhibition seeks to illustrate the creative process of costume design, from preparatory drawing to performance. The curators, Damien Delille and Philippe Sénéchal, discuss fifteen of the thirty-four shows for which Lacroix designed costumes between 1986 and 2008. This number is impressive in view of the tiny one-room installation space, which is inventively divided into a white and black cube. The sketches are displayed in the white cube, where a bright light enhances their details and qualities; while the black cube houses videos and costumes, which are protected and dramatised through dim lighting.

The curators use these resources to explore connections between high fashion and costume design, seen through, as Delille wrote, the “double status” of Lacroix's drawings.¹ The same dynamic and colourful features characterise

both his fashion and costume illustrations, which depict bodies that seem to want to jump off the paper and become animate. Furthermore, Lacroix's inspiration comes as much from past couturiers like Cristóbal Balenciaga, as from historic costumes of the eighteenth century, for instance. Through these inquiries, which include the visual analysis of the drawings against his larger clothing production, Lacroix's costumes are no longer an isolated fragment of his work: pieces of the puzzle can be put together.



"Hats off!" Hallwylska museet, Stockholm / Carl Bengtsson

Fragments of Lacroix's interest in the eighteenth century also appear at the Hallwylska museet, notably in the form of the two-horned hats he created for his Summer 1989 collection. This exhibition is not specifically dedicated to him but based on the private collection of its curator, Swedish designer Lars Nilsson. However, although only thirteen of the forty hats on display are by Lacroix, his presence is highlighted by other exhibited artefacts such as branded materials or the curtain originally designed by Elisabeth Garouste and Mattia Bonetti for Lacroix's salons. These elements bear witness to the period in 1989 when Lars Nilsson worked as Lacroix's assistant, which "was invaluable to [his] development."²

The thirteen hats by Lacroix, made between 1988 and 1999, when he had his own house in Paris, constitute fragments from his fashion shows: a golden straw hat, a pistachio green felt toque hat, a shepherdess straw hat with ribbons. They are displayed alone, without a single garment; consequently, the viewer focuses on parts that he or she usually would not dissociate from the whole. The hats effectively become fragments that denote a presence, and thus the absence of the garments they once accompanied. This also leaves space for the viewer's imagining which outfit would have matched the hats on display.



"Hats off!" Hallwylska museet, Stockholm / Carl Bengtsson

Exhibitions that fragment a designer's work both oppose and complement the gargantuan retrospectives typically organised by major fashion museums, such as *Christian Lacroix, histoires de mode*, held at Les Arts Décoratifs (2007-2008).³ These exhibitions present the museum audience with complete pictures and canonical narratives. On the contrary, *Hat's off!* and *Christian Lacroix et les arts de la scène*, drive the viewer to become an explorer on the lookout for clues. By collecting fragments, visitors draw their own conclusions and even curate their own unique exhibitions. This means of viewing, however, requires a foundational knowledge of fashion and thus could be considered an elitist experience. This begs the question of how to retain the context, content and detailed scope of such displays as these institutions target a wider public.

Fragments of Lacroix or, more generally, fragmentary exhibitions prevent the viewer from drowning in a deluge of dresses or sketches. Moreover, the fragmentation of Lacroix's work echoes the state of the majority of museum dress collections that conserve but a small quantity of a particular designer's work. For example, the Costume Institute at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art holds only thirty-seven objects with Lacroix's label, according to the online database. One could argue that the display of incomplete ensembles rather than retrospectives' artificial reconstructions better translates the state of fashion history records.



Galerie Colbert, Institut national d'histoire de l'art, Paris / OTCP – Marc Bertrand

Small-scale installations also illustrate a shift towards novel spaces for fashion exhibition. Such exhibitions invest spaces not intended for display with new meaning. *Christian Lacroix et les arts de la scène* is installed under the neoclassical glass rotunda of the Colbert Gallery, next to classrooms. Through this exhibition and its past dress-related seminar, the INHA brings discussions of dress within an institute dedicated to the study of art history, adding to debates on the question "is fashion art?"

In contrast, *Hat's off!* is located in the Hallwyl House, the late nineteenth-century palatial residence of the Count and Countess Walther and Wilhelmina von Hallwyl, which they transformed into a museum to display the family's collection of various fine and decorative arts. There, the viewer must traverse a set of opulent baroque rooms before reaching *Hat's off!* This passage through the collections of weapons and ceramics sets the tone for the exhibition space itself, which also consists in the fragmented, side-by-side display of similar objects.



Hallwylska museet, Stockholm / Åke E:son Lindman

The distinctiveness of these exhibitions also reflects the varied backgrounds of their curators. One exhibition valorises the archival work behind collections, while the other, seen through the lens of a private collector, draws attention to emotional and biographical meanings of objects. Although they may lack some of the polish of large-scale retrospectives, they offer a new point of view, and attract visitors who seek novel exhibition experiences. Rather than existing for the purpose of bringing in revenue, these exhibitions serve to increase the institutions' visibility through their very non-traditional nature.

In exploring anecdotal aspects of Lacroix's work, which perhaps best reflect the multifarious nature of the subject himself, these institutions seek to rethink his narrative within that of art and fashion history. Another fragment for future investigation might be the collections Lacroix created for the house of Jean Patou, before he opened his own house.

Notes:

1. 'Entretien avec Damien Delille' (2014) *Christian Lacroix et les arts de la scène*, press release, Paris: INHA, p. 4.
2. Lewenhaupt, L. (2014) 'Lars Nilsson', *Hat's off! Hats from the Lars Nilsson Collection*, exhibition materials, Stockholm: Hallwylska Museet.
3. Lacroix, C., Mauriès, P., and Saillard, O. (2007) *Christian Lacroix, histoires de mode*, Paris: Arts Décoratifs.

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