

Haute – à – Porter

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Filep Motwary

Foreword

Kenneth Ramaekers

Director Modemuseum Hasselt

Haute-à-Porter came about thanks to Filep Motwary, a man whose life cannot be summarised in one word. Motwary is a costume designer, stylist, journalist, photographer, but above all, he has a tremendous passion for fashion and an eye for unequalled poetry in an entire line of designs by designers of the last decade. Motwary asks frankly whether the characteristics that we nowadays associate with haute couture are the same as those of today's prêt-à-porter. Over the last three decades, we have seen how prêt-à-porter has taken over the world of haute couture, shifting the focus to another and wider creative horizon. This book, and the exhibition of the same name, examines the impact of haute couture on prêt-à-porter and how the latter has become a major player in the modern fashion landscape.

Haute couture came about in the second half of the 19th century when British couturier, Charles Frederick Worth, turned the fashion system upside down when he stopped designing according to the client's wishes. Worth was the first to design his own collection and he made only one or a few customised versions of each design. More and more couturiers followed his example, which led to the establishment of the *Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne* in 1868. To this day, this association of Parisian couturiers still dictates the rules of haute couture: all couture items must be hand-made in the designer's atelier, where at least 15 people work full-time. These items must be produced of the finest and most luxurious materials using the most refined techniques. The collections must be shown on a catwalk twice a year using at least 50 different original designs of daytime and evening wear. Most of these creations demand hundreds, if not thousands of hours of handwork; each item is pure craftsmanship, which also explains its price tag. Haute couture is high-end fashion, designed by designers (haute couturiers) who work for an exclusive market. It's a feast that focuses on luxury, craftsmanship, volume, extravagance, beauty and splendour.

Prêt-à-porter – which literally means ready-to-wear – is in theory an industrialized version of long evening gowns, coats and ensembles often with extravagant details and materials of haute couture. Prêt-à-porter is made for everyday wear, yet in reality, that's not always true. Prêt-à-porter items are often real showpieces and are anything but wearable. And this is precisely why Haute-à-Porter zooms in – to fill the gap. Who knows, perhaps in time *Haute-à-Porter* will become a concept which as familiar to us as haute couture and prêt-à-porter.

This project required almost as much inspiration and perspiration as a haute couture collection. First of all, I would like wholeheartedly to thank Filep Motwary for his inspiration, insight and the many fascinating interviews on the subject. In addition, I wish to thank everyone who has contributed to this book and to the exhibition, in particular Eve Demoen and the team in Modemuseum Hasselt, Friends of the Modemuseum, Lannoo Publishers and the City of Hasselt.



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Filep Motwary

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As one of the most powerful and intriguing tools for body reformation, the corset has always been a part of fashion. The history of the corset has been linked to and discussed in a variety of contexts. It has been regarded, amongst other things, as a tool and symbol of the oppression of women, an aesthetic fashion item, a fetish and erotic tool and a technical masterpiece. This chapter focuses on the use of the corset in both haute couture and prêt-à-porter today.

The Corset

The corset was worn for centuries as an accessory in order to perfect the imperfect human silhouette. Although it was abandoned in the early 20th century, haute couturiers such as Christian Dior launched a new corset interpretation which has been referenced by designers ever since. What do you think is the purpose for creating corsets today?

Maria Luisa Frisa

Today the corset and its usage are no longer related to the reconstruction of the silhouette or issues directly linked to fetishism or tight lacing. It doesn't address these issues directly, even if it contains a reference to these meanings. During the 1980s, designers used the corset as something to expose and bring to the surface, with the postmodern ironic attitude of imitation, with clear allusions to a reimagined past when sexy was associated with the complex layers involved in the practices of dressing. Today it's just another tool we can use to design ourselves and our clothed body.

Alexander Fury

There are multiple interpretations. I tend to focus on two: physiological and psychological. The former is the less interesting: as a construct, a corset achieves a certain silhouette. It affects proportion. Many designers draw in the waist to emphasize the hips and breasts, to exaggerate the silhouette and produce greater impact. It's a technical tool for achieving a particular visual effect. The flip side, however, is the fact that much of fashion is forever born back into its own past. The corset is symbolic of that past, of nostalgia for bygone times. I'm always interested in the idea of fashion turning to its own archetypes, echoes of its own past reactivated for the present. There are also the complex notions of femininity, when, for example, the corset is displaced from its traditional female wearer to the body of a man, where, as Jean Paul Gaultier has argued, it continues to fulfil its technical function of drawing in the waist. However, I would argue that it completes a second function, not of slenderising the silhouette, but of *feminising* it. A man doesn't merely look thinner in a corset, but more feminine, due to the proportional play. A waist cincher is frequently employed by drag queens and transvestites to achieve an aesthetic illusion; not so by men wishing to appear thinner. Why? Because the garment's psychological implications cannot be divorced from its technical purpose. On the same level, what does the corset say about femininity? Doesn't it hark back to a physically and politically 'restricted' period for women in popular culture? In my opinion, that is what Dior's use of the corset was linked to – the idea of

shackling the liberated women of the war, of putting them back into the home and emphasizing their roles as wives and mothers by focusing not on the feminine, but on the fecund. And yet, today, it is women who frequently choose to wear the corset.

Jun Takahashi – UNDERCOVER

For our – my – generation, corsets act only as a medical instrument to support your back or to correct your skeletal structure. I don't feel that modern women care about their own bodyline as much as women of the 19th century, although modern women might care more about their breasts. I think nowadays women prefer a more relaxed clothing style. So I'm not interested in corsets.

Stephen Jones

People like mutating the body, whether it's through shape or colour or something else. For example, corsetry is closely linked to cosmetic surgery and Chinese foot binding. There's a story in which a Chinese lady in the 19th century was told that it was disgusting and inhumane for Chinese women to bind their feet, and she replied saying, "Well, we think exactly the same thing about corsetry". So people are always seeking to adapt and change their bodies. If we're talking about a traditional corset, which is on the waist, what is that about? It's basically about sex, and I don't think that sex is going to go away.

Valerie Steele

Corsetry has no single meaning. It has always been revised, renegotiated, and in the earlier part of the 20th century the corset didn't so much disappear as it was replaced with diet and exercise while it continued to have a sort of underground life through erotica and pornography. With the whole punk movement in the 1970s, particularly with Vivienne Westwood, the corset was taken out of the hidden underworld, this time as outerwear rather than as a foundation garment. At that point, designers very quickly began to recreate it for a variety of different purposes. In the early 21st century, the designs of certain couture houses such as Christian Lacroix, Chanel, Dior or Valentino gave the corset a kind of idealizing quality that even recalls the glamour of the Belle Époque with its historically romantic, ultra-feminine shape.

To these couture houses, the corset has come to represent a sort of eroticized femininity.

Other designers, such as the late Alexander McQueen or Hussein Chalayan, give the corset other roles that sometimes involve the idea of the damaged or vulnerable body. So for example Chalayan designed a corset that very much resembles a surgical corset, and



















Colophon

This book is published on the occasion of the exhibition **Haute-à-Porter**, curated by **Filep Motwary**, at the **Fashion Museum of Hasselt** (02/04/2016-11/09/2016).

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