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A Gallery Where Prada Gets the Picasso Treatment

The FIT Museum Exports Its Aesthetic

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By ANDY BATTAGLIA



Daniella Zalman for The Wall Street Journal

Valerie Steele at the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, where she is the director and chief curator.

Like the sartorially inclined masses who swarm the Fashion Institute of Technology, Valerie Steele has an eye, and a mind, for fashion. But as the director and chief curator of the Museum at FIT, she employs a special skill for presenting fashion outside the bounds of style.

At the museum, which is open to the public and operates with a mission "to collect, conserve, document, exhibit and interpret fashion," Ms. Steele has assembled shows based on straightforward aesthetics and learned themes. (Current exhibitions there include "Fashion and Technology," a survey devoted to materials and manufacturing from the past 250 years, and a self-evident affair simply titled "Shoe Obsession.")

Ms. Steele's mix of eye and mind has also served her well as the author of several books, including the new "Fashion Designers A-Z" (Taschen), a compendium of 20th- and 21st-century designers featuring lavish photographs of more than 500 garments from the museum's collection. The book, which will be feted on Tuesday at a free event at the Taschen store in SoHo, arrives in a series of six designer editions, each bound in a fabric created by one of six designers (Akris, Etro, Stella McCartney,

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Missoni, Prada, and [Diane von Furstenberg](#)). The photos inside are accompanied by writings and essays by Ms. Steele and a cast of contributors that includes Suzy Menkes, the International Herald Tribune's head fashion editor.



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Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology

A cape by Coco Chanel from 1927, a selection from Ms. Steele's book 'Fashion Designers A-Z'

From her office at FIT, amid an abundance of books with titles like "Fashion and Psychoanalysis" and "Male Subjectivity at the Margins," Ms. Steele, who is 57, spoke with The Wall Street Journal about finding meaning in fashion, wondering about "art," and New York as a center for style.

As a museum director, how do you reconcile the historical perspective with fashion's appetite for fads and

trends?

Fashion is all about change, but it's not a kaleidoscope of meaningless change. The forms of fashion are highly revealing about people's attitudes and beliefs at any given time. They're revealing about people's feelings. So the changes in fashion make up a picture of how people's minds and lives change.

So when you're sizing up an era, do you favor fashion that identifies expressly with its times or projects into the future?

When you think about why fashion changes, there are different causal factors. It can involve individuals, like a great designer or a cultural figure like Madonna. Then there are also big world-historical changes, like the rise of women's rights, that allow certain kinds of clothing that weren't allowed before. Then, in between, there's the world in which fashion designers work. Just like painters look at what other painters are doing more than anything else, designers do that, too. So most fashion doesn't scream out at you, "This is reflecting this aspect of the times." You have to tease out that element of it, and it's by tiny incremental steps.

Do you consider fashion "art"?

The problem is nobody has a very clear definition of what art is. Since Warhol in particular, if you have him making a replica of a Brillo box and say that's art, in a way you have to say anything can be as long as artists and critics and curators and collectors decide it's art. If you apply that kind of fluctuating definition, I would say fashion is at the moment in the process of being redefined as art in the same way that photography and cinema and jazz were gradually redefined.



It does seem like fashion often aspires toward art.

I know, it's kind of embarrassing. I always feel ambivalent about this discussion, because there's nothing wrong with fashion per se. A lot of designers deny explicitly that fashion is art. Their reasons vary greatly, whether they want fashion to be considered more a part of life or that, because it's being worn, it's functional. My definition of fashion is that it helps create an embodied identity. It's something we wear on our bodies and associate with our identity and personality. It's not just a changing style form—it's something we put on us.

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While the historic nature of this weekend's blizzard is still settling in across the tri-state, the first in a string of additional storms will arrive Monday.



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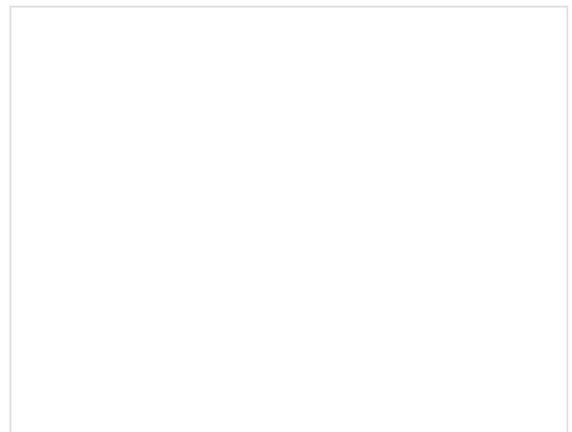
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So is the recent democratization of fashion, on TV and the Internet, good or bad?

People not only have access to cheaper "fast fashion," but they also can watch it in a way that's very immediate. It's like it has become a spectator sport. In a way it's comparable to what sports are for men. Most men don't actually engage in football, but they watch it. But in the fashion world, people are avid spectators as well as participants.

Is New York's role in the fashion world growing or shrinking?

New York as a center of fashion has become increasingly significant. Yet it's interesting: I was talking to a colleague who just did a study of the history of fashion exhibitions around the world over the last 20 years. He found that, in the U.S., about half of the exhibitions were of European or Japanese designers, but in Europe there's almost never any exhibitions of American designers. From the European point of view, [American fashion] is all just sportswear. It's a huge blind spot over there.

Speaking of Americans, Halston is held out for special attention in the book.

Halston was very influential figure in the rise of New York fashion. In particular, there was a famous fashion show in 1973, when four American designers [Halston among them] went to France and showed with four French designers, as part of a fundraiser for Versailles. Much to everyone's surprise, the Americans "won" the battle. They were much more young and dynamic, models were dancing down the runway, there were African-American models; there was a certain kind of dynamism that is associated with New York fashion.

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