

DRAFT – DO NOT CITE WITHOUT THE AUTHORS’ PERMISSION**Montréal Chic: Institutions of Fashion – Fashions of Institutions**

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[Katrina Sark and Sara Danièle Bélanger-Michaud, Montréal Chic: Institutions of Fashion – Fashions of Institutions](#)

Like Berlin and Vienna, the first two cities that make up the Urban Chic Series published by Intellect, Montréal is not considered to be a global fashion center like Paris, London, Milan, New York, or Tokyo.¹ Nevertheless, in our quest to define Montréal Chic, we argue that Montréal is both a fashion city and a fashionable city. We identify four essential components that make it a fashion city. First, it requires the presence of local fashion schools (Collège Lasalle, Cégep Marie-Victorin, École Supérieure de Mode), which continuously produce new generations of talent to supply the fashion industry with local designers, fashion marketers, and other fashion experts. The second and perhaps most vital factor is the presence of a local fashion industry, which includes fashion designers, manufacturers, technicians, merchandisers and other producers of fashion. The third requirement is the presence of a fashion scene, which includes promoters and marketers of fashion, fashion shows and festivals (organized by Groupe Sensation Mode), fashion media (Bureau de la Mode, Style Bureau, *The Gazette*, *La Presse*), journalists, bloggers, photographers, stylists, fashionistas and other consumers of fashion. And

¹ For a discussion of global fashion cities, see David Gilbert, “Urban Outfitting: The City and the Spaces of Fashion Culture,” in Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson (eds.), *Fashion Cultures: Theories, Explorations and Analysis*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000, 7-24), 14.

finally, the fourth essential component is the presence of cultural institutions such as history and art museums that bring together the commerce and culture of fashion. These four pillars of a fashion city are interconnected; they are based on a value system that privileges tradition, economic and social stability, as well as local history. Montréal, like Berlin and Vienna, can be defined as a fashion city because all four of these components are present and complement each other. As the Montréal-based geographer Norma Rantisi noted, “the identity of a fashion center is constituted not by a particular national style or regional costume, but by the localized capabilities that produce new styles or redefine old ones. Such capabilities include the presence of key industry activities,” as well as “interaction and coordination between industry actors” in what she terms a “network of relations.”² Rantisi acknowledges the importance of events such as Fashion Week, not only as promoters of design talent, but also as events that facilitate relations among actors within the fashion industry, the fashion media, as well as other cultural industries – the program of Montréal Fashion Week always includes cultural activities, often hosted by one of the museums.³ As Fred Davis explains in his book, *Fashion, Culture and Identity* (1992), fashion not only seduces, but it “can also initiate persons into realms of thought and experience that could otherwise have bypassed them,” and that “this can be attributed to the circumstance that the molders of fashion, whatever area they work in, are persons who often are in close contact with leading creative and progressive elements in the arts, music, sciences, politics and culture generally.”⁴ Montréal continuously propels this network of

² Norma M. Rantisi, “The Prospects and Perils of Creating a Viable Fashion Identity” in *Fashion Theory* (Vol. 15, Issue 2, 2011, 259-266), 261.

³ Rantisi, 263.

⁴ Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 198-99.

relations not only by linking the institutions and activities of fashion, but also by tying fashion to its cultural institutions.

The second framework for defining Montréal Chic lies in its identity as a fashionable or trendy city. The value system of trendiness is based on the mobility of people, money, and ideas. Unlike the values of the four pillars of a fashion city, trendiness privileges mobility, flexibility, and affordability. It is the responsiveness to change that generates the value and signifies the meaning of a city's trendiness. In Montréal, this can be demonstrated through the gentrification of Mile End, arguably the city's trendiest neighbourhood today. After the Québec government began to invest substantially into developing a local IT industry, start-ups and well-established computer and media companies (most notably, the video game designers Ubisoft) moved their offices into the neighbourhood, which in turn attracted new people, professionals, new businesses, restaurants, boutiques, and ultimately new events and capital into the area. This sudden flow of money, people, and ideas added a marketable, commercial value to the already established cultural value of the neighbourhood, cultivated by the many artists who live there. Real estate prices went up, as did the value of trendiness. Just as in Berlin and Vienna, Montréal has always understood the value of trendiness, and has invested in it accordingly. Starting with Expo 67, urban gentrification, the flow of commercial and cultural capital, as well as place marketing have all been linked to promote the avant-garde trendiness of the city. As the summer Olympic Games of 1976 demonstrated, Montréal is not known for its efficiency, long-term planning, or pragmatism; rather, it is known for its festivals, events, cultural diversity, and mobility of talent. In sum, its values are also the values of fashion and trendiness, and by linking fashion with cosmopolitanism, place-branding, and tourism, Montréal continuously

remains a fashionable city.⁵ These two frameworks for defining a fashion city that is also fashionable make up the very context and the “contact zone”⁶ of Montréal Chic.

In this paper, we focus on one of the four components we identify in the make-up of a fashion city, namely the museal institutions that either own fashion collections or promote fashion as one of their main exhibition practices. By focusing on Montréal’s Musée McCord, Musée du Costume et du Textile du Québec (MCTQ), and Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal (MBAM), we demonstrate the ways in which the traditional roles of these institutions are changing, how these institutions bring together different aspects of culture and fashion, and ultimately how they contribute to Montréal’s fashion contact zone and network of relations. We examine the ways in which collecting and exhibiting practices are determined by the museums’ mandates as institutions, and are guided by explicit or implicit and often contrasting philosophies regarding the aesthetic, cultural, historical, and social value of fashion artifacts and objects. Since 2008, fashion exhibitions in Montréal museums have gained momentum both in frequency and popularity, bringing audiences into the museums that would previously not have frequented them. We begin our research with these institutions because despite their different curatorial and collecting practices, these institutions house and generate the images, narratives, and artifacts of fashion, thereby bridging the commercial and cultural elements of fashion, and simultaneously making them accessible to wider audiences. Our aim is to uncover

⁵ Also see Rantisi, 260: “From the perspective of policymakers, fashion contributes to place-branding and the promotion of tourism; it also contributes to defining the aesthetics of place which in turn, can shape the design and marketing of cultural products.”

⁶ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 6-7. Pratt defines the contact zone as the process “when groups of various cultures come into contact and change the original cultural patterns of either or both groups.”

the ways in which these institutions contribute to and sustain a strong fashion identity in Montréal, and ultimately manifest the threads and ties that constitute Montréal Chic.

Musée McCord

Musée McCord was established by the private collector David Ross McCord (1844-1930) in 1919, and opened to the public in 1921 as a history museum. The museum was closed in 1936, and reopened again in 1971 in the former McGill Student Union Building, designed by the architect, Percy E. Nobbs. Because it was conceptualized as a history museum, dedicated to the preservation of Montréal, Québec, and Canadian heritage, McCord's collecting philosophy in the beginning was thoroughly antiquarian, and this practise applied to collecting fashion as well. In 1956, when McCord director Isabel Dobell officially started its fashion collection, she was following a wider North American movement of building fashion collections in museums, which, according to Cynthia Cooper, the curator of costume and textiles at McCord, began with the Museum of Costume Art in New York (established in 1937), that merged with the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET) in 1946.⁷ Several others followed: the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1943, the Philadelphia Museum of Art opened a fashion wing in 1947, and Los Angeles County Museum in 1952.⁸

Valerie Steele pointed out that surprisingly little scholarship has been published on the emergence of fashion in museums, "with the exception of Fiona Anderson's seminal essay

⁷ Interview with Cynthia Cooper at the McCord Museum (July 31, 2013).

⁸ Ibid.

“Museums as Fashion Media” (2000) and Lou Taylor’s book *Establishing Dress History* (2004).⁹

While in Europe fashion collections in museums date back to the nineteenth century and the World Expositions in London and Paris, most notably the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), Britain’s national museum of decorative arts, which, as Steele noted, has collected clothing since its founding in 1852,¹⁰ in North America, the earliest collection dates back to 1915, when the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) was developed out of the Edward C. Blum “Design Laboratory,” which was originally founded at the Brooklyn Museum.¹¹ This relatively late admittance of fashion into European and North American museums was examined by Concordia University graduate, Laurie Filgiano, in her MA Thesis on Canadian fashion exhibitions, where she states that “until the mid-19th century, dress was neglected as both an art form and as material evidence,” and suggests that it was the beginning of ready-to-wear clothing and the establishment of the department store in the 1850s, with its display windows and browsing customers, that played an important role in the development of museum dress collections.¹² We believe that the subsequent cultural wave of establishing fashion collections in North American museums in the 1940s and 50s can perhaps be explained by the war-time admission of women into the work force and the public spheres. Fashion, as a domain of female labour, consumer practises, and aesthetics also gained significance in North American museums as women gradually began to dominate the labour and consumer markets. Lou Taylor provides a confirmation for our gendered-based hypothesis, through her history of

⁹ Valerie Steele, “Museum Quality: The Rise of the Fashion Exhibition,” in *Fashion Theory* (Volume 12, Issue 1, 2008, pp. 7–30), 8.

¹⁰ Steele, 8.

¹¹ Steele, 9.

¹² Laurie Filgiano, *Squeezing In and Zipping Up: Canada’s Involvement in the late 20th and 21st Century Trend of Fashion Exhibition* (MA Thesis in the Department of Art History at Concordia University, Montreal, 2011), 3-4.

the role of dress within the V&A, in which she notes that the museum has always collected dress, yet only in a minor way until the 1950s. Taylor attributes this to the fact that “in the eyes of male museum staff, fashionable dress still only evoked notions of vulgar commerciality and valueless, ephemeral, feminine style.”¹³ Thus, it took approximately one hundred years (since 1852) for fashion to stop being considered “unworthy”¹⁴ and to stand on par with other decorative and fine arts.¹⁵

Cynthia Cooper explains the peculiarity of McCord’s fashion collection, claiming that “what’s interesting [is that] here in Montréal, it was not the art museum starting a fashion collection, it was a history museum. So this is quite different from other cities in North America.”¹⁶ McCord’s mandate “to collect things that were Canadian,” was also extended to its fashion collection, which initially was established “to constitute a timeline of fashion, to show how fashion changed.”¹⁷ But a shift in collecting practices across North American museums reveals the ways in which the initial interest in collecting fashion evolved from an antiquarian approach to an aesthetic one. As Jean Druessedow, the associate curator in charge of the Costume Institute of the MET from 1984 to 1992, explained in 1985, “the philosophy of acquisition [of the MET’s fashion collection] is that of judging each item as a work of art, rather than as representative of specific cultures. For us, the aesthetic elements of a costume are a

¹³ Lou Taylor, “Doing the laundry? A reassessment of object-based dress history,” in *Fashion Theory: the Journal of Dress, Body, and Culture*, Methodology issue (2 (4), 1998), 341, quoted in Fiona Anderson, “Museums as Fashion Media,” in Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson (eds.), *Fashion Cultures: Theories, Explorations and Analysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000, pp.371-389), 376.

¹⁴ Steele, 9.

¹⁵ For a detailed history of dress and fashion exhibitions see Valerie Steele (2008) and Laurie Filgiano (2011).

¹⁶ Interview with Cynthia Cooper at the McCord Museum (July 31, 2013).

¹⁷ Ibid.

primary consideration.”¹⁸ In contrast, McCord’s collecting practice differs from that of an art museum. But, significantly, its historical focus does not preclude fashion collecting practice based on both cultural history and aesthetics. As Cooper explains:

David Ross McCord was maybe less concerned with aesthetics, it was more about who did [the fashion item] belong to, what some people would refer to as ‘original sweat.’ So, it’s all about the originality. And with Isabel Dobell, looking at what all the other museums were doing, it was collecting the fashionable, the garments that were beautiful to look at, that represented high fashion at any given time. [...] The approach throughout those years in the 50s and 60s was that of a history museum but the presentation was that of a decorative arts museum.¹⁹

Integrating these varying approaches allows McCord to produce exhibitions such as “Reveal or Conceal,”²⁰ curated by Cooper in 2008-2009, which blended local history (through the history and artifacts of a local undergarment manufacturer) with an aesthetically appealing presentation of historical and contemporary dresses and garments from the museum’s own collection. Typically, as Valerie Steele has argued, fashion as an applied art is increasingly likely to be showcased in art museums, but in Montréal, McCord serves multiple functions because it owns a historical dress collection, and both produces and hosts fashion exhibitions, thereby practicing what Steele termed the “new” fashion history, “which also places greater emphasis on analyzing the *meanings* of cultural objects and practices.”²¹

McCord’s fashion collection is not unique in North America. There is, for example, the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., which has a dress and accessories collection, and the ROM in Toronto has a textile and fashion collection that consists of

¹⁸ J. L. Druessedow, “The Costume Institute, the Metropolitan Museum of Art,” in Hildreth, *In Pursuit of Elegance*, (p. 36), quoted in Lou Taylor, *Establishing Dress History*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 191.

¹⁹ Interview with Cynthia Cooper at the McCord Museum (July 31, 2013).

²⁰ Reveal or Conceal exhibition at McCord: <http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/expositions/expositionsXSL.php?lang=1&expold=47&page=accueil> (accessed September 2012).

²¹ Steele, 24-25.

anthropological artifacts from different cultures and societies. Its approach is historical as well, but is not restricted to a national, provincial, regional, nor urban milieu.²² In the Canadian context, McCord's fashion collection differs essentially from that of the ROM, in its cosmopolitan and locational approach. The McCord now owns the largest museum collection of Canadian dress and accessories, consisting of 18,845 items, made and/or worn in Canada and in Montréal since the 18th century. In July 2013, the McCord merged with the Stewart Museum (founded in 1955, and located in the arsenal of the British fortified depot on Île Sainte-Hélène), amalgamating its 27,000 artefacts on the history of European presence in New France and North America, including some dresses and accessories from the 17th and 18th centuries.

The fact that McCord, like many Canadian museums, acquires by donation makes it harder to concentrate primarily on an aesthetic approach. As Cooper explains, "through the 1980s, 90s, and 2000s the McCord has always wrestled with this question of what is a history museum. And in fact, there are very few [history museums with fashion collections] that give good examples to follow."²³ Yet the upside is that the example is also McCord's to invent.²⁴ The inherent difficulties in managing a historically-influenced mandate together with an aesthetic approach allow McCord to develop its own exhibition practices. McCord overcomes these challenges by narrating and exhibiting Montréal's heritage and authentic stories of local inhabitants and manufacturers, while simultaneously maintaining a competitive edge according to exhibition standards established by other fashion museums, which are usually art museums with different types of fashion collections. For example, in 1989 the McCord produced an

²² ROM Website: <http://www.rom.on.ca/en/exhibitions-galleries/galleries/world-cultures/patricia-harris-gallery-textiles-costume> (accessed September 2013).

²³ Interview with Cynthia Cooper at the McCord Museum (July 31, 2013).

²⁴ Ibid.

exhibition on the work of Montréal post-war couturier Marie-Paule Nolin.²⁵ In 2002/03, the exhibition “Clothes Make the MAN,” which included a section with the wardrobe of former Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, was developed by guest curator Gail Cariou in collaboration with Cynthia Cooper and included the participation of Montréal designer Philippe Dubuc as a spokesperson.²⁶ The exhibition received the Costume Society of America's Richard Martin Award²⁷ for Excellence in the Exhibition of Costume, and travelled to the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau in 2003, and then to the Musée de la Civilisation in Québec City in 2004. In 2009, Cooper's “Reveal or Conceal” exhibition also won the Richard Martin Award.²⁸ In 2010, the museum hosted the exhibition “Dream Weavers - Costumes by Cirque du Soleil.” To celebrate the museum's 90th anniversary in 2011, the exhibition *90 Treasures, 90 Stories, 90 Years*, included artefacts such as the jersey of legendary Canadian hockey team Maurice Richard (1921- 2000),²⁹ and encouraged the interactive participation of Montréal's most creative minds from various fields, including Montréal fashion designer Joseph Helmer, to reflect upon their favourite artifact in video clips presented via iPod in the exhibition. That same year the museum announced its partnership with Montréal Fashion Week (MFW), with

²⁵ Alexandra Palmer, “Introduction,” in *Fashion: A Canadian Perspective* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 6.

²⁶ For a list of McCord exhibitions since 1997, see: <http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/expositions/expositionsXSL.php?lang=1§ionId=143> (accessed September 2013).

²⁷ The Richard Martin Award for Excellence in the Exhibition of Costume is named for Richard Martin (1947-1999), former curator of costume at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Fashion Institute of Technology. Richard Martin was an outstanding scholar, lecturer, critic and curator of many critically acclaimed costume exhibitions. Now in its second year, this award recognizes annually up to two institutions for excellence in the exhibition of costume. The McCord Museum is the first institution outside of the United States to win this award. The other Martin Award recipient for 2003 is the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, for their exhibition *Miracles and Mischief: Noh and Kyogen Theater in Japan*. (from the McCord Museum Press Release: <http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/en/info/pressreleases/119n.html>).

²⁸ As the museum press release emphasizes, “No other museum in Canada has won it. No other museum in the world has won it twice.” (http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/pdf/PR/PR_Prix_Richard_Martin_EN.pdf)

²⁹ Canadien de Montréal is, among Montréal institutions, a strong vector of identity and one of the team's nicknames, Sainte-Flanelle (Holy Flannel), shows how sacred a piece of clothing can be for Montrealers.

whom the museum had collaborated on previous occasions in the past. For the following edition of MFW in February 2012, the museum hosted screenings of fashion documentaries, *Cristóbal Balenciaga – Endurance in an Ephemeral World*, by filmmaker Oskar Tejedor, and *Monsieur Hubert de Givenchy*, a film by Karim Zeriahen, with the filmmaker in attendance, again bridging the relational networks of the fashion scene.

In 2013, McCord opened a new permanent exhibition “Wearing Our Identity – The First Peoples Collection,” which pays tribute to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples through rarely displayed artefacts drawn from McCord’s Ethnology and Archaeology collection. While it is not a traditional fashion exhibition, it centers on the dress history of the First Peoples of Canada and how it helped define their rich cultures and identities. It also illustrates the ways in which the McCord constructs historical and educational fashion exhibitions and draws attention to a variety of issues, such as fashion identities, national dress, and the First People’s heritage that pertain both to the work of cultural and fashion historians. Simultaneously, the museum hosted a travelling exhibition, “From Philadelphia to Monaco: Grace Kelly - Beyond the Icon,”³⁰ based on an exhibition produced by the V&A in London, which participates in the new millennium’s wave of celebrity fashion exhibitions Lou Taylor briefly describes in *Establishing Dress History*.³¹ Popular interest in celebrities attracts huge crowds to exhibitions, such as “Diana: A Celebration” (at the Althorp House and on tour) and “Jacqueline Kennedy: The White House Years – Selections from the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum” (at the Met), that were both popular and commercial successes. While benefitting from international celebrities, museums

³⁰ Grace Kelly exhibition at McCord: <http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/expositions/expositionsXSL.php?lang=1&expold=89&page=accueil> (accessed September 2013).

³¹ Lou Taylor, *Establishing Dress History* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004), 289-291.

as cultural institutions can still use these exhibitions to bridge history, culture, fashion scenes, and education through cultural awareness. With the Grace Kelly exhibit, the McCord managed to once again link various relational networks with Montréal's history, by featuring the dress Grace Kelly wore to Expo 67, and to its fashion scene, by inviting the designer Jean-Claude Poitras to give a lecture on Grace Kelly's influence on the fashion world at the McCord. During the fall edition of Montréal Fashion Week 2013, designers Christian Chenail and Denis Gagnon presented designs inspired by Grace Kelly's style.³² As Montréal was renegotiating the future of its Fashion Week after Québec government cut more than half of its funding, as well as its need for international recognition, Grace Kelly became the international fashion symbol that allows Montréal to push its own imaginaries and regional boundaries, and Musée McCord participated in facilitating this network of relations. As Laurie Filgiano noted, in Canada, Montréal's Musée McCord and the ROM in Toronto are, arguably, "the only two Canadian museums with 20th-century costume collections that have [also] been able to move beyond the antiquarian displays."³³ We would also like to add the newly relocated Musée du Costume et du Textile du Québec in Montréal to that list.

³² Stella Bruzzi defined the powerful influence that Grace Kelly possessed in the world of fashion, noting that, "she defined her iconic status rather than be defined by it. In this alone, Kelly posed a clandestine threat to men and their adoring eyes, as her femininity anachronistically implied she didn't exist to please them. A significant component of this power was fashion, or more precisely Kelly's interest in fashion as an articulation of her independence." Stella Bruzzi, "Grace Kelly," in Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson (eds.), *Fashion Cultures: Theories, Explorations and Analysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 207.

³³ Filgiano, 13-14: "Under Cynthia Cooper's curatorial eye, the McCord Museum has won the Richard Martin Award for Excellence in the Exhibition of Costume twice: in 2003 for *Clothes Make the MAN* and then again in 2009 for *Reveal or Conceal?* This prestigious award has never been won more than once, as the McCord proudly announces in a press release. —No other museum in Canada has won it. No other museum in the world has won it twice — not even the Metropolitan Museum of Art!"

Musée du Costume et du Textile du Québec

The second, newly reconceptualised institution that owns an important fashion collection and holds fashion exhibitions in Montréal is the Musée du Costume et du Textile du Québec (MCTQ), originally established in 1979 in the greater Montréal area as Musée Marsil in Saint Lambert.³⁴ Its relocation to the Old Port's Marché Bonsecours in June 2012 placed it strategically within Montréal's cultural and fashion landscape and contact zone. Significantly, its establishment in 1979, the same year as the Montréal Museum of Decorative Arts that was later joined with the Musée des Beaux-Arts, was comparatively late in relation to the other Montréal museums, and points to a renewed interest in Québec's identity and cultural history at that time. Coincidentally, 1979 was also the year when the V&A in London changed its fashion collecting practice, "after well over a hundred years of exclusion, the name of the Textile Department was finally changed to include dress. Since then, the V&A has been the model for balancing the educational and entertaining quality of fashion exhibition."³⁵ Perhaps this points to a second wave in the establishment and consolidations of fashion collections in museums, both in North America and Europe. As Lou Taylor reminds us, the 1980s correspond to more open-minded multi-disciplinary curatorial approaches and new critical theory (with Elizabeth Wilson and Joanne Entwistle, for example) that would eventually contribute to elevating fashion to be considered a legitimate academic field of study.³⁶

Musée Marsil had an artistic and historical vocation. Its mission was "to highlight costume, textile and fiber, both as material witnesses of [past and contemporary] civilizations,

³⁴ Maison du Musée Marsil: http://www.marigot.ca/courrier_du_sud/clba18.htm (accessed September 2013).

³⁵ Filgiano, 29-30.

³⁶ Taylor, 279.

and as means of artistic expression.”³⁷ Until recently, as Filgiano noted in her 2011 thesis, the MCTQ, like many other Canadian museums, has “not had the funding and specialized staff to host any major exhibitions or document their collections professionally.”³⁸ According to Cynthia Cooper, who worked at the Musée Marsil from 1988 to 1998, the museum’s collecting mandate was very general in those years, but its name and programming were reconstituted to reflect its fashion collection in the early 1990s, following a requirement from the Québec government to make the museum’s mandate more specific. The institution decided on its new name (MCTQ) and focal points on costume and textiles to better reflect its collections.³⁹ The museum’s relocation to the Old Port in 2012, its first fashion exhibition in the new space that opened in April 2013, as well as its new objective to serve as a research institution for fashion scholars in Montréal,⁴⁰ have all contributed to the museum’s most recent reconceptualization. Moreover, its emphasis on French language (its website is only in French so far), Québec fashion heritage, and Montréal’s contemporary designers, make it different from the McCord. Its collection includes over 8000 clothes worn and donated by Québécois, from the mid-19th century to today, as well as hats, textiles, art, and graphics. The collection features clothes by Marielle Fleury, Raoul-Jean Fouré, Marcel Martel, Marie-Paule Nolin and Michel Robichaud and hats by Yvette Brillon and Fanny Graddon, among others. Many of the objects carry respected local store labels like Brisson & Brisson, Henry Morgan, Holt Renfrew, Lily Simon, Simpson and Windsor Bazaar. Other clothes bear witness to distribution and circulation of international

³⁷ Jennifer Millen in Gérald Baril (ed.), *Dicomode* (Montréal: Fides, 2004), 268. (our translation)

³⁸ Filgiano, 11-12.

³⁹ Email correspondence with Cynthia Cooper at McCord Museum (September 16, 2013).

⁴⁰ See MCTQ website: <http://mctq.org/fr/category/le-musee/mission-et-historique/> (accessed September 2013).

fashion in Québec (clothes by Cristobal Balenciaga, Pierre Balmain, Pierre Cardin, Christian Dior and Elsa Schiaparelli).⁴¹

The Québec fashion specialist known as Régor (Roger Lacrose) left his archive to the museum, including a large collection of magazines, books, old fashion journals and newspapers. As yet, little is known about Régor, except that in the 1940s, the Québec government mandated him to establish “traditional” clothing for Québec, in order “to offer rural clothes and accessories that would be attractive, suitable for our climate and typical for each of the province’s regions.”⁴² This project was unsuccessful because Québec had no traditional style of its own, and no institution can impose such a tradition. Despite this failed attempt at establishing traditional attire, Québec’s vast collection of historical and contemporary dress and fashion make up the collections of two local museums. In contrast to McCord, the mandate of MCTQ is to “cleverly circulate the know-how (*savoir-faire*) regarding clothing and textile, in order to show Québec’s diversity and cultural wealth. Clothing and textile heritage, ethnology and fashion, conservation, and education are the main focal points of the museum.”⁴³ What particularly distinguishes MCTQ from other Montreal museums that own fashion collections is their dedication to education. They offer a wide range of educational activities (guided tours, creative workshops, literary contests, collective exhibitions, performances and other projects)

⁴¹ Jennifer Millen in Gérald Baril (ed.), *Dicomode* (Montréal: Fides, 2004), 268. (our translation)

⁴² Larose dit Regor, Roger, (s. d.) a “Le costume regional dans la province de Quebec,” Fonds du ministere de l’Industrie et du Commerce, Archives nationales du Quebec a Quebec, boîte 180, dossier “Costume regional” in Hamel, Nathalie. “Créer des costumes régionaux au Québec: entre l’(inventé) et l’(authentique).” *The Free Library* January 1, 1999. [http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Creer des costumes regionaux au Quebec: entre l’\(invente\) et...-a030516590](http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Creer+des+costumes+regionaux+au+Quebec:+entre+l+(invente)+et...-a030516590) (accessed September 2013).

⁴³ Our translation: “Diffuser avec ingéniosité le savoir-faire en matière de vêtement et de textile pour témoigner de la diversité et de la richesse culturelle au Québec. Patrimoine textile et vestimentaire, ethnologie et mode constituent les axes privilégiés de recherche, de conservation et d’éducation du Musée.” Musée du Costume et du Textile du Québec website: <http://mctq.org/fr/category/le-musee/mission-et-historique/> (accessed September 2013).

for families, schools (from high school to university levels), community, and cultural organizations. MCTQ has taken the mission to bridge the gap between museum experience and academic learning, between fashion experts and the general public.

The current exhibition, entitled “Tapis rouge: la mode au musée” (Red Carpet: Fashion at the Museum), on display between April and October 2013, was conceptualized by the former general director Suzanne Chabot. The exhibition features vintage pieces by international and local designers, such as Elsa Schiapparelli, Jean Patou, Thierry Mugler, Arnold Scaasi, Christian Dior, and demonstrates Montréal women’s attention to elegance and style. It also showcases recent work of contemporary Montréal-based designers, such as Christian Chenail, Michel Desjardins, Valérie Dumaine, Ying Gao,⁴⁴ Joseph Helmer, Jocelyn Picard, Marie Saint Pierre, and Tavan & Mitto. Their creations range from haute couture to experimental and technologically-innovative design.⁴⁵ The exhibition brings together major highlights from fashion history and present-day innovations and creativity in the world of Montréal fashion. It displays the gradual evolution of the vocabulary of fashion through the multiple examples of dresses from the museum’s collection, created by international and local designers. Furthermore, with the previous exhibitions, such as “Michel Robichaud, couturier: retour sur les années 60” (from 1995), and their exhibition “Belle et à la mode: images du 20^e siècle” (from 2000), the museum has demonstrated a strong commitment in showcasing local creativity in design while highlighting Montréal’s dynamic fashion industry. MCTQ often bridges local fashion, visual arts, and poetry by curating exhibitions like “De terre et de soie,” intended as a

⁴⁴ See Ying Gao mechanical dresses: <http://yinggao.ca/interactifs/nowhere-nowhere/> (accessed September 2013).

⁴⁵ See interview with “Ying Gao – une mode improbable” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mcyH4ArKcG> (accessed September 2013).

poetic dialogue between artist Nathalie Ducharme’s ceramics and the museum’s permanent collection of costumes, dresses, and textiles.⁴⁶ It also exhibits its dress collection in unusual places such as shopping centers (Mail Champlain, Eaton Center, Place Ste-Foy), thereby bringing together different threads of the vast local fashion web (commerce, fashion, history and art). Thus by blending the aesthetic presentation of exceptional dresses with its educational mandate to showcase and make accessible Québec’s fashion and cultural heritage, the museum consolidates the city’s past and present fashion identity, facilitates a network of relations, and contributes to Montréal’s fashion contact zone.

Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal

The third and final institution we examine in this paper is the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal (MBAM), Canada’s oldest art museum, originally established in 1847 under the name of Montréal Society of Artists, it became the Art Association of Montréal in 1860. In 1948-49, the association formed a new corporation under its present name. In 1972, it became a semi-public, non-profit institution, largely funded by grants from different government levels. According to its website, its mission is “conserving art for all to share,” as well as “acquiring and promoting the work of Canadian and international artists past and present [...] to attract the broadest and most heterogeneous public possible, and to provide that public with firsthand access to a universal artistic heritage.”⁴⁷ Its collection consists of 36,000 objects—paintings,

⁴⁶ See MCTQ website: <http://mctq.org/fr/category/expositions/passees/> (accessed September 2013).

⁴⁷ Musée des Beaux-Arts (MBAM) website: <http://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/a-propos-du-mbam> (accessed September 2013).

sculptures, prints, drawings, photographs, and decorative art objects – from antiquity to today. In 1997, the Montréal Museum of Decorative Arts, which was founded by Liliane and David M. Stewart in 1979 (the same year as the MCTQ in its original location in Saint Lambert), merged with MBAM, and provided the museum with an additional fashion and accessories collection, currently amounting to 821 pieces, including one of Denis Gagnon's sculptured zipper dresses. Boasting one of the highest attendance rates among Canadian museums (more than 760,000 visitors annually), it is also one of Canada's leading publishers of art books in English and French.

Since 2007, museum director and chief curator, Nathalie Bondil has made fashion, along with music and pop art, a new priority for MBAM. She specifically insisted on producing the museum's own fashion exhibitions, rather than merely hosting them. The first fashion exhibition produced under the new mandate, in collaboration with the Fine Art Museum of San Francisco, was the "Yves Saint Laurent Style" retrospective, conceived by the Fondations Pierre Bergé –Yves Saint Laurent in 2008. As Diane Charbonneau, curator of the Contemporary Decorative Arts at MBAM explained, the success of the exhibition increased the museum membership to 73.000, created momentum for fashion exhibitions in Montréal, facilitated media interactions (the museum invited Québec designers to the show), and established fashion as a frame to bridge different disciplines and media in the museum.⁴⁸ As Laurie Filgiano pointed out, the YSL exhibition was organized chronologically and divided up thematically based on his famous collections, and "while it was the first retrospective spanning his entire forty year career and even though a third of the pieces had never before been exhibited, the

⁴⁸ Interview with Diane Charbonneau at Musée des Beaux-Arts (September 5, 2013).

content itself was factual and did not explore any underlining issues that would have brought it from a merely aesthetic exhibition to one which added to the scholarship of dress history.”⁴⁹

The tradition of exhibiting a designer’s oeuvre at art museums was established in the 1970s and 80s and has been documented by Valerie Steele.⁵⁰ Filgiano’s research reminds us that because fashion designers were originally rejected from the Arts and Crafts Movement, it allowed them to “align themselves with the fine art notion of creator as genius, carving themselves a comfortable spot in the art museum by the mid-20th century.”⁵¹ As many designers since the 1920s transcended the discipline of fashion and spilled into other arts, theatre, and film (Coco Chanel designed costumes for the *Ballets Russes*, Givenchy designed Audrey Hepburn’s costumes in Hollywood), they began to be increasingly recognized as artists and their work entered the museums in the form of retrospectives. Pierre Cardin, whose retrospective was first shown at the MET in 1980, then at the V&A in 1990, and at Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal in 1991, stated that, “a couturier is no longer a maker of clothes, but rather a true artist who masters matter, the shapes given to fabrics, and the abstraction of matter in space.”⁵² Both Steele and Filgiano credit Diana Vreeland, the former editor of *Harper’s Bazaar* and *Vogue*, and Special Consultant at the Costume Institute at the MET, where she worked for seventeen years until her death in 1989, with the beginning of modern fashion exhibitions, and with taking exhibition practices from an antiquarian and chronological

⁴⁹ Filgiano, 14-15.

⁵⁰ Steele, 7–30.

⁵¹ Filgiano, 5.

⁵² Quoted on the Musée des Beaux-Arts Info brochure, announcing the Pierre Cardin exhibition in 1991, MBAM archives. Also see: Catalogue: *Pierre Cardin: Past, Present, Future*. With an Introduction by Valerie Mendes, Curator of Textiles and Dress, Victoria and Albert Museum (London, Berlin: Dirk Nishen Publishing, 1990, V&A 10 Oct 1990 – 6 Jan 1991).

approach to an aesthetically and theatrically entertaining one.⁵³ Vreeland was often criticized for her preference of spectacle over historical accuracy or pedagogical value of curatorial practices.⁵⁴ This debate over curatorial values escalated in 1983, when Vreeland curated “Yves Saint Laurent: 25 Years of Design,” at the MET, the first museum exhibition dedicated to the work of a living designer that sparked a controversy on the values of education and entertainment in museums, and caused the MET to ban shows on living designers.⁵⁵ However, as many museums began to change their historical or aesthetic mandates to include new disciplines and to attract new audiences, fashion exhibitions became popular attractions.⁵⁶ The curatorial debates and controversies simmered down, and the curators and critics agreed on the common denominator of fashion exhibitions that are “both beautiful *and* intelligent, entertaining *and* educational.”⁵⁷

Since the success of the YSL exhibition in 2008, MBAM produced two more original fashion exhibitions, “Denis Gagnon Shows All” in 2010-2011, and the blockbuster show “The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk” in 2011, which will be touring European and North American museums until 2015. As Filgiano explains,

The benefits of traveling an exhibition are immense. In most cases, this is where a show earns the largest amount of money as host institutions pay high rental fees. Unfortunately, this is not often the case with fashion exhibitions as the cost involved with the maintenance and display of dress is enormous. Neither the hosts nor the creators financially benefit from such a partnership. It is for this reason few fashion collections travel but those that do tend to be sponsored and have entrance fees, resulting, inevitably, in public criticism.⁵⁸

⁵³ Filgiano, 6, and Steele, 10.

⁵⁴ Steele, 11.

⁵⁵ Steele, 12.

⁵⁶ Filgiano, 11.

⁵⁷ Steele, 14.

⁵⁸ Filgiano, 43.

The JPG exhibition may not turn out to be a huge financial success, but its export value is high because it provides the MBAM with the kind of exporting prestige traditionally reserved for the MET and the V&A. Such fashion exhibitions not only allot the museum both national and international recognition, but also elevate its production quality on par with that of the MET and the V&A. It also makes the MBAM the only Canadian museum that created three consecutive fashion exhibitions produced in Canada in the last few years. This is significant because, as Filgiano explains, “Canada’s lack of dress collections, particularly in fine art museums, has inhibited further development of Canadian dress history and our involvement with the larger international trend of fashion exhibits.”⁵⁹ For example, when Alexandra Palmer’s “Au Courant” fashion exhibition at the ROM in 1997-98 showcased over forty Canadian designers, it did not attract the crowds.⁶⁰ Filgiano observed that “our fine art institutions are obviously interested in dress exhibitions, as several have hosted large traveling shows, but without our own collections, the scholarship is never truly credited to Canada.”⁶¹ She proposes a closer collaboration between Canadian fine art and history museums.⁶² However, it is important to point out that by showcasing Montréal designers like Denis Gagnon, and inviting other local designers to their fashion exhibition openings, the MBAM, like the McCord and MCTQ, participates in the creation and maintenance of the city’s fashion contact zone.

⁵⁹ Filgiano, 41.

⁶⁰ Filgiano, 42.

⁶¹ Filgiano, 41.

⁶² Filgiano, 55.

Conclusion

When comparing the three museums, it becomes apparent that they all contribute to grounding the locational history of fashion in Montréal. Even when exhibiting international designers like Jean-Paul Gaultier and Yves Saint Laurent or fashion icons like Grace Kelly, the museums provide strong local links and sustain both the awareness and the importance of the location fashion industry and history. As such, the museums facilitate and extrapolate the material and cultural manifestations of Montréal Chic by establishing a network of relations with the public, the designers, the industry, and the critics. Simultaneously, they also benefit from fashion exhibitions in terms of membership. The ties between institutions and other actors of the fashion scene and industry are important to each party. Not only do the museums encourage Montréalers' interest in fashion, but they also create and sustain a dialogue around both local and international fashion, and thus contribute to the creation of the fashion contact zone. By having their distinct points of focus on Montréal, Québec, and the international fashion world, there is no evident rivalry or competition between the museums because there is enough space for the different languages and localities that the museums represent within the cultural landscape of the city. Ultimately, the museums demonstrate that there is a strong fashion identity in Montréal, while simultaneously building ties and bridges between local and global fashion. Thus the essence of Montréal Chic lies in its status as a fashion city with its four institutional components, its status as a fashionable city conscious of global fashions and trends, and its ability to combine local and international history, identity, and networks.

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Abstract

This paper examines and contrast the fashion collections at three of Montréal's cultural institutions, the [Musée McCord](#), an urban and historical museum that houses over 18,000 pieces of costume and textile artifacts, the [Musée du Costume et du Textile du Québec](#), which owns and exhibits a collection of 8000 items worn, collected, and donated by Québécois and contemporary fashion by Montréal-based designers, and the [Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal](#), whose current director Nathalie Bondil has made locally-produced international fashion exhibitions one of the key point of its curatorial practice since 2008.

Our goal is to show that even though Montréal is not considered a global fashion center like Paris, London, Milan, New York, or Tokyo, its fashion history and practices are inevitably tied to its urbanity, rapid modernization, its turbulent history, its vibrant culture, and its unique status as the largest French-speaking and bilingual city in North America. As such, the city fits in well with the other Urban Chic studies, such as Berlin, Vienna, and Toronto.

What these fashion collections and institutional practices of acquiring, preserving, and exhibiting these collections reveal, is not only a closer look at the institutions themselves, but a rich spectrum of the city's cultural history and cosmopolitan trendiness as well. These collections reflect and support Montréal's identity as a cultural center – as the city of jazz, disco, Cirque du Soleil, festivals, etc. The collections also reflect the city's social and political history, for example the labour conditions of the manufacturing industries. Finally, these collections tell us what role fashion plays in the everyday lives of people who live and work in this city, and what role fashion dialogues play in the urban imaginary of Montréal.

Following the models of *Berliner Chic: A Locational History of Berlin Fashion* (Ingram, Sark, 2011) and *Wiener Chic* (Ingram, Reisenleitner, 2013), *Montréal Chic* approaches fashion as a lens through which urban culture, institutions, scenes, and sub-cultures can be analyzed and connected.

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Katrina Sark is a Montreal-based writer and photographer. Her research on Montreal fashion and culture can be followed on her blog: <http://suitesculturelles.wordpress.com/>. Her photographs have been printed in several publications, including an upcoming artist profile and photo essay on Montreal in [Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Studies](#) (2013). She is a PhD candidate in the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at McGill University in Montreal. Her [dissertation](#) examines contemporary Berlin documentary films and the intersection of city branding and nostalgia. She is the co-author of [Berliner Chic: A Locational History of Berlin Fashion](#) (Intellect, 2011), and assisted with the research on the forthcoming sequel *Wiener Chic* (Intellect, 2013). Her other publications include a chapter in [Berlin's Culturescape](#) (2008), an article on post-Wall Berlin cinema in *CineAction* magazine (2010), an article in *Seminar: Journal of Germanic Studies* (2012), as well as and several articles and photographs in [World Film Locations: Berlin](#) (Intellect, 2012). She is currently conducting research for the next Urban Chic volume, *Montréal Chic*.

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