

fQaroundtown August 06/ 07/ 2008

“Love: Yves St Laurent” at the Montreal Museum of Fine Art

the first retrospective spanning the forty years of creation of the Maison de haute couture Yves Saint Laurent.

May 29 – September 28, 2008,



1.) Evening Jacket in tribute to Ma Maison, Spring - Summer 1990, Sequinn embroidery, plastic, and faceted glass cabochon. Foundation Peierr Bergé – Yves Saint Laurent Inv. 1990 PE 113, Photo: Alexandre Guirkingier

YSL a Dirge in Flat Black and More Flat (non-reflective) Black.

Silk, Satin, Velvet, Luxurious, Rich Saturated Colour, Luminescent, Provocative, Life Affirming, Brilliant Design... the work of Yves Saint Laurent, designer , arist and fashion god.

There is atmosphere and then there is Cirque du Soleil atmosphere. I have come to realize that Cirque du Soleil has had a major effect on the world of display presentation and stage effects that work perfectly well on stage or on film and possibly as installation art. At any second you expect to be surprised by a gossamer clad acrobat descending from the ceiling to do a death defying twist to make you gasp. Why I kept expecting that while touring the rooms in which the “Love: Yves St Laurent” was displayed at the Montreal Museum of Fine Art is a bit bothersome. What should have been a celebration of the clothing designed over a forty year span of the master French Haute Couture designer was instead a dimly lit quasi atmospheric hall of mirrors with out the mirrors, or the acrobat. If it hadn't been for the crowd I would have been convinced the museum was closed.



2.) Installation shot of section of "The Palette," (theme area). Photo by Christine Guest: "The Palette," which shows how traditional rules of colour harmony were reversed in new contrasts inspired by cross-fertilization.)

The predominant colour on the walls of these rooms was a dull, lifeless, light and colour absorbing flat black. Add lighting that was so low it couldn't cause a flash or sparkle of the numerous Sequences and metallic threads adorning the sumptuous garments created by Yves Saint Laurent one begins to wonder just what one is supposed to be seeing in this exhibition. We know from magazines and television and movies that these clothes are sumptuous, colourful (Yes there are the Classic Black Cocktail outfits but they were not his trademark) heavily textured, and patterned that go from extreme elegance to absurdest lyrical confections. I guess we were to absorb the atmosphere and just know we were in the presence of great design and not actually be concerned with viewing them, if you want to see them I guess you should buy the catalog/ book that has been produced to accompany this event that has been developed by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco in partnership with the Foundation Pierre Bergé – Yves Saint Laurent



3.) Installation shot of section of "The Stroke of a Pencil"(theme area). Photo by Christine Guest: "The Stroke of a Pencil" where the designer's idea is followed from the original sketch

The French fashion historian Florence Müller, Chief Curator of the exhibition, having shared her passion for and knowledge of French fashion and haute couture with Associate Curators Diane Charbonneau, Curator of Contemporary Decorative Arts at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, and Jill D'Alessandro, associate curator, Caroline and H. McCoy Jones Department of Textile Arts, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco . Seems to have been rendered almost redundant by the brooding dark heavy handed "Exhibition Design" of this

international traveling exhibition by the Paris firm Agence NC. This lack of presentation lighting goes beyond conservation needs and is part of a design scheme that's as far as I can see goes to great lengths to keep these beautiful clothes hidden.



4.) Wedding Dress, Spring Summer 1999, Wreath, Bracelet, and ankle bracelet of roses and leaves, Gazar train, Crepe sandals. Foundation Peierr Bergç – Yves Saint Laurent Inv. 1999 PE 68, Photo: Alexandre Guirkinger

That said there is a certain excitement to be experienced by being in the same room with some of them. The display is divided into four main sections and the only place you can see them clearly is on the mezzanine or lobby around the top of the grand staircase leading up to the exhibition floor. As for the other rooms the anticipation created by the design that gives the impression that something is just about to happen (the acrobat descending from the ceiling) just left me frustrated. Though turning around and looking back into the room where the "artistic influences" portion of the "Lyrical Sources," section where displayed and looking at the Picasso Harlequin period inspired dress, a vignette complete with child, the full power of this man's work becomes evidence and the design of the exhibition actually adds to viewing experience, rather than marring it.



5.) Wedding dress in Tribute to William Shakespeare, Fall- Winter 1980, Damask, satin, lamé, braid. Lamé caul and veil. Netting, sequins, bead and rhinestone pendant earrings, metal and paste bracelets and rings, rhinestone and bead rings, choker and cross, rhinestone jet and bead chain necklaces. Metal and bead pin. Lamé brocade pumps. Foundation Peierr Bergç – Yves Saint Laurent Inv. 1980 AH 126, Photo: Alexandre Guirkinger

I spent almost five hours looking at this exhibition, going outside to stomp my feet in frustration every once and a while, in spite of the lack of light I was determined to see at my leisure as much of the beautiful detailed

construction and embellishment that is the joy and fun of these things. Mostly we have only been able to catch a glimpse of the lifestyle of the clients these clothes were made for in Society (pre Celebrity) gossip columns and on the pages of fashion magazines. This being the era of flash in the pan Instant Sex Tape Celebrity and being puzzled by the perpetual coverage of such lackluster Donatella Versace clad personalities (I'm sure she one) such as Paris Hilton, looking at the pieces made for Nan Kempner (1930–2005) (fashion maven, jet setter and early supporter of YSL) who was once called “la plus chic du monde” by Yves Saint Laurent and “the world’s most famous clotheshorse” by Vanity Fair, was a pleasure. (they are located in the lobby at the top of the grand stair case and are well lit)



6.) Installation shot of section of the well lit staircase lobby. Photo by Christine Guest: the dress on the dress by pillar was designed for Nan Kempner

This exhibition being the first retrospective spanning the forty years of creation of the Maison de haute couture Yves Saint Laurent it would have been nice to have had a better viewing experience. I am by no means saying give it a miss, I am just saying lower your expectations and forget about the “WOW” factor and go prepared to be frustrated and annoyed and to re work an Oscar Wilde quip “ if you only expect the worst, you’ll be amazed how often you don’t get it” I was going to close this review by jokingly saying (in all seriousness) if you are planning on see this exhibition wear glow in the dark shoes and your spelunking light, and bring along a pair of binoculars.

Go see it if you can and enjoy the fact that you are in the presence of one of the most creative fun inspiring fashion geniuses of the later half of the twentieth century. If you can’t see it I recommend going to the website and ordering the catalogue which is the triumphant of this project. This 258 page collection of images and text is worth much more than its fifty bucks price tag. Informative and beautiful it can only inspire your creative imagination and be available to you at your leisure and for long after the experience of seeing the exhibition has softened into a nostalgic memory



7.) Original sketch for the wedding Dress from collection sketchbook, Fall-Winter 1988, graphite on paper, gazar sample, 24 X 32 cm. Foundation Peierr Bergé – Yves Saint Laurent, Photo: Foundation Peierr Bergé – Yves Saint Laurent

“Love: Yves St Laurent” runs until September 28, 2008 at the Montreal Museum of Fine Art .Jean-Noël Desmarais Pavilion located at 1380 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, Quebec, Canada then moves to the de Young Museum of San Francisco, from November 1, 2008, to March 1, 2009.

All images provided by Montreal Museum of Fine Art and used with permission
Image list:

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website in this article

the exhibition:

Love: Yves St Laurent

http://www.mbam.qc.ca/micro_sites/ysl/expo_en.html

YSL Archive:

Fondation Pierre Bergć – Yves Saint Laurent,

The Museums

Montreal Museum of Fine Arts <http://www.mbam.qc.ca/en>

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco <http://www.famsf.org/>

The Exhibition Designers:

Agence NC <http://www.nathaliecriniere.com/main.html>

Society Maven and Celebrity from a more sophisticated era

Nan Kempner http://www.metmuseum.org/special/Nan_kempner/more.asp

Yves Henri Donat Mathieu Saint Laurent (August 1, 1936 – June 1, 2008)