

ANIMALIA FASHION

Patricia Lurati

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Florence, Uffizi Galleries
Pitti Palace
Fashion and Costume Museum
8 January – 5 May 2019



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Roma, Biblioteca Casanatense
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Firenze, Musei del Bargello
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Acknowledgements

Giuditta Amisano, Paul van As, Fausto Barbagli, Luca Bartolozzi, Mariapia Bianchini, Stefania Borghesi, Antonella Brogioni, Martina Butticè, Lisa Cesarani, Giuseppe Ciriello, Simonella Condemi, Valentina Conticelli, Martino De Tomasi, Sara De Tullio, Monica Fiorini, Giuseppina Gallo, Yaya Gatti, Paola Giannini, Caterina Grisafi, Paola and Piero Lurati, Gael Mamine, Anita Matell, Lia Monteleone, Annamaria Nistri, Gloria Pasi, Susanna Pelle, Cristina Petrelli, Andrea Piatti, Franca e Lorenzo Pinzauti, Monica Pistolesi, Cinzia Ribechini, Luca Ruggeri, Lorenzo Sbaraglio, Donatella Schembri, Francesca Romana Secca, Gabriella Seri, Gail Solberg, Carla Sozzani, Ann Fristoe Stewart, Monica Zavattaro

Special Thanks to

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Pantheism at the Museum

In his book *Art and Illusion* (1960), Ernst Gombrich theorizes a visual path in art that, beginning with a pattern, gradually creates a definitive image, a representation, as a consequence of progressive adaptations or corrections. The acknowledged reference to the notion of artistic reproduction according to Plato – as expressed in *Republic* or in *Sophist* – highlights the constant creative strain between an ideal model and its practical transcription, between an archetype and its accidental transformation. This duality powerfully emerges in the *Animalia Fashion* exhibition and turns into a poetical comparison – be it intended by the fashion designer or perceived by the viewer – between the animal world and the clothes inspired by it, and which through form bears witness to man's relationship with other beings of creation. A relationship of love, contrast and conflict, but also of boundless curiosity and admiration – even study. At the highest archetypal level we find the creations of designers like Iris van Herpen or Gareth Pugh, where the function/accident yields completely to the needs of sculptural portrayal, which achieves the greatest degree of abstraction in the tectonics of the coral garment made with orange PVC plates; or the large mass of black silk conceived for the dress by Maison Margiela, puffed up and threatening like a gigantic poisonous spider. The new “*haute couture* ethology” evoked by some creations coexists, in other cases, with an ancestral mimetic ambition, which is rooted in palaeontology, in mythology, in religion – such as for example Hercules's lion hide or Saint John the Baptist's camel fur. Thus the segments of a lobster's carapace are transformed into iridescent fabric panels for the sophisticated evening *toilette* by Yiqing Yin; or the entire fearful back of a crocodile, in the jacket by Azzedine Alaïa shaped upon the shoulders and the hips, celebrates strong, feisty and even dangerous femininity. The interpretation becomes playful in the parrot garments and in the clutches shaped like fish, scarlet macaws, beetles or even bee hives; almost scientific in the purse that traps insects in resin, the result of a collaboration between Prada and Damien Hirst; and illusionist in the cape by Valentino, a veritable case of optic hybridization between bird feathers and butterfly wings.

The rooms seem like they are sets in a surreal science museum, leading people through on a zoologically credible or just reminiscent visit, and through colours and shapes, a new bestiary comes to life, powerfully intellectual and at the same time impressionistic and instinctive: to the point where one seems to hear the buzzing and clicking of insects, the wriggling of reptiles, the beating of wonderful bird wings and the gnashing of teeth of babirusas. Drawing upon our cognitive patterns and models, an unexpected cosmogony of the elements is gradually revealed: the water of fish, coral and crustaceans; the earth of spiders and snakes; the air of butterflies and swans; the fire of the colours of parrots and beetles. All combine into a marvellous primordial schema, recreating a mysterious universe and carrying us off, albeit in a museum, into a pantheistic dimension.

Eike D. Schmidt
Director, Uffizi Galleries

Fashion Bestiary

The greatest ambition for any fashion designer is to reinvent Nature: through its forms, details, the way the clothes move, its romantic essence or its glittering thorns, and through the embroidery that uses needle and thread to portray the soul of the animal kingdom and its sublime transformation into the domain of seduction and magic. A cut calls to mind a feline's jaws; a puff of chiffon evokes the flight of a butterfly; a cape resembles a carapace; a hat looks like a fish tail.

Perhaps never so much as during the last twenty years of international fashion have bees, flies, shells, fish, snakes, butterflies, beetles and many other natural *mirabilia* become part of *haute couture* ateliers and the workshops of highly-skilled artisans in an unrivalled encounter between reality and imagination; a contest of transformation looking to the future in the kingdom of truth and fantasy.

During the past few months this very noble ambition has grown to such an extent that many new prodigious minds heading the most prestigious *maisons* are re-defining their own personal Paradise, overturning, with a poetic tone at times, the creation itself and the legend of Noah's Ark, with real animals portrayed with the grandiloquence of the myth or reinvented almost as if we were once again at the dawn of time. A teeming mass of sphinxes and chimaeras on prints take us back to antiquity; a love for the Middle Ages is projected into space; the Renaissance comes back to the fore as a model of endless grace and splendour, almost as if Fashion were increasingly striving to be Art with a visionary approach that crosses cultures and eras up to the present day. The world of jewellery also embraces this evocative power, just as it did in a very distant past, and suddenly the pounce of a tiger or the body of a bee are transformed into motifs, ornaments and symbols of beauty.

On the catwalks references to Nature are constant and often exhilarating. Butterflies that dance upon extravagant headdresses; dazzling golden bees on precious Dior invitations; stunning thorns some fashionistas might call neo-punk but instead they are purely the projection of contemporary stylists' imaginations battling for the terrain of the soul and the mind of the person who is about to purchase that dress or those accessories. Not everyone can carry off walking around with spider webs on their feet or covering themselves in hideous black snakes! Twirling in the spirals of a shell attracted by the perfection of the plissé of Fausto Sarli (an as-yet undervalued atelier artist) or hiding in the fabric of Armani Privé that evoke the perfection and lightness of a fly. Clothes become symbolic

interpreters of a different nature, of often little known and yet such captivating animals. Among the masters on display in the exhibition *Animalia Fashion*, which seems to take us back to the primitive nature in every one of us, John Galliano for Maison Margiela features with a garment as black as night that bears all the mystery of femininity and is inspired by the world of spiders. The spiders weave their webs on the naked backs of evening dresses by Schiaparelli with the delicate hand of the creative director for the *maison* founded by the brilliant Elsa, Bertrand Guyon. Guyon dares the impossible by re-presenting the "Lobster Dress" with a lobster fabric insert on an evening dress that evokes the surrealist model Schiap asked Salvador Dalí to draw in 1937, later worn for *Vogue* by a then relatively unknown Wallis Simpson.

Fashion designers are like physiologists in search of an atelier bestiary, an enchanted and branded forest with a *toile de jouy* that loses all bucolic emphasis to transform into the most precious, expensive and mysterious canvas. And Maria Grazia Chiuri for Dior is developing this concept with very modern and wistful poetics. For new and modern Marie Antoinettes, pushing the boundaries of beauty and wonder. And today, hands are the fashion bestiary's main stage with rings in the form of snakes and frogs, coloured in gold or with parrot feathers, with solitaires in the shape of sea urchins. The unforgettable shell bag Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel presented to the world seemed to come straight out of a Prince's *Wunderkammer*. Roberto Cavalli's mermaid dress, and the unparalleled crocodile jacket by Azzedine Alaïa are equally memorable. The jacket, made from an entire crocodile skin, was a sculpture of Nature before it became a sculpture of Fashion and it shone among the masterpieces at the Galleria Borghese in Rome during the exhibition on the French-Tunisian designer. I recall being enchanted and quite shy in front of that savage and sensual mirage. When on display, reptile clothes like the coat by Ferragamo speak an arcane yet very modern language; the purse Miuccia Prada designed with Damien Hirst looks like a display cabinet at the Specola Natural History Museum teeming with rare insects, for enchanting and poisonous women. It is a recurrent symbology, which associates the eroticism of the clothes with the qualities of the goddess wearing them on the catwalk, who, maybe, dreams about them for her entire life.

Eva Desiderio



Animals: Masters of Elegance

Are fashion victims odd little animals to be pinned like butterflies and framed in the history of fashion? From decade to decade, feathers and furs adorn the heads and cover the shoulders of those who set the standard in looks. Women have no hesitation in imitating them. Hats are decked, according to the period, with the plumes of ostriches, birds of paradise and egrets, giving elegant ladies the appearance of thinking lofty and whimsical thoughts. It is in the pelts of animals that they become indistinguishable during the winter. Until the 1960s, bare skin had a longing for minks, silver fox and astrakhan, to name just a few. Increased awareness of animal rights fortunately put an end to the association of elegance with slaughter. Synthetic furs came into play and natural materials under no threat took over. Even when animals are able to graze freely in new pastures and roam with no danger, their style is still sought after by women. Printed on dresses or adorning waists, animals to be dreaded and feared or cherished and protected remain the arbiters of fashion. The leopard and the cheetah are the best designers of motifs of all time, as attested by male garments back in the eighteenth century. In cut velvet and trimmings, the yellows and blacks of felines ensured uncommon waistcoats that few would dare to wear today. Caged in the nineteenth century, these animals were alternately objects of delight or disdain in the twentieth. Sometimes acclaimed as the hallmark of good taste and sometimes seen as eloquent evidence of tastelessness, leopard-skin clothing adorned both respectable ladies and women of ill-repute in constant alternation. Women wearing Dior and Balenciaga were chic in leopard-skin and dappled rosette patterns in the 1950s, and the motifs were equally noticeable in areas on the outskirts of towns where prostitution took root in the 1970s. Yves Saint Laurent dared to combine it with the long sheath dress, slyly bringing the elegant and the provocative together in a subversive, corrosive fashion. Thierry Mugler quietly followed his lead in the 1980s, presenting his models as secretaries ready to pounce with all their claws out from distant savannahs. Azzedine Alaïa, a stylist and sculptor, was also a shrewd and attentive tamer in the 1980s. With eight cats and dogs of all breeds, from the smallest to the biggest, in his home, Alaïa was an animal lover and also the designer best able to adapt their coats to the curves of the female body. In leggings, ice skating dresses, waspies and knitwear as close as possible to the tamed bodies, he made the cheetah motif a hallmark for women of the same breed, those unafraid to attract. Banished from fashion as from

the 2000s, the cheetahs and leopards leapt back onto the catwalks very recently, around 2018, discovered and acclaimed by women journalists as though for the first time. The example of this simultaneously cuddly and sultry feline is not unique. All the animals of all the geographical areas of the world can enjoy the limelight one day or another in the land of looks. Some make brief appearances, like the monkey with long black hair, genuine or synthetic, of the 1930s, and the zebra in the optical zebra prints of the 1960s. Others still more unusual have occupied the clothes hangers for a season. Can unloved insects invade the realm of frivolities? This was the case for the flies and bees featured in Thierry Mugler's striking and amusing collection of 1997, where elytron gloves, insect sunglasses and wasp waists caused a sensation. Mugler was inspired by the billowing indolence of jellyfish for evening dresses of organza and organdie, far lighter than deep, calm waters. Animals have enjoyed strict and very welcome safeguards for some years now after decades of ignorance that no fashion can justify. When species become scarce, their protection is a matter of urgency. We can be as daring as we like in drawing inspiration from their extraordinary natural forms and compete in imitating their fur and feathers as all these motifs are fake. The stylist Jean Paul Gaultier decided in 2018 not to use fur any longer in *haute couture* fashion shows. Attention has been focused increasingly on vulnerable species at risk in the modern world. Given this new awareness, which will hopefully spread to others, fashion designers now dream of imaginary animals. Metaphorical and magical, disturbing or benevolent, these dream animals from fairy tales and fashion houses take no lives to make another fur coat. Beneath the arabesques of harmless gorgons and the carapaces of still unknown reptiles, fashion designers have opened the gates to the most beautiful of zoos, the most divine of nature reserves, allowing animals of the imagination to roam in an imaginary Eden. With the elegance of a peacock and the dignity of an eagle, they can wander freely because they are unthreatened. They are creations that copy no originals because nature is the greatest of couturiers. These fantastic animals dreamed up for fashion shows sometimes make it as far as museums, where they can be gazed upon with no cages, no bars, no display cases and no weapons. Let us hope that all the others can enjoy the same consideration in the future.

Olivier Saillard







