

Fashioned from Nature,
London: Victoria and Albert Museum,
21 April, 2018 – 27 January, 2019

Jaiya Anka, University of Victoria

The exhibit under review makes an important contribution to our understanding of the complex relationships between people and fashion. *Fashioned from Nature* draws mainly from the Victoria & Albert's (V&A) permanent collection to explore the intricate relationships between fashion, people, and nature from 1600 to the present day. The exhibition reveals how fashion finds inspiration in nature while highlighting the increasing scope of the clothing industry and its detrimental effects on the natural environment. The distinguishing characteristic of the current exhibition is its examination of the past and its implications for twentieth-century and present-day practices. Through this dialogue between past and present, the visitor is given an appreciation for those forces of fashion which have sparked controversy or shifted attitudes across centuries. Essentially, the narrative of *Fashioned from Nature* was motivated by today's widespread concerns about environmental harm and also by the V&A's collection of fashion and textiles. Because very few textile pieces dating before 1600 survive, both the exhibition and its accompanying book begin in the seventeenth century.¹ *Fashioned from Nature* is set within "Gallery 40," a circular space which spans two levels. This space is surrounded by the outer Fashion Gallery and its semi-permanent display which explores European fashion from 1700 to the present day. Such a design poses a unique challenge to the V&A—given the circular and open configuration of both levels, the way in

which visitors navigate the exhibition spaces is indeterminant. In addition, the architecture, lighting, and display cases are completely different on the two levels.

Entering *Fashioned by Nature* via the ground floor, the visitor encounters a text panel with the two central questions the exhibit aims to address: *How can we design a more sustainable fashion industry?* And, *what can we learn from the past?* In the words of senior exhibition curator Edwina Ehrman, “I wanted to keep nature at the heart of the exhibition to remind visitors of how the natural world sustains us, and the importance of thinking seriously about the urgent need to protect it.”² Ehrman indicates the goal of the exhibit is to draw its core audience of the Fashion Gallery (fashion students, women of all ages and tourists) and to build awareness with visitors who are working with the industry, students in science-based programs, and with people that have interests in sustainability, the environment, and natural history. From the entry point of the exhibition, it is uncertain as to which direction the visitor is meant to proceed—the route is circular and one may turn to their left or right; there is no definitive path to follow. Perhaps it is by design that this rhizome-like configuration alludes to the inevitable circular relationship between human choice, fashion, and nature, and how one is inevitably connected with the other.

The ground floor places considerable emphasis on the materials themselves—wool, cotton, and silk—and situates the visitor within the production context of Britain between the years of 1600 and 1900. Working with three research assistants, Ehrman combined modalities in the organization of the exhibition; it was organized chronologically and by interconnected thematic sections pertaining to a more nuanced definition of the relationship between

fashion, people, and nature. For example, pieces from the V&A's historical collection are paired with materials such as raw wool and silk-worm cocoons, alongside images of live animals (beavers next to a fur hat or egret plumes next to a muff, for example).

Underscoring such connections is the use of a soundscape³ which forms a backdrop to the entire exhibition across the two levels: this combines birdsong and animal cries that alternate with noises of human activity such as water wheels, looms, and sewing machines. Many of the types of birds and animals of the soundscape also feature in material form at various points throughout the exhibition. While at times this enhances the power of the exhibit, at others, it can feel distracting. Panels that spoke to the significance of the soundscape placed at intervals throughout the exhibition might have helped to demystify a space that at times feels disorienting. Perhaps this effect was also intentional as though to disturb a sense of harmony, balance, or complacency.

An attempt at cohesiveness for the two spaces is achieved through devices of graphic design. The different combinations of materials found in nature inspired Senior Exhibition Designer, Juri Nishi, and Senior Graphic Designer, Judy Brugger.⁴ They layered and combined materials to provide texture, visual interest, and consistency across the two floors of the exhibit. Resin panels that have real plants such as flax incorporated into them separate many of the exhibit cases. All section panels, case panels, and object labels are designed to express the idea of layering, as they all consist of two papers. An interplay of materials, including some that are transparent, act as metaphor for the subject of the exhibition: it reveals something about nature that normally remains hidden.

Labelling is substantial and supports the goals of the exhibition as they educate the viewer on how clothing production has changed over the centuries to coincide with human demand. Supplemental and concise panels highlight the significance of various elements of fashion including materials, motifs, processes, global trade, and environmental issues, while linking individual choices and industry practices to their global consequences. Even the paper that labels and panels are printed on convey the mandate of the exhibit: the textured Favini paper from Italy is made from upcycled leather waste.

A stand-out piece is an extravagant dress, labelled as one of “World Proportions,” encapsulating how fashion connects us across the globe: the raw silk is from Italy, Spain, and the Middle East; the flax was grown in northern Europe; the ermine, or the white winter fur of the stoat (*Mustela Erminea*), was likely imported from North America or Russia; the silk was woven in Lyon for a dressmaker in London (fig. 1). The dress is accompanied by three labels, each outlining the key themes developed throughout the exhibit: one is devoted to the relationship between fashion and plants (the silk was coloured with plant dyes); another addresses the environmental harm caused by dyeing (pollutants and soap are released into the water supply); and the third to being “dressed in nature,” as evidenced by the ermine that was made into trimmings and stoles. The fashion for such a dress complements an eighteenth-century portrait, *Mrs. Everard*, attributed to Allan Ramsay (fig. 2).



FIGURE 1
(Top) Court Mantua and Petticoat,
garment construction ca. 1760s.

© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



FIGURE 2
(Left) *Mrs. Everard*, attributed to
Allan Ramsay ca. 1768-9, oil on
canvas.

© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Subsequent cases illustrate how fashion is continually inspired by forms found in nature. The gallery's didactic panels note how the diversity and beauty of the natural world have provided a plentiful source of inspiration for textile design for centuries. In Renaissance Europe for example, the circulation of illustrated books provided a rich variety of images of nature that could be copied. While many of the flora and fauna were real, some existed only in fantasy. In the seventeenth century new books offered a careful observation of the natural world and represented a systematic attempt to classify and order nature. Such examination was encouraged by travel and colonial expansion, which introduced European explorers to species they were eager to record.⁵ Surviving garments and designs for textiles attest to this fascination with the natural world: many of the fruits, insects, and flowers embroidered on early seventeenth-century garments and accessories are identifiable and include carnations, pansies, caterpillars and butterflies, and grasshoppers and snails. Throughout this initial section, the curators have woven in various references to natural history books as a testament to the popularity of the study of insects in the eighteenth century. One example is a compendium by Moses Harris on English moths and butterflies published in 1766, recommended as a source book for decorating furniture.

Colour is one of fashion's most powerful tools for introducing innovation. With the susceptibility of dyes to fading, raw materials with naturally beautiful and longer-lasting colour were valued for clothing and accessories. Iridescence was particularly admired. Colours shift depending on their relationship to light on the surface, and the angle from which it is viewed; materials like the feathers of certain birds, mother-of-pearl (nacre), and the metallic wing cases of jewel beetles

owe their shimmering hues to such interactions with light. An almost circular cape (Britain, ca. 1898. Silk, velvet, and cotton, V&A) is made from velvet whose colour shifts from pale to dark blue. Shot silk, woven with warp and weft threads of contrasting colours, and moiré silk simulate the natural optical effects of iridescence. Displayed next to the cape is a dress made with beetle wings: over 5000 beetle wings and parts of wings were used to decorate this dress, an item that exemplifies the trend in Europe established by the 1820s⁶ (fig. 3).



FIGURE 3
Cotton, gilded metal
thread and Indian
jewel beetles, ca.
1868-9.

© Victoria and Albert
Museum, London.

As the viewer proceeds upstairs to the mezzanine level, they are met by a mannequin displaying a dress once worn by the actress Emma Watson to the Metropolitan Museum's Gala in New York City in 2016. The dress, which is made from recycled plastic, was created for Ms. Watson by Calvin Klein as part of the Green Carpet Challenge, an initiative that has paired celebrities and sustainable fashion at high-profile events throughout the year since its inception in 2010. In comparison to creating new polyester fibre, the processing of plastic bottles into yarn reduces carbon dioxide emissions and saves energy. In addition, the gown is composed of three separate parts—a bustier, the trousers, and train—that could also be worn again in different ways. This mannequin, along with others throughout the exhibit, features wooden arms (another element that references natural materials). She is surrounded by a series of glass terrariums and set against a large-scale photograph of a field, with seemingly infinite rows of green stems topped by their white flowers. This marks the beginning of a journey across the twentieth century to the present day, through a space dedicated to the initiatives of various fashion designers who demonstrate how ethics and aesthetics can be interwoven.

With the “modernity” of the twentieth century, the fashion industry revolutionized textiles and transformed nature's materials along its path: human-made textiles were created from chemically treated organic fibres and synthetic fibres were made from by-products of coal and oil manufactured in the laboratory. Owing to their interest in the environmental impacts of fashion, and meriting a standalone exhibition, the curatorial team assembled a series of designers who work with fashion to raise awareness of the damage caused by the industry to act as a

catalyst for new practices. Alexander McQueen's (1969–2010) last fully realised collection "Plato's Atlantis" imagined a world of climate change—submerged land, melting ice caps, and humans evolving to live underwater. The designer's collections often expressed his ecological awareness. Stella McCartney (b. 1971) is one of several contemporary fashion designers who are dedicated to sustainable practices. As one example, she works with "Colorifix", a technique which aims to create a low-water, pollution-free method of dyeing: when cloth is placed in the dye bath, microorganisms fix dyes to the fabric with the addition of an environmentally benign dye transfer agent.

While sustainability is the focus of the second level of the exhibit, the curators extend the theme of fashion finding inspiration in nature through a nod to the work of several designers, including Christian Dior (1905–57). We learn of the designer's love of gardens since childhood. His designs, such as a rose-strewn silk dress, transform his clients and models into living embodiments of flowers. According to an accompanying label, Dior spoke of creating "clothes for flower-like women, with rounded shoulders, full feminine busts, and hand-span waists above enormous spreading skirts". The curators also reinforce the connection between the present and the past via a handbag created for Gucci in 2017—the source is a book of the kind that inspired some of the seventeenth-century textiles found on the lower level. The handbag reflects designer Alessandro Michele's (b. 1972) love of the natural world and includes an image of a fox and two male stag beetles. The beetles are drawn from Thomas Moffet's *Theatre of Insects or Lesser Living Creatures* (ca. 1634).



FIGURE 4
The exhibition setting with visitor.

Source: photo by author.

As the viewer moves away from two cases showcasing the work of designers who are inspired by nature's forms, they navigate a space dedicated mostly to issues of protest and sustainable practices within the fashion industry. We learn how the modern environmental movement that took shape in the 1970s became part of the political agenda on a national and international level.⁷ Designers such as Vivienne Westwood (b. 1941), and pressure groups like Greenpeace and Fashion Revolution, heightened awareness of the adverse consequences of our consumer society by using fashion's ability to reflect social concerns and initiate change through their designs.

The curators deserve praise for their vision of how to bring together the various threads of the exhibition via this gathering of innovative designers and interactive displays. On the upper level, the visitor is invited to engage

with sustainability issues via a number of creative multi-media displays. For example, a large-scale screen projects a reel of films which shows the impact of human activity on the planet, from rising sea temperatures in the oceans to birds endangered by oil spills. The films are synchronised with different sounds—ice sheets twisting and cracking, wind turbines, mill looms—that reflect the damaging effects of the fashion industry today.⁸ The Centre for Sustainable Fashion (CSF) at London College of Fashion, UAL, presents two interactive installations which explore “Fashion Now” and “Fashion Futures.” The CSF installations are curated by Professor Dilys Williams, founder and Director of CSF, and Ligaya Salazar, Director, Fashion Space Gallery with help from MA students. “Fashion Now” presents five iconic contemporary fashion pieces (including a white t-shirt and denim jeans) and by using sensors, visitors are able to explore the impacts on nature with the construction, making, acquiring, wearing, caring, and disposal of each item. “Fashion Futures” asks viewers to consider the fashion world of the future by posing questions that we can ask ourselves and others, in order to help us develop a healthier relationship with nature through our fashion choices. The installations include maps and infographics alongside a handful of informational films. Even though the installations allow for more varied interpretations than usual object labels, their significance is minimized given the layout of the mezzanine—the stations needed to be placed along the only available wall, the temporary wall that has been placed around the edge of the gallery. The senior curator Ehrman acknowledges that this is not optimal as it has the effect of “physically side-lining” the most interactive of exhibit components.

Be that as it may, at every turn the viewer is meant to pause and consider the impacts of the fashion industry and therefore, the consequences of our own choices. One especially poignant example of this is the wearing of denim: since the 1960s jeans have been an everyday wardrobe staple, with millions

of pairs produced annually. Growing the cotton to manufacture jeans requires extraordinary amounts of water; in the absence of more sustainable practices, irrigation can exhaust local water supplies, harming ecosystems and communities. Each day—as we are reminded by the objects, visuals, sounds and texts assembled here—we express our relationship to the natural world through what we choose to make, buy and wear. The exhibition presents a variety of solutions to reduce fashion’s impact on the environment from low-water denim and using wild rubber to make jewellery to more conceptual and collaborative projects. These include a dress that is grown from plant roots by the artist Diana Scherer, who uses soil, seeds, and water to train root systems to form into textile-like material.⁹ The viewer learns about contemporary designers at the forefront of sustainability initiatives today. Inevitably, designers contend with learnings from the past (and present) in their attempts to lessen the harmful effects of the fashion industry on the environment in the future.

Even though noteworthy, the exhibition is not without its challenges. The exhibition attempts to answer two questions it poses from the outset (*How can we design a more sustainable fashion industry? What can we learn from the past?*). While there is hope, we learn how such questions pose complex challenges with no straightforward solutions. There is a risk that the overall tone of both the exhibit and its accompanying catalogue could sound moralizing; for many visitors, the reality could simply be that the price tag for sustainable fashion as it is now is too high. In addition, while the curators make note of twentieth-century designers who were inspired by nature’s forms or motifs, they do not address their use of human-made or toxic materials in the final products. As this exhibition introduced

audiences to complex issues, the addition of larger text panels, or panels that were more easily distinguished from didactic labels, would have helped to concretely articulate the fundamental themes. However, these are minor observations: the exhibition presents a powerful vision of the complex and dynamic medium that is fashion and the curators are to be recognized for a creative approach to a multi-faceted exhibition. In presenting works that challenge our preconceptions of dress, the curators accomplish their goal of highlighting concerns about environmental damage alongside the V&A's impressive collection of fashion and textiles. Moreover, they leave the viewer with strong impressions about the consequence of fashion and our close relationship with nature. Ultimately, the exhibition challenges visitors to scrutinize their own fashion choices more critically through this thoughtful presentation on the implications of common practices used by the fashion industry across the last four centuries. By highlighting fashion's deep connections with everything from art, design, science, culture, and history to politics and economics, the exhibit takes the visitor beyond the surface of limited definitions of "fashion" to nuance our understanding of its, and therefore our, relationship with nature.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Edwina Ehrman, curator and editor. "Introduction," in *Fashioned from Nature*. London: V&A Publishing, 2018, pp. 10-17. The V&A has collected both textiles and fashion since its earliest days: the collection now includes around 100,000 objects, from silks and lace to buttons and ballgowns.
- 2 Edwina Ehrman, e-mail message to author, November 2018.
- 3 "Soundscapes" was created by Rob St. John and Tommy Perman (ca. 2018).
- 4 Victoria & Albert Press Office, e-mail message to author, December 2018.
- 5 By the mid-eighteenth century in Britain books on natural history were said to sell better than any others.
- 6 Europeans first encountered the use of jewel beetles to embellish clothing in South America and Asia.
- 7 For example, Earth Day, held every year on April 22 since 1970, became a global event in 1990 when it was marked in 141 countries.
- 8 Film projections, *Lovers*, 2018. Sound by Rob St. John and Tommy Perman. Film footage courtesy of Dissolve, Motion Elements, Pond5, Shutterstock and Videohive.
- 9 For more information visit <http://dianascherer.nl/>.