

Clio's Scroll



Special Issue

Spring 2020

Reconsidering *Heavenly Bodies*:

Essays from "Fashion, the Middle Ages, & the
Catholic Imagination"

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Clio's Scroll, the Berkeley Undergraduate History Journal, is published twice yearly by students of the Department of History at the University of California, Berkeley. The journal aims to provide undergraduates with the opportunity to publish historical works and to train staff members in the editorial process of an academic journal.

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PETER ZHANG is a second-year History major. He is interested in Ming-dynasty Chinese history and modern British history, and is currently trying to connect these two different fields in his studies. His research topics are imperialism, bureaucracy, war and anything else he comes across. A former school journalist, a current SLC writing tutor, and a Clio's Scroll editor, he is passionate about all kinds of writing (but poetry is his favorite). Aside from drowning in the infinite amount of readings, essays and the occasional computer code, he loves to dig out fun places to visit in the Bay Area, looking for fancy restaurants, and spending a lot of time on Football Manager.

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Note from the Editors

Dear Readers,

"Nothing is static in nature, or in the universe, not even God." So says Cardinal Bergoglio, played by the incomparable Jonathon Pryce, in *The Two Popes*. We editors at *Clio's Scroll* have decided to take *Il Papa* at his (fictional) word and evolve a bit ourselves. Thus, in the spirit of innovation, we present to you, our dedicated readers, the first ever special issue of *Clio's Scroll*! We have partnered with UC Berkeley's very own Prof. Maureen Miller to publish essays from her History 39B class, "Fashion, the Middle Ages, & the Catholic Imagination: The *Heavenly Bodies* Exhibit". It was a class devoted to Catholicism and its expression, particularly through the Met Gala's 2018 exhibition, titled *Heavenly Bodies*. The exhibition was a great success, but due diligence was not done to all pieces in the collection, as the following essays demonstrate. Fortunately, the enterprising students in Prof. Miller's class were more than up to the challenge, and pulled apart some of the dresses and issues on display, seeking to place them in their proper contexts. The essays in this volume, by Tate Archibald, Zoe Carwin, Dorian Cole, Sofia Howard, and Emily Su represent some of the best History 39B has to offer. They examine contemporary issues like feminism, gender identity, the conversion experience, and cultural representation as conveyed by the dresses on display and the Catholic imagery in each.

We at *Clio's Scroll* hope to be able to do more of these special issues in the future for particularly outstanding or interesting classes. Let this first entry into a hopefully long and prosperous series stand out for its excellent scholarship, luxurious dresses, and lustrous images. The Editorial Board of *Clio's Scroll* would like to thank the Townsend Center for the Humanities and the Associated Students at the University of California (ASUC) for their generous funding that makes this publication and editorial process possible. As always, the Editors are indebted to Berkeley's Department of History for its endless support, guidance, and encouragement. In particular we are dedicated to Leah Flanagan, the undergraduate history adviser, for all her counsel; and our faculty adviser, Prof. Ethan Katz, for his invaluable experience. Of course, none of this would have been possible without the hard work and dedication of our associate editors!

--The Editors

Note from Prof. Miller

In 2018 the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art mounted an exhibit on *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination*. Set in the museum's medieval galleries, this blockbuster show juxtaposed Catholic-themed haute couture garments with the religious art of the European Middle Ages. The star-studded Met Gala opening the exhibit was widely covered in the media, generating both popular and scholarly interest. The latter produced a special session devoted to *Heavenly Bodies* at the 2019 meetings of the Medieval Academy of America. Organized by Anne E. Lester of Johns Hopkins University and Sarah Spence, editor of the Academy's journal *Speculum*, the roundtable was moderated by Jacqueline Jung (Yale University) and featured commentary by five scholars. I was honored to participate along with Maria J. Feliciano (Independent Scholar), Valerie Garver (Northern Illinois University), Jeffrey Hamburger (Harvard University), and Warren Woodfin (Queens College, CUNY). While noting the beauty of the exhibited garments, all of us found the show's conceptual framework, catalog, and presentation disappointing and, on many issues, problematic.

Our presentations generated a lively discussion with the standing-room only audience and collectively we moved from criticism to positive steps forward. Given the significant appeal of the show's haute couture ensembles, might the exhibit's weaknesses actually offer opportunities for teaching and research? I felt confident that they did and proposed a Fall 2019 Freshman and Sophomore Seminar on *Fashion, the Middle Ages, and the Catholic Imagination: Reconsidering the Heavenly Bodies Exhibit*. After introductory readings on the history of fashion, material culture, object biographies, and the exhibit, each of the seminar's participants selected a garment as their research subject and set out to find information and explore issues that the exhibit and its catalog neglected. What in the designer's background, or in the events or circumstances surrounding the collection, best explains the garment's engagement with Catholicism? What meanings or statements are produced by the garment's materials, forms, or symbols? Did the exhibit's juxtaposition of medieval artifacts with the garment create new meanings? Periods of research alternated with presentations (using the "three-minute thesis" model), short papers, and feedback. So exciting were the developing topics that participant Dorian Cole floated the idea of publishing a special issue of the Department of History's undergraduate journal, *Clio's Scroll* with its editor, Geraint Hughes, who enthusiastically embraced the project. Not every student opted to revise their final essay for submission to the journal, but the five published here well represent the diversity of issues and approaches that animated the seminar.

I thank the 18 wonderful participants in the seminar: Patricia Alvarado, Tate Archibald, Zoe Carwin, Anna Clary, Dorian Cole, Ava Dobbs, Cora Downey, Sofia Howard, Parker James, Emma Kim, Ebbani Ray Lenka, Amanda Liu, Ying Long, Ronit Sholkoff, Emily Su, Natalie Sun, Jaywon Yi, and Xiaolin Joyce Yue. Their lively intelligence and generosity of spirit created a model research community. Thanks too to Elizabeth A. R. Brown and Valerie Garver for providing some of their unpublished work on the exhibit for use in the course. The Freshman and Sophomore Seminar program and its Director Alix Schwartz made all this possible, funding not only the catalogs that served as the course "textbook" but also the publication of this special issue, the latter supported as well by grants from the UC Berkeley Department of History and the Associated Students of the University of California (ASUC).

-- Maureen C. Miller

Contributors

TATE ARCHIBALD is a current UC Berkeley freshman studying Linguistics and History. She is interested in European Studies and the historical linguistics of Romance languages. Particularly, she tends to focus her studies on the Medieval and Renaissance periods in Western Europe. She would like to thank Professor Miller for being so encouraging and supportive in the research, creation, and publication of this piece

ZOE CARWIN is a UC Berkeley undergraduate studying Cognitive Science. She works at Gopnik Lab as a research assistant and is a member of the Latin American Leadership Society. Some of her passions include fashion, art, and history, particularly the Middle Ages. When she isn't learning about the brain, Zoe likes to update her Pinterest boards with new fashion finds, plan her next study abroad trip to an old European city, and spend time in her hometown of San Francisco with friends and family.

DORIAN COLE is an undergraduate student at UC Berkeley studying History and English. Dorian is interested in religious history and is especially concerned with the shifting relationship between the Catholic Church and the secular world. They would like to thank Professor Miller for her guidance in exploring this topic and for all of the encouragement she has offered along the way.

SOFIA HOWARD is a first-year at UC Berkeley studying Political Science and Data Science. Sofia is interested in political theory and the historical contexts in which different political structures change, especially within countries impacted by foreign influence. She is also particularly drawn to social justice issues and how the effects of colonization have persisted into the modern age. She would like to thank Professor Maureen Miller for providing her the opportunity to explore the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit and analyze fashion's societal power in an academic context.

EMILY SU is a current sophomore at UC Berkeley pursuing a B.A. in History and Economics. Her interests lie in intellectual history, particularly that of Russia. She hopes to further these interests as well as discover new ones in her remaining time at Berkeley. She would like to thank Professor Maureen Miller for conducting the Fashion, the Middle Ages, & the Catholic Imagination: The *Heavenly Bodies* Exhibit seminar and for her constant guidance throughout the course.



The Penelope Dress, Credit: Greg Kessler/KesslerStudio

Who Owns the Catholic Imagination?

A Look into the Creation and Intention of the Met's Heavenly Bodies Exhibit through Dolce & Gabbana's Penelope

Tate Archibald

If ever there was a material representation of the intersection of the unlikely realms of religion and luxury fashion it would certainly be "Penelope" —Dolce & Gabbana's entirely gold wedding ensemble that was presented to the public at the Met's *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit as what the creators believed to be one of the many representations of "The Catholic Imagination".¹ As David Tracey states in the opening pages of "The Catholic Imagination," the exhibit catalog, this concept can be described in context with the Catholic vision for society—"Here comes everybody".² That being said, it is safe to say that neither the Catholic Church nor *haute couture* have been traditionally viewed as "here comes everybody" types of social spheres. Dolce & Gabbana's Spring/Summer 2013 Alta Moda Wedding Ensemble, "Penelope," revealed the true intersection of the outwardly accepting yet exclusive nature of the Catholic Church and of high fashion while simultaneously embodying the Met Gala's interpretation of the Catholic Imagination.

For much of its history the Catholic Church was not only a religious but also a political, social, and economic global force which included practices that made it difficult for certain members of society to belong to the Church.³ For example, during the Middle Ages the Catholic

¹ Bolton, Andrew, *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018).

² Bolton, Andrew.

³ Robert B. Ekelund, Robert F. Hébert, and Robert D. Tollison, "An Economic Model of the Medieval Church: Usury as a Form of Rent Seeking," *Journal of Law, Economics, & Organization* 5, no. 2 (1989): 307–31.

Church became an economic force selling salvation to its constituents. The sale of “indulgences,” through which practicing Catholics believed that they could make up for sins or secure their loved ones’ spots in Heaven by donating to the church, became increasingly popular.⁴ Encouraging their followers to participate in practices such as this not only aided the Catholic Church and the Papacy in becoming world powers, but also continued to promote elitism within the church. Concepts such as “indulgences” promoted the idea that salvation could be bought—and that there were people who essentially could not “afford” to get into Heaven. It was the widespread acceptance and promotion of these “indulgences” drove Martin Luther to post his *Ninety-five Theses* in 1517 condemning this practice among other papal transgressions and marking the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.⁵ Luther’s actions reflected one of the most recurrent themes in the history of Catholicism — the question of who actually constitutes the Church. While the church attempted reform in the later Middle Ages to compensate for their apparent misuse of economic power, the Catholic obsession with the material and opulent world remained as a visual representation of their wealth to many.

Although Catholicism places an emphasis on rejecting material goods and excess as a form of happiness or fulfillment, visual manifestations of the papacy, religious structures, and doctrine visibly contradict this sentiment and have led to tensions within the church. Materialism is more often associated with excess and opulence than the reverential appreciation for simplicity that the bible seems to advocate. During the aforementioned Protestant Reformation, the papacy attempted to justify material obsession by claiming the spiritual value and sacredness of these objects, but to many it seemed like a rather superficial attempt to justify the apparent wealth of the clergy.⁶ These

⁴ R. N. Swanson, *Indulgences in Late Medieval England: Passports to Paradise?* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁵ Swanson.

⁶ Miller, Maureen C., “Material Culture and Catholic History,” *The Catholic Historical*

contrary foundations of the Catholic Church--an opulent appearance that opposes its appreciation of a humble lifestyle--are reflective of the elitism rooted in its history. Although the teachings of the Catholic Church were expected to be upheld as moral guidelines for a just and accepting society, the values of the church and its authority often promoted a rigid social structure in which wealth was thought to be a reflection of virtue.

While the Catholic Church of the 21st century may be a far more inclusive and progressive community than that of its historical predecessors, it continues to adhere to a strict set of guidelines that determines who exactly is "eligible" for salvation. To put it simply, Catholicism is a religion fundamentally organized around structure and hierarchy. While the church has begun to open its doors to some, its exclusionary roots can still be felt. In the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council approved measures to make the Catholic Church more accepting and accessible to people from all places in society and the world.⁷ Rather than creating tension between Catholicism and other religions, this shift in teaching advocated for Catholics to engage with and appreciate other forms of spirituality. Additionally, the Holy Mass could now be held in adherents' native languages rather than only Latin. While this period of change known as the Second Vatican Council or "Vatican II", created a much more globally involved and accepting church, the rigid hierarchical preferences of the Church remain below the surface. Many people point to the economic and authoritarian power of the Vatican as a continued manifestation of Catholicism as a religion that is for the elite, by the elite, regardless of their attempts to become a more inclusive space.

A similar trend can be seen in haute couture. Although the elitist nature of its foundation has somewhat shifted into the much more

Review 101, no.1 (2015): 11–17.

⁷ "Second Vatican Council | Description, History, Documents, & Legacy | Britannica," accessed December 11, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Second-Vatican-Council>.

artistic and accepting modern world of fashion, its exclusionary tendencies are still visible to many. The mid-1800s saw the rise of small specialty shops conglomerating into department stores with shopping becoming a leisure activity for women.⁸ With sewing machines and textile production on the rise, clothing became cheaper and more available to those in the middle and lower classes.⁹ The increased democratization of shopping incentivized the upper class to seek out clothing that distinguished the activities and culture of their social circles from those of the working classes. This desire to find attire fitting to wear to more extravagant events such as balls or operas led them to clothing producers that still tailored by hand—a skill that became specialized following the creation of the sewing machine and factory production of clothes.¹⁰ Therefore, haute couture rose to popularity in the mid-19th century among the elite as an attempt to get back to the roots of luxury fashion—hand tailored custom designed and fitted garments. In its simplest form, what separates haute couture from simply just couture or luxury fashion is that pieces are created and tailored to specific individuals rather than designed and then ordered to fit the purchaser.¹¹ Essentially, the entire appeal of haute couture is its exclusivity. Buying haute couture clothing guarantees that the wearer will have a one of a kind, perfect ensemble.

Haute couture is still very much present in mass culture. In fact, many of the articles of clothing that appear on celebrities during award shows or large events, though perhaps not officially labeled haute couture, can be seen as remnants of this tradition of elitism. However, many of the haute couture garments created today are meant more to reflect the art and inspiration of the designers rather than to flatter

⁸ Arnold, Rebecca.

⁹ Arnold, Rebecca, *Fashion: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Richard Harrison Martin, Harold Koda, and Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York N.Y.), *Haute Couture* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995).

¹¹ Martin, Koda, and N.Y.

wearers of the pieces. The concept of fashion as art and commodity has allowed the fashion realm to be seen as a rather inclusive sphere of society. Though in many aspects of social life clothing still defines how one is perceived, the widespread availability of different types of clothing due to globalization and the idea of everyday fashion as a form of individuality have allowed many people and communities to find methods of expression and interaction in fashion.

And yet, there are still aspects of the fashion realm's classist roots that persist, particularly in luxury fashion. While in the 1800s haute couture clothing was a staple of the elite wardrobe, today luxury fashion dominates this realm.¹² While luxury brand names still act as a symbol of financial and social status, most people who purchase luxury clothing are not expecting to get a completely custom garment from the designer but rather an article of clothing or accessory that is most likely simply limited in quantity or seasonal availability.

However, there is one design house that seeks to break out of luxury fashion and instead refocus on the highly exclusive culture of couture and the couturier: Dolce & Gabbana, a luxury fashion brand aimed at capturing the essence of Italian culture and society. Run by Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana, the fashion house has built an empire off of the cinematic vision of their home—Sicily—among other classic Italian motifs.¹³ The traditional Dolce & Gabbana look is excessive and opulent, throwing simplicity and modesty to the wind in a cinematic and fantastic adaptation of Sicilian culture and how women should look.¹⁴ The luxury brand has made a name for itself in the 21st century due to its iconic style and large celebrity clientele. While Dolce & Gabbana have become iconic in the luxury fashion realm, their

¹² Arnold, Rebecca, *Fashion: A Very Short Introduction*.

¹³ "Dolce & Gabbana News, Collections, Fashion Shows, Fashion Week Reviews, and More," *Vogue*, accessed October 6, 2019, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/designer/dolce-gabbana>.

¹⁴ Christine Whitney, "Dolce & Gabbana Out Loud," *Harper's Bazaar*, no. 3630 (February 2015): 208.

reputation has always been marked by an air of rebelliousness and tension: the pair have often found themselves in scandals due to the social and ethical complications of their designs or production.¹⁵

To facilitate this return to the couturier style of fashion—and in an effort to remove themselves from the “limelight”—the design house created an event known as “Alta Moda.” Dolce & Gabbana’s Alta Moda events are meant to be runway shows and collections that reject the 21st century consumer ideals of ready-to-wear fashion and instead celebrate the skills and design of more traditional couture.¹⁶ While Dolce & Gabbana’s clothing is still reflective of their iconic style, their garments are created with the roots of haute couture in mind. Rather than showcasing luxury clothing that can be bought directly by the consumer, the Alta Moda collections showcase one of a kind clothing and encourage their clients to visit the atelier in order for each seasonal release.¹⁷

The Alta Moda events are opulent and even excessive, which is expected from a Dolce & Gabbana runway show. However, the Alta Moda shows differ in their audience and exclusivity. Dolce & Gabbana claim that the Alta Moda is meant for “true” Dolce & Gabbana clients—those that could even fathom purchasing entirely custom tailored ensembles. So, the designers have chosen to make much of their Alta Moda collections secret from the general public. In order to view parts

¹⁵ Robin Givhan, “Dolce & Gabbana, Exposed,” *Newsweek*, 2012,

<https://libproxy.berkeley.edu/login?qurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ebscohost.com%2flogin.aspx%3fdirect%3dtrue%26db%3dedsbro%26AN%3dedsbro.A316794551%26site%3dedb-live>.

¹⁶ Condé Nast, “Dolce & Gabbana Stage an Epic Alta Moda Show in Sicily’s Valley of the Temples,” *Vogue*, accessed December 11, 2019,

<https://www.vogue.com/article/dolce-and-gabbana-alta-moda-sicily-valley-of-the-temples>.

¹⁷ Avril Mair, “La Dolce Vita: What It’s Really like to Attend a Dolce & Gabbana Couture Show Extravaganza,” *Harper’s BAZAAR*, July 6, 2018,

<https://www.harpersbazaar.com/uk/fashion/shows-trends/a25259149/dolce-gabbana-alta-moda-couture-show/>.

of the Alta Moda collections, an extremely exclusive invitation is required.¹⁸ It is not enough to simply be a celebrity either: of the 100 or so guests that Dolce & Gabbana do allow to view this collection, the majority are royalty, heirs and heiresses, or owners of multi-million dollar companies.¹⁹ Although Dolce & Gabbana are attempting to bring haute couture into the 21st century, it is clear they are dragging along with it the socio-economic prejudice of the 19th century. Dolce & Gabbana create Alta Moda events with a certain class of people in mind—those that can actually afford to purchase one of their items. For a brand known for celebrating rebels and outcasts, Dolce & Gabbana are not afraid to let it be known exactly who they believe should be embodying their clothing.

This elitist and exclusionary sentiment pervades in one collection in particular: The Spring/Summer 2013 Alta Moda Collection. Its initial release was held in Sicily, the “home base” of the design house. The theme was meant to be “Sicilian culture”, featuring aspects from traditional Sicilian dress to specific regional cultural practices. However, even this event was marked by scandal as the designers chose to have the models wear blackface while showcasing a particular group of garments. While this garnered significant media backlash, the designers defended their choice by stating that it was simply a representation of Italian culture and history.²⁰ Besides this scandal, which was nothing out of the ordinary for the designers, the release seemed to be essentially a routine occasion. However, this was in fact not the case.

A few months after Dolce & Gabbana’s initial release of their 2013 Spring/Summer Alta Moda collection celebrating Sicily, the designers aired an extremely exclusive second-half of the show

¹⁸ Mair.

¹⁹ “Inside Dolce & Gabbana’s Exclusive Couture Club - Telegraph,” accessed November 6, 2019, <http://fashion.telegraph.co.uk/news-features/TMG9955048/Inside-Dolce-and-Gabbanas-exclusive-couture-club.html>.

²⁰ Givhan, “Dolce & Gabbana, Exposed.”

dedicated to the culture of Milan. Only about 100 people were invited to this luxury salon—princesses, heirs, and billionaires, all sat in one room reminiscent of the roots of haute couture, dripping in gold.²¹ This second Alta Moda, titled of course, "Milan" was meant to be private and confidential, however, the showstopping final piece—an entirely gold wedding ensemble named "Penelope" would go on to be featured in the *Heavenly Bodies* catalog and exhibition garnering a much wider audience than that for which the piece had initially been intended.

As an haute couture piece, the many ornate and intricate details of Dolce & Gabbana's Penelope produce several symbols and meanings. At its core the wedding ensemble is fully representative of the two realms it comes from, religion and fashion, and presents a common and consistent paradox: appearance versus reality. The Wedding Ensemble's form is influenced by "The Madonnina," a sculpture of the Virgin Mary atop the Cathedral of Milan. The figure is positioned on the cathedral's highest spire and depicts the Madonna made entirely out of gold with a crown of stars ascending to Heaven. The Penelope gown is a strikingly similar ensemble utilizing embroidered gold fabric and a golden crown finish the look. The full length gown has a modest silhouette with full length sleeves and a high neckline—mindful of the purity and virtue of the Virgin Mary and Catholic tradition. However, this silhouette still contains elements of the true Dolce & Gabbana style as it accentuates the hips to create a sort of over exaggerated A-line figure.²² The portions of the Penelope gown, as well as the mostly see-through bodice, hint at a more risqué side of this Madonna. It is in these elements that the name 'Penelope' may come into play.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, a Greek hero named Odysseus journeys home to Ithaca following the fall of Troy. His wife, Penelope, waits for him for several decades turning down more than a hundred suitors,

²¹ "Inside Dolce & Gabbana's Exclusive Couture Club - Telegraph."

²² Bolton, *Heavenly Bodies*, 188-189.

persistent in staying faithful to Odysseus.²³ Penelope is a figure that has been compared to that of the Virgin Mary as they share the foundational virtues of loyalty, trust, and purity.²⁴ However, these figures are also linked on the basis that their stories are only credible should they be believed by others. It is this aspect of Doubt and Belief that Dolce & Gabbana call to mind with the figure of this wedding ensemble. The entirety of Christianity hinges upon the initial belief that Jesus Christ was in fact born of a virgin—the idea that Mary was impregnated by the Holy Spirit therefore allows Jesus as the Son of God to be without original sin. Likewise, Penelope's virtue is almost wholly dependent on other people's belief that she has been able to refuse the many suitors that came to her in the decades that she has been without her husband. Most importantly, the entire epic is dependent on Odysseus's belief that his wife had been faithful. Therefore, the name "Penelope" reinforces the idea of this inherent duality of certainty and doubt within the Catholic Church that is suggested in the gown's figure—a representation of the Madonna that hints at female sexuality.

Here, the representation of duality and the female form is found at the intersection of both the religious world that Penelope is meant to embody and the fashion world that the gown was created for. However, it is important to recall that the fashion world that Dolce & Gabbana introduced their gilded bride to is not one that is reflective of either the more progressive versions of the church or the fashion industry. Instead, Penelope was created for an audience and event much more reminiscent of the religious organizations and designers of the past—a reminder that at their core these two worlds are made by and for the elite. That being said, this changed when Dolce & Gabbana decided to break the secrecy of this garment for one event that would

²³ ancientadmin, "The Odyssey-Homer-Homer's Epic Poem-Summary," *Ancient Literature* (blog), accessed November 5, 2019, https://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_homer_odyssey.html.

²⁴ Michael Ewans, *Opera from the Greek: Studies in the Poetics of Appropriation* (Routledge, 2017).

garner so much media attention and celebrity that the confidential show-stopping finale would soon become world famous and openly available to the public eye: The *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit.

The *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit was put on by the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, or the “Met,” featuring both designer garments and Vatican artifacts meant to represent “The Catholic Imagination.” It included the annual red carpet event known as the Met Gala in which celebrities and designers showcased pieces either from the exhibit or inspired by it garnering worldwide media attention. In addition to this fundraising event and the exhibit itself at both the Met 5th Avenue and in the Met Cloisters, the catalog of both Vatican items and garments was later published as well. The event and exhibit were chaotic, tense and controversial, making both the most viewed in the institution’s history.²⁵ The critiques targeted the Met’s use of religion as a theme and the seemingly haphazard organization and labeling of pieces in coordination with the art that the Met usually hosts in the Cloisters.²⁶ After careful review, many found that the pieces displayed in the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit were given very little or misleading context, were placed next to art or artifacts not relevant to the subject of the pieces and oftentimes actually had very little to do with Catholicism. Regardless, the creators and curators justified their decisions of what to include in the exhibit by unifying all of their items under one central theme—“the Catholic Imagination.”

In the intro to the *Heavenly Bodies* catalog, David Tracey wrote that the “Catholic Imagination” embodies the more progressive “Here

²⁵ “1,659,647 Visitors to Costume Institute’s *Heavenly Bodies* Show at Met Fifth Avenue and Met Cloisters Make It the Most Visited Exhibition in The Met’s History | The Metropolitan Museum of Art,” accessed December 11, 2019, <https://www.metmuseum.org/press/news/2018/heavenly-bodies-most-visited-exhibition>.

²⁶ Brown, Elizabeth A.R., “Jesus Christ, Heavenly Bodies, and Catholic Imaginations: The Apostolic Church, the Vatican, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art,” November 24, 2018.

comes everybody” attitude of Catholicism.²⁷ Tracy seemed to base his definition less on the aesthetics and narrative of Christianity and focused instead on aspects of Catholic social teachings that extend into the Catholic Church’s interaction with the greater community. Tracy’s “Catholic Imagination” affirmed the refocusing that occurred during Vatican II and more modern interpretations of Catholicism, which rely heavily on the idea that Catholicism is non-exclusive. At its core, this definition seems to be a perfect summary of what the “Catholic Imagination” should be—a global community of those within and outside of the church who are all connected under the basic Catholic idea that all people are made in God’s image and likeness. In this vision, sex, race, religions, and class are all rejected as a basis for judgement, and instead acceptance is promoted by attempting to recognize divinity in all people.

While this sentiment is perhaps reflective of what Tracy believes the “Catholic Imagination” should be, it is certainly not the Catholic Imagination that was presented in the *Heavenly Bodies* Met Gala. In fact, if anything the *Heavenly Bodies* event and exhibition were particularly opposed to this concept. Tickets to the *Heavenly Bodies* Met Gala cost roughly \$30,000 and the designers and models featured in this Gala were most—if not all—of some sort of celebrity status. Additionally, most of the featured garments came from luxury brands. To even view the exhibit at the Met Cloisters tickets ran \$25 for adults.²⁸ For an event inspired by the “Catholic Imagination,” the exhibit certainly lacked the sentiment of “here comes everybody”. In fact, if ever there was a clear material representation of the certain “Catholic Imagination” that seemed to inspire the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit, it would have to be Dolce & Gabbana’s golden bride, Penelope.

Penelope was created by Catholic designers from a Catholic

²⁷ Bolton, Andrew, *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination*.

²⁸ Vanessa Friedman, “What Is the Met Gala, and Who Gets to Go?,” *The New York Times*, May 3, 2018, sec. Fashion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/03/fashion/what-is-the-met-gala-and-who-gets-to-go.html>.

country, clearly resembled Catholic art, and was most certainly made with a "Catholic Imagination." However, David Tracy's "Catholic Imagination" was certainly not consistent with the "Catholic Imagination" of the Penelope dress. Instead, it was more reflective of the one that seemed to motivate the creators of the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit. "Penelope" blended the worlds of fashion and religion to appeal to an event such as the Met Gala that emphasizes spectacle and exclusivity. 'Penelope' represented the extravagant materialism of Catholicism through its gilded form and near replica of Milan's famous Cathedral adornment, bringing with its appearance a royal, elite air that is often associated with the sheer economic dominance of the Catholic Church and its rather oppressive and classist roots. In addition, the gown's very creation and place in haute couture represented a modern day attempt to return to an era in which high fashion was truly only meant for those deemed important enough to wear it. Moreover, the gown went on to be displayed in the *Heavenly Bodies* Met Gala, an event that fed off of the general population's desire to glimpse into the seemingly untouchable world of high fashion. Finally, the garment was eventually added to the exhibit—placed in a room with no context of its origins or intentions and surrounded by art that was not related to it—so that ordinary people could pay to look at the Golden Bride inside of a glass box. Its audience was most likely impressed by its intricate and opulent beauty which seemed to project a regal sense of "untouchability" without directly stating it. However, little did they know that had it not been for the Met creating this opportunity to use fashion and religion once again to display the lines of "who" is entitled to "what," only a hundred people in the world would know of Penelope's existence.

So then, the question at hand regarding fashion, religion, exclusion, and the Met comes down to this: Who owns the "Catholic Imagination"? From Tracy's perspective, the correct answer would be no one. However, the Met has made it clear through the presentation of their *Heavenly Bodies* Exhibit that they do not believe this to be the case.

For them, the "Catholic Imagination" is a term used to loosely link together the lavish aestheticism of Catholicism with the grandiose world of high fashion in an attempt to create an event emphasizing elitism and materialism. This is most clearly observed in Dolce & Gabbana's Penelope, one ensemble out of the plethora of gowns and garments presented at the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit that manifests the Met's "Catholic Imagination." This problem with this interpretation is that it sets back decades, if not centuries, of progress that both the Catholic Church and fashion world have made to become more progressive in the modern day and instead creates a clear example for the general public to once again point to these institutions as being rooted in discriminatory values. Although the Met marketed the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit as a celebration of religion and fashion, and may have even truly meant for it to be one, it unfortunately appears as an exploitation of the rather undesired aspects shared between these realms.

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Ex-voto Dress, Credit: E. A. R. Brown

J.P. Gaultier's Inspiration and *Heavenly Bodies'* Catholic Imagination

The Problem with an Aesthetic Approach to Catholicism and other Religions

Zoe Carwin

From May 10 to October 8 in 2018, *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination* attracted 1,659,647 people to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, making it the museum's most visited exhibit since the Tutankhamun show in the late 1970s.²⁹ The exhibit featured hundreds of designer pieces from the 1800's to the present day along with many religious adornments loaned from the Vatican. The items from the Vatican were displayed separately in the Anna Wintour Costume Center, while the haute couture and ready-to-wear designs were placed in juxtaposition with medieval artifacts located within the Met Fifth Avenue and in Met Cloisters. Andrew Bolton, head of the Costume Institute at the Met, hosted the show along with Anna Wintour, the editor of *Vogue* magazine and a Met trustee.³⁰ French fashion designer Jean Paul Gaultier created some of the garments featured. One particular dress titled "Ex-voto" reflects the theme of the exhibition through the use of metal ex-voto plaques in its design.³¹ Ex-votos are

²⁹ Elizabeth A. R. Brown, "Jesus Christ, Heavenly Bodies, and Catholic Imaginations: The Apostolic Church, the Vatican, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art" (paper presented at The Middle Ages in the Modern World Rome Conference, John Cabot University, Rome, Italy, November 24 2018), 2.

³⁰ Brown, "Jesus Christ," 1.

³¹ Although the journal can only publish a black and white image, color photos are available at <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2007-couture/jean-paul-gaultier/slideshow/collection#27>

offerings in the form of physical objects, like small paintings or metal plaques, used for prayer by Catholics in exchange for a vow. Jean Paul Gaultier's "Ex-voto" ensemble is not only studded with Catholic symbolic imagery, but also reveals how the designer derived inspiration from the beauty of diverse cultures and faith traditions. The dress encapsulates the vantage of the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit as a whole in its purely aesthetic approach to the "Catholic Imagination." Gaultier's superficial use of symbols and *Heavenly Bodies'* aesthetic approach to the "Catholic Imagination," while effective in some ways, undermined the deeper meanings, significance, and history of the religion leaving many visitors with a feeling of distaste and a yearning for deeper explication.

"Ex-voto" is an ensemble designed by Jean Paul Gaultier for his 2007 Spring haute couture collection, *Les Vierges*, or Virgins.³² Evidently "Ex-voto" was chosen for the exhibit due to the use of Catholic symbolic imagery present throughout its design. Through the careful selection of its materials, forms, and symbols, this dress promises many divine protections to its wearer, especially from the ex-votos placed strategically around the bodice as armor against various evils and ailments. An ex-voto, meaning "'from the vow made' or 'in gratitude, devotion'" is a votive offering—such as a painting or metal plaque depicting a body part—placed in a church or shrine as a prayer to God or a particular saint for a miracle or in thanks for a miracle already received.³³ The dress features crocheted gold and silver silk embedded with aluminum ex-votos and other metal detailing. A lace skirt and a train of gray silk mousseline, as well as long mousseline sleeves, flow from the upper thigh down. Juxtaposed around the bodice are metal ex-votos depicting the body parts they are placed over.³⁴ Ex-votos can

³² Andrew Bolton, *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018), 109.

³³ Rosamond Purcell, "The Stories of Strangers: Mexican Ex-Voto Paintings," *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 84, no. 2 (2008): 81.

³⁴ Bolton, *Heavenly Bodies*, 109.

either be prayers for future protection and healing or 'thank yous' and promises of further devotion for some healing or stroke of good fortune the person attributed to God or a saint.³⁵ Altogether the dress can be interpreted as one large ex-voto for the person wearing it, symbolizing both a prayer for protection as well as a show of devotion.

Looking at the dress as a whole, the shape is visually striking with its long, dramatic, flowing silk mousseline sleeves and train; structured torso; and floor length skirt. The top half of the dress resembles a chainmail shirt, which a medieval soldier would have worn in combat. This armor-like shape, along with the embedded ex-votos, seems to be calling on divine protection similar to when medieval Christian soldiers in the Crusades believed they were protected by God

for carrying out His will.³⁶ In contrast to the divinely protected outer metal shell, the exposed lace underneath the top "armor" represents the more delicate, vulnerable, inner layer in need of protection. One of the main functions of religion is to provide believers with a sense of security and safeguard against evil. The lace slip demonstrates this need for the armor. Lace is a much softer, delicate material than the ex-voto plaques or metal rings sewn into the top around the torso. Beautiful, shimmery, and see-through, the skirt exposes the bare legs of the model. Without the



³⁵ Marjorie Atwood, "The Ex -Voto as Symbol of Faith and Survival," (PhD diss., Salve Regina University, 2002), 44-47.

³⁶ Atwood, "The Ex-Voto," 112-113.

chainmail top she would be “completely exposed. However, it is “white metal lace” so she is still not completely vulnerable.³⁷ Collectively, the different pieces of the ensemble provide physical and spiritual protection to those who wear it in faith.

Gaultier’s inspiration for this collection did not stem from a personal connection to Catholicism, but rather from a desire to celebrate diverse traditions and cultures through their aesthetic beauty. In examining the dress and the surrounding collection, the designer’s history offers clues as to the inspiration and motivation behind the work. Jean Paul Gaultier was born in Arcueil, France on the 24th of April, 1952.³⁸ Growing up in this suburb outside Paris he was exposed to religiosity at an early age. Despite being “raised as a Catholic, religion left him cold.”³⁹ Gaultier cites his “very open-minded” parents as the reason for his appreciation of “lots of different types of beauty. And not just the beauty of the person but the beauty of the culture.”⁴⁰ Throughout his artistic career, he has created pieces inspired by Chinese, Japanese, African, Native American, Eastern European, and Indian cultures.⁴¹ Rather than a personal connection to the religion, Gaultier appears inspired by the beauty and symbolic imagery of the Catholic faith tradition, similar to how his experience walking around New York inspired his earlier Autumn/Winter 1993 *Chic Rabbis*

³⁷ Bolton, *Heavenly Bodies*, 109.

³⁸ Caroline Cox, “Jean-Paul Gaultier - Fashion Designer Encyclopedia,” Fashion Encyclopedia, Advameg, accessed October 23, 2019.

³⁹ Peter Ross, ““My Ambition is to make Clothes the Best I can to be More Loved” Jean Paul Gaultier has Gone from being a Lonely Boy in the Parisian Suburbs to One of the most Celebrated Names in Fashion. He Tells Peter Ross about the Influence of His Grandmother, the Death of His Lover and how an Incident at Madonna’s Wedding Taught Him how to Wear a Kilt: Final Edition],” *Sunday Herald*, Apr 08, 2007, 9.

⁴⁰ Suzanne Weinstock, “The Provocateur: Jean Paul Gaultier,” *ELLE*, June 16, 2011.

⁴¹ Thierry-Maxime Lorient and Valentina Baslyk, *The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: from the Sidewalk to the Catwalk*, (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2011), 272-273.

collection.⁴² Gaultier commented on these Jewish orthodox inspired pieces, saying “What I wanted to convey was the feeling these traditional costumes gave me, to pay tribute to their beauty.”⁴³ In his own words, Gaultier recounted how “[e]thnicity [sic] is part of my work definitely,” a clear inspiration for many of his designs and shows.⁴⁴ “In reality,” he reflected, “maybe I steal things because I see things that I find beautiful and I take them with me.”⁴⁵ It is evident from Gaultier’s body of work that he did not feel the need to be part of a certain religion, ethnic group, or from a certain country to create pieces inspired by those peoples, traditions, or places.

Thierry-Maxime Lorient curated the 2011 *The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: from the Sidewalk to the Catwalk* exhibit, which traveled around different museums including the De Young in San Francisco. The exhibit was all about Gaultier and his designs and featured dresses from many of his collections through the years.⁴⁶ Lorient placed dresses from the Virgins collection near the start of the exhibition, admitting “For me the Virgins collection is one of the best collections of Gaultier, one of the most spectacular.” However, Lorient further commented that the collection “...is not about using Christianity as much as it is about the beauty of religious icons. His inspirations come from everywhere...”⁴⁷ Gaultier’s Spring 1996 collection drew inspiration from “a whirlwind trip around the globe, from the American West to Africa,” prompting one critic to comment, “Gaultier’s tailoring almost always is impeccable—even though it’s obscured by his constant

⁴² Frida Rosenqvist, “Jean Paul Gaultier: Provocateur or Uninhibited Creative?” *Heroine*, last modified February 28, 2018.

⁴³ Lorient et. al., *The Fashion*, 271.

⁴⁴ Weinstock, “The Provocateur.”

⁴⁵ Weinstock, “The Provocateur.”

⁴⁶ Kiriakos Spirou, “The Fashion World Of Jean Paul Gaultier: From The Sidewalk To The Catwalk,” (Yatzer: yatzerland, last modified May 1, 2013).

⁴⁷ Weinstock, “The Provocateur.”

pastiche of exaggerated ethnic and cultural references."⁴⁸ Gaultier feels inspired by topics the public interprets as controversial "and [he] tends to focus on the most literal visual representations of these subjects..."⁴⁹ Although perhaps unintentionally, Gaultier's designs sometimes struck viewers as offensive and insensitive because they suggested the cultural appropriation of aesthetics without knowledge of or participation in the borrowed culture.

The *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit at the Met also took an aesthetic approach to its theme, the "Catholic Imagination." This title in itself left much room for interpretation without any precise definition as to what could be considered in this imagination. From the introduction in the *Heavenly Bodies* catalogue, curator Andrew Bolton described this imagination as "operat[ing] on a narrative level, which is where its power lies and its resonance is felt," which is to say that, very generally, the "Catholic Imagination" is stories told through images and juxtapositions.⁵⁰ "However understood," Elizabeth A. R. Brown, a history professor at The City University of New York, observed, "the poetic suggestiveness of the amorphous notion of 'imagination' added dramatic cachet to the exhibition's title, without precisely defining or cumbrously [sic] restricting the show's scope."⁵¹ Sponsors of the exhibition, such as Donatella Versace, "praised the show for demonstrating the history of Catholic Imagination, even though the exhibit was neither historical nor chronological in focus or organization."⁵² The descriptive panels beside garments lacked explanations from designers about their design process, although most designers were at the time (and are still) alive and could have been asked to provide some insight into the inspirations for and meanings of

⁴⁸ Robin D. Givhan, "Jean Paul Gaultier, Giving the World a Twirl" (The Washington Post, Oct 19, 1995; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post) pg. D1.

⁴⁹ Rosenqvist, "Jean Paul."

⁵⁰ Bolton, *Heavenly Bodies*, 96.

⁵¹ Brown, "Jesus Christ," 8.

⁵² Brown, "Jesus Christ," 9.

their pieces. Similarly, there was "a lack of attention to workers and craft, both medieval and modern" throughout the exhibit.⁵³ The descriptive panels only mentioned the names of designers and gave basic descriptions of the objects beside them.⁵⁴ In many cases, the juxtaposition of the high fashion garments with medieval artifacts and the presentation of religious items on loan from the Vatican were less than effective. The placements of the designer clothing with artifacts "which they sometimes echoed or resembled and which they generally overshadowed" demonstrated only surface level associations.⁵⁵ Without input from the designers, the curators created new contexts for the dresses, which the designers may not have originally intended, by placing them near certain artifacts. And although some garments seemingly referenced the historic sexual abuse and exploitation of the church, such as the "pee[p] hole" robe by designer Rick Owens, the show did not address this or even acknowledge the scandal happening at the time of "shocking reports of child and sexual abuse by Catholic clergy being released while the show was in progress."⁵⁶ Perhaps because they had worked so closely with the Vatican to get religious objects and garb on loan, the Met sought not to embarrass the church while accepting the loan of the objects. Whatever their reasoning, the effect of the Met's lack of acknowledgement was that they seemed to ignore the scandal so that they did not have to deal with the implications it would bring to the exhibit.

Although the "Ex-voto" dress was both undeniably visually striking and laden with Catholic symbolic imagery, an analysis of Gaultier's motivation for designing this dress and the surrounding collection in the context of his entire body of work leads to the conclusion that it was simply because he found the aesthetic of Catholic virgins beautiful. Likewise, the curation of *Heavenly Bodies* paralleled

⁵³ Valerie L. Garver, "Heavenly Bodies Roundtable," MAA 2019, 4.

⁵⁴ Bolton, *Heavenly Bodies*, entire book.

⁵⁵ Brown, "Jesus Christ," 5.

⁵⁶ Brown, "Jesus Christ," 6, 2.

this surface-level approach to Catholicism because of its ineffective explanations and tendency towards provocation for the purpose of attracting visitors rather than educating them. Gaultier evidently had no other agenda or message he wanted to convey with *Les Vierges* other than his appreciation for the beauty of the Catholic image of virgins, comparable to his motivations for the garments which emulate Hasidic apparel in *Chic Rabbis*.

Notably, Gaultier's aesthetic approach to religion and culture in his design inspiration was consistent throughout many of his collections. For his Spring/Summer 2013 menswear collection, all the models wore traditional Sikh turbans along with Gaultier's streetwear designs. Criticism about cultural appropriation "surrounding this collection targeted the fact that Gaultier's models were non-Sikh men in sacred headwear—removing a religious symbol from its original context and reintroducing it as a fashion accessory."⁵⁷ Gaultier is widely known for his provocative designs and has been famously nicknamed *l'enfant terrible* of fashion.⁵⁸ "My designs," he confessed, "corresponded to the desires of the time, and I never deliberately tried to shock, even if I was aware that my clothes would create a stir. I'm still astounded by some people's reaction to things I consider quite normal."⁵⁹ While Gaultier claimed that the public's perception of his designs as shocking is not his intention, the Met certainly purposefully employed and benefited from provocation to attract visitors. Met president Daniel Weiss commented that the juxtaposition of the high-fashion garments with Vatican ornaments and clothing "serve[d] as both inspiration and...provocation."⁶⁰ The reason behind this use of provocation was almost certainly to attract media attention and visitors, which it successfully did, in part because of the "items and pairings

⁵⁷ Rosenqvist, "Jean Paul."

⁵⁸ Rosenqvist, "Jean Paul."

⁵⁹ Weinstock, "The Provocateur."

⁶⁰ Brown, "Jesus Christ," 10.

recognized—and planned—to be ‘provocative’ and ‘inflammatory.’”⁶¹ As previously mentioned, *Heavenly Bodies* turned out to be the museum’s most attended show ever.

The public received both Gaultier’s designs and the exhibit with mixed reviews. Some loved the *Chic Rabbis* collection and appreciated the tribute to the beautiful traditional aspects Jewish garb, others decided to look past the religious references and focus on the designs and tailoring of the clothing, and others still were very offended by the whole show and collection. Some Jewish people who identified as part of the “Hasidic community considered it mockery while others were more disturbed by the fact that women walked down the runway in the traditionally male clothing.”⁶² With such a diverse array of strong opinions, the show attracted much attention and contributed to Gaultier’s growing reputation as a provocative designer. *Heavenly Bodies* prompted a wide range of reviews as well. Some in the Catholic community were deeply offended, particularly by the Met Gala event. Many celebrities, who were not all practicing Catholics, attended the gala in very revealing designer clothing inspired by the “Catholic Imagination.” A group of these devout Catholics decided to make their voices heard in a protest which “took place in front of the Met Fifth Avenue on Saturday, 9 June 2018,...some six hundred people assembled to condemn the exhibit as sacrilegious.”⁶³ Neither Gaultier nor the curators of *Heavenly Bodies* intentionally set out to offend anyone; however, their creations did come off as offensive to some.

While it may be fine for a haute couture collection by a provocative fashion designer, when an entire exhibit at an institution as prestigious as the Met is loosely based off the aesthetic of the “Catholic imagination” without any real analysis or dialogue about the religion, it raises some concerns. The exhibit did nothing to address the hypocrisy

⁶¹ Brown, “Jesus Christ,” 10.

⁶² Rosenqvist, “Jean Paul.”

⁶³ Brown, “Jesus Christ,” 12.

of the church, which is what most people take issue with regarding Catholicism. The church is historically associated with opulence, wealth, and splendor while Catholic teachings preach simplicity, charity, and abandonment of materialism. One man commented, “[i]t was amazing. All these designer clothes and medieval stuff. I loved it all, except those ‘awful things’ from the church.”⁶⁴ The “awful things” he was referring to were the traditional clothing and accessories worn by members of the Catholic church, including popes, bishops, and priests. Some of the objects were one of a kind, handmade, priceless artifacts worn by popes and commissioned by royalty.⁶⁵ He continued to say, “What a waste of time that part was... Why did they bother to show us things that just prove ‘what hypocrites those priests are?’”⁶⁶ Hypocrisies about wealth and sexual exploitation are some of the main reasons people who grew up Catholic subsequently abandon the faith and the church. If the exhibit was supposed to, in part, prompt visitors to consider and reflect on the beauty and positive aspects of Catholicism, then the creators of the exhibit should have addressed these hypocrisies or provided a space for dialogue about them. Only surface level physical and visual beauty cannot fully encompass a religion, especially with all its deeper rooted issues and controversies. Unfortunately, as Brown so adeptly critiques, “[v]isitors learned little of substance, nor were they prompted to reflect on their reactions and ponder their attitudes to the many issues raised by the show, including, on the one hand, the responsibilities of charitable and religious institutions dedicated to serving the needy and the defenseless, and, on the other, the varieties and determinants of creative imagination.”⁶⁷ The aesthetic approach to Catholicism fell short in many ways, failing to fully encompass the religion and create a dialogue about its deeper meanings and teachings, as ideally a good museum exhibition should

⁶⁴ Garver, “Heavenly Bodies,” 1.

⁶⁵ Brown, “Jesus Christ,” 3.

⁶⁶ Brown, “Jesus Christ,” 2.

⁶⁷ Brown, “Jesus Christ,” 15-16.

do. Significantly, "the show was accompanied by no symposia or public lectures at the Met designed to encourage thoughtful consideration, discussion, and debate."⁶⁸ To a trained eye, many of the modern fashion designs were obviously not inspired by medieval artifacts; however, due to the lack of explanations, some museum goers could have been misled as the exhibit "fail[ed] to engage seriously with the degree to which these confections are modern fantasies, not yet historical objects."⁶⁹ Valerie L. Garver critiqued this failing at the *Heavenly Bodies* Roundtable, asserting "[m]any of the dresses in *Heavenly Bodies* reminded me far less of the medieval than of imagined attire."⁷⁰

Both Jean Paul Gaultier and *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination* achieved style over substance in their aesthetic interpretations of Catholicism. In focusing mainly on the visual beauty of religions and cultures, many opportunities for reflection, education, and engagement were lost. In terms of the criticisms of Gaultier's work regarding cultural appropriation, it is important to consider others when seeking inspiration from religions and cultures other than one's own, so as not to hurt or offend those who do identify with these groups. And yet, there is a difference between Gaultier's engagement with "provocative" material because it is what he enjoys and is inspired by and the Met's purposeful employment of provocation to attract attention. Museums should rise above 'hype culture' to provide people substance rather than content aimed merely at attracting the most foot traffic. *Heavenly Bodies* failed the public in its exploration of the "Catholic Imagination" by seeking provocation and allurements as well as sacrificing some of their creative autonomy in exchange for Vatican support.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Brown, "Jesus Christ," 9.

⁶⁹ Garver, "Heavenly Bodies," 6.

⁷⁰ Garver, "Heavenly Bodies," 6.

⁷¹ Brown, "Jesus Christ," 15.

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The Joan Dress, Credit: Taylor Hill and GettyImages

She is Clothed with Strength and Dignity

Joan of Arc and the Catholic Imagination in the Met’s Heavenly Bodies

Dorian Cole

When the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit premiered in the summer of 2018, it was immensely popular. Over 1.5 million people visited the exhibit during its five-month run at the Met Cloisters, breaking the Met’s record for most visited exhibit.⁷² As suggested by its subtitle “Fashion and the Catholic Imagination,” *Heavenly Bodies* examines the relationship between Catholic iconography and the fashion inspired by it. The exhibit was supported by both the Vatican and fashion design houses like Versace, who acted as a sponsor of the exhibit.⁷³ In fact, Versace’s head designer Donatella Versace was the co-chair of the 2018 Met Gala.⁷⁴ She also designed several garments for the Gala, including the actress Zendaya’s striking Joan of Arc-inspired dress.⁷⁵ The Gala is an important event for the Met because, unlike its other departments, the Costume Institute gains its

⁷² Eliza Brooke, “A fashion exhibit just became the Met museum’s most popular show ever. Here’s why.” *Vox Media*, October 12, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2018/10/12/17965642/heavenly-bodies-metropolitan-museum-of-art-fashion-exhibit>.

⁷³ John Seitz, “Just How Catholic Is the Met’s New Fashion Exhibit?” interview by Eliza Brooke and Tara Isabella Burton, *Racked*, Vox Media, May 7, 2018, <https://www.racked.com/2018/5/7/17328590/catholic-met-fashion-exhibit-heavenly-bodies-roundtable>.

⁷⁴ Donatella Versace, “Donatella Versace Talks ‘Heavenly Bodies’ and This Year’s Met Gala,” interview by Mark Holgate, *Vogue*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.vogue.com/article/donatella-versace-heavenly-bodies>.

⁷⁵ Alexa Tietjen, “Zendaya Channels Joan of Arc in Custom Versace at 2018 Met Gala,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, Penske Media Corporation, May 7, 2018, <https://wwd.com/eye/lifestyle/zendaya-versace-joan-arc-2018-met-gala-1202667880/>.

funding chiefly from the event, which also acts as an advertisement for the year's exhibit.⁷⁶ As such, designers of the guest's ensembles for the gala intentionally create dresses that relate to the exhibit's theme. Because of Versace's close connection to the exhibit and her role chairing the gala, the dress she designed for Zendaya, which I will henceforth be referring to as the *Joan dress*, offers a unique perspective on how Versace and the exhibit as a whole interact with Catholicism.⁷⁷ As exemplified by the implicit criticism of the church establishment embodied by Versace's Joan dress, the Catholic imagination referenced in the exhibit's title allows lay Catholics like Donatella Versace to mobilize Catholic symbols for their own purposes.

Despite the term's prominent role in the exhibit, the definition of the Catholic imagination is nebulous. The *Heavenly Bodies* exhibition catalogue contains an essay by Catholic theologian David Tracy titled “The Catholic Imagination: The Example of Michelangelo” that explores this definition. Using the Sistine Chapel ceiling as an example, Tracy emphasizes Michelangelo's use of “the central symbols of Catholic Christianity in all their complexity” to illustrate “the dignity of the human being created in God's very image and likeness.”⁷⁸ According to Tracy, even Michelangelo's comparatively bleak *Last Judgement* represents the Catholic imagination because it retains some of the “Renaissance optimism about human beings” by shifting it into “a theologically grounded, eschatological hope.”⁷⁹ With Michelangelo's work in mind, the Catholic imagination appears to be connected to the proximity of human beings to God. However, in his “Introduction” to

⁷⁶ Eliza Brooke, *Vox Media*.

⁷⁷ Although the *Clio's Scroll* can only publish black and white images, color photos of the garment may be found at <https://www.accessonline.com/articles/zendaya-channels-joan-arc-inspired-gown-met-gala-internet-cant-handle-it>.

⁷⁸ David Tracy, “The Catholic Imagination: The Example of Michelangelo,” in *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination*, vol. 1 (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018), 11.

⁷⁹ Tracy, 12.

the second volume of the catalogue, Andrew Bolton, the curator of *Heavenly Bodies*, asserts that most of the designers featured in the exhibit “acknowledge [Catholicism’s] significant influence over their imaginations.”⁸⁰ Instead of describing a theological perspective, Bolton’s Catholic imagination seems to refer to the direct influence of the Catholic religion on the artist’s imagination. This contradicts Bolton’s later references to the sociologist Father Andrew Greeley’s definition of the Catholic imagination, which focuses more on theology and was inspired by Tracy.⁸¹

In his book *The Catholic Imagination*, Father Andrew Greeley defines the Catholic imagination in opposition to the Protestant one. Greeley references Tracy’s view that Catholic art exposes an emphasis “on the presence of God in the world,” and he contrasts that art with the “works of Protestant theologians [that] tend to emphasize the absence of God in the world.”⁸² For Greeley, the Catholic imagination is the tendency to “emphasize the metaphorical nature of creation.”⁸³ Bolton, in his “Introduction”, seems fixated on this idea of metaphor, explaining that his exhibit focuses “specifically on the trope of metaphor.”⁸⁴ However, in Greeley’s work, this metaphor is not entirely figurative, but instead refers to a religious interpretation of the world wherein the “objects, events, and persons of ordinary existence hint at the nature of God and indeed make God in some fashion present to us.”⁸⁵ Thus, “everything in creation...discloses something about God and, in doing so, brings God among us.”⁸⁶ This is the perfect sentiment

⁸⁰ Andrew Bolton, “Introduction,” in *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination*, vol. 2 (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018), 95.

⁸¹ Bolton, 95.

⁸² Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 11.

⁸³ Greeley, 11.

⁸⁴ Bolton, 95.

⁸⁵ Greeley, 11.

⁸⁶ Greeley, 12.

to describe an exhibit about Catholicism in fashion, not because Catholicism has influenced the designer’s imaginations, nor because the garments act as a metaphor for the divine, but because within a world view that assumes everything contains information about God, the garments become literally divine. In the context of Greeley’s work, every dress in the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit and every outfit created for the Met Gala, no matter how disparate their vision, has the capacity to reveal God to the viewer.

Donatella Versace’s Joan dress not only exposes the influence of Catholicism on Versace’s imagination, but also reveals something about God. In an interview with *Vogue* in May 2018, Versace explained that she values her connection with the Met “because apart from being the most important fashion event in the world, [the Met Costume Institute] is also one of the very few [museums] that associates fashion with culture. That’s very important to me.” She went on to describe how the Catholic theme of the 2018 exhibit “is very close to [her] heart.”⁸⁷ Both Donatella and her brother Gianni Versace, the founder of the Versace fashion house, were raised Catholic. As Bolton suggests in his “Introduction,” growing up Catholic clearly influenced the imagination of Donatella Versace. Her interest in the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit likely stems not only from that personal Catholic background but also from a connection to her late brother forged through religious imagery.

Gianni and Donatella Versace’s mother, a dressmaker often credited with inspiring her children’s careers in fashion, also had a marked influence on their shared attraction to Catholic symbols. Recalling a childhood of watching his mother work in her studio, Gianni once said that before she “started cutting, she would always cross herself.”⁸⁸ Likewise, in an interview with the Economist Group’s

⁸⁷ Donatella Versace, *Vogue*.

⁸⁸ Amy Spindler, “Gianni Versace, 50, the Designer Who Infused Fashion With Life and Art,” *New York Times*, July 16, 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/07/16/style/gianni-versace-50-the-designer-who-infused-fashion-with-life-and-art.html>.

culture and lifestyle magazine *1843*, Donatella expressed that she and her brother “didn’t go to church every week, but [their] mother believed. Catholicism in life is very intense.”⁸⁹ Donatella’s description of “Catholicism in life” echoes Greeley’s assertion that God is within everything, a perspective she might have particular insight into having been religious despite not participating in the institutions of the Catholic church. Versace connected this religious intensity to her culture, maintaining that Catholicism “stays inside you as an Italian—you do not want to offend God.”⁹⁰ Catholicism must have stayed inside her brother as well if his collections are any indication.

Gianni Versace often mined his Catholic upbringing for inspiration in his role as head designer of the Versace fashion house. According to Donatella, Gianni’s first attempt at merging religious iconography with haute couture was his Fall 1991 collection.⁹¹ The collection featured a pair of pants emblazoned with several images of the Madonna and child in the Byzantine style and with bejeweled crosses and stripes of gold fabric patterned as if inlaid with jewels.⁹² “He had been thinking about it a lot,” Donatella said in her interview with *1843*, “and when he included crosses and the image of Maria in that collection there was criticism...[but] Of course he knew how important Catholicism was to people—we grew up religious too.”⁹³ Gianni’s last show, staged in the fall of 1997, represents the apotheosis of his particular brand of kitschy Catholic opulence. The dresses from the collection were suffused with metallic colors, replete with gaudy

⁸⁹ Luke Leitch, “Versace: The Resurrection,” *1843*, Economist Group, April/May 2018, <https://www.1843magazine.com/style/versace-the-resurrection>.

⁹⁰ Luke Leitch, “Versace: The Resurrection,” *1843*, Economist Group, April/May 2018, <https://www.1843magazine.com/style/versace-the-resurrection>.

⁹¹ Leitch, *1843*.

⁹² Gianni Versace, Fall 1991 Ready-to-Wear Collection, *Vogue*, 1991, Accessed October 10, 2019, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-1991-ready-to-wear/versace/slideshow/collection#40>.

⁹³ Leitch, *1843*.

byzantine crosses, and fashioned from a fabric Gianni had invented in the 1980s called Oroton, a metal mesh reminiscent of chainmail.⁹⁴ During the show, Gianni and Donatella clashed fiercely over model Karen Elson, who Donatella had selected even though Gianni disliked her. According to biographer Deborah Ball in her book *House of Versace*, Gianni “raged at Donatella for having suggested the girl [Elson] in the first place” and reassigned the garment Elson was intended to wear—a translucent silver veil and oroton dress decorated with Byzantine crosses—to another model. It is not recorded whether Donatella and Gianni made up after this intense fight, but since Gianni Versace was assassinated only nine days later, the turbulence in their relationship was left largely unremedied.⁹⁵

It would take 15 years for Donatella to gain what she refers to as “the courage” to revisit that day, but in her Fall 2012 Ready-to-Wear collection, Donatella paid homage to her brother’s last show by repurposing his Byzantine cross motif on various black garments.⁹⁶ The collection also included Gianni’s oroton fabric, genuine chainmail, and the word Versace spelled out across garments in tribute to her brother’s legacy.⁹⁷ Donatella’s involvement with the Met’s *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit represents a similar tribute. Gianni’s final collection was inspired by the Met’s 1997 *The Glory of Byzantium* exhibit.⁹⁸ In 2018, dresses from that

⁹⁴ “Gianni Versace,” *Victoria and Albert Museum*, October 17, 2003, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/g/gianni-versace/>.

⁹⁵ Suzy Makes, “Versace: Looking to the Past, With Courage,” *New York Times*, February 24, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/25/fashion/25iht-rversace25.html?mtrref=undefined&gwh=0803978AFBFD8FC6D602B850FFF4DA03&gwt=pay&assetType=REGIWALL>.

⁹⁶ Donatella Versace, Fall 2012 Ready-to-Wear Collection, *Vogue*, 2012, Accessed October 10, 2019, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2012-ready-to-wear/versace/slideshow/collection#1>.

⁹⁷ Makes, *New York Times*.

⁹⁸ Jason Farago, “Heavenly Bodies’ Brings the Fabric of Faith to the Met,” *New York Times*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/09/arts/design/heavenly-bodies-met-costumes.html>.

Fall 1997 collection were showcased in the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit sponsored in part by Donatella, bringing Gianni’s unique interpretation of historic Catholic iconography full circle. In addition to working closely with the exhibit as a sponsor and co-chair, Donatella also designed several garments for the promotional Met Gala event, including the Joan dress, which is another clear reference to her brother’s legacy. The dress is stylized to evoke the image of armor and chainmail, and the silver plating around the shoulders and hips of the dress resembles the oroton so prevalent in Gianni’s 1997 collection.

Donatella’s interaction with the Catholic imagery pioneered by her brother is part of an intentional relationship Donatella has forged with her brother’s memory. In describing her place in the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit to *Vogue*, Donatella further cemented the connections between her own designs and Gianni’s work, commenting, “Both Gianni and I have used religious symbols in our creations.” She reflects that doing so was controversial, “But after Gianni did it, slowly it became part of the culture in a different way,” and this cultural shift is a large part of her brother’s legacy.⁹⁹ With her designs, Donatella uses the shared language of Catholic symbology to communicate with her dead brother. As objects of communication between this world and the next, Donatella’s Catholicism-inspired garments, already granted religious significance by Greeley’s interpretation of the Catholic imagination, become sacred objects for use in a public ritual that celebrates both God, through the veneration of Catholic symbols, and Gianni Versace, through homage.

However much Donatella’s Joan dress comments on Gianni Versace’s legacy, it also implicitly criticizes the Catholic Church. The Joan dress, worn by the singer and actress Zendaya at 2018’s Met Gala, was a collaboration between Versace and Zendaya’s personal stylist Law Roach. In styling Zendaya, Roach “started thinking about strong women who had a connection to religion” and claims that he was

⁹⁹ Donatella Versace, *Vogue*.

inspired after he “dreamt of Joan of Arc one night.”¹⁰⁰ The idea of prophetic dreams is not an unusual one in Catholicism. In fact, Joan herself began having prophetic visions of God at the age of thirteen that would eventually inspire her to lead the French Army against the English. However, though the story behind the Joan dress may recall the Catholic tradition of prophetic dreams, its design does not suggest compliance with the Catholic Church. On the contrary, if Versace’s Joan dress represents a message from God, that message calls upon Catholic symbology to challenge a church that continuously marginalizes women. Roach’s association of Joan of Arc with the idea of “strong women” suggests that the garment should be viewed through a feminist lens. The descriptor *strong woman*, often used in the context of the strong female character, is cultural shorthand for a Fourth Wave Feminist critique of women in media. However, the term has become increasingly controversial. While it may have originally been intended to refer to well-written female characters, according to feminist author Carina Chocano, it often instead refers to women who are “tough, cold, terse, taciturn and prone to scowling” — that is, women whose traits echo those seen as desirable in their male action-movie counterparts.¹⁰¹ Joan of Arc is particularly interesting to examine within the framework of the “strong woman” because she is renowned primarily for being a woman who led an army, a role usually reserved for men. When Joan was eventually tried in an English court, she was accused of

¹⁰⁰ Alexa Tietjen, “Zendaya Channels Joan of Arc in Custom Versace at 2018 Met Gala,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, Penske Media Corporation, May 7, 2018, <https://wwd.com/eye/lifestyle/zendaya-versace-joan-arc-2018-met-gala-1202667880/>.

¹⁰¹ Carina Chocano, “A Plague of Strong Female Characters,” *New York Times Magazine*, July 1, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/03/magazine/a-plague-of-strong-female-characters.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0. For more discussion of this cinematic and cultural shorthand see the articles “I Hate Strong Female Characters” by Sophia McDougall from <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2013/08/i-hate-strong-female-characters> and “‘Strong Female Characters’ Aren’t Enough, Goddammit” by Kelly Faircloth from <https://jezebel.com/strong-female-characters-arent-enough-goddammit-1592135553>.

“proudly and presumptuously [assuming] domination over men” “against the bidding of God and His Saints.”¹⁰² This language suggests that both the English court and the Catholic Church condemned women who adopted male roles. The separation of male and female roles is included in Catholic ecclesiology, which differentiates between male and female clerical roles. As recently as 2016, Pope Francis justified the exclusion of women from the priesthood by citing these two dimensions of the church—the male “Petrine dimension...which is the pastoral activity of the bishops, as well as the Marian dimension, which is the feminine dimension of the Church.”¹⁰³ In other words, men in the Catholic church may provide spiritual guidance in positions of power, while women may do so as mothers like the Virgin Mary. Joan of Arc, herself a saint of the Catholic church, frustrates this binary. In addition to adopting a male social role, Joan was also charged with wearing masculine clothing “with her hair cropped short and round like a young fop’s.”¹⁰⁴ This accusation criminalizes the divergence of women’s appearances from those befitting their expected social roles. In response, Joan affirmed that “she had God’s command to wear man’s clothes” and was reported to have said repeatedly that “she would rather die than relinquish a man’s clothes.”¹⁰⁵ Joan’s insistence that God Himself directed her to break traditional Catholic social rules about gender and clothing positioned her in opposition to the patriarchal Catholic church that would later canonize her. As such, Joan is a multi-faceted symbol because she represents both the Catholic Church itself as one of its saints and a feminist critique of the Catholic Church’s

¹⁰² Charge #53 in *The Trial of Jean d’Arc*, trans. W. P. Barrett (New York: Fordham University, 1932), 216.

¹⁰³ Pope Francis as quoted in Hannah Brockhaus, “Pope Francis reiterates a strong ‘no’ to women priests,” *Catholic News Agency*, November 1, 2016, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope-francis-reiterates-a-strong-no-to-women-priests-71133>.

¹⁰⁴ Charge #12 in *The Trial of Jean d’Arc*, 160.

¹⁰⁵ *The Trial of Jean d’Arc*, 166.

restrictive roles for women.

Though much of Joan’s notoriety stems from her adoption of masculine roles and clothing, Versace’s Joan dress is as feminine as it is masculine. Both Donatella Versace and Zendaya are self-described feminists who have built reputations as activists, so their design choices in depicting an historical figure who was known for defying gender roles were likely very intentional.¹⁰⁶ The styling of Zendaya’s hair, a lightly-curled red bob with blunt bangs that mimics the “young fop’s” style Joan was maligned for adopting, and her dress, made of Versace’s unique oroton fabric among other fabrics that mimic the appearance of chainmail, both evoke a 1903 engraving of Joan of Arc by Albert Lynch.¹⁰⁷ This engraving depicts Joan with an unsmiling and determined look on her face and dressed in masculine armor that cinches in at the waist. Likewise, Donatella Versace’s dress, while it retains the masculine associations of armor, features a studded band at the waist that accentuates Zendaya’s female figure. Donatella Versace is known for this feminine silhouette as her “collections in recent years have concentrated on the sexy natural shape of a woman’s body” with designs that “hug every curve.”¹⁰⁸ The Joan dress also features a long draping skirt in a metallic, chainmail-esque fabric and neck, shoulder,

¹⁰⁶ For Donatella Versace’s perspective on feminism as a woman in design see Jess Cartner-Morley, “Donatella Versace: ‘My brother was the king, and my whole world had crashed around me,’” *Guardian*, September 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2017/sep/14/interview-donatella-versace-my-brothers-death-made-me-strong>. For Zendaya’s history of feminist activism see Alicia Cox Thomson, “Cover Star Zendaya on Her New Album and Undefinable Style,” *Flare*, St. Joseph Communications, November 2, 2015, <https://www.flare.com/video/december-cover-star-zendaya-interview-fashion-style-chameleon/>.

¹⁰⁷ Albert Lynch, *Jean of Arc*, 1903, engraving, 770 × 1,062 (954 KB), *Le Figaro*, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Albert_Lynch_-_Jeanne_d%27Arc.jpg

¹⁰⁸ Kathleen Bonann Marshall, “Donatella Versace,” *Encyclopedia of Fashion*, Advameg, Inc., accessed on November 5, 2019, <http://www.fashionencyclopedia.com/To-Vi/Versace-Donatella.html>.

and hip plates fashioned from oroton; all of these details directly parallel the armor from Lynch’s engraving. However, Zendaya’s dress differs from the one worn by Lynch’s Joan in a few key areas that make it more feminine than real armor. For instance, the oroton shoulder plating on Zendaya’s dress is designed to produce the fashionable “cold shoulder” effect, exposing Zendaya’s shoulders while covering her arms. Additionally, the metallic fabric of the rest of the dress, which is slightly sheer, drapes loosely and falls in a low scoop neckline below the faux-plate armor at Zendaya’s neck. While the Joan dress is based on a painting that portrays Joan of Arc as relatively masculine, these elements add an inescapable femininity to the dress. Notably, none of these changes detract from the powerful depiction of the modern Joan of Arc as a young black woman. In fact, by highlighting certain feminine attributes in a garment designed to look like a male military uniform, Donatella Versace further frustrates the expectations of binary gender in a manner similar to Joan’s original fashion choices.

Zendaya’s dress at the Met Gala is an important example of Joan’s relevance to modern feminists through her resistance of gender roles within the Catholic church, but the image of Joan of Arc also implies a critique of the Church Militant that comes directly from the Church Triumphant. In Catholic ecclesiology, the terms *Church Militant*, *Church Penitent*, and *Church Triumphant* are the three states of the Church, wherein the Church Militant represents souls on Earth, the Church Penitent represents those in purgatory, and the Church Triumphant represents those in Heaven.¹⁰⁹ Saints who are able to communicate directly with God are able to speak for the Church Triumphant and, in Joan’s case, issue criticisms of the Church Militant. While the idea of this direct connection to God is usually reserved for saints, Greeley’s interpretation of the Catholic imagination allows for increased access to the Church Triumphant because God’s existence

¹⁰⁹ “Catechism of the Catholic Church,” *The Vatican*,
http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p123a9p5.htm.

within everything on Earth “brings God among us.”¹¹⁰ The Joan dress uses the image of Joan of Arc precisely because she was a saint who criticized the Catholic establishment. The dress, then, mobilizes her image at an event dedicated to the Catholic imagination to issue its own criticism of the modern church because the dress, as an object that contains the divine, can also speak for the Church Triumphant.

Joan of Arc’s status as a saint who was critical of the church establishment may also explain why images of Joan appeared prominently in 2018, a troubled year for the Vatican. George Bernard Shaw’s 1923 play *Saint Joan* opened on Broadway in April, Zendaya appeared at the Met Gala in May, and Rachel Maksy won the NYX Face Awards—a professional makeup competition—with a Joan of Arc look in August.¹¹¹ This collection of Joan of Arc related media was potentially inspired by what New York’s Cardinal Timothy Dolan called “the Catholic Church’s ‘summer of hell,’” a period during which the Catholic church faced multiple allegations of sexual misconduct in several different countries.¹¹² In May, a three-day emergency summit at the Vatican resulted in all thirty-four of Chile’s bishops offering to resign over mishandling allegations of abuse.¹¹³ Pope Francis accepted seven of these resignations, but scandals continued until November when “more than 46,000 Catholic women [signed] an open letter” to Pope Francis questioning his own failure to act on allegations of sexual

¹¹⁰ Greeley, 12.

¹¹¹ For Shaw’s play see Jesse Green, “In Shaw’s ‘Saint Joan,’ a Sane and Sensible Martyr,” *New York Times*, April 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/25/theater/review-condola-rashad-george-bernard-shaw-saint-joan-broadway.html>. For the Nyx Face Awards see Marisa Petrarca, “The Results are In!” *Makeup.com*, L’Oréal USA, August 27, 2018, <https://www.makeup.com/nyx-face-awards-winner>.

¹¹² Daniel Burke, “How 2018 became the Catholic Church’s Year from Hell,” *CNN Online*, December 29, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/28/world/catholic-church-2018/index.html>.

¹¹³ Burke, *CNN Online*.

abuse by clergy members.¹¹⁴ In the midst of this time of crisis for the Catholic church, the image of Joan of Arc loomed in popular media like a divine vision, as if the saint herself had once more been sent by the Church Triumphant to tell the Vatican that they were acting contrary to God’s will. A less spiritual explanation might be that the image of Joan, at once Catholic and critical of the church and armed with a direct connection to the divine, is an appropriate expression of the disgust and righteous anger that these allegations produced.¹¹⁵ Because the Met Gala specifically celebrated the opening of the “Heavenly Bodies” exhibit, created in partnership with both the Vatican and Versace, the Joan dress may have allowed Donatella Versace to issue a criticism of the institution with which she was working without endangering her professional relationships or attracting accusations of heresy. After all, this stunning interpretation of Joan of Arc, a holy woman who once walked on Earth, is certainly in accordance with the exhibit’s desire to explore the Catholic imagination, an idea rooted in the presence of God on Earth. However, as Zendaya glared resolutely at the cameras, the garment she wore, through its gender-bending design and the history of the saint it referenced, revealed that the Catholic imagination and the voice of the Church Triumphant do not belong solely to the institution of the Catholic Church. The symbols of the patriarchal church can be appropriated by women and weaponized against a flawed institution that might otherwise suppress women’s voices. In fact, the Catholic imagination allows anyone to interpret God’s presence in the world and raise their voice in His name.

In her *Vox* article, “A fashion exhibit just became the Met museum’s most popular show ever. Here’s why,” Eliza Brooke attempts to explain the record-breaking success of the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit by examining how “the appeal of specialized fashion exhibits

¹¹⁴ Burke, *CNN Online*.

¹¹⁵ She is certainly a fitting representation of the 46,000 angry Catholic women who wrote to Pope Francis later in the year, putting the Marian dimension of the church on the offensive.

has sharpened thanks to digital media’s democratization of the fashion industry.”¹¹⁶ In other words, she suggests that fashion has become a successful medium for exhibition because, whereas fashion shows were previously reserved for select viewers, they are now broadcast to the public through platforms like Instagram and YouTube. However, I suspect that Catholicism is equally, if not more, important to the exhibit’s popularity as the medium of fashion. It may seem ironic that Catholicism, a religion heavily dependent on the very exclusive institution of the Vatican, could generate mass interest, but, just as in the success of haute couture, offering individuals access to something deemed exclusive acts as a unique draw. The Catholic imagination, the exhibit’s foundational idea, allows for radical access to Catholic symbols. This democratizing effect even applies to those who, like Donatella Versace, might use Catholic symbols to criticize the church. Through its reference to the Catholic imagination—which is, at its simplest, the supposition that God is present within everyone and everything in the world—the Met’s *Heavenly Bodies* created a location for pilgrimage separated from the institutions of the church. The exhibit became a place where anyone with \$25 could experience God first-hand. If you had the chance to walk through an exhibit filled with 100 different representations of the divine, each one more beautiful than the next, wouldn’t you buy a ticket?

¹¹⁶ Eliza Brooke, *Vox Media*.

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The Apparition Dress, Credit: E. A. R. Brown

Cultural Representation and the Guadalupe Dress

Examining the Singular Catholic Narrative Portrayed in Heavenly Bodies

Sofia Howard

The Heavenly Bodies exhibit received a multitude of praise and criticism from Catholics and non-Catholics worldwide. Regardless of the discussion on whether or not Heavenly Bodies celebrated or mocked Catholicism, however, this exhibit failed to represent non-European Catholic cultures, thus presenting a singular Eurocentric narrative to viewers of the exhibit. This paper explores the impact of curatorial choices in creating this narrative, and delves into the background and significance of the only gown featured in the exhibit that depicts a facet of a culture colonized by European Catholicism. Understanding the influence of Catholicism’s colonial past on non-European communities is the first step towards rendering an animated, intersectional narrative and catalyzing a diverse future.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Met) is one of the world’s largest art museums, featuring approximately 2.2 million works in its permanent collections and visited by 6,953,927 people in 2018 alone.¹¹⁷ The *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit was the most attended Met exhibit of all time,¹¹⁸ and featured haute-couture and ready-to-wear designer gowns from the 1950s to the present. Inspiration for the gowns

¹¹⁷ “Met Museum,” accessed December 11, 2019, <https://www.metmuseum.org/>.

¹¹⁸ Eliza Brooke, “A Fashion Exhibit Just Became the Met Museum’s Most Popular Show Ever. Here’s Why,” *Vox*, October 12, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2018/10/12/17965642/heavenly-bodies-metropolitan-museum-of-art-fashion-exhibit>.

varied from priestly vestments to nun habits to angels to Joan of Arc, with each gown picked by the curators at the Met Museum for its relationship with this idea of a “Catholic Imagination.” However, a majority of the gowns featured in this exhibit were inspired by Western, Eurocentric perceptions of Catholicism, with only one noted exception: a gown from French designer Christian Lacroix’s 2009-2010 haute couture collection that presented a connection to Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Mexican interpretation of the Virgin Mary. Christian Lacroix’s Guadalupe-inspired wedding gown and its isolated presentation in the exhibit reflects colonial Catholic narratives, thus revealing the *Heavenly Bodies* Eurocentric portrayal of the Catholic Imagination and the narrow perspective it presented to the exhibit’s viewers.

Christian Lacroix was born in 1951 in Arles, a city in southern France, where he spent most of his childhood sketching historical and fashion costumes. This passion for history and fashion led him to pursue a career as a museum curator, and he met his wife while studying museology at the École du Louvre. However, he ultimately ended up opening a haute couture house in 1987, and thus started down the path to becoming a world-renowned fashion designer, utilizing crosses and other religious symbols in a wide variety of his designs.¹¹⁹ Lacroix’s use of Catholic iconography stems not only from his personal religious background, but also from his fascination with costume design, and adoration of historical French court dress.

The most obvious connection between his work and Catholicism lies in Lacroix’s own personal relationship with the religion. While Lacroix has yet to state that he affirms the Catholic faith, he has repeatedly described the importance of religion in his life and his craft. The prevalence of religious iconography in his designs can be found throughout his years as an active designer; in fact, bedazzled crosses

¹¹⁹ Joanne Bubolz Eicher, *Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 333.

are one of his most popular embellishments, and the Lacroix jacket that graced Anna Wintour’s first cover of *Vogue Magazine* in 1988 featured an ornate jeweled cross.¹²⁰ Upon being asked what music he likes in an interview with Sabine Morandi for *Fascinashion*, Lacroix said the music that speaks to him and feeds him is religious music.¹²¹ Lacroix also revealed in this interview that he was the honorary President of the Centre National du Costume de Scene in Moulins and stated, “all the religious costumes that I have found since the beginning of time are displayed, archived, restored, etc. by the nuns. Including certain high-ranking religious ones...for example, Marie Antoinette’s fiancée dress that she donated to her confessor.” This blend of Lacroix’s fascination with religion, French history, and costume design has resulted in his distinct design style, as the garment chosen from his 2009 autumn/winter haute couture collection for the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit incorporates elements of theatrical Catholicism with traditional French court fabric choices. This prevalence of religion in his life combined with the fact that France is a Catholic-majority nation¹²² leads to a reasonable conclusion that Christian Lacroix is indeed himself a Catholic designer.

However, the inspiration of “heavenly bodies” and “Catholic imagination” in the Lacroix design label stretches beyond his own religious identity. In the aforementioned interview with Sabine Morandi, Lacroix claimed that the rediscovery of fashion in the late 80s occurred not “in fashion but in stage costume” and that he “didn’t think of fashion when [he] was a child, [he] thought of stage costumes” as his childhood dream was to become a costume designer. Lacroix

¹²⁰ “History: Christian Lacroix,” Magazine History Comments, accessed October 23, 2019, <https://christian-lacroix.com/en/history/>.

¹²¹ Fascinashion, *Fascinashion*, http://www.fascinashion.com/mp4/christain_lacroix_st.mp4.

¹²² Around 77% of those who identify as religious identify as Catholic in France, found from “Catholicism in France,” Religious Literacy Project, accessed October 23, 2019, <https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/faq/catholicism-france>.

“dreamt of staging reality” as a child and stated that he “wanted life to mimic theater, to be full of witticism like that.”¹²³ This love for theater and costume design has become a widely accepted stimulus for his fashion designs, with author Marjorie Alessandrini going so far as to claim that “the Lacroix woman is staged in a theatrical fashion. She is not afraid of being noticed; for her one can imagine nothing that is bland.”¹²⁴ The opulence of the gown featured in the exhibit demonstrates that this Virgin Mary inspired dress is no exception: the theatrical aspect of the gown coupled with his own religious background appear to be at the root of the gown’s creation.

In addition, Lacroix’s love for history and culture, in particular French court dress, also serves to further his involvement with the “Catholic imagination.” Lacroix’s background in curation at the *École du Louvre* and as President of the *Centre National du Costume de Scène* illustrates his rich relationship with French history, and Lacroix has even cited history as a source for his design, with his website detailing that “he brought back touches of folklore, history and theatre, infusing them with elegance and sophistication.”¹²⁵ A great deal of French history is steeped in Catholicism, and the monarchy’s relationship with the religion has been a stimulus for many defining moments in French history.¹²⁶ Thus, this union of Lacroix’s personal religious identity with his love for history can produce a naturally synergistic effect on his theatrical designs, which pull from varying aspects of Catholicism, French court dress, and costume design.

¹²³ Fascineschion, *Fascineschion*, http://www.fascineshion.com/mp4/christain_lacroix_st.mp4.

¹²⁴ Marjorie Alessandrini, “Christian Lacroix: La mode est un théâtre,” *Le nouvel observateur*, 12-18 July 2001, 22.

¹²⁵ “History: Christian Lacroix,” Magazine History Comments, accessed October 23, 2019, <https://christian-lacroix.com/en/history/>.

¹²⁶ George J Marlin, “The French Revolution and the Church,” *The Catholic Thing*, July 26, 2017, <https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2011/07/14/the-french-revolution-and-the-church/>.

Cultural environment influences how individuals interpret and express the values they find most significant in their lives. For French designer Christian Lacroix, personal background is an essential impetus for his designs. While his Catholic identity is an obvious source for his religiously derived garments, it is the amalgamation of this religious identity with his love for theater and interest in French history that has yielded the influence of the “Catholic Imagination” in his unique design style.

Catholicism, while it is a unified religion with fairly consistent beliefs across the globe, always takes on a slightly regional flavor depending on the environment in which it is being practiced.¹²⁷ The Virgin Mary is an interesting symbol in Catholicism as she has seemed to adapt to the specific needs of various geographical communities and thus morphed into various representations of the same person.¹²⁸ While the iconography for Jesus, for example, is rather consistent across all Catholic cultures, Mary is often depicted very differently across various countries and even within certain regions of that country.¹²⁹

Part of this phenomenon is due to the idea of a “Marian Apparition,” which is a reported supernatural appearance of the mother of Jesus as an expression of Mary’s motherly care for the Church.¹³⁰ These apparitions have occurred across the globe, and it is believed that each apparition is sent to draw attention to the needs of a particular time and place, thus creating varying interpretations of Mary to fit the unique culture that Catholicism is existing within. Although there are many reported sightings and many widely accepted stories,

¹²⁷ “Practices & Values,” Catholics & Cultures, February 1, 2017, <https://www.catholicsandcultures.org/practices-values>.

¹²⁸ Victor Lasareff, “Studies in the Iconography of the Virgin,” *The Art Bulletin* 20, no. 1 (1938): 26–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.1938.11408662>.

¹²⁹ Robert L Fastiggi, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1, (Detroit: Gale / Cengage Learning, 2011), 377-391.

¹³⁰ “Apparitions and Appearances - Mary, Mother of God,” Catholic Online, accessed November 6, 2019, <https://www.catholic.org/mary/appear.php>.

the Pope and the Holy See have only specifically verified 11 of these reported apparitions, with two of them occurring in Belgium, one in Portugal, one in Brazil, one in Mexico, and six in France.¹³¹

Lacroix’s Virgin Mary-inspired wedding dress draws upon various cultural interpretations of the Virgin to produce an apparition-like effect that celebrates the virtue and tenderness of the mother of Jesus through the utilization of theatrical forms, soft materials, and Marian symbolism. The form of the garment is constructed of a rigid silhouette and a big extravagant headdress that trails behind the garment and creates a theatrical effect that is signature to Lacroix’s background in costume design. The silhouette of the gown emphasizes the idea of purity that is often associated with the Virgin as the rigidity of the



Figure 1: The Apparition Dress from Christian Lacroix’s 2009/2019 Haute Couture collection. Photograph by Pierre Verdy for AFP and Getty Images.¹³²

¹³¹ Catholic Online, “Apparitions and Appearances - Mary, Mother of God.”

¹³² Although the journal is only able to publish images in black and white, color photos of the dress may be found at <https://api.time.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/gettyimages-88895543.jpg>

materials and the cut of the garment create straight lines that hide the shape of the model’s body. This produces a juvenile figure for the model that can be associated with ideas of innocence and modesty reflective of Catholic beliefs surrounding the Immaculate Conception.¹³³ In addition, the opulent, eye-catching headdress evokes the imagery of the oval *aureola*, or *mandorla*, that is always depicted in the iconography of the Virgin Mary.¹³⁴ The headdress produces a costume-like, theatrical effect on the garment that Lacroix utilizes to mimic the effect of a Marian Apparition, as the garment’s realistic, literal depiction of Mary makes it as though Mary is actually appearing.

The soft silk-satin materials indicate Lacroix’s own beliefs about the Virgin’s nature, as white is often associated with purity, angels, and Jesus, and gold with wealth and divinity. This gown is a wedding dress, so Lacroix’s use of white and gold is appropriate in the context of this classification, however the aforementioned ideas of purity, wealth, and divinity reflect the effects of an apparition on a community, as Mary has historically appeared to carry out God’s will through good fortune and various miracles for the affected community.¹³⁵ Although the form of the garment is more structured than draped and flowing, the garment is almost entirely constructed of a smooth silk satin material. While Lacroix stresses the Virgin’s innocence through the rigid silhouette and tough tulle sleeves, it appears that he utilized the contrast of stiff and soft to accentuate the Virgin’s affectionate, motherly nature. Thus, Lacroix emphasizes his own association of virtue and tenderness with the Virgin as the color palette highlights purity and fortune while the softness of the silk materials demonstrates the gentleness of the Virgin’s actions.

¹³³ James Hennesey, “A Prelude to Vatican I: American Bishops and the Definition of the Immaculate Conception,” *Theological Studies* 25, no. 3 (1964): 409–19, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056396402500303>.

¹³⁴ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Mandorla,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, inc., January 29, 2007, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/mandorla>.

¹³⁵ Catholic Online, “Apparitions and Appearances - Mary, Mother of God.”

In addition, this gown is the only entirely white, religious piece in the Fall 2009 Haute Couture collection.¹³⁶ When it appeared as the final garment during the runway show, it achieved an apparition-like effect because it presented a sharp contrast to the dark colors of the other garments. The audience gave this garment a standing ovation once it appeared and during the final presentation of the collection Christian Lacroix walked out arm-in-arm with the model wearing the Virgin Mary dress.¹³⁷

This gown appears to be the most representative of the Mexican apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe, as opposed to other interpretations of the Virgin, due to the stylization of the oval headdress, organdy roses, and Spanish influence on the embroidery and tulle sleeve ruffles. A unique characteristic of Our Lady of Guadalupe is her signature *mandorla*, which radiates not only from her head in the traditional depiction of a halo, but also surrounding her entire body in an oval *aureola* that mirrors the large oval shape of the headdress on the garment.¹³⁸ While the Miracle of Roses appears in the stories of several apparitions, this particular miracle is essential to the story of the native-boy Diego and Guadalupe, as the shroud, or *tilma*, Diego fills with foreign Castilian roses per Guadalupe's request produces a life-size image of Guadalupe that convinces the community to carry out God's will.¹³⁹ Thus, the multicolored organdy roses that

¹³⁶ Sarah Mower, "Christian Lacroix Fall 2009 Couture Fashion Show," *Vogue*, August 8, 2015, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2009-couture/christian-lacroix/slideshow/collection#25>.

¹³⁷ YouTube, "fashiontv | FTV.com - PARIS HC F/W 09-10-CHRISTIAN LACROIX SHOW" accessed November 6, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Suw0IsGCqy4>.

¹³⁸ Diane Douglas, "Why the Virgin of Guadalupe Lives in Every Heart in Mexico," *Medium*, A Remarkable Education, August 3, 2017, <https://medium.com/a-remarkable-education/why-the-virgin-of-guadalupe-lives-in-every-heart-in-mexico-442e72aeea88>.

¹³⁹ Alicia María Arellano, *The Lasting Gift of Our Lady of Guadalupe*, (Ligouri, 2009), 7-14.

decorate the gown seem to be the most reflective of both traditional Mexican colored rose designs and the Miracle of Roses that occurred in the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The Spanish inspired embroidery patterns found throughout the garment are found in many other Lacroix designs as well, contributing to the Spanish, Latin influence on the design.¹⁴⁰ These three characteristics of the gown lead to a conclusion that Lacroix, rather than drawing on just his own native French culture for the design, utilized many aspects of the iconography of Our Lady of Guadalupe to create his Marian Apparition garment.

While this gown presents a non-European depiction of the Catholic Imagination, Christian Lacroix himself is European, and this gown is arguably the only gown in the entire exhibit that demonstrates an obvious connection to non-European Catholic cultures. In fact, every designer featured in the exhibit, with the exception of Japanese Jun Takahashi and Tunisian-born Azzedine Alaïa, has European ancestry. Jun Takahashi does not have a Catholic background nor does he come from a predominantly Catholic country,¹⁴¹ and Azzedine Alaïa is described in the *Heavenly Bodies* catalogue as “French, born Tunisia.”¹⁴² Contrary to what the diversity of designers represented in the exhibit may suggest, Catholicism spread and grew in many non-European cultures due to religious colonialism and the Era of Conquistadors.¹⁴³ Countries in Latin America such as Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil as well as the Philippines and the Democratic Republic of Congo are majority Catholic nations that rank within the top ten countries with

¹⁴⁰ Zarah Crawford, “Lacroix, Sweetie,” *The New York Times*, February 24, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/24/style/tmagazine/24lacroix.html>.

¹⁴¹ “Jun Takahashi Is Part of the BoF 500,” *The Business of Fashion*, September 6, 2019, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/community/people/jun-takahashi>.

¹⁴² *Heavenly Bodies*, 258.

¹⁴³ Megan Armstrong, “Transatlantic Catholicism: Rethinking the Nature of the Catholic Tradition in the Early Modern Period,” *History Compass* 5, no. 6 (2007): 1942–66, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2007.00483.x>.

the largest Roman Catholic populations.¹⁴⁴ Each of these countries has developed their own distinct Catholic culture due to the adaptation of the religion among the colonized peoples, and thus each has a unique depiction of the “Catholic Imagination.”¹⁴⁵ So, what—or who—is responsible for the lack of Latin American and other cultural representations of Catholicism in *The Heavenly Bodies*?

There are a few possible explanations for the lack of non-Eurocentric representation in the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit. The absence of designers from outside of Europe may have contributed to this underrepresentation. Art and design often stem from personal background, and said lack of diversity within the industry would produce a limited perspective expressed through the haute couture garments. Another possibility to consider is that there are indeed non-European designers, however many of these designers may have not produced designs influenced by the “Catholic Imagination,” and thus the curators did not have a variety of non-Eurocentric garments to draw upon for the exhibit. A final possibility may lie in the curation of the exhibit. Perhaps this lack of non-Eurocentric designs is due to the inherent Eurocentricity of the curators, and thus those in charge of choosing the gowns in the exhibit chose—either intentionally or unintentionally—to showcase designs from European designers. Eurocentric intentions could be the result of personal European background while unintentional Eurocentric influence may be a product of close-minded colonial socialization and a lack of diverse designers in prestigious fashion houses. While it is possible that the answer lies in a combination of all of these possibilities, the lack of non-Eurocentric representation is most likely due to curatorial choices and the limited presence of non-European, non-Anglo-American designers in haute couture.

¹⁴⁴ Kasia Jurczak, “Countries with The Largest Roman Catholic Populations,” WorldAtlas, May 1, 2017, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/countries-with-the-largest-catholic-christian-populations.html>.

¹⁴⁵ Megan Armstrong, “Transatlantic Catholicism,” 1942-66.

The position of Lacroix's wedding ensemble in the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit suggests a Eurocentric perspective behind the included garments, and thus the inherent power of curation in presenting narratives. This gown is not directly placed near any paintings or any walls, and it was in the center of a room labeled "Celestial Hierarchy"¹⁴⁶--which curator Andrew Bolton talks about at length in the introduction of the catalogue, since he refers to Mary as the "crowned queen of heaven."¹⁴⁷ Since the gown was juxtaposed with only other gowns, it may at first appear that the positioning of this gown is insignificant to the meaning of the garment. However, this lack of juxtaposition reveals the Eurocentricity of the curation of the exhibit. Christian Lacroix's "Apparition dress" presents an apparent connection to Our Lady of Guadalupe and her *mandorla*; those familiar with Mexican Catholic iconography would naturally draw this connection between the garment and the familiar, repetitive image of Guadalupe with her *tilma*. Thus begging the question, why would the Met have chosen to leave the gown without any juxtaposed art when there is a vast collection of Guadalupe paintings that might aid in the viewer's understanding of the gown and how it connects to Catholicism? The only reasonable answer as to why the Met would leave the gown without any art, specifically Guadalupe art, is that perhaps they could not get ahold of a painting, or maybe only wanted to use paintings in their medieval and byzantine collections and they just did not possess any of Our Lady of Guadalupe. However, Bolton himself speaks a little on Marian Apparitions in the introduction to the catalogue, writing, "Devotion to Mary had spread across the globe during the centuries of colonialism, especially in Spanish and Portuguese regions from Latin America to the Philippines and Asia...[and] so were Catholics in New Spain, where Our Lady of Guadalupe, another instantiation of the

¹⁴⁶ "b1975342," accessed December 11, 2019,

<https://libmma.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16028coll1/id/36197>.

¹⁴⁷ *Heavenly Bodies*, 101.

Immaculate Conception, was deemed heaven’s unique commitment to the Mexican people, revealing herself as an image on a cope said to have been wrought by God himself.”¹⁴⁸ In addition to this attempt to acknowledge the colonial Catholic past that was non-existent in the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit, Bolton includes a figure of a painting done by Mexican artist Nicolás Enríquez titled *The Virgin of Guadalupe*, which bears the accustomed depiction of Guadalupe. In the citation for the figure,



Figure 2: Nicolás Enríquez (Mexican, 1704-1790). *The Virgin of Guadalupe*, 1773. Oil on copper. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ *Heavenly Bodies*. 101.

¹⁴⁹ Although the journal is only able to publish images in black and white, a color image may be found at <https://collectionapi.metmuseum.org/api/collection/v1/iiif/635401/1484905/main-image>

Bolton mentioned that this painting by Enriquez is in fact owned by the Met Museum. Thus, it is unclear as to why the curators for this exhibit did not juxtapose the gown with this readily available painting, at the very least in the *Heavenly Bodies* catalogue. It may be impossible to determine the intentions of the curators, however this lack of juxtaposition and isolation of the gown in the exhibit mirrors the lack of non-Eurocentric narratives found within *Heavenly Bodies*. The gown's isolation reveals the power of the curators to--either intentionally or unintentionally--prevent the viewers of the exhibit from learning and understanding non-European cultural representations of Catholicism that stem from colonial influence.

Furthermore, this absence of non-Eurocentric perspectives in *Heavenly Bodies* may also be due to the absence of designers from the Global South in haute couture fashion houses. While designers such as Oscar de la Renta, Carolina Herrera, Isabel Toledo, and Carlos Miele, among others, may have made a name for themselves in the fashion industry,¹⁵⁰ there does not seem to be any Catholic-inspired fashions from these designers. However, that is not to say that non-Eurocentric Catholic-inspired fashions do not exist. In fact, there are haute couture gowns that were made by designers from formerly colonized countries that present a non-European depiction of the “Catholic Imagination” that could have been included in the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit. For example, Maria del Rayo Macias designed a “war gown” that depicted scenes from La Cristiada, or the Cristero Wars, for 2006 Miss Mexico Rosa Maria Ojeda to wear when she represented Mexico at the 2007 Miss Universe pageant.¹⁵¹ This gown sparked local and global controversy, and the violent imagery was “toned down” for the pageant as Macias was forced to exchange the image of a man facing a

¹⁵⁰ Jennifer Rice, “7 Of the Most Influential Latin Fashion Designers Ever,” theFashionSpot, October 18, 2017, <https://www.thefashionspot.com/latina/708319-latin-fashion-designers/#/slide/1>.

¹⁵¹ “Americas | Miss Mexico 'War Gown' Toned Down,” BBC News, BBC, April 19, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/6571061.stm>.

firing squad with an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the women that were involved in the Cristero War. The “war gown” also featured rosaries, scapulars, and a crucifix necklace, thus providing more than enough religious imagery to qualify the gown for a spot in the exhibit, especially when the gown represents the impact of Catholicism on a community and



Figure 3: Rosa Maria Ojeda in Maria del Rayo Macias 2007 “war gown.”
Photograph via BBC News.¹⁵²

has already sparked widespread commentary. Catholic-inspired garments from various Filipino designers could have also secured a place in the exhibit. After the 2018 Met Gala theme was announced, PhilStar Global released an article titled “Haute and Holy: 6 Filipino Designers on ‘Fashion and the Catholic Imagination’” that describes the work of six designers and how their Filipino Catholic childhood and personal background has influenced their designs. The article mentions

¹⁵² Although the journal is only able to publish images in black and white, a color image may be found at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/6571061.stm>

Joyce Matikalo’s jewelry, Gian Romano’s high fashion “eyelet church dresses,” Jaggy Glarino’s “rich vestment embroidery” and “intricate church woodwork” inspired designs, Janina Dizon’s Maltese bejeweled crosses, Michelline Syjuco’s Crusades-inspired armor dress that was shown at 2016 Paris Design Week, and Esme Palaganas’s Babang Luksa--a Filipino celebration



Figure 4: Michelline Syjuco’s “Crusade armor dress.” 2016 Paris Design Week. Photograph via PhilStar Global

to end the mourning of death--inspired fashion show.¹⁵³ Each of these designers and their subsequent designs have all openly acknowledged their relationship with the “Catholic Imagination,” and their Filipino-inspired Catholic fashions could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of Catholicism’s various cultural appearances across the globe.

The only possible justification on behalf of the *Heavenly Bodies* curators as to why they excluded garments such as the ones mentioned above is the lack of a renowned, popular fashion house behind the non-European designer’s name. However, it is important to consider that this justification itself is resultant of the inherent Eurocentricity existing

¹⁵³ Martin Yambao, “Haute and Holy: 6 Filipino Designers on 'Fashion and the Catholic Imagination',” *The Philippine Star*, May 10, 2018, <https://www.philstar.com/lifestyle/ystyle/2018/05/11/1813965/haute-and-holy-6-filipino-designers-fashion-and-catholic-imagination>.

within postcolonial society, as formerly colonized populations have been historically given far fewer opportunities to succeed,¹⁵⁴ especially in haute couture.¹⁵⁵ Furthermore, the curators at the Met Museum could have utilized the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit to provide a platform for these non-European designers to showcase their designs, thus helping them gain representation in the fashion industry while educating their viewers on how Catholicism’s colonial past led to the creation of diverse cultural renditions of the religion. Instead, they chose to overlook the centuries long history of Catholic colonization and to reinforce the misguided narrative of the “Catholic Imagination” as a solely European thought system.

Fashion is just one means of sharing narratives. In a vibrant, diverse post-colonial society, it is imperative that the shared narratives reflect the vibrancy and diversity of the population. The Met Museum’s 2018 *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit failed to reflect this vibrancy and diversity of Catholic cultures that emerged from the colonial impact of Catholicism on the developing world. Eurocentricity in the curation of the garments as well as an underrepresentation in non-European designers in the exhibit portrayed a singular, Eurocentric narrative to *Heavenly Bodies* viewers despite the multiplicity of faces that make up Catholicism today. Representation functions as the only method to achieving and understanding a cohesive, comprehensive global narrative. Tearing down singular, culturally elitist narratives that inundate haute couture and the world beyond is the first step towards breaking down the legacy of colonialism and building a decolonized future.

¹⁵⁴ Elise Huillery, “History Matters: The Long-Term Impact of Colonial Public Investments in French West Africa,” *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 1, no. 2 (2009): 176–215, <https://doi.org/10.1257/app.1.2.176>.

¹⁵⁵ Gaugele, Elke, and Monica Titton, “Fashion and Postcolonial Critique,” *Fashion Theory*, June 2019, 11–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704x.2019.1645928>.

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The Lochner Dress, Credit: ChrisMoore/Catwalking and GettyImages

Alexander McQueen's Lochner Dress

Changing Identities and the Heavenly Bodies Exhibit

Emily Su

I. Introduction

Dubbed by the Metropolitan Museum of Art as an examination of "fashion's ongoing engagement with the devotional practices and traditions of Catholicism,"¹⁵⁶ the Spring 2018 *Heavenly Bodies* exhibition broke historical records for its attendance numbers.¹⁵⁷ Along with the wave of visitors however came an equally prevalent criticism and commentary pertaining to the Met's presentation of the various garments it chose to feature. As an NPR review of the exhibition described it, "The result is beautiful, with some heavy silences."¹⁵⁸ Where exactly these silences stemmed from, and how they interacted with the beauty presented through the garments, are important in understanding whether the Met fully addressed and portrayed the complex facets of Catholicism—both in medieval times and in modern day. The widespread popularity and media attention the exhibition and

¹⁵⁶"Exhibition Overview," The Met 150, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed December 11, 2019, <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2018/heavenly-bodies>.

¹⁵⁷ Victoria Kingdon, "The Met's Heavenly Bodies Exhibition Has Broken Records," *Harper's BAZAAR*, September 28, 2018, <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/uk/culture/culture-news/a23502879/the-Mets-heavenly-bodies-exhibition-has-broken-records/>.

¹⁵⁸Genevieve Valentine, "'Heavenly Bodies' Is Gorgeous - But Full Of Strange Silences," *NPR*, June 2, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/06/02/613155526/heavenly-bodies-is-gorgeous-but-full-of-strange-silences>

the accompanying Met Gala garnered certainly raises such a question and prompts further examination.

Featured within the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibition was the garment which will be the focus of this essay, and which will be referred to as the Lochner Dress for its usage of Stefan Lochner's work.¹⁵⁹ This garment, designed by Alexander McQueen, was one of sixteen pieces from his unofficially titled *Angels and Demons* collection. This collection featured McQueen's last works before his suicide in 2010 and was displayed posthumously in Paris that same year.¹⁶⁰ A major theme of McQueen's final collection centers around religious imagery, Catholic thought, and the contrasts between light and dark, prompting its connection to the Met exhibition's theme.¹⁶¹ Moreover, the manner in which the Met displayed the Lochner Dress at the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit played an important role in generating the meanings that museum attendees unfamiliar with Alexander McQueen's personal background came to associate with the dress.

¹⁵⁹While *Clio's Scroll* is only able to publish black and white photos, colored images of the Lochner Dress can be found at <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2010-ready-to-wear/alexander-mcqueen/slideshow/> collection.

¹⁶⁰"Encyclopedia of Collections: Autumn/Winter 2010," The Museum of Savage Beauty, Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed December 11, 2019, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/museumofsavagebeauty/rel/encyclopedia-of-collections-autumnwinter-2010/>.

¹⁶¹The collection, which is composed of sixteen individual garments, was 80% completed at the time of McQueen's death. In the period between McQueen's suicide (February 2010) and the show's feature of the collection (March 2010), the garments were completed by the head of McQueen's womenswear design Sarah Burton and her team. Given the proportion of the collection which was designed and completed by McQueen himself, the short period of time between his death and the show, and Burton's close understanding of McQueen as an individual and as a designer, it will be assumed that the work completed by Burton was a continuation of McQueen's thematic and stylistic intentions for the collection.

The meanings attributed to the garment during the fashion show and the subsequent meanings it took on at the Met exhibition were not fundamentally different. However, they did embrace and enhance very different aspects of the dress' overall identity. Ultimately, in emphasizing the Gothic art element of the Lochner Dress, the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit detached the garment from its major symbolic meanings and larger connections to McQueen's personal background. This essay will examine the Lochner Dress as an individual garment, McQueen's relationship with Catholicism as a fashion designer, and the connection between the two as presented in the Fall 2010 Ready-to-Wear show of *Angels and Demons*. Following this examination, an analysis of the Lochner Dress as seen in the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit will be given in order to formulate the differences in meaning drawn in each context.

II. The Lochner Dress

Set in the backdrop of McQueen's death, the Fall 2010 ready-to-wear showing of *Angels and Demons* was heavily centered around the idea of McQueen the designer and McQueen the individual. Thus, there is a heavy connection between each garment's identity and McQueen's identity, as read in the collection notes accompanying the show: "Each piece is unique, as was he."¹⁶² This statement is important, not only in summarizing the trademark elements that marked McQueen's final works, but also in drawing the connection between the sixteen dresses and their designer's personality.

Under these circumstances and the established statement, the Lochner Dress makes its appearance as the fifth look of the collection.¹⁶³ The most prominent aspect of the Lochner Dress is the painting that it imitates, namely, the *Altarpiece of the Patron Saints of Cologne* (also known as the *Dombild Altarpiece*) painted by Stefan Lochner in the mid-

¹⁶² Jess Cartner-Morley, "Alexander McQueen: Into the Light," *The Guardian*, February 10, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2015/feb/10/alexander-mcqueen-into-the-light>.

¹⁶³ Mower, "Alexander McQueen Fall 2010 Ready-to-Wear Fashion Show."

1400s.¹⁶⁴ In its entirety, the triptych depicts the scene of the Three Magi presenting their gifts to baby Jesus following his birth. The center panel focuses on this procession between the Magi and baby Jesus, while on the two sides of the image are Saint Ursula with her virgins (left panel) and Saint Gereon with his soldiers of the Theban Legion (right panel).¹⁶⁵

While the overall painting with its images of the Three Magi, Jesus, and Mary forms an important aspect of the Lochner Dress, McQueen's sole usage of the right panel for this garment puts a particular emphasis on the subject of Saint Gereon and his companions. Soldiers and primarily converts, Saint Gereon and the Theban Legion are most known for their martyrdom after refusing to carry out military orders contradicting their faith.¹⁶⁶ In reference to the gold mosaics that cover the walls of Saint Gereon's Basilica, Saint Gereon and his fellow soldiers often referred to as the "Golden Saints."¹⁶⁷ This pseudonym is seen reflected in Lochner's painting as Saint Gereon dons a body of gold armor, as well as in McQueen's garment through the deliberate enhancement of gold coloring throughout the Lochner Dress. McQueen's repeated depiction of the altarpiece's arches—present on the gauntlet and the sleeve and bottom portion of the dress (a section absent in the original painting)—also contributes a great deal to this amplified luster. The heavy saturation of this color, in addition to referencing the title of the "Golden Saints," can be taken to symbolize joy and celebration in Catholicism.¹⁶⁸ These prominent references to Saint Gereon and the Theban Legion through color and design steep

¹⁶⁴ Richard Kenneth Emmerson and Sandra Clayton-Emmerson, *Key Figures in Medieval Europe: an Encyclopedia* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 412.

¹⁶⁵ Susie Nash, *Northern Renaissance Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 23.

¹⁶⁶ Donald F. O'Reilly, "The Theban Legion of St. Maurice," *Vigiliae Christianae* 32, no. 3 (September 1978): 195-207, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1582882>.

¹⁶⁷ Colum P. Hourihane, *The Grove Encyclopedia of Medieval Art and Architecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 172-173.

¹⁶⁸ Dennis Bratcher, "The Meaning of Church Colors," *The Voice*, accessed November 6, 2019, <http://www.crivoice.org/symbols/colorsmeaning.html>.

the Lochner Dress in representations of these converted soldiers, and the subsequent joy associated with them.

In terms of material, the bulk of the dress is composed of silk satin featuring the digitally printed right panel of *The Altarpiece of Patron Saints*. On its own, the concentration of fibers in satin help make for a "lustrous finish" and a "beautiful drape."¹⁶⁹ The shiny characteristic of the fabric captures and emits the vibrant colors and details—down to the flourishes of the carved wood—of the original altarpiece.¹⁷⁰ The painting's overall theme of joy and celebration in addition to its vibrant and gold-enhanced depiction through the silk satin presides over the entirety of the garment, arguably characterizing the Lochner Dress as one of the lighter pieces in the *Angels and Demons* collection. In light of this, the dress and its associated panel, isolated from the other panels of the altarpiece, can be seen as a celebration of its subjects: converts.

Delving further into the symbolism present within the Lochner Dress, McQueen has chosen no small number of symbols to present. The form of the dress covers the model's left arm in the silk satin altarpiece while leaving the entirety of the opposite shoulder and arm bare. This stark bareness places an especially prominent focus onto the gauntlet that adorns the model's right arm. Much like the body of the dress, the gauntlet features a portion of Lochner's painting—the arches—that has been digitally printed, this time onto a material of leather.¹⁷¹ Such material composition combined with the gauntlet's

¹⁶⁹"What Is Satin Fabric? A Guide to the Types, Characteristics, and Uses for Satin," Design, Photography, and Fashion, MasterClass, July 2, 2019, <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-is-satin-fabric-ha-guide-to-the-types-characteristics-and-uses-for-satin#what-are-the-characteristics-of-satin>.

¹⁷⁰"Gauntlet," The Museum of Savage Beauty, Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed November 6, 2019,

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/museumofsavagebeauty/mcq/gauntlet/?fbclid=IwAR3NMdl2Es5oQw5hpe0b36uZ1QdW2iIthn4ThWo0k9Vlkm3Sv48EZ5BC2HE>.

¹⁷¹Andrew Bolton et al., *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, n.d.), 278.

billowing structure closely resemble the type of glove used in an activity that McQueen was personally interested in: falconry.¹⁷² The essence of the activity lies in the usage of tamed birds of prey—such as falcons—to hunt for wild animals.¹⁷³ Following this symbolic theme, while the model's sporting of the glove designates her the role of the falconer, various design elements scattered throughout the garment also portray her to be the falcon itself. The headpiece and puffed skirt both establish connections to this bird-like imagery with their employment of feathers that adorn the model from her head to body. And the three distinctly pointed jewel formations of the heels visually resemble the talons of a falcon.

In relation to Catholicism, the falcon has two distinct interpretations within Catholic art. On the one hand, the wild falcon is used to symbolize evil, while on the other, the tame falcon represents one who has converted to Catholicism.¹⁷⁴ The falcon conveyed through the model, one that is tamed to be used in falconry, can then be interpreted to symbolize the overall image of the converted. In depicting a tame falcon rather than a wild one, the Lochner Dress detaches itself from the savagery and sinfulness associated with the latter, and again illustrates the goodness and joy that accompanies conversion.

In addition to a falconer's glove, the gauntlet can also be interpreted to represent simply a gauntlet, a form of protective metal armour worn by soldiers in the Middle Ages.¹⁷⁵ While the gauntlet featured in this garment is not actually made of metal, this interpretation is helpful as it lends itself to yet another symbol present

¹⁷²"Gauntlet," The Museum of Savage Beauty.

¹⁷³Floyd Barton Chapman et al., "Falconry," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, updated December 17, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/sports/falconry>.

¹⁷⁴"Birds Are Used as Christian Symbols," Catholicism.org, October 30, 2004, <https://catholicism.org/birds-are-used-as-christian-symbols.html>.

¹⁷⁵"Gauntlet Noun," Dictionaries, Oxford Learners Dictionary, accessed November 6, 2019, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/gauntlet>.

in the Lochner Dress, that of the soldier. To begin with, the body of the dress itself emanates soldier imagery, portraying the figures of Saint Gereon and the Theban Legion. These figures that McQueen has chosen to single out from Lochner's larger painting are then folded and draped over a protruding skirt of feathers that conjure images of a metallic shield with its gold-painted coating and uniform arrangement around the model's upper thigh.¹⁷⁶

Following this symbol throughout the entirety of the garment, the model's rigid, metal-appearing headpiece can be seen to serve as a helmet, while the densely beaded and jeweled structure of the heels work to provide additional shielding for the ankles of the soldier-model. The position of the model's gauntlet-adorned arm on her hip—the positioning also seen on the *Heavenly Bodies* mannequin displaying the garment—is almost identical to that of Saint Gereon himself as he heads his soldiers in Lochner's altarpiece. The portrayal of the model as a soldier and the overall presence of this symbol throughout the garment plays into a direct connection between the wearer of the dress and the figures portrayed on it. In connecting the model to these soldiers, the Lochner Dress then also connects her to their identities as converts. The aforementioned gold symbolism of now the model's armour, makes an eye-catching statement surrounding the beauty and celebration of conversion. With the jumble of details on the dress itself and the feathers and accessories accompanying it, the garment is one very obviously steeped in religious imagery and symbolism.

III. Alexander McQueen's Relationship with Catholicism

Unlike other designers whose works were featured in the exhibition, McQueen's usage of Catholic imagery did not stem from a strong personal tie to the religion. *Angels and Demons*, and more specifically, the Lochner Dress, were not steeped in religious imagery solely for the purpose of being Catholic. Religion itself had not

¹⁷⁶Bolton et al., *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination*, 278.

occupied a major role in McQueen's upbringing—though the designer had distant ties to the French Huguenots through his mother and periodically attended church as a child, there is no indication of strong ties with religion, much less Catholicism, in his private life.¹⁷⁷

Moreover, there was no apparent presence of critique of the Church within *Angels and Demons*. As a designer renowned for his anti-establishment attitudes, then, McQueen's decision to utilize one of the most powerful establishments in history—the Catholic Church—as the basis for his final works speaks to Catholicism's role in helping the designer accomplish his artistic intentions.

Garment making and fashion as a whole were for McQueen an outlet through which he revealed more intimate details concerning his personal life. In his own words, "My collections have always been autobiographical, a lot to do with my own sexuality and coming to terms with the person I am—it was like exorcising my ghosts."¹⁷⁸ This description of garment making as a process of self-reflection and self-discovery likewise characterizes the themes and sources of inspiration that McQueen chose to use as those which he felt most fit to serve as a means of expression. Catholicism is no exception.

Along these lines, it is important to note that *Angels and Demons* was not the first time McQueen drew inspiration from Catholicism. Fourteen years earlier, the designer had already turned heads with his usage of Catholic imagery in his *Dante* collection in 1996. With the employment of crucified Jesus masks and garment titles referencing the divine—such as "Into the Light"¹⁷⁹—the collection's usage of Catholic imagery to juxtapose life and death was a direct reflection of

¹⁷⁷"Encyclopedia of Collections: Dante," The Museum of Savage Beauty, Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed December 11, 2019, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/museumofsavagebeauty/rel/encyclopedia-of-collections-dante/>.

¹⁷⁸Steve Turner, *Popcultured: Thinking Christianly about Style, Media and Entertainment*. (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013), 118.

¹⁷⁹"Encyclopedia of Collections: Dante," The Museum of Savage Beauty.

McQueen’s fascination with Romantic Gothic.¹⁸⁰ Involving elements of both horror and romance, Romantic Gothic was again seen in later collections such as *Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious*—particularly with garments consisting of pieces such as a puff sleeved black velvet coat and swags of jet beading¹⁸¹—and was by no means an explorative subject confined solely to the theme of Catholicism.¹⁸² McQueen’s return to Romantic Gothic combined with his repeated draw on Catholic imagery throughout his fashion career, mark the subject of Catholicism as one that served McQueen particularly well in exploring his personal interests and displaying his personal narratives.

On a broader scale, the designer was known for his consistent and pronounced draw to Romanticism. The Met itself was aware of this characteristic as it wrote in a previous exhibition (*Savage Beauty*) catalogue dedicated to McQueen, “...[he] engaged deeply with other ideological and philosophical abstractions of the Romantic movement, which are revealed in the dominant themes of his collections...”¹⁸³ The early 1800s artistic movement’s particular emphasis on inspiration, subjectivity, and the sublime closely aligned with McQueen’s own beliefs regarding the creation of his work. In an interview discussion about his garment creation process, McQueen voiced these underlying beliefs saying, “in times like these I think the world needs fantasy, not reality, we have enough reality today...”¹⁸⁴ This departure from reality greatly shaped the design elements that garnered McQueen such a provocative reputation in the fashion industry. Placing the Lochner

¹⁸⁰Andrew Bolton, Susannah Frankel, and Tim Blanks, *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 13.

¹⁸¹Sarah Mower, “Alexander McQueen Fall 2002 Ready-to-Wear Fashion Show,” *Vogue*, August 8, 2015, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2002-ready-to-wear/alexander-mcqueen>.

¹⁸²Bolton, Frankel, and Blanks, *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty*, 13.

¹⁸³Bolton, Frankel, and Blanks, *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty*, 5-6.

¹⁸⁴Nick Knight, “In Fashion: Alexander McQueen Interview,” December 11, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVF3slTpuj0>.

Dress into this larger pattern, the Catholic thought can be seen as just another form of expression through which McQueen explored his own imagination and beliefs.

Turning to how Catholicism tied into the creation of *Angels and Demons* specifically, the same form of self-expression is seen. In the process of designing *Angels and Demons*, McQueen was said to have been studying the Dark Ages and religious iconography for the creation of his garments.¹⁸⁵ But while the Madonnas and Byzantine empresses that McQueen had been drawing inspiration from certainly served as the basis for this collection, another marking aspect of the garments was their references to McQueen's past collections.¹⁸⁶ From allusions to his previous *Asylum*—with the presence of bandaged heads—to the usage of feathers hinting at *Icarus*, his first collection after entering couture, McQueen incorporated aspects and creations of his own past into this Catholic centered collection. *Angels and Demons* featured Catholicism not only as a means to inspire and manifest McQueen's artistic desires, but also to display the unique themes that had come to shape McQueen's identity as a fashion designer.

Though Catholicism itself was not an integral aspect of McQueen's personal life, his usage of Catholic imagery in his collections is tied to a much deeper preoccupation revolving around McQueen's artistic philosophy. Rather than a direct connection to his religious background, Catholicism served instead as a provocative outlet through which McQueen explored and manifested his identity and beliefs.

On the surface, the Lochner Dress' visual ties to Catholicism and Gothic art are indisputable. As prominent as these features are, however, equally crucial to the construction of the identity of the dress

¹⁸⁵Sarah Mower, "Alexander McQueen Fall 2010 Ready-to-Wear Fashion Show," *Vogue*, August 8, 2015, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2010-ready-to-wear/alexander-mcqueen>.

¹⁸⁶Mower, "Alexander McQueen Fall 2010 Ready-to-Wear Fashion Show."

are the ties to McQueen's background and beliefs through falcon and conversion symbolism. On the one hand, the images of the falcon/falconer are a direct manifestation of McQueen's personal interests, and on the other, his preoccupation with utilizing Catholic imagery to evoke emotions and meanings is reflected in the complex depiction of conversion.

In the same manner, the individual meanings and symbols of each of the fifteen other garments that make up the *Angels and Demons* collection can be analyzed and interpreted in connection to McQueen's personal background. What will be referred to as the Bosch Dress (look two in the show),¹⁸⁷ which was shown alongside the Lochner Dress at the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit, draws its own individuality from the *Temptation of Saint Anthony*, *The Last Judgment*, and *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymous Bosch which have been woven into its jacquard body.¹⁸⁸ While the dress' deeper meanings will not be explored further within this essay, it is apparent that the garment differs both stylistically and in terms of its content from the Lochner Dress; these variations establish the Bosch Dress its own unique identity and connection to McQueen's personal background. Through these varied concepts, *Angels and Demons* as seen on the runway becomes a thematically diverse collection in which individual garments take on separate identities, all expressed through references to Catholic imagery, and all ultimately rooted in McQueen's own unique approach to fashion.

IV. The Lochner Dress in the *Heavenly Bodies* Exhibit

When these garments become situated in a different time and space, the meanings that are subsequently attached to them are likewise altered. Within the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit, the Lochner Dress was

¹⁸⁷Mower, "Alexander McQueen Fall 2010 Ready-to-Wear Fashion Show."

¹⁸⁸"Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination [Exhibition Checklist]," (New York: Thomas J. Watson Library, 2019), 65-66, <http://library.Metmuseum.org/record=b1975342>.

placed within the Late Gothic Hall of the Met Cloisters;¹⁸⁹ this location serves as home to various paintings and sculptures from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.¹⁹⁰ Alongside the garment, were two other dresses from the same *Angels and Demons* collection, both of which feature late medieval art printed onto the bodies: the aforementioned Bosch Dress and another garment featuring *Annunciation* by Hugo van der Goes. In close proximity, were a mixture of works typically on display in the Late Gothic Hall along with garments from other designers; the most notable ones included the *Altarpiece With Scenes From the Passion*, the *Retable with Scenes from the Life of Saint Andrew*, and Dolce and Gabbana's "Penelope" Wedding Ensemble.¹⁹¹

This spatial layout is crucial to understanding the meanings that were both detached from as well as newly attributed to the Lochner Dress. Situated within a location primarily dedicated to medieval artwork, the preexisting function of the space as one promoting such pieces inherently associates the garment with its surrounding fifteenth and sixteenth century paintings. The paintings found in closest proximity to the Lochner Dress were the *Altarpiece With Scenes From the Passion* and the *Retable with Scenes from the Life of Saint Andrew*, under whose influences the focal point of the dress becomes the medieval painting printed onto its own body.¹⁹²

The Met further strengthens this connection with medieval art in its *Heavenly Bodies* catalogue as the digital image of the featured panel from the *Altarpiece of the Patron Saints of Cologne* is placed next to a panel from the aforementioned *Retable with Scenes from the Life of Saint*

¹⁸⁹"Heavenly Bodies: [Exhibition Checklist]," 65-66.

¹⁹⁰Colored images of the *Heavenly Bodies* display of the Lochner Dress can be found at [https://libmma.](https://libmma.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16028coll1/id/36197)

[contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16028coll1/id/36197.](https://libmma.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16028coll1/id/36197)

¹⁹¹"Heavenly Bodies: [Exhibition Checklist]," 65-66.

¹⁹²"Heavenly Bodies: [Exhibition Checklist]," 65-66.

Andrew.¹⁹³ This retable is characterized by its striking use of color, the rich narrative content, and the detailed design. The exact panel that was selected from this larger piece and placed in parallel with Saint Gereon and his soldiers is one which depicts Saint Andrew saving a bishop from the devil disguised as a fair woman.¹⁹⁴

While the two altarpieces and the respective panels feature commonalities in terms of their artistic styles—a rich narrative, striking colors, and detailed designs—there is little that is shared between the two in terms of content. In placing these two panels side by side, the Met primarily draws attention to the artistic similarities between the pieces, namely, the Gothic style found on both the dress and the altarpiece. Such comparison then simultaneously detaches, by drawing attention away from, the content and figures in the *Altarpiece of the Patron Saints of Cologne*. With a decreased focus on Saint Gereon and the Theban Legion, the previously prominent symbol of the soldier likewise decreases in importance. Other symbols are similarly diminished in the viewer's attention, further detaching the dress' identity from McQueen's identity.

Aside from the larger surrounding influences, the individual presentation of the dress also lends itself to a primarily artistic interpretation. Not displayed as part of the overall Lochner ensemble at the exhibition, were the feathered headpiece and jeweled shoes which the model donned in the collection's show. In the absence of these defining accessories, the dress becomes, once again, solely what the body of it portrays: *The Altarpiece of the Patron Saints of Cologne*. Under this presentation, the gauntlet is less likely to be associated with a falconer's glove or the protective shield of a soldier. While taking on the role of the sole accessory, the gauntlet's only major significance becomes that of another seemingly decorative portion of the painting

¹⁹³Bolton et al., *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination*, 278.

¹⁹⁴Peter Barnet and Nancy Y. Wu, *The Cloisters: Medieval Art and Architecture* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2005), 129.

draped onto a part of the mannequin's body. Instead of attributing the symbols of conversion and the soldier to the garment, then, the gauntlet places additional emphasis on *The Altarpiece of the Patron Saints of Cologne*. The previous interpretations that associated the Lochner Dress with McQueen's personal background have now come to take on different meanings; the gauntlet's tie to the Gothic-style arches of the altarpiece now positions it as a vehicle to promote the painting.¹⁹⁵

The Met's presentation further strips the Lochner Dress of its individualistic characteristics as it places the garment amidst two others from *Angels and Demons*, essentially showcasing a mini-collection. Situated on the left-most of this mini-collection, the Lochner Dress draws similarity with the aforementioned Bosch Dress in its short length and feature of a rather eye-catching work of art on the body of the dress. Sandwiched between these two outwardly similar garments, is the Hugo van der Goes evening dress, which differentiates itself with its full-body length and elegant, sculpture-like appearance.¹⁹⁶ The absence of colors other than black, white, and gray, further highlights and sets the evening dress apart from the Lochner and Bosch Dresses. The focus of the mini-collection becomes primarily this Hugo van der Goes garment, which is both placed in the center of the mini-collection and separated by its distinctive style.

The combination of these surrounding factors as well as the changes in presentation of the Lochner Dress itself work to not only draw attention away from specific symbols conveyed through the dress, but also to draw attention away from the dress as a whole. Connections to symbols and thereby McQueen's personal background are detached, while new meanings emphasizing Gothic art and its relation to Catholicism are generated. In this way, the presentation of the Lochner Dress at the Met not only honed in on one specific aspect of

¹⁹⁵ "Gauntlet," The Museum of Savage Beauty.

¹⁹⁶ Bolton et al., *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination*, 202.

the dress, but it also contributed to the creation of new meanings pertaining to that particular aspect.

V. Conclusion

This emphasis on certain characteristics of a garment over others is seen in the display of a number of other pieces, and undoubtedly contributed to the heavy criticism surrounding the Met's presentation. While the Met and curator Andrew Bolton may not have done so out of ill-purpose, it can be agreed upon that some "silences" stemmed from the lack of sufficient contextualization and information. Much like the case of the Lochner Dress, the power of museum curation when it comes to exhibitions ultimately shows itself in the varying identities that objects come to adopt when placed into spaces and times different from those of their original contexts. As such varying new and old meanings come to interact with their larger surroundings, they consequently come to form narratives pertaining to topics such as was seen in *Heavenly Bodies*.

On a larger scale, the Met's presentation of the Lochner Dress was not as much a misinterpretation as it was simply a display emphasizing one particular facet of the dress. In the scope of the Met's exhibition theme and the context of the Late Gothic Hall, Bolton was successful in drawing a legitimate connection between the Gothic art printed onto the Lochner Dress and the surrounding altarpieces in the exhibit. Moreover, the exhibition catalogue detailed the Met's awareness that McQueen constantly drew inspiration from religious art, and more specifically, Netherlandish religious paintings.¹⁹⁷ Its lack of emphasis on the reason behind this inspiration and loose connection with a Spanish altarpiece (*Retable With Scenes From the Life of Saint Andrew*), however, undermine that awareness and instead work to detach the Lochner Dress from its other major symbolic meanings. In absence of these important symbols, McQueen's own identity becomes

¹⁹⁷ Bolton et al., *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination*, 274.

equally obscured, hidden somewhere along the folds of a silk-satin 14th century altarpiece.

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