



The new era of fashion's art exhibitions

LACMA's latest wing opening next year will host more costume and textile exhibitions than any other time in its history. It's just one museum that is digging deeper to blend fashion and art.

By Booth Moore



Every week seems to herald a new fashion exhibition opening at a museum somewhere in the world. 'Virgil Abloh: The Codes' is coming to Paris's Grand Palais in September, 'Westwood Kawakubo' will debut at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne in December, and 'Schiaparelli: Fashion Becomes Art' will land at London's V&A next year.

At Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), when the David Geffen Galleries open in 2026, there will be more costumes and textiles on display in the new building's inaugural installations — more than 130 — than any other time since the museum opened in 1965.

Next year will also see the opening of its 'Fashioning Chinese Women: Empire to Modernity' exhibition, with mannequins created by designer Jason Wu. Then, in 2027, LACMA will open the second part of 'Fashioning Fashion', this time spanning 1900 to 2025, showcasing international designers as well as those closer to home including Gilbert Adrian, Rudi Gernreich, Libertine, Freak City, Dosa and Jamie Okuma.

Fashion is big business for museums. To understand exactly how, one only has to look at the success of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute in New York, where the Louis Vuitton-sponsored 'Superfine: Tailoring Black Style' exhibition is currently on view, and the *Vogue*-powered Met Gala kick-off raised a record \$31 million for the costume and textiles department. Over the years, the size and scale of the attention generated by the Met Gala, and the museum attendance it has helped generate, have inspired other institutions to up their fashion game.

"Exhibitions that have popular, public media support and currency have grown," says LACMA CEO Michael Govan, because fashion is a sector with money to spend and an interest in legacy. "We've seen a transition in companies to a whole new generation of designers, so establishing a legacy is very important. And the companies themselves understand that museums are the way to do that. The Armani show at the Guggenheim ushered in a lot of resources being put into grand fashion exhibitions, which are also historical."





The game-changing Giorgio Armani retrospective Govan is referring to was mounted in 2000 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, following the Italian designer's sizable donation to the institution, before popping up in several other cities globally.

Since then, other luxury brands including Dior and Louis Vuitton have also funded, curated and packaged exhibitions promoting their respective heritage stories, tailoring them to different global markets, whether that be Brooklyn or Tokyo, and donating millions to museums to use their spaces, thus blurring the line between art and commerce.

Luxury brands have also opened their own museums, both fashion (Fondation Pierre Berge Yves Saint Laurent, Musée Christian Dior, Gucci Garden) and art-focused (Fondation Louis Vuitton, Bourse de Commerce Pinault Collection), alongside financially supporting art exhibitions at locations across the world.

"The wealth that has been created in fashion and luxury has been a great benefit to the awareness of art, to artists whose works are acquired, to the promotion to the public every day of the critical importance of art and creativity to our lives, including fashion," says Govan, who has deep connections to the fashion world, and has worked with Gucci through a decade of sponsorship of the LACMA Art + Film Gala. Sometimes likened to the Met Gala, the starry annual event does not fundraise specifically for the museum's costume and textiles department, however.

While Govan is looking for luxury brand sponsors for the gala opening of the Geffen Galleries next year, he is not looking to host their fashion exhibitions. Because LACMA, like the Costume Institute, curates its own, building on the research and scholarship of the costume and textiles department, and a permanent collection numbering more than 35,000 pieces.

In LACMA's new Brutalist-style building and Geffen Galleries designed by Peter Zumthor, textiles will play a more prominent role because of a renewed curatorial direction that does away with chronology and hierarchies in favour of a collaborative, thematic approach organised around the world's oceans and how they have fostered the exchange of ideas, materials and aesthetics over both time and place.

"It's the whole world on one floor," says Govan. The museum hosts a rare, early 18th century Qing Dynasty formal men's robe in its gallery between two ocean sections; African Mbuti barkcloth, Kuba cut-pile "velvet" cloths, and African American quilts in the Atlantic Ocean section; as well as a 1984 Jun'ichi Arai for Nuno Japanese-made textile next to Issey Miyake's Autumn/Winter 1980 Plastic Body bustier in the Pacific section, among others.

"There were times when cloth was way more important than painting... and I want to remind people that the hierarchies of value are always changing," he says. "Part of that was to elevate the fashion and costume collections from their tiny little corner and to make commitments to exhibitions, but more importantly, to collection building in a diverse way."

"This has been a golden decade for my department and for the museum in general," says LACMA costume and textiles department head and senior curator Sharon Takeda, who has been in the role since 2000. "We have brought in multi millions of dollars' worth of collections." Among them: a major 18th to early 20th century European men's, women's and children's dress and accessories collection; the Marcel and Zaira Mis collection of Sub-Saharan textiles, dress and adornment; the Georges Meurant collection of African Kuba textiles; a rare 1940/42 Zoot suit; a large 18th to 20th century menswear collection; and significant collections of 20th century women's high fashion, including a recent gift of Rodarte clothing and accessories from 2005 to 2023.

The museum aims to launch an exhibition every two to three years.





A gifted contemporary Chinese fashion collection from a wealthy Chinese American merchant family in Central California, including pieces from the 1910s to the 1960s, will anchor next year's showcase, reflecting the museum's long-standing ties to the Pacific Rim.

For autumn 2026, Takeda is also curating a retrospective of Reiko Sudō, one of Japan's most important contemporary textile designers, whose company Nuno created computer-designed woven fabrics for Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo and others, a connection made in the Geffen Galleries's Pacific Ocean section.

Sudō also played a part in the opening of the galleries, designing 9,000 yards of silvery chrome-sputtered fabric for the curtains.

"She's intersecting textiles, architecture and art in a beautiful way," says Govan. "And museums have become intersection points for our cities and our diplomacy internationally. They are an amazing gathering space for fashion, for music, for cinema, for digital art... I think the future holds a lot more connectivity."

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