

# REVIEWS

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## Fashion that fascinates and frustrates

**Dries Van Noten: Inspirations**  
*Les arts décoratifs (Musée de la mode et du textile), 75001 Paris*  
1 March - 31 August 2014  
Catalogue: £55

Reviewed by Cynthia Rose

The status of *couture* has always proved contentious. Is it art? Is it craft? Or simply

superficial ephemera aimed at a rich clientele? Buried in these questions is an equally knotty one: how profound is the couturier's bond with his so-called 'inspirations'? From the Victoria & Albert's worshipful *Vivienne Westwood* (see *Crafts* No.189 July/August 2004) to an epic show such as *Yves Saint Laurent* (see *Crafts* No.224 May/June 2010), this is a question central to every designer retrospective.

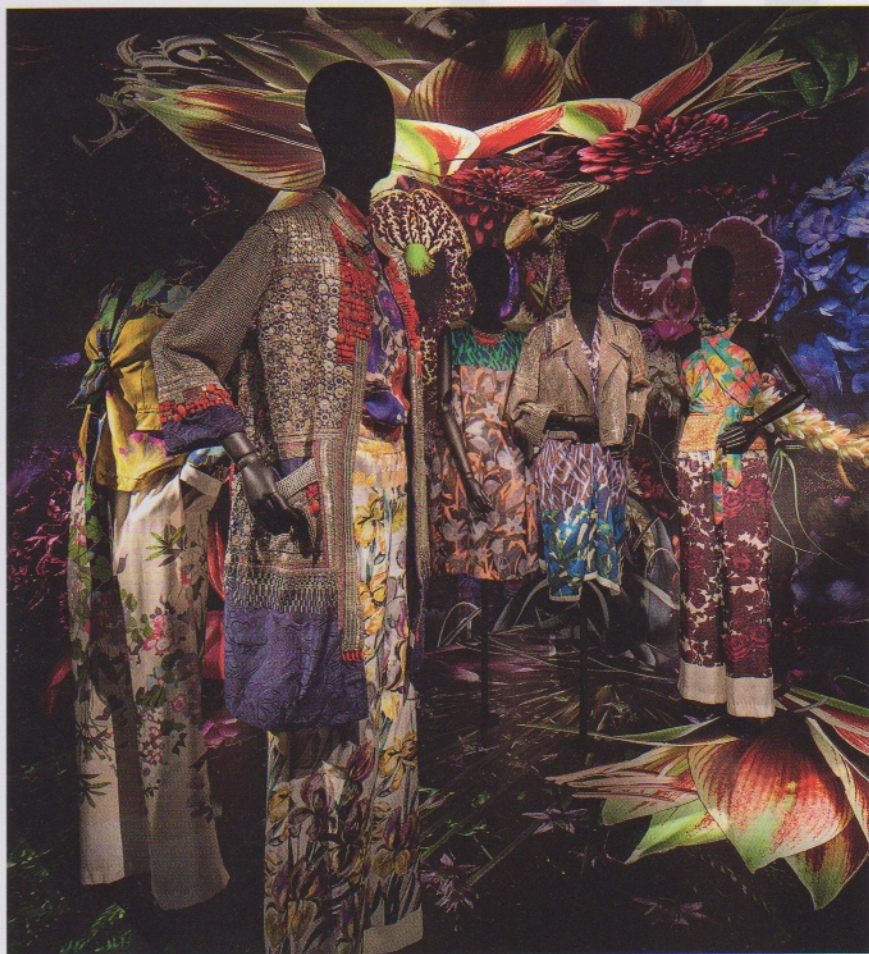
Big modern shows often confront it with juxtapositions. Picturing various influences with their putative offspring can result in stunning scenography – all the more if one can actually show original garments. Also, it provides the shock of the new backed up by acknowledged talent. Deeper connections, however, are harder to articulate. It's easy to describe

Installation view of *Dries Van Noten: Inspirations*

your show as a 'cabinet of curiosities' but just as easy to end up at the Twitter and Pinterest level – with an experience that's limited to ooh-ing and ah-ing.

*Dries Van Noten: Inspirations* really goes for broke. It crams 400 items into two levels of winding, dimly lit space. This results in a dizzy and sometimes overloaded bombardment where one can actually watch mesmerised visitors walk into walls. Arranged by theme, the show is both frustrating and fascinating. Not all the garments here are by Van Noten; an equal number represent the Rolodex of *haute couture*. From Balenciaga and Chanel to Yves Saint Laurent, it takes a while to realise the historic works are mounted on dummies. Van Noten's, by contrast, are all shown on mannequins.





Installation view of *Dries Van Noten: Inspirations*  
 Below: *Hundreds and Thousands*,  
 Angela O'Kelly, 1999  
 Opposite: *Prototype XL1 chair*,  
 Michael Marriott, 1991

## Crafts with a social conscience

**Hidden Agenda:  
 Socially Conscious Craft**

Granary Gallery, Berwick-Upon-Tweed  
 22 March – 1 June 2014

Reviewed by Anna Burnside

Socially conscious craft? Twenty years ago, this would have been the cue for a joke about hand-knitted armpit hair. Not today. The green movement, craftivism, the conscious decision of many non-artists to revisit the homely skills of their grandparents have combined to turn subversive ceramics and provocative embroidery into recognisable trends rather than aberrations from a decorative norm.

This small show, at Berwick-Upon-Tweed's enviable Granary Gallery, shows many of the different disciplines that shelter beneath the 'socially conscious' umbrella. The idea sprang from a recent piece by Doug Jones, who worked on the show in conjunction with the Crafts Council and Berwick Visual Arts. Another exhibit is the result of a call-out to artists in the north-east of England; the remaining works are from the Crafts Council's own Collection. All of which is further proof that this is part of the new mainstream.

Some of the choices, such as the prototype of Jane Atfield's *RCP2 chair*, are functional objects constructed from unexpected materials (her smudgy, psychedelic plastic is made from old yoghurt pots). The anti-consumption message is in the construction; the

The exhibition's visual art and artefacts are really astonishing. They include smart society paintings by Elizabeth Peyton, Kees van Dongen and Cecil Beaton – but also important works from Johannes Bosschaert, Léon Spilliaert, Francis Bacon and Mark Rothko. A Schiaparelli butterfly print pales in comparison to its backdrop, which is a huge wheel of the shimmering insects by Damien Hirst. Even Van Noten's penchant for 'the foppish' becomes a gallery – one that includes a van Dyck, a famous portrait of Proust and Boldini's oil of the dandy Robert de Montesquiou. Near the end of the show, one finds both Bronzino's 16th century *Portrait of a Sculptor* and Gerhard Richter's equally splendid abstract, *Mohn*.

Nor is there a lack of sculptures, films or objects. One can see the sword designed for Jean Cocteau by Cartier (it's part of his *habit vert* for the Académie française) and the bespoke shoe collection of Baron Alexis de Redé. Clips from *A Clockwork Orange* and *Chariots of Fire* are showing, as well as images from David Attenborough's *The Life of Birds*. On the tonier side, one can see *Carnations* by Pina Bausch and a Van Noten *défilé* in outsize slo-mo.

A stimulating bow to its subject as a man of taste, this multi-faceted exhibition is a big sensation. Its many loans comprise

a real accomplishment by Pamela Golbin, one of the French museum system's youngest-ever chief curators. What she has assembled is indeed amazing. But, at the centre of it all, there is something missing.

The stock of Van Noten's inspirations may be exhaustive, but all this dazzle effectively suppresses the personal. Nothing is really divulged about this creator's singular palette, his signature approaches to both colour and texture. Engaging as it is comparing his camouflage with Toile de Jouy, I also wanted to know about the Van Noten family (*Dries* marking its third generation in the garment biz).

Posing the question of 'inspiration' need not mean resolving it. However, some of the tableaux here put Van Noten's work in the shade. For instance, Christian Dior's long-legendary *Bar* suit – the ivory jacket and full black skirt which codified his New Look – appears behind a radiant *Blue Venus* by Yves Klein. Each of those pieces comes from a very different discipline and each exudes an individual virtuosity.

Yet both are striving to capture the absolute. It makes a stunning composition and a poetic moment. But it's one that makes Van Noten's nearby gowns and jacket superfluous.

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