

Industry Insight: extended

Oriole Cullen, Senior Curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, home of Fashion in Motion series, full interview

Oriole's interview appears in abridged form in Chapter 2, page 56.

How did Fashion in Motion start?

Claire Wilcox started Fashion in Motion in 1999 with two models wandering around the galleries in Philip Treacy hats. Then there was one small show a month with models wandering through the galleries. The shows became popular very quickly with big names participating: Alexander McQueen, Stella McCartney, Phoebe [Philo]'s Chloe, but the galleries became thronged, so it was decided to do a more traditional catwalk. Then came multiple shows throughout day with 400 people per show, limited because of health and safety. We have tried to keep it a free event. It is very expensive to stage shows. We work with top models and big producers. It is a huge production now but not as poetic as it was.

How do you choose the designers?

We are in touch with many designers, but people don't have the time and resources ... lots want to do it, sometimes we are in talks for years before we agree a date: sometimes around someone's anniversary... I saw Grace Wales Bonner at Fashion East in a tiny gallery, her work stood out so we asked her to do a show here and it was incredible. There was a live choir singing slave songs; it was very beautiful.

How do you choose what to show?

We always ask the designers to do something different from their last collection. Most choose to do something retrospective or a theme. One designer found it amazing because they didn't otherwise look back at their collections. There is no pressure for the designers because there is no critique. The shows are about celebrating creativity, about engaging with contemporary design and making it accessible.

The shows are a chance for the designers: we ask what they would ideally do in this space? Some of the designers use the museum as a source of inspiration so that is a nice link. Garments are always from designers' collections, not the V&A collections, because those are treated as objects once they are in the collection. The V&A preserves item so they are never worn.

There is a good following; the fashion world follows and supports the V&A. Journalists and other designers support the shows.

Who builds the shows?

We can only work with recommended suppliers to build and produce shows. We work with the production company Bacchus and also DSA Productions. We sometimes have only 30 minutes to load the rig, benches and so on past priceless treasures because of our neighbours. We have just 24 hours to load everything and do four shows.

We are working to a budget and surrounded by priceless objects in an historical building. The Raphael Gallery is used every evening so it's a challenge to use the space. We can only have three dates in the calendar, so we try to avoid fashion weeks because we use the same production teams and everyone is too busy.

With museum budgets slashed, keeping the budget is a challenge. Physically, 1,600 people come through the door, but most exhibitions at the V&A last for months. Logistically, Fashion in Motion can't be for more than one day. But there are other material outcomes. The shows extend the archives. It's impossible to collect every designer for reasons of space, time and budget so Fashion in Motion provides a photographic archive and web-based material. It is about the V&A engaging with contemporary designers to show clothing. It's a great record of who was working at the time.

It is hard because it is a non-charging event. It's important that it's free but we are under pressure to charge. The designers and the teams give their time and the suppliers charge low fees. It's a very different experience to fashion week with the applause and the clapping.

What is the nature of a show in a museum setting?

A fashion show lifts an audience and stays with people for days. Music is very important. From the first bar, you know whether the designer has chosen well. You can manipulate the audience with music but people are less present now because they are on their phones. There is huge significance to shows. When everyone started live streaming, we wondered whether they would lose their cache but, no, people still want to be there.

Some of the Victoria and Albert shows have had big production values. Fashion in motion designers work free of charge on the shows. Designers and fashion companies can contribute to the budget if they want to do more than the museum would otherwise afford. Ralph and Russo wanted to show the skill of haute couture so they designed a piece with a long train, which was mirrored in the ceiling, and was spectacular!

What is the overall purpose of the shows?

The Victoria and Albert Museum is here to bring things to people. Unlike fashion weeks, there are often many students in the audience.