



## Our New Clothes: Acquisitions of the 1990s

*Richard Martin*

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An impressive array of clothing, accessories, and library materials was acquired through gift and purchase during the 1990s by The Costume Institute, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Adding substantially to its comprehensive collection gathered over fifty-five years, the costumes span three centuries, beginning with a magnificent and rare silk damask brocaded English mantua of 1708 and including a wide-ranging selection such as a luxuriously embroidered and sequined French man's ensemble of about 1765, a sparkling Agnès Drécoll robe en panner of 1912, a beautiful Charles James wedding gown of 1940, and a slinky gold-tone metal mesh Gianni Versace evening gown of 1997–98.

The "new" clothes are presented in six chapters. In "A History of Fashion" a mini view of three centuries of clothing vividly attests to the breadth of collecting achieved by The Costume Institute during the past decade. "The White Dress" poses a provocative question about the role of women in white, who have, in the author's words, "haunted the romantic imagination for centuries." As Richard Martin notes, men's clothing is difficult to find, largely because it has been far less coveted than womenswear, but the chapter on "Men of Three Centuries" illustrates a number of fine examples from the eighteenth century to Jean Paul Gaultier. Additions to the Irene Lewisohn Library, The Costume Institute, which since 1939 has been building a comprehensive archive of visual and written documents concerning costume history, include a pair of engraved cards front around 1780 showing European headdress and interesting illustrations from the comprehensive Giorgio di Sant'Angelo archive.

Twentieth-century costume is brilliantly displayed in the chapters on "The Americans" and "The Contemporaries." During the 1990s The Costume Institute gathered American fashion with particular zeal, including works by the New York minimalist designer of the 1940s and 1950s Valentino and in such contemporary designers as Geoffrey Beene, Giorgio di Sant'Angelo, Halston, and Calvin Klein. The exhibitions and publications held since Richard Martin became curator in 1993 have emphasized contemporary design, and included here, in addition to the Americans, are choice pieces by Giorgio Armani, Ann Demeulemeester, Dolce & Gabbana, James Galanos, Romeo Gigli, Christian Lacroix, and Issey Miyake.

The 113 color illustrations and the illuminating text by Richard Martin add up to a fascinating overview of one decade of The Costume Institute's collecting, which conveys its ongoing dedication to the acquisition and exhibition of costumes from the earliest extant examples of the eighteenth century to the newest works of voting designers. Our New Clothes displays the commitment to present costume in the museum setting as a living art that interprets history, becomes part of the historical process, and inspires subsequent art.

(This title was originally published in 1999.)

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