Fashioning the Cloisters: A Reflection on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Exhibition Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination

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The iconographical nature of clothing was explored in the monumental 2018 exhibition *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic* Imagination; staged by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Fashion Institute with the expressed hope that viewers would engage with garments from designer houses, the Vatican Collection, and artworks housed in the Met to explore the deep-rooted connection between Catholic iconography and fashion design in the modern age. Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination stands as a testament to the grandeur of the Met, spanning twenty-five galleries over two buildings. It drew an astounding 1,659,647 visitors during its six-month duration, making it the largest exhibition in the history of the Met.[1] Curator Andrew Bolton implemented the use of the Met Cloisters, a first for this annual exhibition format, outfitting each chamber with garments and artworks to reflect biblical themes. Bolton believed the Cloisters held the more stimulating ideas explored in the exhibition.[2] While the intention, as mentioned earlier by curator Andrew Bolton, may have been to display the bond shared between fashion design and catholic iconography, Bolton's exhibition was able to draw the viewer's gaze from the art to the fabric, making fashion become art. Bolton used the architecture and aura of the Met cloisters, curatorial methods of display, and surrounding artworks to create a visual, experiential, and cultural throughline for the viewer to change how they experience clothing and how they might see it as an art form.

Perched atop the highest point in Manhattan, The Met cloisters, a testament to the enduring power of medieval art and architecture, were opened in 1938 and made possible by the

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[1] *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*, 11 Oct. 2018 www.metmuseum.org/press/news/2018/heavenly-bodies-most-visited-exhibition.

[2] Kate Farrell, director. *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination Gallery Views—The Met Cloisters*. *The Met*, 2018, https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2018/heavenly-bodies/video.

funds of John D. Rockerfeller Jr. and the design of architect Charles Collens. However, the true origins of the Cloisters began with George Barnard, an American sculptor who, in 1914, opened a museum. This museum was a collection of architectural fragments from the Medieval cloisters of Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, Trie-en-Bigorre, Larreule, Bonnefont-en-Comminges, and Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa in the south of France.[3] Barnard's museum was more than a collection; it was an experience, a testament to the power of architecture to transcend time and space. Barnard did not merely display his collection; instead, he transported visitors from twentieth-century America to fifteenth-century France by crossing a doorway, as Rachel Gross writes in her article *American religion at the cloisters*.

> He artificially weathered the modern walls of his museum, which he called a 'sanctuary' by hosing down the brick walls while the mortar was still fresh. The interior was lit with candles and smelled strongly of incense, providing the sense that one was walking through the haunted ruins of a medieval cloister.[4]

When the Met absorbed Barnard's collection, they forwent these theatrics. Nevertheless, they embraced Barnard's belief in the aura of architecture. They saw the potential to elevate the Medieval art housed in the cloisters, as at the time, Medieval art did not have the prestige it receives today. The Met Cloisters were constructed with the intention of creating an amalgamation of Romanesque, Medieval, and Gothic cloisters, chapels, and gardens to house

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[3] Rachel B. Gross, "American religion at the Met Cloisters." Material Religion, no. 18, Sept. 2022. Ebscohost, https://web-p-ebscohost-com.uc.idm.oclc.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=4&sid=07fd0331-d3fd-4b77-b62abe95ecddb279%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#AN=ATLAi9KZ221114000090&db=reh.

[4] Ibid

and reflect the chronological and geographic extent of the Medieval art collection.[5] While the Cloister's purpose was purely secular, the space was designed with the reverence given to the sacred. Early sketches by Collens show not a contemporary viewer perusing the collection but a monk in blue robes, book in hand, and a beam of light diagonally transecting the composition. (Fig I) From their conception, the Met Cloisters were intended to be appraised not only for their aesthetic and historical value but also for their ability to convey Christian, not inherently Catholic, spiritualism.

Visitors first entered through the Saint-Guilhem Cloisters, inspired by late twelfth and early thirteenth-century French architecture. Here, they were met with *Look Twenty-Six* from Valentino's 2015 Fall/Winter collection inspired by the Colosseum. (Fig II) The Colosseum is recognized in the Catholic faith as a place of martyrdom during the Roman era; in 1750, Pope Benedict XVI consecrated the arena in memory of Christian martyrs.[6] It should be noted that this is an ongoing topic of debate among many historians, citing a lack of evidence on behalf of the church. The garment is a floor-length black cloak adorned with a Roman arch motif rendered in raised velvet. A visual connection is drawn between the arches on the cloak and the surrounding architectural arches. The shape of the garment replicates the structure of the arch; once a figure adorns the piece, the illusion is enhanced, with the head furthering the rounded shape of the arch. Not only does the clothing reference the architecture, but the display method also reinforces architectural principles of viewership. The mannequin is placed atop an approximately ten-foot-tall pillar, meaning the viewer may only address the garment from below or at a distance. The

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[5]Timothy Husband. "Creating the Cloisters." *Google Books*, Google, 2013, www.google.com/books/edition/Creating_The_Cloisters/p5lbloWdrisC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=charles%2Bcollens%2Bcloisters&printsec=frontcover. 10.

[6]O'Reilly, A J. The Martyrs of the Coliseum: Or, Historical Records of the Great Amphitheatre of Ancient Rome - An Early Christian History. Pantianos Classics, 1875, 127.

room is one story with no balcony, so engagement cannot be held at eye level. This creates a visual and sensory power dynamic between the observer and the observed, a dynamic that is by no means new to art; however, it is unconventional to see the observer acquiescing to the observed. This approach is standard with architecture, which has the propensity to loom over the viewer, just as the Colosseum was said to have loomed over Christians as they were martyred within. In this room, Bolton uses architecture and placement of the work to reflect the garment and its inspiration; the figure surveys the Cloister; they are unbending and unbroken, much like the famed arches of the Colosseum, which served as the muse for *Look Twenty-Six*.

The Fuentidueña Chapel is a Spanish-inspired room; while the room itself was built in the 1930s, the apse in the center of the room was constructed in Madrid in the late twelfth century to the early thirteenth century.[7] *The Apse from San Martín at Fuentidueña* has been on loan to the Met since 1957; it consists of 3300 pieces of limestone brought from the Church of San Martín at Fuentidueña, after which it was reconstructed in the Cloisters.[8] The apse is the most sacred part of a church, usually where the altar is placed and liturgical rites are held. For this most sacred of spaces, Bolton used The Fuentidueña Chapel to explore the seven sacraments displaying garments directly inspired by them.[9] The most notable garment on display is Cristobal Balenciaga's (1895-1972) acclaimed 1967 'one seam' *Wedding Dress*. (Fig III) Balenciaga's dress is widely rumored to have been constructed from one piece of silk cloth with one seam used to create the shape of the garment; in actuality, it is made of two pieces of silk with three shaping

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[7] "Apse from San Martín at Fuentidueña: Spanish." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/472507. Accessed 16 Apr. 2024.

[8] Ben Poster, director. *Highlights of the Met Cloisters*. *YouTube*, 20 Aug. 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKBCn34KZBU&t=1752s.

[9] The seven sacraments include: Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Marriage, and Holy Orders.

seams. The mannequin is placed just before the steps of the apse; there is a sense that the viewer is witnessing a moment caught in time.

Above hangs a wooden crucifix; the figure and the floor below are bathed in light, giving the illusion that Christ is shining his unbroken light upon her. The lighting is a strategic choice on behalf of the curatorial team; evidence of a spotlight can be seen in the upper left portion of the arch, this was an intentional decision made to emulate the iconography of the Holy Spirit. A sense of awe comes from this staging and the scene it creates. In Christian iconography, the Holy Spirit is "typified as a dove, or rays of light or flames."[10] This depiction of the Holy Spirit can be seen in Italian artist Fra Angelico's (1395-1455) 1435 painting *Annunciation*; in the upper left-hand corner, two hands appear to release a dove that extends a ray of light dissecting the painting, drawing a diagonal connection between God and Mary. (Fig IV) Returning once more to Balenciaga's 'one seam' *Wedding Dress*, the figures are sartorially connected; Bolton remarks, "It relates to the garments worn by Jesus at the Crucifixion, which were made from one length of fabric, so it's a nice connection to one of the main crucifixes in that space."[11] While Bolton continues to employ architecture in this portion of the exhibition, the inclusion of elements such as lighting and space serve to create an experience. Regardless of one's knowledge or adherence to catholic doctrine, there is an impression caused by the lighting and tranquility used to elevate Balenciaga's creation.

The early Gothic Hall is centered around the Cult of the Virgin, specifically garments inspired by stained glass. The early Gothic Hall features three elaborately designed thirteenth-century French stained-glass windows and displays a collection of smaller works. Light is

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[10] Diane Apostolos-cappadonna, *Dictionary of Christian Art,* Continuum, 1994, *162.*
[11] Farrell, Kate, director. *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination Gallery Views—The Met Cloisters*. *The Met*, 2018, https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2018/heavenly-bodies/video.

essential to gain the full effect of stained glass; the colors become more vibrant and the image more identifiable. The Annunciation is a favored depiction of the Virgin Mary; it is the moment when she receives the news that she will give birth to Christ and learns of his death. "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."[12] As seen in Fra Angelico's painting, a depiction of light often accompanies artistic depictions of this Biblical scene. Light is essential to the Virgin Mary and stained glass; Bolton displays the two as inextricably linked in the early Gothic Hall. *Lumière*, French for light, was designed by Jean Paul Gaultier (1952) as part of his 2007 collection *Les Vierges*, the Virgins, a collection inspired by the Virgin Mary. (Fig V) While the rest of the collection was loosely inspired by historical and contemporary depictions of the Virgin Mary, *Lumière* was cited as being directly inspired by the right panel of fifteenth-century French painter Jean Fouquet's (1420-1481) *Melun Diptych* painted in 1452. (Fig VI)

Rather than a replica of Fouquet's work, Gaultier dismantled the painting and soldered the pieces together, creating a garment resembling stained glass. Elements from the original work can be seen in the blue of the mantle, a blue-white cape, along with the large swath of blue fabric hugging the waist and the golden girdle draping down the hip. Gaultier makes a monumental change to this work. Although this comes as no shock as Gaultier is known as an agent provocateur, perhaps more surprisingly, it is the nature of his modification. Gaultier's design shows Christ reaching for his mother's breast; categorized as *Madonna Lactans*, or nursing Madonna, it is meant to show her humility and humanity. Fouquet's Christ is not interacting with his mother. Instead, he reacts to the men in the accompanying panel, even going so far as to point

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[12] *Holy Bible (KJV),* Luke 1:26-38, Thomas Nelson, 2017.

in the direction of the figure in red, Etienne Chevalier, the commissioner of the work. Saint Stephen, who appears to be gazing at the Virgin's breast, furthers the voyeuristic quality of this painting. Art historian Martha Easton writes, "It is said to be an image of Agnes Sorel, the king's [Charles VIII] mistress," whom the commissioner, Etienne Chevalier, is also rumored to have known intimately.[13] Bolton does not stop the connection to art with *Lumière* at Fouquet's *Melun Diptych*; the garment is paired with a fourteenth-century French sculpture of the *Virgin and Child*, displaying a similar bond between mother and child. (Fig VII) Both depict Mary holding clothed Christ in her right arm nestled against her hip. The *Melun Diptych* was not present during the exhibition, and therefore, viewers without prior knowledge of this work may not have seen the influence. However, by placing artworks with visual similarities, Bolton granted agency to visitors, allowing them to draw their own artistic and visual comparisons. The architecture of the space, surrounding artworks, and the use of thematic elements converge to amplify the artistic and design elements of Gaultier's *Lumière*.

The concept of displaying articles of clothing in a museum setting is by no stretch of the imagination groundbreaking. Last year, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston held an exhibition, *Fashioned by Sargent*, which showed fifty paintings by American Painter John Singer Sargent (1856–1925) and approximately a dozen articles of period-accurate garments which served as inspiration for the garments rendered in the paintings.[14] In 2022, the Taft Museum displayed costumes from the 2005 movie adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*; some were shown in a line,

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[13] Martha Easton. “Was It Good for You Too? Medieval Erotic Art and Its Audiences.” Semantic Scholar, 2008, www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Was-It-Good-For-You-Too-Medieval-Erotic-Art-and-Its-Easton/dd2012080cabddc6ca10df0e6a282e2c58fc37e6, 13. By redesigning the depiction of Mary, Gaultier was able to take a once anachronistic depiction and place it in line with gothic representations of the Virgin Mary. These representations are reflected in the surrounding artworks displayed in the early Gothic Hall of the Met Cloisters.

[14] https://mfa.org/exhibition/fashioned-by-sargent

and others were exhibited throughout the house.[15] What differentiates these examples from *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination* is the methods Andrew Bolton used to take advantage of human senses through the lighting of the spaces and the layout, the music playing in the galleries, and even the earthy smell of centuries-old stone to create amplify the aura of the garments to transposes clothing from something one wears to something one regards. These garments have an aura.

Walking through a museum, A work of art might beckon a viewer from across the gallery. Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) might describe this as a work's aura. As Benjamin defines in his 1935 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, the aura is an object's "presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."[16] In his essay, Benjamin is concerned with the devaluation of artwork due to technological advances in photography and film in the early twentieth century. For as many times as the object is replicated, it loses that much more of its aura. As a result, it becomes commoditized, and its intrinsic cultural identity is negated. Many of the garments shown in the exhibitions came from haute couture houses; the criteria to be considered a haute couture house require an atelier, or workshop, that employs fifteen or more full-time staff and twenty full-time technical workers. The designs must be made to order for private clients who must undergo at least more than one private fitting. Lastly, the house must produce fifty designs annually every January and July. The garments could be replicated, but they would never be identical; each garment would have its own aura. The hierarchal system of an haute couture house is not unlike that of a Renaissance painter's workshop; these workshops would have a master painter who would train apprentices to

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[15] https://www.taftmuseum.org/jane-austen

[16] Walter Benjamin. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1935, web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/benjamin.pdf. 2

complete aspects of the painting. There would also be patrons who would commission works, and while an artist might have had a formula for an Annunciation painting, each would be uniquely created for its commissioner based on the requirements given.

Benjamin raises an exciting point concerning the dichotomy between objects of cult value versus objects of exhibition value.[17] Benjamin would argue that a cult object's value is granted on the pretense that it is created, exists, holds spiritual significance, and need not be seen regularly to be valued. Objects of exhibition value are as such because they are created to be seen frequently and by many. This polarity raises an interesting question when discussing The Vatican collection, an assortment of garments worn by previous Popes including chasubles, mantles, and dalmatics. (Fig VIII) The Met was granted access via the Vatican, with two thousand eighteen marks the first and only time these items were displayed outside the walls of the Vatican.[18] These garments belong to the Vatican's sanctity and are used by the Pope today, meaning they serve a religious purpose. These garments align with Benjamin's characteristics for cult value in that they are not created for display but for ritual significance. There is scarce photographic replication and information on the Met's website regarding these objects, further lending to the cult characterization of the items. Nevertheless, this exhibition marked a turning point where objects of cult value became objects of exhibition value. Stationary holy objects were removed from their context and commodified for public consumption. Heavenly Bodies as a concept has cult value in the nature of its theme, fashion and the Catholic imagination. It was not meant to be seen by all, yet its existence was to be known. Paradoxically, this is an exhibition. The very

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[17] Walter Benjamin. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1935, web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/benjamin.pdf. 4

[18] America, Media, director. *Meet the Curator of the Met's New Heavenly Bodies Exhibit*. *YouTube*, America Media, 21 Sept. 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jXxmXLrvokk. Accessed 12 Mar. 2024.

nature of Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination was created to be seen; otherwise, would it have been conceived?

It should be noted that despite the record-breaking attendance and rave reviews from publications such as *The New York Times*, *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination* was not without its critics. It should come as no shock that where religion goes, controversy follows. On June 9th, 2018, over 600 people protested the sexually explicit clothing displayed in an exhibition so closely tied to the Catholic faith.[19] There were mounting concerns surrounding the appropriation of Catholic iconography in the pursuit of fashion. However, it should be noted that many of the designers came from Catholic upbringings, as did Andrew Bolton. Robert Orsi, a religious studies scholar, voiced his concern that while the exhibition touched on themes of gender and sex in Catholicism, there was no mention of the widescale abuse by the hands of church officials.[20]

There is also the prevailing issue of who has a seat at the table. In her article *American religion at the met cloisters*, Rachel Gross writes,

> Nearly all the featured designers were white men from Europe and the United States… The specially manufactured mannequins—with closed eyes and chins tilted slightly upward, gesturing toward a mood of reverence and worshipful repose—were also literally white, a visual assertion of an imagined racially homogenous Catholicism.[21]

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[19]William Gossett. "Protest at the Met: It Feels Good to Be Catholic Again!" *The American TFP*, 18 Dec. 2018, www.tfp.org/protest-at-met-good-to-be-catholic-again/.

[20]Robert Orsi. "Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue, Something Dead." *SSRC The Immanent Frame*, The Immanent Frame, 11 Sept. 2019, tif.ssrc.org/2018/09/21/something-old-something-new-something-borrowed-something-blue-something-dead/.

[21] Rachel B. Gross, "American religion at the Met Cloisters." Material Religion, no. 18, Sept. 2022. Ebscohost, https://web-p-ebscohost-com.uc.idm.oclc.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=4&sid=07fd0331-d3fd-4b77-b62abe95ecddb279%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#AN=ATLAi9KZ221114000090&db=reh.480

Gross' assertion on the male-dominated nature of the designers is further shown in the hierarchy of the Catholic church, especially considering only men can be ordained. However, many mannequins and garments were designed for the 'female' figure; in the cloisters alone, there were two rooms dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The rationale for highlighting the controversy of *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination* was not to discredit the work of Andrew Bolton or the designers, nor to diminish the exhibition, but rather to showcase the similarities between art and fashion in that they have been and will continue to be controversial, certainly in a museum setting, and absolutely when religion is concerned.

Fashion design has long been looked upon as a frivolous commercial endeavor. Karl Lagerfeld, the eponymous subject of the previous year's exhibition *of Karl Lagerfeld: A Line of Beauty*, believed art and fashion to be two separate entities.[22] In a *New York Times Article*, Lagerfeld succinctly clarified his thoughts on the matter: "Art is art. Fashion is Fashion." [23] However, *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination* was able to implement the architecture and aura of the Met cloisters, curatorial methods of display, and surrounding artworks to create a visual, experiential, and cultural throughline for the visitor to change how they experience clothing and how they might perceive it as an art form. The garments in the collection and the collection itself had an aura, a contradictory one at that, but perhaps one that captured the artistic imagination. For all the exhibition's ardent praise, it received warranted skepticism. Yet, the fact remains that over 1,659,647 visitors interacted with garments from the Vatican Collections, various design houses, artworks from the Met's collection, *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination* was able to show museums how fashion design could be

[22] https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/a-line-of-beauty/visiting-guide#
[23] Carol Vogel, “An Ad for Chanel, with an Artistic Mission.” New York Times, July 24, 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/24/arts/24iht-24zaha.14742206.html.

displayed in their galleries not just as a comparative piece but as a work of art deserving of equal merit, works that can stand on their own, perhaps with the help of a few mannequins.

Figures

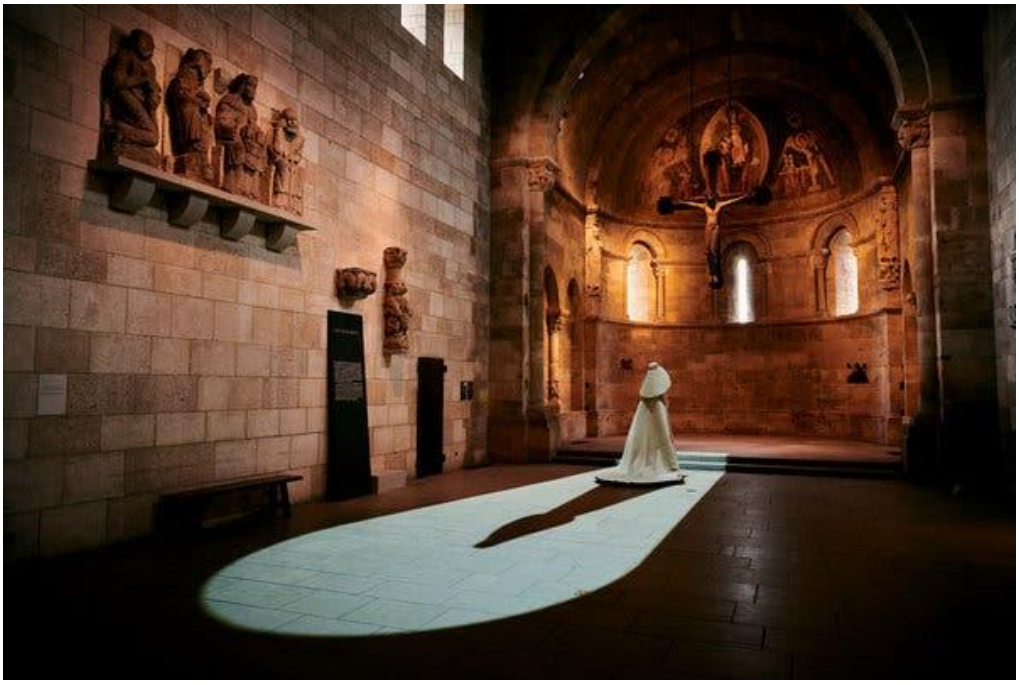
Fig. I

Charles Collens, rendering of gallery for fragments from the cloister of Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, 1933. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY.

Fig. II

Valentino, *Ensembles* (Fall/Winter 2015–2016) in the St. Guilhem Cloister. Photograph by Risham Majeed.

Fig. III



Balenciaga, Cristobal. ‘One seam’ *Wedding Dress*. Silk. 1967. In the Fuentidueña Chapel. Credit.Vincent Tullo for The New York Times, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Fig. IV

Angelico, Fra. *Annunciation*. Tempura on panel.1435. 154 cm × 194 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Fig. V

Gaultier, Jean Paul. *Lumière.* 2007. House of Gaultier, Paris. In the early Gothic Hall. Photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Fig. VI

Fouquet, Jean. *Melun Diptych,* Circa 1452, Oil on wood. 186 cm x 170 cm. Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp.

Fig. VII

French. *Virgin and Child*. Circa 1340-50, 172.7 × 58 × 28.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Fig. VIII

The Keys of Saint Peter (left,) *Zimarra and fascia* (middle), *Zucchetto and shoes* of John Paul II (right) in the Vatican section of the Met exhibition, Credit. Agaton Strom for The New York Times, Metropolitain Museum of Art, New York.

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