



The Museum at FIT

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Museum information line: 212 217.4558

Force of Nature

May 30–November 18, 2017

Curated by Melissa Marra

Supplemental I-pad content by Javier Alvarez

exhibitions.fitnyc.edu/force-of-nature

#ForceOfNature

#MuseumatFIT

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Cover: Alexander McQueen, dress detail, Plato's Atlantis collection, spring 2010, England.



FORCE OF NATURE

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FORCE OF NATURE

Leonardo da Vinci once said that “those who are inspired by a model other than Nature, a mistress above all masters, are laboring in vain.” Nature has inspired both art and fashion for hundreds of years. Fashion designers often reference the natural world — its flora and fauna, geology, and physical processes — to create wildly imaginative designs. As Alexander McQueen said, “I have always loved the mechanics of nature, and to a greater or lesser extent my work is always informed by that.”



1.

Force of Nature examines the complex relationship between fashion and the natural world. The exhibition reveals how nature has historically influenced fashion, and how fashion can serve as an indicator of society’s relationship with the natural world. In eighteenth century Europe, for example, nature became an object of renewed fascination as a result of overseas exploration. This fascination found expression in garments that featured depictions of exotic plants and animals.

Spanning the eighteenth century to the present, the exhibition is organized into ten sections, each focusing on a facet of fashion’s connection to nature. Garments, textiles, and accessories, exclusively from the collection of The Museum at FIT, illustrate how principles in the natural sciences, such as the dynamics of sexual attraction, have informed fashion design. Elaborately feathered women’s hats, for example, show how the plumage male birds use for sexual display has been appropriated to emphasize female beauty.

Naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), often considered the father of ecology, characterized the vast diversity of nature as an interconnected global force. He also believed that imagination was essential to experiencing and understanding nature. Therefore, *Force of Nature* begins with a series of garments that demonstrate this diversity and the creativity it inspires. Included are a mesmerizing “water” dress by Iris van Herpen that appears to splash away from the body and an ensemble by Rick Owens that was inspired by the mighty, prehistoric mastodon.



2.

During the Enlightenment, as naturalists classified newly identified plant species, exotic botanic gardens flourished throughout Europe. These gardens inspired the work of textile designers, who began to depict flowers from around the world. The sexuality of plants and the symbolism of flowers such as roses and orchids have also been explored through dress. An evening gown by Charles James with a petal-like stole bestows upon its wearer a sensual elegance by transforming her into a flower. A pair of shoes by Pierre Hardy challenges traditional representations of flowers by rendering realistic images of lilies in saccharine, artificial colors.

The bold patterns of animal skins have been appropriated by fashion designers for their strong visual impact and erotic appeal. However, these patterns are often employed in a manner that contradicts their evolved purpose in the natural world. The striking patterns that serve to camouflage animals in the wild are often used in fashion as a way to stand out. The undeniable beauty of birds and the phenomenon of metamorphosis, the most radical form of change in nature, have also fueled the imagination of many fashion designers.

Nature was the subject of intense study during the nineteenth century, with everything from ocean life to microorganisms under examination. This led to the appropriation of natural objects as a form of adornment. Scientist and artist Ernst Haeckel illustrated his discoveries using the microscope in *Art Forms in Nature* (1899–1904), a book that influenced artists and designers. Nature’s geometric shapes and forms have continued to inspire designers such as Christian Dior and more recently the design trio ThreeASFOUR.



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In 1863, Charles Baudelaire drew comparisons between fashion and the natural world, describing changes in fashion to be “as elaborately articulated as they are in the animal kingdom.” In an 1872 essay, Charles Darwin’s son George Darwin directly compared changes in dress to evolution by natural selection. Few principles of modern scientific thought have had as wide an impact as the theory of evolution, and fashion designers, in turn, have addressed evolution in their collections. Alexander McQueen’s spring 2009 collection *Natural Dis-Tinction, Un-Natural Selection* contemplated the notion of survival of the fittest, in addition to the “deleterious results of industrialization on the natural world.”

Discoveries relating to celestial bodies, the greater universe, and the physical forces that created them have also led to extraordinary designs. Electric force is conveyed in an ensemble by Arzu Kaprol that features an image of lightning and conveys a sense of strength and power.

The natural world has influenced fashion in positive ways, but fashion’s impact on the environment has been largely detrimental. However, this relationship is changing, with many designers engaging in more sustainable practices. This shift indicates a new attitude toward nature, from one of dominion to participation. Science and technology play key roles in transforming this relationship, as evidenced by designer interest in biomimicry (employing design principles that imitate nature’s processes) and biomaterials that are grown using biological organisms. *Force of Nature* closes with an examination of this emerging dynamic, encouraging a vital discussion about future directions in fashion.

Melissa Marra, curator

Pictured:

1. M.A. O’Connell, dress, circa 1888, USA.
2. Alexander McQueen, dress, Horn of Plenty collection, fall 2009, England.
3. Pierre Hardy, shoes, summer 2015, France.
4. Charles James, Tree evening dress and Petal stole, 1955, USA.
5. Rick Owens, ensemble, Mastodon collection, fall 2016, USA.
6. Patrick Kelly, dress, spring 1988, USA.
7. Arzu Kaprol, evening ensemble, fall 2014, Turkey.



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#ForceOfNature