

***I Do: The Marriage of Fashion and Art.* Indianapolis Museum of Art. June 11, 2006-February 25, 2007.¹**

Reviewed by Carrie Hertz

Unveiled during the height of the Midwestern United States' wedding season, the Indianapolis Museum of Art (IMA) recently ended its beautiful exhibition of "nuptial attire," *I Do: The Marriage of Fashion and Art*. Inaugurating the newly renovated and expanded Paul Fashion and Textile Arts galleries, *I Do* displayed nearly 50 items of adornment from the United States, England, China, Japan, Indonesia, India, Iran, and Africa. The installation, divided between two galleries, clearly separated Western and non-Western dress to stunning visual effect; American and English gowns, like white and pastel pieces of cake, appeared luminous against pale pink walls, while the gallery of non-Western garments, in comparison, offered a brilliant array of vivid color and form. The separation, a standard art historical approach, though aesthetically revealing also anticipates the different standards applied to the constructed categories.

In the Western gallery, full-form mannequins sculpted the gowns into three-dimensional shape. Labels provided information about the designer and the item's ability to represent particular moments in fashion history or the cultural milieu. The label for an 1875 English gown with silk orange blossoms trimming the sleeves and bodice, for example, reveals that the flowers, a "Chinese symbol of fertility," indicate the West's growing interest in Eastern design during the 19th century. Accompanying a number of the minimal labels were additional contextualizing materials such as photographs of the owner wearing the displayed gown in her wedding portrait or reproduced pages from fashion magazines recommending similar dress styles. A 1975 gown donated by G. Vance Smith included a reproduced, handwritten letter from the donor explaining the provenance of the garment and its continued use as an "evening gown" by removing the more formal train. An Indianapolis society newspaper clipping, another interesting inclusion, provided a contemporary description of the gown and wedding of socialite Caroline Ella Buford Danner that commenced at the Buford Mansion in Indianapolis. These materials lead the viewer beyond a simple appreciation of form by infusing the garments with a sense of individual choice and creative innovation. A casual scan of the gallery showed a diverse group of dresses chronologically arranged and connected to individual, named, and often pictured women whose informed, stylistic choices are celebrated. The wedding portraits and descriptions placed the gowns within a larger context of the material culture of a recognizable marriage ceremony by revealing the assemblage of adornment (such as hair, makeup, and accessories) and ritual accoutrements.

Entering the gallery of non-Western items, the format of the display changed. While every garment in the adjoining installation space was showcased to maximum advantage on full-form mannequins with paper-cut hair consistent with the era of the dress, non-Western pieces appeared on partial or two-dimensional mannequins, hung flat against walls, and framed. The formal beauty of a 19th-century silk Punjabi wedding veil may be best observed on a single

¹ Posted to *Museum Anthropology Review* April 30, 2007. See: <http://museumanthropology.wordpress.com/2007/04/30/mar-2007-1-19/>. © 2007 Carrie Hertz.

plane. However, as an exhibit of ritual apparel, many of the display techniques for this portion of the installation masked how the items were worn on the body or fit into larger ensembles. The few ethnographic photographs affixed to the walls presented a normative picture of nameless – and occasionally faceless – people. Understandably, the legacy of ethnographic materials in art history collections lack contextualizing information about makers, wearers, or cultural milieu. Such a legacy can pose substantial obstacles for the curators who inherit it. The stark contrast, however, between the active choices of G. Vance Smith celebrated in the adjoining gallery and the “traditional” expressions of the “Chodor people” of Turkmenistan, for example, present an imbalanced and inappropriate comparison. More confusing is the inconsistent definition of “wedding apparel.”

I Do does not include a main label, but print material distributed with the IMA visitor map explains that the exhibit “celebrates the international traditions of the marriage rite as seen in stunning wedding gowns and other nuptial attire.” While the Western-centered gallery presents only ritual garments (the Western wedding gown), the non-Western installation includes “trousseau” items and clothing that simply indicates the wearer has reached marriageable age such as an exquisitely red and black “beaded bodice” from Sudan (Dinka people) that, according to the label, is actually removed at the time of marriage. Textiles identified as the mid-19th century creations of the Shahrizabz people of Uzbekistan are not garments at all but “hangings, bridal bed covers, or room dividers” that constitute part of a woman’s dowry. These inclusions, while lavishly and skillfully decorated—certainly worthy of display—only enhance the feeling of incommensurability between the two galleries. Conceptualizations of marriage and wedding ceremonies are not universal and *I Do* would have benefited from either more careful object selections or more explanatory text. By neglecting the social and cultural perspectives that enliven the non-Western items of *I Do*, the exhibit not only rejects the very parameters set by its stated objectives, it does a disservice to a collection of fantastically beautiful objects.

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