

# ELLE

## The Provocateur: Jean Paul Gaultier

On the opening of his first retrospective, at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the legendary Parisian designer and the exhibition's curator reflect on some of the most memorable pieces from his illustrious career.

BY SUZANNE WEINSTOCK | JUNE 16, 2011

 Like

 Tweet

37



PREV

1 of 14  
AUTOPLAY

NEXT

"At first, I did not want to make exhibition because for me a retrospective is for a funeral—and I am alive!" Jean Paul Gaultier says about the first international exhibit devoted to his work, opening at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. "But instead of putting it together chronologically, it is almost like a new collection."

Photo:

TAGS: JEAN PAUL GAULTIER | FASHION



The exhibit, which spans the 35 years of Gaultier's career, is instead grouped into six thematic rooms: an introduction to his favorite themes, the boudoir, skin and nudity, punk cancan (a fusion of Parisian chic and punk rock London), a multicultural urban jungle, and futurism. The result is a dizzying explosion of Gaultier's most creative fashion feats in fashion and pop culture told through images, video, and, of course, clothing. "I don't like dreams or reality. I like when dreams become reality because that is my life," Gaultier says of the result. The exhibit, curated by Thierry-Maxime Loriot, opens June 17 and runs through October 2 before traveling to Dallas, San Francisco, Madrid, and Rotterdam. Here, Gaultier and Loriot discuss just a few of the gems it includes.

Photo:



"As I child, I sketched two collections a year, for fun," Jean Paul Gaultier says about his formative years. "Doing fashion drawings was the only way I had to express myself when I was a teenager. I made a lot of sketches that, in hindsight, I now find clumsy and sometimes crude. I was full of ideas but no real style or technique. I soon realized that there is a world of difference between a silhouette drawn on paper and the reality of a garment on a three-dimensional body." Left: Jean Paul Gaultier and his maternal grandmother, Marie, about 1958

Photo: © DR/Archives Jean Paul Gaultier





"For me the Virgins collection is one of the best collections of Gaultier, one of the most spectacular," says curator Thierry-Maxime Loriet. The exhibit opens with a series of dresses from this collection. "It is not about using Christianity as much as it is about the beauty of religious icons. His inspirations come from everywhere, but you have to see these dresses up close to see all the work, the craftsmanship in his tailoring. He is a virtuoso of mixing fabrics—like on the bustier you cannot see on the image, but part of it is made with holograms and the 'céleste' print is also created by Gaultier." Left: *Les Vierges* [Virgins] collection, *Apparitions* dress, haute couture spring-summer 2007

Photo: © Patrice Stable/Jean Paul Gaultier



"The origin of the stripes is a combination of many things, but first and foremost, a childhood memory," recounts Gaultier. "My mother dressed me in sailor-striped sweaters. They go with everything, never go out of style, and probably never will. There were also other influences: my grandmother, Coco Chanel, Jean Genet, Popeye, Tom of Finland, Rainer Fassbinder and his film *Querelle*, the title character of which was the ultimate sailor, a hyper-sexualized gay symbol, a fantasy, an icon, a form of virility that could be ambiguous. With their tattoos, sailors are also associated with the bad-boy image. The uniforms are so gorgeous and can be very elegant. I particularly like sailor pants, which I've adapted in many of my men's and women's collections." Left: *Les Indes galantes* [Romantic India] collection, *Lascar* dress, haute couture spring-summer 2000



TAGS: JEAN PAUL GAULTIER | FASHION



Gaultier continues: "When I started in fashion, I had already adopted the sailor-striped sweater as my uniform; that way, I wouldn't have to drive myself crazy trying to figure out what to wear. I've worked variations of stripes and the sailor uniform into each of my haute couture and prêt-à-porter women's collections before designing my first men's collection. Then at one time, I was going to London pretty often, where men were dressing in a sexier way. I wondered what erotic clothes for men would look like. For the Boy Toy collection, my first prêt-à-porter collection for men, I reinterpreted the sailor-striped sweater by giving it an open back, which was considered disrespectful! In the studio, we had cut out the back of a striped Breton sailor top on a mannequin for something else, leaving only the back of the neck and the band at the bottom. It was this creative accident that I used for the runway show." Left: *L'Homme-objet* [Boy Toy] collection, men's prêt-à-porter spring-summer 1984



"I actually made my first cone-shaped breasts out of newsprint for my teddy bear Nana," Gaultier says about the origin of this corset Madonna wore on her *Blond Ambition* tour. "Some people saw my work as a form of provocation, which in certain respects was true. My designs corresponded to the desires of the time, and I never deliberately tried to shock, even if I was aware that my clothes would create a stir. I'm still astounded by some people's reaction to things I consider quite normal." Left: Body corset worn by Madonna, *Blond Ambition World Tour*, 1990; *Dazed & Confused*, April 2008

Photo: © Emil Larsson





"This look is presented in the X-rated section of the show, where sexuality and his openness to it is evoked," Lorient explains. "Gaultier often gave power to women through clothes, and this piece from the Hussardes collection is not a print but is a jacquard tissé, which is an amazing technique that clearly show the virtuosity in his work—but also how he pushes his imagination to the extreme." Left: *Les Hussardes* [Hussars] collection, *Incognito* ensemble, haute couture fall-winter 2002

Photo: © Patrice Stable/Jean Paul Gaultier



"Jean Paul Gaultier worked a lot on the trompe-l'oeil idea, in his ready-to-wear, couture, and artistic collaboration, like for this Almodovar movie," Lorient says. "Gaultier says that 'as the garment is a second skin, I wanted to re-create a real second skin for the body. Our body, the way we present ourselves—it's a form of communication. Our clothing, hair and body decoration reflect our true identity.'" Left: Jean Paul Gaultier costume sketch for Gael García Bernal's character in *Bad Education* (*La mala educación*), directed by Pedro Almodóvar, 2004

Photo: © Jean Paul Gaultier



TAGS: JEAN PAUL GAULTIER | FASHION

"The Parisienne is the woman I know best, but it's also possible I still haven't actually met her!" jokes Gaultier. "I've designed many runway shows, both for my haute couture and prêt-à-porter collections, around the theme of Paris, its female icons and characters, its monuments and neighborhoods. It was Jacques Becker's film *Falbalas* that made me want to become a designer. The Parisienne in that film, portrayed by Micheline Presle, was the first I saw going around wearing couture outfits—she was so inspiring. Later, I knew young women who had a really unusual style, like Edwige, queen of the punks, whom I met in the Halles district, Farida, the rebels, the girls of Studio Berçot, with their attitude and their red lipstick. These are my Parisiennes, the ones who have influenced my style." Left: *French Cancan* collection, women's prêt-à-porter, fall-winter 1991–92



"Ethnicity is part of my work definitely," Gaultier says. "I was lucky because my parents were very open-minded. I learned there are lots of different types of beauty. And not just the beauty of the person but the beauty of the culture. In reality, maybe I steal things because I see things that I find beautiful and I take them with me." Left: The Great Journey collection, women's prêt-à-porter fall-winter 1994–95

Photo: © P. Stable / Jean Paul Gaultier





"Gaultier worked a lot with the camouflage pattern through the years from the very first collection," Lorient says about this dress that Sarah Jessica Parker wore to the MTV Movie Awards in 2000. "He always loved the idea of giving a second life to vintage clothes, to 'gaultierize' them, by adding his own touch and giving them a new life." Left: *Les Indes galantes* [Romantic India] collection, *Durbar* dress, haute couture spring-summer 2000

Photo: © P. Stable/Jean Paul Gaultier



"When you think of a movie like *The Fifth Element*, Gaultier did more than a thousand costumes," Lorient says, explaining why the designer's costume design features prominently in the exhibit. "So a thousand costumes is like 10 collections but all for one movie. It's an incredible amount of work people don't even know about. For a thousand costumes, he may have even done 5,000 sketches before narrowing it down. Including costumes wasn't even a question." Left: Milla Jovovich (Leeloo) in *The Fifth Element*, 1997



Themes appear over and over throughout Gaultier's career if you look across his couture, ready-to-wear, film, and stage work, points out Lorient, naming the cage dress as a perfect example. "If you see film *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover*, by Peter Greenaway, with Helen Mirren in the cage dress in 1989, and then after that you see the Snow White ballet from Angelin Preljocaj in 2008—then in the Cages collection, you can really see the evolution of Gaultier's vocabulary." Left: *Les Cages* [Cages] collection, *Calligraphie* dress, haute couture fall-winter 2008–09

Photo: © Patrice Stable/Jean Paul Gaultier