

A CULTURE TRIP

We round up the very best fashion and textile museums in the UK, whether you're after a look back in time, or something altogether more contemporary.

Written by Sarah Dawson.

Fashion is as much about looking back as it is about moving forwards – indeed, we've all seen familiar trends (including the ones we'd much rather forget!) return to the high street, reinvented and reimagined for a new generation. So, where better to look for sewing and style inspiration than one of the many fashion and costume museums in the UK? Their diverse displays are where fashion and history collide; where you might get the chance to admire 18th-Century ball gowns alongside 1960s mini dresses and on-trend designer pieces; where clothes from the past are given new meaning with personal stories from the people who wore them; and where ground-breaking exhibitions explore the innovations yet to come in the future. Here, we take a peek behind the scenes at three iconic museums – The V&A, Fashion Museum Bath, and The Bowes Museum – to discover what goes into curating their fashion exhibitions.

A dramatic Vivienne Westwood gown, inspired by 18th-Century dress, on display at the V&A.

The V&A's Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion show celebrated the iconic designer's influence on modern fashion.



THE V&A, LONDON

The Victoria and Albert Museum, aka the V&A, stands proudly in South Kensington's museum district and is home to over 5,000 years of art and design, featuring everything from ancient Japanese suits of armour to Art Deco teapots.

Boasting a truly outstanding, world-class collection of historical fashion spanning five centuries, the V&A is a dream come true for fashion lovers. It's no exaggeration to say that there really is something for every taste and passion here, whether you're interested in grand 18th-Century mantua court gowns, breathtaking eveningwear from the 1930s, iconic fashion pieces from the Swinging Sixties or modern designs from some of the country's most ground-breaking designers. You'll also find jaw-dropping pieces from key fashion houses including Chanel, Dior and Balenciaga – which are all even more dazzling up close – plus a collection of wedding fashion through the ages, extraordinary examples of the most exquisite embroidery, and a comprehensive display of accessories and jewellery that is guaranteed to spark off some creative inspiration.

The V&A is known for its trailblazing fashion exhibitions, and one of its latest shows, titled Fashioned From Nature, on until 27th January 2019, is no exception. Presenting high-fashion clothing alongside natural history specimens, innovative fabrics and dyeing processes, it invites us to consider the materials of fashion and the sources, and the sustainability, of our clothes. Its curator, Edwina Ehrman, aims to "dispel the idea that sustainable fashion is boring and worthy. Here visitors can see striking and desirable fashions created by Stella McCartney in viscose made from wood pulp from sustainably managed, certified forests in Sweden, and G-Star RAW's Cradle to Cradle gold standard certified denim."

The exhibition takes us on a chronological style journey from 1600 to the present day, and includes the environmental impact of each piece. "In the historical periods I took my lead from the trends of the time, such as the vogue for printed cotton and fine muslin in the 18th Century, and for furs in the 19th," explains Edwina, "but the fabrics are the focus of the object labels. They explain what the materials are, how they were produced and what effect, if any, their manufacture and use had on the environment." It's not all about historical dress, though – for the modern section of the display, Edwina chose garments and accessories "that show solutions to the environmental challenges that the fashion industry has created.

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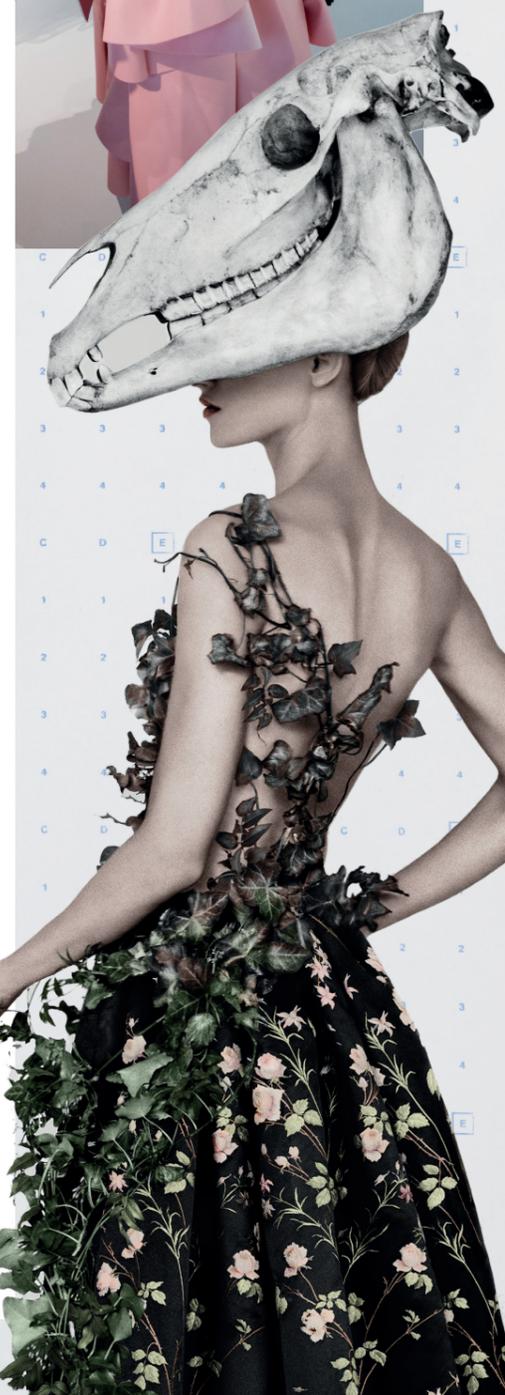
Together, the fashions represent a range of different approaches to sustainable design. Colour and high fashion values also informed which pieces I selected."

For Edwina, creating an exciting exhibition is not just about the individual pieces, but also how they all work together, both visually and historically. "Every object should carry the exhibition narrative, but they also should look great together or visitors will pay them scant attention! You also need a few stand-out or unexpected pieces, such as the 175cm-wide court dress trimmed with ermine fur from the 1770s, which is displayed alongside a taxidermy specimen of a stoat whose white winter coat is used for ermine. Objects like this provoke conversations and entice our visitors to look a little closer."

Where? Cromwell Road, South Kensington, London, SW7 2RL.

How much? Admission is free, although some exhibitions and events carry a separate charge, including Fashioned From Nature.

See more: www.vam.ac.uk



FASHION MUSEUM BATH

With its UNESCO World Heritage Site status and Georgian architecture, the beautiful city of Bath has plenty to offer for a relaxing mini-break or day out. As well as the world-famous Roman Baths and dramatic abbey, the city is home to one of the world's leading fashion museums. The Fashion Museum Bath has a fascinating, extensive collection of historic and contemporary dress, all housed in the grand setting of the city's Assembly Rooms – amongst Bath's finest Georgian buildings.

The museum's ongoing A History of Fashion in 100 Objects display showcases 100 star pieces from its 100,000-strong archive. Each era-defining outfit or accessory perfectly captures a moment in time and tells the story

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in polythene and freeze it for several days, as this eradicates any insect activity. We then re-introduce it to the collection area and monitor to make sure the problem doesn't come up again."

Keeping the garments in a good condition for future generations to enjoy is a labour of love for the Fashion Museum team. "Fashion touches everyone's lives, to a greater or lesser extent, and to be able to show and share real fashions from days gone by is a delight and a privilege," Rosemary enthuses. "Visitors enjoy seeing dress from the past, whether that is a bright yellow 18th-Century silk dress (a style which might have been worn in Georgian Bath) or the latest ensemble straight off the catwalk from Paris, like our 'We Should All be Feminists Now' T-shirt. Both of these are vastly different looks, worn at very different times in

(and, indeed, our own wardrobes!), keeping moths at bay is an ever-present concern, says the museum's manager Rosemary Harden. "Like a lot of other museums, we run an IPM (integrated pest management) programme, which involves monitoring both store and display spaces with insect traps. We check these regularly and if we find more than seven moth in a trap we know we have to look for a garment that is particularly attractive to moths – more often than not something incorporating feathers, or fur or wool. Once we have located a possible garment, we bag it



history, but both say something about the time in which they were made, and at the same time about personal choice and style." Rosemary's current pick from the museum's collection is "the beautiful silver metal thread embroidered purple silk evening dress, which was designed by Paris fashion house Doeuillet and chosen by Queen Alexandra as a part of her royal wardrobe in around about 1910. It's on display in our current exhibition, Royal Women, and it just glitters and sparkles – pure queenly magnificence!" On until the end of April 2019, the display charts the fashion worn by female members of the British monarchy and the important statements these made. **Where?** Assembly Rooms, Bennett Street, Bath, BA1 2QH. **How much?** Tickets cost £9 for adults, £8 for seniors and £7 for children aged 6-16. **See more:** www.fashionmuseum.co.uk

Photos: www.fashionmuseum.co.uk



Museum manager Rosemary's current favourite piece is a lilac evening dress (left) from the Royal Women exhibition.

The Bowes Museum's latest exhibition brings together cutting-edge garments and Chris Moore's revolutionary catwalk photography.



THE BOWES MUSEUM, COUNTY DURHAM

The Bowes Museum, in the historic Teesdale market town of Barnard Castle, was built in the 19th Century. This grand, French-style chateau houses an impressive collection belonging to John and Joséphine Bowes, which has been added to throughout the centuries. Alongside beautiful paintings, ceramics and furniture, you'll find its huge dress and textile collection, now housed in a permanent gallery. Using cutting-edge display methods, you can get a 360-degree view of the garments on show as you walk through a dazzling timeline of fashion. With women's, men's and children's clothing from the late 18th Century right up until the 1960s, expect a comprehensive trip through time as you take in the various displays. Highlights include heavenly 20th-Century haute couture designs by Madeleine Vionnet, wedding dresses, and an outfit that once belonged to Empress Eugénie, one of the 19th Century's biggest fashion icons.

The garments on display are just a small percentage of the Bowes Museum archive, says Joanna Hashagen, curator of fashion and

textiles there. "The displays are chronological and chosen depending on what themes I want to present or what points I want to illustrate. Another criteria is the condition of the object; whether it is too fragile, or whether it requires conservation treatment. I like to choose items that have a provenance, so there is a history to tell – about who they belonged to, where they were worn and who wore them, and so on. The reserve collection is stored in wardrobes or packed in boxes, and stores are monitored in the same way as display cases." The pieces on show are treated with the utmost care to preserve them, with the temperature and lighting kept just so. "The display garments are mounted on conservation-grade materials, including acrylic, which are fitted so they fully support the garment," explains Joanna. "We monitor the temperature and humidity using radio-controlled sensors in the display cases, which also protects objects from dust, and the lighting is reduced to 50 lux to protect dyes from fading. We have sticky traps to monitor if there is any insect activity, too."

Joanna is the curator behind the museum's latest exhibition, Catwalking: Fashion through the Lens of Chris Moore. This is a blockbuster of a show, spread over three large galleries and bringing together 230 of Chris Moore's revolutionary images that tell the story of the evolution of fashion better than any book can. Alongside these amazing pictures you'll find 40 original catwalk outfits from some of the world's biggest fashion houses, from Yves Saint Laurent to Alexander McQueen,

including two of Joanna's many favourite garments: "A Jean Paul Gaultier dress from 1995, paid for by The Friends of the Museum and bought at auction, and a Dior designed by Maria Grazia Chiuri from spring/summer 2017, bought new from Dior with funding from the Art Fund." This exhibition really is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see seminal fashion pieces all under one roof, so make sure you visit before it closes on 6th January 2019.

Where? Barnard Castle, Co Durham, DL12 8NP. **How much?** An annual pass, with unlimited entry to both The Bowes Museum and the temporary exhibitions, costs £14 for adults and £12 for concessions. **See more:** www.thebowesmuseum.org.uk



Photo: www.thebowesmuseum.org.uk