

‘Manus x Machina’ Is Another Record Setter for the Metropolitan Museum

Ben Davis, September 6, 2016



A costume is displayed during the press preview of the Metropolitan Museum of Arts Costume Institute spring 2016 exhibition "Manus x Machina: Fashion in an Age of Technology." JEWEL SAMAD/AFP/Getty Images.

The people have spoken. And what do the people want to see at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the most influential art museum in the United States? If you guessed painting, or sculpture, or even flashy contemporary art, you guessed wrong. The answer is very, very expensive dresses.

The Met announced today that "Manus x Machina: Fashion in the Age of Technology" notched in as its seventh most visited show of all time after closing over Labor Day weekend. More than three quarters of a million visitors—752,995 to be exact—turned out to see the Andrew Bolton-curated Costume Institute show dedicated to the use of technology in high fashion.

The museum even offered extended hours on September 2-3, staying open until midnight to feed the hunger to see high-end design by the likes of Karl Lagerfeld, Iris van Herpen, and “Coco” Chanel.

Like other recent Costume Institute extravaganzas, “Manus x Machina” was presented as an event, with installation design from Rem Koolhaas’s OMA architects. The affair was sponsored by Apple, representing a first dip into cultural funding for the technology giant.

The show received generally positive reviews. Few can doubt that the wildly inventive examples of couture on view count as “art.”

The news, however, does increasingly make it appear as if the Fashion Institute tail is wagging the Met Museum dog.

Last year’s “China: Through the Looking Glass” also made headlines as the Met’s fifth most visited show of all time. Hype was so intense that the show took on a second life as a documentary, *The First Monday in May*, which opened this year’s Tribeca Film Festival.

A quick look at the current record of the Met’s 10 most-attended shows, organized chronologically, shows that fashion exhibitions have been the Golden Goose, attendance-wise, in the second decade of the 21st century. The Costume Institute has perfected a formula that has driven levels of attention only rarely touched before with the museum’s fine art offerings:

“MANUS X MACHINA” (2016)	752,995
“CHINA: THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS” (2015)	815,992
“ALEXANDER MCQUEEN” (2011)	661,509
“PICASSO IN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART” (2010)	703,526
“PAINTERS IN PARIS: 1895-1950” (2000)	883,620
“ORIGINS OF IMPRESSIONISM” (1994)	794,108
“THE VATICAN COLLECTIONS” (1983)	896,743
“THE HORSES OF SAN MARCO” (1980)	742,221
“TREASURES OF TUTANKHAMEN” (1978)	1,360,000
“MONA LISA” (1963)	1,077,521

Still, nothing in recent decades has come close to the cultural clout of the 1978 “Treasures of Tutankhamen” exhibition, or the 1963 American tour of the Mona Lisa. Both of these shows garnered over a million visitors. To this day, they rank as the two all-time biggest shows at the museum.

The King Tut spectacular, in particular, had impacts far beyond the Met: Its resounding success has long been thought to have inaugurated a new era for museums in general, with an emphasis on temporary shows of cultural treasures or name-brand modernists becoming the main fuel of attendance.

From the current evidence, it seems that the furor around the Met’s 2011 Alexander McQueen exhibition may mark the opening of a new, fashion-forward era of museum blockbuster.

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