

Website Spotlight



Worth & Mainbocher: Demystifying the Haute Couture *Lynn Duffield*

An online exhibit juxtaposes the work of 19th century English fashion designer Charles Fredrick Worth, and 20th century American designer Mainbocher (Main Rousseau Bocher).

The Museum of the City of New York's mission is to preserve and present the history of New York City. Given that the museum is located on Fifth Avenue in the Upper East Side of Manhattan, you might expect it to have a nice collection. The museum's Costume and Textiles Collection is one of the foremost repositories of New York City-centric attire and contains 23,000 garments. The Collection includes 131 garments from the House of Worth and 103 Mainbochers.

Fortunately for us, the Museum has created an [online exhibit](#) that guides you through a detailed analysis of 57 Worths and 62 Mainbochers judged to be the Collection's most significant examples, measured on the basis of design, workmanship, and presentation.

Here is a description from the online exhibition website:

“In 1860, Englishman Charles Frederick Worth (1825-1895) founded a Parisian atelier that defined the luxurious standards of the haute couture and set high fashion's stylistic course for the balance of the 19th century. Almost seven decades years later, Chicago-born Mainbocher (Main Rousseau Bocher, 1891-1976) perfected those standards while designing in Paris and later transported his Parisian-based skills across the Atlantic to New York. In so doing he modernized the language of the couture, streamlining it to suit the lifestyle of the socially prominent 20th century New York woman.”

The online exhibition has six parts: Introduction, Exhibition, Biographies, Discussion, Essay, and Acknowledgements.



Discussion

The discussion section covers an interesting discovery made during the research for this exhibit. Mainbocher donated his atelier's mascot to the Museum – a small, mid-1860s dress form. Mainbocher acquired the dress form when Maison Worth closed in 1956. I'll leave you to discover to whom the dress form belonged yourself.



Essay

The essay provides more information about the two couturiers and their influence in the fashion world. Both dressed the A-listers of their time and guaranteed the wearers social credibility. But beyond the silhouettes, luxurious textiles and trims, and balance of design, the labels became symbols for impeccable finishing of the interiors. The exhibit allows us to view these details.

I recommend you read the essay before you view the garments.



Exhibition

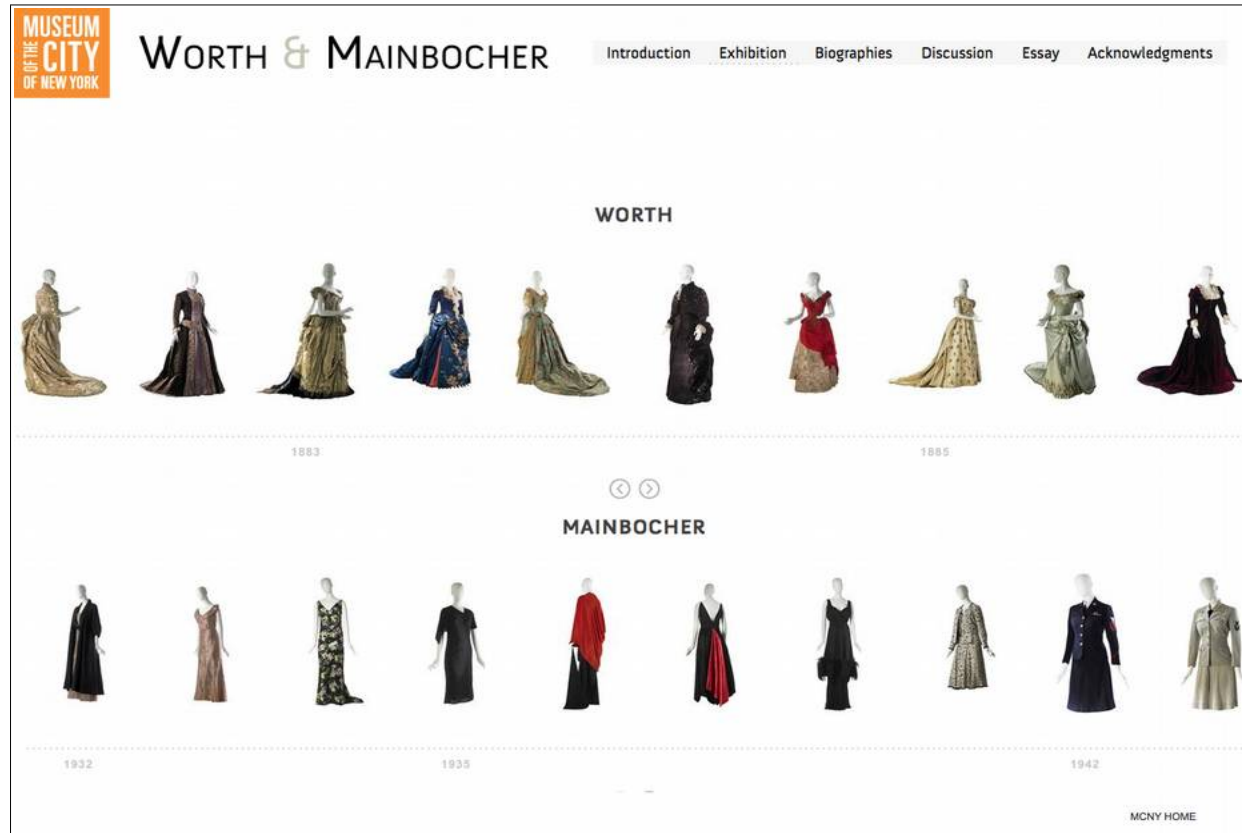
The exhibition combines comprehensive catalogue entries along with social histories. Claire Schaffer served as the couture sewing technique consultant and many of the garments have detailed technical observations on the details of the garment's construction and internal finishing techniques. In addition, the exhibit demonstrates the breadth of Worth and Mainbocher's work and includes evening gowns, suits, "fancy dress", and uniforms.



Larger view displayed with mouse over image.



Garment detail page of Worth Afternoon Dress 1883-84. (Ref # 31.3 5A-B).



Timeline showing fashions in the Worth and Mainbocher exhibition.

The exhibition displays each couturier's work separately with the garments arranged in chronological order. (left) The House of Worth garments span 1860 through 1952-1953 while Mainbocher's cover 1932 through 1967. You can view a larger image of a garment by hovering over it with your mouse. (above left) To open the garment detail page for a particular garment, click on the garment's photo.

The Collection photographed each garment full-length on a white mannequin. This photo appears on the left side of each garment detail page. (above) Next to the photo you'll see a detailed description of the garment including the fabrics used, colors, trims, laces, etc. The description includes the name of the original owner and who donated the garment to the museum.



REFERENCE

31.3.5A-B

TECHNICAL DETAILS

Dark blue satin; dark blue satin brocaded with bouquets of coral pink to rust colored roses and white stemmed flowers; petal pink chiffon; rust satin

Label: Worth / Paris

Bodice:

Center front length: 12"

Center back length: 16 1/8"

Waist measurement: 26"

ADDITIONAL IMAGES



Garment detail



Technical details of garment.



GARMENT DETAIL

A petal pink, pleated silk chiffon ruffle is stitched to the neckline and along the center front closure. Unlike the selvage used decoratively on many of Worth's chiffon trims, this is edged with a narrow double fold hem.

On the far right side of the garment detail page, you will find the garment reference number and technical details. (left) Many of the garments have additional images with different views of the garment. This is particularly useful for the Worth garments where so much of the decoration may be asymmetrical.

The majority of the garments contain photographs that show details on the garments, either on the exterior, or of the interior finishing. Select the thumbnail to enlarge the image. These detail



Two views of Worth Afternoon Dress 1883-84 (Ref # 31.3 5A-B) that can be selected from detail page.

images are often accompanied by additional descriptions about the what is being shown. (left) Some garment pages also list the finished garment's measurements.

You can navigate forward and backward in the timeline by using the arrows at the top of the garment detail page. You can also return to the timeline from here, as well.



Mainbocher U.S. Navy WAVES uniform, Yeoman 3rd Class Spring-Summer 1942 (Ref # 46.298.3A-D)



Mainbocher Evening Dress 1956-58 (Ref #: 04.37.4).

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REFERENCE
04.37.4

TECHNICAL DETAILS
 "Mainbocher Red" (scarlet) silk satin
 Label: 835 (house model label)
 Bust measurement: 31"
 Waist measurement: 24"
 Center back length: 40" (originally 38")
 Hem circumference: 84"

ADDITIONAL IMAGES

Next time you are looking for some inspiration, want to see the inside of couture dresses, or just want to look at pretty dresses, this online exhibit is well worth your time.

Lynn Duffield has been sewing for over 50 years, but has been costuming for only about 12. So far, all of her costumes have been recreations of movie costumes or 20th century historical garments. She is a member of the Cherokee tribe of Oklahoma and lives in Marietta, Georgia.