

Spotlight Review



Superheroes: Fashion and Fantasy Kathe Gust*

A book based on a 2008 Metropolitan Museum exhibition explores the imagery and aesthetics of comic book superheroes.

Superheroes: Fashion and Fantasy by Andrew Bolton, with an essay by Michael Chabon, is actually the catalog of a Summer 2008 Exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art that was made possible by Giorgio Armani. Andrew Bolton is a Curator at The Costume Institute of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. He is a coauthor of *Chanel* (2005), *Dangerous Liaisons: Fashion and Furniture in the Eighteenth Century* (2006), and *Poiret* (2007).

Michael Chabon is a respected, contemporary American author. Part of his draft script for *Spiderman 2* was used in the movie. His introductory essay, *Secret Skin: An Essay in Unitard*, originally written for *The New Yorker* magazine, explains how superhero costume serves as a transformation, symbolizing mankind's desire to alter and reinterpret our bodies into physically perfected, supernatural beings.

This lays a foundation for the rest of the book in which highly regarded designers



The cover and title pages are indebted to the super-charged graphics of Marvel and DC comics, creating a super-typography that is as bombastic and hyperbolic as the comics.

including John Galliano, Giorgio Armani, Hussein Chalayan, Alexander McQueen, Jean Paul Gaultier, Comme des Garçons, and others riff on the several themes of superhero transformation.

Superheroes emerged in the late 1930s, between the misery of the Great Depression



Panels of superhero imagery open each section.

and the beginning of World War II. Wonder Woman's starred skirt and golden bracelets, Batman's brooding cape and mask, Superman's streamlined spandex unitard have contributed to both street wear and high fashion.

"Today, superhero imagery has suffused almost every aspect of popular culture," according to Bolton, "The superhero's iconic costume of cape, mask, and bodysuit finds many fashionable permutations. But fashion's embrace of the superhero extends beyond iconography, to issues of identity, sexuality, and nationalism. Fashion shares with the superhero an inherent metaphorical malleability which fuels its fascination with the idea and the ideal of the superhero."

Like the exhibit, objects in the book are organized thematically around specific superheroes, whose movie costumes and superpowers are catalysts for discussion of key concepts of superheroism, their expression in fashion, how various superhero esthetics have influenced radical couture, extreme sportswear and state-of-the-art military garments.

Superman and Spider-Man costumes address the subject of *The Graphic Body*, relating Superman's 'S' chevron to designer logos and branding. Catwoman represents *The Paradoxical Body*, which explores the

character's vacillating manifestations of good and bad. The stars and stripes of Wonder Woman's uniform, a composite of the American flag, epitomize The Patriotic Body and designs that approximate patriotic emotions implicit in the character. The Hulk, a metaphor for male potency, introduces a section on The Virile Body, which includes inflatable clothing that swells to exaggerate the male physique.

The Flash – a character who possesses



Section opener.

superhuman speed - addresses the Aerodynamic Body as manifest in high-tech sportswear including Speedo's "Fastskin LZR Racer" designed by Rei Kawakubo for Michael Phelps and the 2008 United States Olympic swim team, Nike's "Swift Suit" for running, and Descente's "Muscle Suit" for speed skating. Batman and Iron Man represent The Armored Body, and examine avant-garde fashion that merges flesh and metal, skin and chromium. The Mutant Body, denoted by the X-Men, highlights clothing that morphs men into beasts. Ghost Rider (the biker-demon with flaming skull)

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The Graphic Body: Designs by Jean-Charles de Castelbajac, left, Moschino by Rossella Jardini, right.

and The Punisher (the vigilante who sports a giant death-skull emblem on his T-shirt) symbolize The Postmodern Body that suggests an anti-hero identity through the eclectic mixing of street styles.

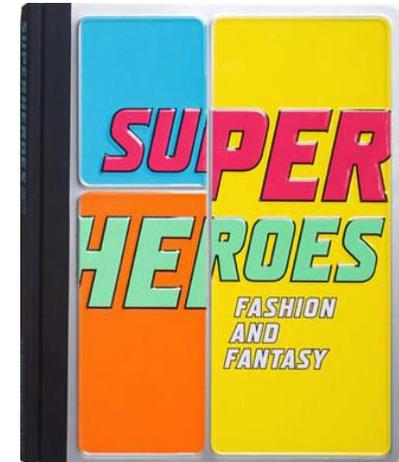
The book is bound in tin covers, rather like those of a child's school lunch box from an earlier era. Within, the designers delve into issues of identity, sexuality and patriotism, sparked off from some of the famous superheroes (and a few villains) of



The Armored Body: Design by John Galliano.

past and contemporary popularity. The pages have a high-gloss acrylic coating that makes the colors pop from the page. Some of the photos are graphic in their depiction of the human frame, but many others are simply beautiful in color, odd in concept, or thought provoking.

Superheroes: Fashion and Fantasy is



published by The Metropolitan Museum of Art and distributed by Yale University Press. This hardcover book is 160 pages with 277 illustrations (270 in full color). It can be purchased from Amazon (~\$34.21), or at ABEbooks (\$9.99 and up).

Kathe Gust enjoys creating clothing for many historical periods, and for various sci-fi and fantasy genre. Visit her [web site](#) to read articles and see photos for some of her costuming projects.