

The Sublime Universe of Guo Pei

Chinese Art and Couture at the Asian Civilisations Museum

By Isabella Olcer

Against the grim backdrop of the Cultural Revolution in China, a grandmother whispered bed-time stories to her granddaughter. She spoke of the imperial elegance of a bygone era, fantasies in silk and satin, rich embroideries of luscious flowers, fluttering butterflies and shades of delicate pinks and vibrant yellows. In the little girl's grey universe the coarse cotton Mao suit was the norm, having fashionable attire was a criminal offence, so these sartorial descriptions were the stuff of dreams. She would fall asleep imagining the smoothness of silk and flowers made of thread, but would have to wait till she was 16 before she saw an embroidered dress for the first time. The girl's name is Guo Pei and to this day she is still chasing those elusive images of beauty and opulence.



The majestic embroidered cape of bright yellow silk worn by Rihanna

Guo Pei's story is one of perseverance and passion and also of modern China transforming itself and reconnecting with its past. Today Guo Pei is a globally famous, game-changing designer whose runway shows, mesmerising visual feasts of high fashion at the Paris Haute Couture Calendar, are highly anticipated. Her masterpieces combine the beauty of China's dynastic past as seen in the traditional craftsmanship and its historical elements, with a personal, contemporary perspective. As a designer she draws inspiration from her cultural heritage and is also concerned with reviving it, reimagining it, taking it to new heights, and passing it on. Her aspirations overlap with the Asian Civilisations Museum's (ACM) overarching vision, which is to cultivate an understanding of heritage cultures. An

exhibition of Guo Pei's work, consisting of fantastical gowns encrusted with Swarovski crystals and sequins, embroidered with golden dragons, phoenixes and thousands of flowers, is here to open the *Season of Chinese Art* at the ACM. Multiple pieces are displayed in three sections: Gold is the Color of my Soul, China and the World, and Treasured



The Chinese blue and white porcelain dress

Heirlooms, with the majestic embroidered cape of bright yellow silk that Rihanna wore to the Met Gala in 2015 setting the tone. Already well-known in fashion circles, Guo Pei was catapulted into global Instagram fame.

The sumptuous world of couture and its finest output have found their way to museum exhibitions, especially during the last ten years when fashion has become...well, fashionable! Guo Pei has been invited to show her work in many museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Victoria and the SCAD Museum of Fashion. The ACM's exhibition is different in that it sets up an interesting discourse by juxtaposing Guo Pei's masterworks with Chinese art pieces from its own galleries, thereby making these pieces points of reference for contemplating how she has reimagined Chinese aesthetics.

The comparison often illustrates Guo Pei's inspiration, such as the phantasmagorical Chinese porcelain dress. This is literally what the spectre of porcelain would wear, with its sculptural charger-like protrusions and the most refined shimmering blue and white decorations. At other times the connection is direct, as seen in the two dresses that were inspired by the ACM's Peranakan artworks, which Guo Pei saw in Paris in 2010. They are being displayed for the first time and an intricate traditional cloud collar that could rival any parure is a sight not to be missed. The exhibition provides an opportunity to discover the recurring historical themes and the more subtle sensibilities of a contemporary designer, making this an amazing exhibition for the fashion savvy as well as art-lovers.

Guo Pei has often been asked about the difference

between a runway show and a museum exhibition of her work. She emphasises that she loves both, but has a certain affinity with a museum setting as this enables a deeper appreciation of her work and a closer observation of the amazing details she puts into her creations. For her, details are wisdom: they are what touch us when we look at an artist's work, what make us human. In fact, at her Rose Studio in Beijing and Paris she and her huge team of embroiderers spend enormous amounts of time, months and sometimes years, to create each masterpiece, lavishly enriched with beautiful details. Unsurprisingly, when she talks about this effort, she often uses words such as 'love' and 'passion', which are essential for such intense dedication. "Time is life," she says, "it takes time to give life to my designs" and she believes that the time she invests makes them timeless and worthy of future generations. The ultimate fruit of this love is the magnificent gold dress that took an astounding 50,000 hours to be completed in genuine gold thread. She says she was driven by her insatiable desire to make the "the most beautiful dress in the world", and recognises that it was a crazy endeavor, but unhesitatingly adds that, "the most beautiful dress in the world is still to be made, tomorrow". Don't miss this strapless, larger than life wonder of a crinoline skirt and its amazing scalloped trailing hem.

Today Guo Pei has the freedom to satisfy most of her artistic whims, but this was not always the case. The financial structure of couture houses is as delicate as are their products; their sine qua non is one of excellent craftsmanship and absolute luxury, which means they cannot employ economies of scale and the mechanisation that enables other industries



The magnificent gold dress (Da jin) that took 50,000 hours to complete in genuine gold thread

to be profitable. It took decades, clever strategies and many outstanding, but wearable, dresses for Guo Pei to build the successful business that backs her up today as an artist. She achieved a balance between dresses that made her clients happy and creations that appealed to her artistic soul. This exhibition displays items of her artistic pursuit and are not necessarily wearable items of clothing, although most have been worn on the runway at some point. So when you go, check out the elaborately embroidered jumpsuit with dragon's wings coming out of each side, and the 'Palace Flower' dress overlaid with hundreds of silk peonies (a photo of this dress is on the cover), as well as the beautifully decorated wedding gowns inspired by traditional dresses, which serve as models in her studio and have been borrowed by celebrities such as Angelababy to wear on their special day.

In today's world, inspiration comes from many sources and as a modern designer, Guo Pei is sensitive to outside influences. The body of her work has traces of couture's classical era of the 50s, grand opera costumes, Gothic fairy tales and inspiration from many aspects of western architecture. However, as she herself says, Chinese culture is in her blood and is definitely her design language. This multicultural blend is very much at home in the ACM. Her designs are both traditional and contemporary; she is influenced by the West but has a clear Asian identity and thus challenges popular perceptions. She contradicts prejudiced associations about Chinese products and creates fashion influences from outside the set Euro-American centres.

In today's world, just like inspiration, change comes from different places. It comes here from a gracious Chinese woman, pretty and petite, modest and natural, whose dedication to perfection is fearless and whose depictions of feminine beauty and elegance are utterly enchanting. Discovering this beautiful world is an extraordinary experience and a treat. Go to the ACM and enter the sublime universe of Guo Pei.



Guo Pei with two of her contemporary interpretations of Peranakan wedding garments, image courtesy of Russel Wong Photo

Isabella Olcer has always loved fashion but the fashion designers she used to read about have been replaced by Indian gods and Chinese emperors since she became an ACM docent.

Unless otherwise noted, all images courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum