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Clothes of the Millennia ? Inspiration for Today

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“Clothes of the Millennia – Inspiration for Today” at the NHM Vienna is a model example of how a museum can translate archaeological knowledge into a vivid, contemporary aesthetic experience, without sacrificing scholarly precision. Framed as part of the 150th anniversary celebrations of the Natural History Museum, the historical fashion show turned the Lower Dome Hall into a living timeline, in which seven thousand years of textile history walked past the audience in the form of 55 models.

The evening’s dramaturgy led from the Stone Age through the Bronze and Iron Ages, into the Roman world and the early Middle Ages, before opening out onto the speculative present and future. Each of the roughly 40 historical costumes was grounded in specific archaeological and art historical sources: garments reconstructed from textile fragments, patterns and cuts inferred from depictions, and accessories based on excavated jewellery, belts, pins and brooches.
Seeing these ensembles in motion rather than in vitrines made one immediately aware that clothing is not an inert object but a technology of the body: silhouettes changed with each epoch, affecting posture, gait and the way fabric responded to light.

Central to the project is the work of Priv.-Doz. Karina Grömer and the Prehistoric Department, whose research on prehistoric textiles underpins the entire event. The famous Hallstatt finds from salt mining – some more than 2,500 years old – supplied not only colours and patterns, but also the weaving and spinning techniques that students and craftspeople re learnt and applied.
What distinguished the show from a merely picturesque re enactment was the insistence on traceability: every garment could be led back to specific fragments, techniques or iconographic sources.

This gives the evening a didactic subtext in the best sense: the audience is invited to see the catwalk as a moving archive of intangible cultural heritage, a reminder that techniques like tablet weaving, complex twill structures or plant based dyeing are part of a long Central European continuity rather than recent “craft trends.” The programmatic text rightly emphasizes that clothing has always been interwoven with everyday life and language. The show makes this insight tangible by highlighting how dress codes communicate social position, profession, gender roles and spiritual or ritual affiliations. In early periods, the distribution and richness of accessories—jewellery, elaborate belts, cloak fasteners—mark rank and function.

In this light, the evening can be read as a visual essay on fashion as a system of signs. The idioms cited in

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the concept (“facts are interwoven,” “the thread of patience tears”) suddenly seem less metaphorical when confronted with the sheer labour embodied in each reconstructed textile: every thread literally carries time, skill and social meaning. The second part of the evening handed the stage to the students of the fashion school KunstModeDesign Herbststrasse and their project “Hallstatt Revisited – the Hallstatt period as an inspiration for sustainable fashion and art.” Here, the historical material was no longer reconstructed, but re imagined.

This segment was perhaps the most forward looking. It demonstrated that “prehistory” is not a closed chapter behind glass but a reservoir of techniques and aesthetics that can inform a more sustainable fashion practice today. The students’ designs implicitly argued that slowness, durability and repairability—qualities built into prehistoric textiles—could become guiding principles for a post fast fashion era. Staging the show in the Lower Dome Hall was a curatorial masterstroke. Under the historic ceiling, models moved between columns and visitors, creating a dialogue between the museum’s 19th century architecture, the deep time of the artefacts and the youthful energy of the fashion school.

The setting affirmed that a natural history museum can be a laboratory for living culture rather than a mausoleum of objects.
As an experiment in interdisciplinary presentation, “Clothes of the Millennia – Inspiration for Today” succeeds on several levels: it communicates complex research in an accessible, sensuous form; it honours the craftsmanship of prehistoric communities; and it invites a predominantly young audience to think of clothing not as disposable trend but as a cultural practice stretching across seven millennia. For an art and cultural historian, this fashion show is more than an anniversary event—it is a persuasive argument that the future of museums lies in precisely such collaborations between science, craft and design.

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