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Curious Beauty

an alternative costume exhibition

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Artistic direction by **Caroline Tonna** and **Francesca Balzan**

Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum, Mdina

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Caroline Tonna and Francesca Balzan guide us through some of the twists, turns, and revelations while working on the forthcoming exhibition by Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti at Palazzo Falson.

How did the idea for a fashion exhibition come about?

Michael Lowell, CEO and Creative Director of Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti (FPM), had the vision to put on a fashion exhibition with a difference and he invited us both—former curators of Palazzo Falson—to return to the museum and work together to bring this vision to life. FPM had, famously, organised a wonderful costume exhibition back in 1998. Since then, a new generation of art lovers has emerged, and we have been repeatedly asked to create an exhibition that focuses on fashion, dress, and costume.

This fascination with fashion appears to be universal. In recent years, we have seen exhibitions that have attractive and original displays, intertwining historic pieces with contemporary designs in all the leading centres of fashion, suffice to mention the epoch-making Alexander McQueen exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and then at the V&A Museum in London, others in Paris at the Palais Galliera and the Musée des Arts Décoratifs ...

Everyone relates to fashion in one way or another and it is appreciated more when it is presented as an art form. The visitor is transported to the past through the intricate designs and styles of past eras, evoking nostalgia and new experiences.

You call this show 'an alternative fashion exhibition'. What is alternative about it?

Our exhibition is playful and whimsical—it celebrates the joie de vivre of Olof Gollcher who was the last owner and resident of Palazzo Falson (until 1962). He held a deep interest in Maltese heritage, art, and research. We have built the concept of the exhibition around Gollcher's creative spirit and eye for beauty.

Previous temporary exhibitions, focused mainly on the decorative arts, were more contained in the so-called Orientation Room of the museum, but this exhibition is larger. It sprawls around the entire palazzo,

creating contemporary art in assemblages of historic objects. The artefacts are displayed in unexpected ways against the backdrop of the richly decorated rooms of the museum. We are not dismantling the permanent display, which is a huge challenge, but this will enable the visitor to appreciate these artefacts while still having full access to the museum's permanent collection.

It is an alternative fashion exhibition because it proposes new ways of showing antiques. We did not opt for a chronological approach but a thematic one, linked to the architecture and function of the existing rooms, and thus creating a dialogue with the richly decorated museum spaces in a quirky and fun way. The fact that we both served as curators of the museum, that both of us are art historians specialising in our respective areas of fashion and jewellery, and—perhaps most importantly—thoroughly enjoy working together, were very significant factors to build ideas for this exhibition.

Michael gave us the opportunity to be creative with the displays and the freedom to explore, experiment, and learn how to transform the museum spaces into a whimsical and innovative exhibition display. Each installation was purposely designed to harmonise with the permanent setup to spark curiosity, engagement, and joy. We are showcasing over 200 items of fashion from various important public and private collections ranging from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century, including bodices, waistcoats, period dresses, stomachers, bags, shoes, hats, gloves, corsets, and glasses. Ecclesiastical mitres also feature, highlighting luxury fashion in church vestments that are creatively displayed in the museum chapel.

What are some of the special artefacts to look out for in the exhibition?

Several! And some unexpected ones too. There are some exceptional antique pieces from the eighteenth century, many of which have never been on public display before. Indeed, most of the artefacts in the exhibition are discoveries made in various private collections paired with superb pieces from the national collection and those of the Cathedrals of Malta and Gozo. The exhibition showcases a variety of dress and accessories

from different periods to give a taste of the luxurious fabrics, glamorous styles, and adornments worn in Malta. The unifying element of the exhibition is the colour gold, frequently featured as gold metal thread in the period pieces and accessories. Gold, visually, runs through the exhibition as a leitmotif marking out the temporary exhibits from the permanent collection.

How did you confront the challenge of dealing with all these artefacts, both from the permanent display and those brought in specifically for the installation?

The strength of the exhibition is, of course, Palazzo Falson's splendid interiors, which are chock-full of artefacts collected by Olof Gollcher representing a time span from ancient times till the twentieth century. This was simultaneously the greatest challenge as we opted not to dismantle anything of the museum's interiors bar one or two small items of furniture. Other challenges focused on the technical aspect, for example adapting specific mounts for certain pieces such as female bodices and men's waistcoats that had to be individually sized to fit a specific body shape and garment cut. We tested each display until we achieved the desired result, and, in most cases, we were using replica garments purposely made to avoid handling the original antique artefacts.

We also looked for sustainable solutions for our displays and we upcycled used carton boxes and other materials used in past exhibitions. We used conservation grade paper to hand sculpt mannequin heads and arms, as well as skirts and breeches to give an unusual added visual character to ornate bodices and waistcoats.

Finally, the state of these antique artefacts and how we had to respond to each object—all 200 of them—with great care and purpose-made storage and supports, indeed, posed quite a task. But there were joys, too! The fun of creating together, handling precious old fabrics and beautiful examples of workmanship, and discovering new ways of showcasing these unique artefacts in a safe way. Our ultimate mission is to stimulate and inspire visitors to appreciate the craftsmanship of fashion creations and create awareness of our dress heritage and preservation of our patrimony.