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## Fashion Designers At The Opera

By Elio Iannacci | December 9, 2011

*Reviewed in this essay:*

*Fashion Designers at the Opera*, by Helena Matheopoulos. Thames & Hudson, 2011.

Season after season both fashion designers and opera producers have to contend with the fact that their work will be hotly debated by the masses. Much of the scrutiny they receive comes from that greyest of all grey areas in criticism—personal taste.

In the book *Fashion Designers at the Opera*, author Helena Matheopoulos leaves the ego backstage where it belongs. Instead, her striking tome—devoted to some of the greatest fashion designer/opera house collaborations of our time—gives the reader a well-defined view of two epic worlds. From exclusive backstage photographs to costume sketches taken directly from designer notepads (including Karl Lagerfeld's sublime vision of *Norma*), the 192-page mix of illustration, essay and reportage is considerable.

Matheopoulos, a former editor for *Tatler*, one of the U.K.'s leading fashion

magazines, shrewdly structures the book beyond the token, encyclopedic format seen in many style-centric digests of this kind. Choosing to whittle down her focus to nearly thirty operas, chapters are divided by label or designer. Opening with Giorgio Armani's stark, minimal approach for the Covent Garden staging of *Così fan tutte* in 1995 and closing with an exploration of Dutch design duo Viktor and Rolf's 3D dresses for a German production of *Der Freischütz* in 2009, Matheopoulos chronicles the evolution of fashion-opera partnerships dutifully.

What stands out in *Fashion Designers at the Opera* is the number of well-edited interviews thrown into her timeline and analysis. For example, the late Gianni Versace gifts the author an exquisite one-liner which addresses the difference between making clothes for real women and over-the-top divas. "You can sing with design on stage," he explains.

Matheopoulos also includes Miuccia Prada in her book, who offers the author a few ulterior motives to her costume design sidejob for the Metropolitan Opera House's production of *Attila*. "I wanted to express my vision of the characters from a psychological and historical point of view ... and bring out what the characters mean to me today."

Aside from a the top-notch quoteage—which also includes prima donnas such as Renée Fleming and legendary conductors like Herbert von Karajan—it is Matheopoulos' en pointe historical references and up-to-date runway insight that steals the spotlight here. Her assured expertise is reflected in economic, exact language that rarely flourishes into pretentious opera talk or fashion speak. In many ways, Matheopoulos mirrors an impactful runway collection or opera performance with her approach to sell her study to the reader as more than just a history lesson. The book works as an aria for the new possibility of fashion and opera collaboration, of what both worlds can become if they are allowed to leave the thinking that comes with the expected traditions of both the catwalk and the stage.

