Evening ensemble (dress and veil) - The Tears

Object: Evening ensemble (dress and veil)
Place of origin: Paris (made)
Date: February 1938 (made)
Artist/Maker: Elsa Schiaparelli, born 1890 - died 1973 (designer)
Dali, Salvador, born 1904 - died 1989 (designer)
Materials and Techniques: Viscose-rayon and silk blend fabric printed with trompe l'oeil print
Credit Line: Given by Miss Ruth Ford
Museum number: T.393&A,D to F-1974

Public access description
Savage rips and tears cover Elsa Schiaparelli's slender evening gown and head-veil. A closer look reveals the illusion. The dress is printed, and the rips in the veil have been carefully cut out and lined in pink and magenta. The trompe l'oeil (illusionistic) 'Tears' print was specially designed by Schiaparelli's friend, the artist Salvador Dali. Some of his Surrealist paintings showed figures in ripped skin-tight clothing, disturbingly suggestive of flayed flesh. Schiaparelli owned one of these pictures, which perhaps gave her the idea for this dress. Dali also helped her design the Skeleton Dress (see T.394-1974).

This dress was part of Schiaparelli's famous 'Circus Collection' of 1938. It was a riotous, swaggering fashion show that attracted a great deal of publicity. Clothes were decorated with acrobats and performing animals. The models wore clown hats and carried balloon-shaped handbags. The Tears and Skeleton dresses must have been doubly shocking amongst all this madcap gaiety. Dali's patron, Edward James, gave these dresses to Ruth Ford, the sister of the Surrealist poet Charles Henri Ford.

Descriptive line
Evening dress and head veil, "Tears", Schiaparelli, Elsa, February 1938 for Circus Collection, summer 1938. Fabric designed by Salvador Dali

Physical description
Long sheath dress in pale blue viscose rayon and silk blend marocain, printed with pink and magenta rips and tears. Two-pointed train. Side zipper in chunky white plastic
Mantle worn over head in matching fabric. Pleated and gathered on top of head. "Tears" cut out of fabric, lined in pale pink with magenta lining revealed by hanging "tears"

Museum number
T.393&A,D to F-1974

Object history note
Ref. Paris Centre de Documentation de Costume, Schiaparelli, Album no 19, 1938, p.124

Historical significance: Extremely important Schiaparelli design, representing her collaboration with Salvador Dali. Particularly significant in how it relates to world affairs. The savagely ripped print suggests the horrors of the Spanish Civil War and the upcoming turmoil of the Second World War.

Donated by Ruth Ford

Photo notes:
Zipper: white plastic zipper at side
Scarf flap open: shows the flaps. Exquisite workmanship
Scarf flap closed: Flaps are cut from the white crepe (continuous piece of fabric) and faced with pink.
Pointed hem back: shows the workmanship
Gloves: these are part of the ensemble but there are two other pairs of gloves that also go with this ensemble. The other two pairs are sheerer.

Jan G. Reeder, Curator, The Costume Institute, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Taken May, 2011, Compiled September, 2011

Historical context note
In 1936 Salvador Dali painted three pictures showing figures with flayed/torn skin where torn garment and torn flesh were indistinguishable. One of these, Necrophiliac Springtime was owned by Elsa Schiaparelli. The one most commonly associated with the “Tears Dress” is Three Young Surrealist Women Holding In Their Arms The Skins Of An Orchestra (both paintings can be seen in Blum, p.139)

The Circus Collection for summer 1938 was presented at the beginning of February of that year, just after the Paris Surrealism exhibition opened on 17th January. Along with this dress, Dali collaborated with Schiaparelli on the Skeleton Dress in the same collection. (T.394-1974).

Richard Martin says that to “tear the dress is to deny its customary decorum and utility, and to question the matter of concealment and revelation in the garment.” He compares it to the Spanish Civil War, and the spread of Fascism through Europe. He suggests that the imagery of rent fabric held strong implications for both the political and visual worlds. To Martin, the dress is a memento mori - a reminder of one's own mortality - that was in a state of destruction even when it was new. (p.136-137) The real tears on the cape/veil and the fictive tears on the dress create a visual friction between what is real and what is not. Martin proposes that if the dress were to become mere decoration (like slashing in the 16th century), the cape would still negate this, and vice versa. The two styles support each other's plausibility. The mysticism of penetration without tearing asunder becomes more viable when accompanied by a physical manifestation of the dress without rupture. Dress is therefore used to represent and reference, just as furniture, architecture, and sculpture themselves do. (p.114)

- Daniel Milford-Cottam

Bibliography


URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O84418/the-tears-dress-evening-ensemble-dress-elsa-schiaparelli/