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As this year's Art Dubai kicks off, we discover the best of the city's exhibitions this month, plus art for fashion lovers

Art

& Culture

PAINTING BEAUTY

Fashion illustrations aren't just for magazines: they look super-chic in a frame, too. We love this image of John Galliano's first Dior collection, in January 1997, by David Downton. Price on request, Fashion Illustration Gallery

The Art of Fashion Illustration

Collecting art doesn't have to mean investing in baffling installations: works from the world of fashion can make your walls look divine

Words by Gemma Champ

Take a look at the images on these pages. Beautiful? Yes. Fashionable? No doubt about it. Technically accomplished? Absolutely. But are they Art, darling? Well, while much of the contemporary art world would have you believe that fashion illustration is ephemeral, frivolous and commercial, it seems there is a rapidly growing interest among collectors, investors and plain old fashion enthusiasts. That some seriously cutting-edge artists are actually creating fashion art gives some indication of the genre's potential as a genuinely valuable art form. From Turner Prize winner Grayson Perry's recent exhibition of fashion-inspired work at London's Fashion Illustration Gallery to Takashi Murakami and Richard Prince's collaborations with Louis Vuitton, the glamorous, flamboyant worlds of fashion and art hold a mutual fascination.

"The fashion world by definition attracts the most affluent, glamorous and wealthy of society," explains Ray Waterhouse, of art consultancy Fine Art Brokers (fineartbrokers.com), who advises collectors on their deals. "There is always interest in the movements and taste of people like that. Perhaps there's a desire to connect to an age where celebrity and glamour were not so tainted by tabloid exposure – designs by the great illustrators are like templates for sophistication and people like to be associated with that."

Of course, it's not hard to persuade a dedicated fashionista that these works are fabulous: the vibrant, dynamic sketches of the greats, such as René Gruau, David Downton and Erté, to name a few, have instant appeal for anyone interested in design. And with current prices a fraction of those demanded in contemporary art galleries, you could pay anything from

Dhs3,500 to Dhs150,000 for an original – it could be an ideal area in which to begin collecting art.

William Ling, who set up London's Fashion Illustration Gallery in Notting Hill, says "You could go out tomorrow and buy a world-class collection of fashion art, at relatively low cost. There's no other art activity where you can say that. It's the perfect time to buy."

But for Ling, fashion illustration is about more than a sound investment. He sees it as an unfairly neglected genre, its exponents abandoned by the art establishment because of their perceived commerciality. Ling was himself a curator of contemporary art in the 1990s, putting on Brit-artist Gary Hume's first solo exhibition, but he diversified into illustration when he noticed the popularity of his wife Tanya Ling's fashion drawings.

Erin O'Connor
by illustrator
David Downton



"She was a fashion designer, but she started selling her work to friends, and people really loved it – in fact, hardcore contemporary-art people really loved it."

Top illustrator David Downton, who has been responsible for some of the most iconic fashion images of the last 10 years, has also noticed the growing appeal of fashion illustration recently: "What I have gradually realised over the years is what a popular art form it is," he says. "Even if magazines are not commissioning it at the moment, the public loves it. In fact, everyone loves it, but not many people know quite what to do with it!"

So why does this small, specialised sub-genre of art have such a universal appeal? "People respond to the hand-drawn line," says Ling simply. "What's interesting about fashion illustrators is that they draw on the traditional values of art and design – colour, balance, form, light, draughtsmanship... You don't need a degree in critical theory to understand their work. In fact, illustration is a real meritocracy: only the best and most talented actually make it, because they are commissioned by advertising and magazine art directors who really do understand the minuscule difference between what does and doesn't work. The common claim in contemporary art – 'this artist is very important' – is often mere industry hype, directed at maintaining the art market. But illustrators who rise to prominence do so

"You could go out tomorrow and buy a world-class collection of fashion art"

on the back of their talent alone."

All of this may leave you wondering just what that mysterious gap is between art that is inspired by fashion and fashion illustration. Ray Waterhouse's view is this: "Fine artists will often use fashion and fashionable figures as inspiration for their work. The difference is that they are either performing the role of portraitist, describing the figure rather than the garments they happen to wear, or they are making a satirical comment on the industry or the concept of modern beauty."

It's a difference that David Downton acknowledges. As well as illustrating catwalk fashions, Downton is known for his portraits of the world's most elegant women, from Catherine Deneuve and Elizabeth

The Experts' Picks

How to buy fashion art

1 If you're looking for vintage pieces, try your luck at international auctions of applied art, books and manuscripts, says Ray Waterhouse. "They rarely turn up in art sales," he asserts. "For a more specialised selection, try the Fashion Illustration Gallery in London."

2 The prices of original works depend on the artist and the rarity. For example, an original 50s drawing by René Gruau could cost Dhs75,000, says Ling, while if an image has become iconic, as with David Downton's painting for the poster of the V&A's recent *Golden Age of Couture* exhibition, the price can skyrocket. Work by fine artists can go above the million-dirham mark.

3 If you buy a print of a fashion illustration, ensure that the work is in a limited edition and preferably signed by the artist.

4 It is possible to commission an illustrator, says Ling, although this process has to be managed delicately, with an understanding of the artist's style. David Downton will accept portrait commissions, and says, "If an illustrator only wants to do exactly as he pleases in a piece, then he shouldn't accept the commission. Increasingly I'm asked to do what I'm best at. You play to your strengths or you don't take the commission."

5 Artists to look out for include René Gruau, François Berthaud, David Downton, Erté, Eric, Tod Graz, Tanya Ling, Daisy de Villeneuve, Natasha Law, Julie Verhoeven, Jean-Philippe Delhomme, Andy Warhol, Ruben Toledo, Georges Lepape, Gladys Perint Palmer and Jason Brooks.

A Balmain dress by Tanya Ling



Hurley to Dita Von Teese and his artistic muse, the model Erin O'Connor, but he makes no claim that they are "art". "I call them fashion portraits," he admits. "To me, a real portrait is a Lucien Freud or a Jenny Saville, distilling the essence of a person."

Yet the sinuous lines of his works – sparse, delicate washes and brushstrokes indicating a rounded cheekbone, a flared nostril, tousled hair, the strict boning of a corset – are not purely about creating a carbon copy of the subject and her clothes: "You don't get the same effect if you haven't met the person and sometimes the subject almost gives you the drawing – when I'm working with Erin O'Connor, for example, she's done half the work simply by being herself in the same room as you."

This approach to portraiture is part of a long artistic tradition. "The great and the good have always put on their best bib and tucker to be painted," he explains. "The portraits of John Singer Sargent, in the 1880s, were about the clothes, the ambience, and the status. And the illustrators who

influence me – Gruau, Eric – drew the likes of Audrey Hepburn, Jackie O and Paloma Picasso for their magazines."

In fact, the claim that illustrators are not artists is very much up for debate, says Ling. "Andy Warhol started life as a fashion illustrator in the 50s, but felt that he had to turn his back on commercial art to make serious exhibitions. The

ringfencing of contemporary art works well for those inside it but not for anyone else – the question for buyers should be: 'Is this piece interesting; does it make me happy?'"

Downton agrees: "I come from a period where there was a real division between graphic art and fine art," he explains. "I'm glad to say that wall is breaking down. Fine artists are now taught to be commercial and those in the graphic arts are beginning to be taken much more seriously."

All of which bodes well for the investment potential of an original Gruau illustration, a Julie Verhoeven drawing or a Downton portrait. And while they might not fetch the six-figure sums of contemporary art, they may look rather more glamorous in your living room than a pickled shark. ■