EXHIBITION REVIEW

‘Costuming THE CROWN’ Review: Dressing the Royal Reproductions

An exhibition features the stunningly accurate outfits seen on Netflix’s series ‘The Crown.’

Claire Foy and Jared Harris in ‘The Crown’ PHOTO: NETFLIX

By Laura Jacobs
April 8, 2019 4:13 p.m. ET

Winterthur, Del.

The walls are soft beige, the color of eggs laid by Light Sussex hens. The curving scrim that delineates space in the largest gallery floats like mist at dawn. The overhead lighting in all the galleries is unobtrusive, summery. The new exhibition at Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library, “Costuming THE CROWN,” keeps it simple. If there’s one thing we learn in the Netflix series from which these 40 costumes have come, when history is at hand, royal dress—its mantles, sashes, stars, garters, dragons and crosses, gold bullion and braid—provides its own drama. “Symbol upon symbol,” the Duke of Windsor puts it in episode 5 of season 1, describing
the visual richness and mystery of Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation in 1953. This is protocol as metaphysical poetry.

Costuming THE CROWN

Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library
Through Jan. 5, 2020

“Costuming THE CROWN” is the smart successor to Winterthur’s 2014 “Costumes of Downton Abbey,” the most visited exhibition in its 67 years. “Downton Abbey” was fiction, of course, and while pains were taken to keep the characters appropriately dressed from decade to decade, the show’s designers were free to play with the fashions of the day, as when they put the daring youngest daughter into Paul Poiret’s outré harem pants of 1911. The characters in “The Crown” are not fiction but fact, and the deep historical record of royal portraiture, photojournalism and televised film footage means that the costume designers—Michele Clapton in season 1 and Jane Petrie in season 2—often had to bow to the public record. In other words, God, or the English crown that is bound to God, is in the details. A team of researchers, we are told, makes sure those details are correct.

Co-curated by Winterthur’s Kim Collison, Linda Eaton and Jeff Groff, the exhibition begins with brilliance. Velvet curtains, rose yellow, frame the coronation costumes of the young queen and her consort, Prince Philip—she in ecclesiastical gold, he in red velvet and white ermine. Projected between them is the image of actress Claire Foy as Queen Elizabeth II, seated with full regalia of crown, two scepters, the sovereign ring and a single glove, props that are on view in a vitrine nearby. The mannequin before us wears Ms. Foy’s costume—the imperial mantle, the surpontica and royal stole, and a virginal white dress of accordion pleats (designed by one of the queen’s favorite couturiers, Norman Hartnell). Striking is the similarity between her triangular silhouette and the “cappa magna” (great cape) we associate with the pope. Both garments widen into a hem that tents humanity. While the original robes are made of silk and real gold thread, the replica mixes silk and polyester.

This majestic overture is Part I, “Establishing Roles”; on the wall a lineage and a guide to names and titles refreshes our memory of who’s who. “Dressing the Part,” the second section, moves into a larger space and here we learn the encoded meanings of orders, and see these embellishments gracing the naval uniforms worn by Elizabeth’s father and husband. No matter how one may feel about the royals, such pomp is undeniably glamorous. Meanwhile, the Queen Mother is already wearing wafty chiffon, Queen Mary still dresses with Edwardian gravity, and Elizabeth is under the spell (as everyone was) of Christian Dior. The polka-dot suit from her royal tour of 1952 and the mourning coat she wore upon her return to England as the new queen—both costumes on view here—echo the hourglass of Dior’s “New Look.” This section ends with the wedding gowns of the two princesses, Margaret’s posing a special challenge because actress Vanessa Kirby stands seven inches taller than Margaret herself.
Part III, "Creating Character," brings in Winston Churchill and includes the padded body suit John Lithgow wore to achieve the prime minister's humpty-dumpty shape. There's also more of Margaret in this section—her '60s capri pants and flirty dresses (she liked to show her shoulders)—as well as the queen's at-home clothes: honest British wools, well-cut dresses in fabrics not too flashy. A gown of dark green moire satin suggests the forests of Shakespeare and Coleridge.

The banished Duke of Windsor, with his outside-looking-in life, is represented by a dapper suit of windowpane plaid. The most beautiful costume in the show may be the one designed for his costly wife, the Duchess of Windsor, formerly Wallis Simpson. This body-skimming coral dress, hand-painted with three elegant, elegiac, falling leaves, acknowledges Wallis's taste for couturier Elsa Schiaparelli's chic surrealism. Did she guess her life with the country-less duke would itself become surreal? "Capturing the Image," Part IV, looks at the royal family's relationship with the lens, and displays the types of cameras used by Cecil Beaton and Antony Armstrong-Jones (whom Margaret married), along with gowns immortalized in official portraits.

Throughout the exhibition video clips from the television series are strategically placed, as are camera-worthy replicas of the queen's diamond tiaras—the Kokoshnik, the Cambridge Lover's Knot, the Cartier Halo Scroll. Glittering punctuation, they remind us of the queen's crystalline purpose, her life sentence of pure and ceaseless service.

—Ms. Jacobs writes about culture and fashion for the Journal.
Tropical uniform for Prince Phillip in the exhibition PHOTO: WINTERTHUR

Formal dresses for Queen Elizabeth, Princess Margaret and Queen Elizabeth in the exhibition PHOTO: WINTERTHUR
Claire Foy and Matt Smith in 'The Crown' PHOTO: NETFLIX