



ANTWERP FASHION DEPARTMENT ROYAL ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS ARTESIS HOGESCHOOL ANTWERPEN

GRANTEE REPORT BY: MITRA RAJABI
DEPARTMENT: FASHION DESIGN
DATES OF ACTIVITY: 5/31/12 - 6/08/12

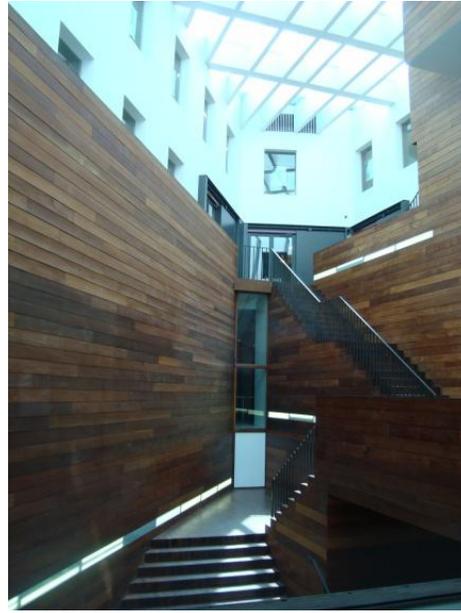
The Royal Academy's Fashion Department in Antwerp, Belgium, is one of the most prestigious design schools in the world. It's been the breeding ground of 'The Antwerp Six', a title given to a group of top fashion designers who influenced the fashion world, starting in the 1980's, with their avantgarde collections: Ann Demeulemeester, Walter Van Beirendonck, Dirk Van Saene, Dries Van Noten, Dirk Bikkembergs and Marina Yee. The Academy has produced famous continuators such as Haider Ackerman, Raf Simons, Veronique Branquinho, and Martin Margiela. In fall 2011, I was the privileged recipient of an Otis Faculty Development Grant in support of attending The Royal Academy of Fine Arts' Annual Fashion Show, in Antwerp. The Grant was given in an effort to study the school's educational system and the current student work showcased in their annual Fashion Show, on June 7th, 2012. The Royal Academy will be celebrating its 50th Birthday in 2013.

1. The Challenge

The Royal Academy's Fashion Department is located on the 5th floor of MOMU, the Mode Museum (Fashion Museum), on the trendy Nationalestraat in the trendy fashion district of Antwerp. During my trip, the entire fashion department was in full preparation mode for the upcoming annual Show 2012. My request for a tour of the campus was unfortunately, but understandably, denied. Thus, my closest encounter with the school was the outside door.



The MOMU



The interior of the MOMU; the Fashion Department of The Royal Academy is located on the top floor, accessible only via private elevator.

Every fashionista visiting Antwerp must make a stop at Ann Demeulemeester's beautiful flagship store. Finding the store was a challenge, as it was inconspicuously situated far outside the fashion district, on the sidelines of the city. The designer's store had a clean and modern interior, with clothes so breathtakingly tailored that it was hard to leave.



Interior of Ann Demeulemeester's flagship store



A look from Ann Demeulemeester's Summer 2012 menswear collection.

As luck would have it, one of the salespersons on the floor, Jolien Vermeulen, happened to be a former student of The Royal Academy's Fashion program. She's currently working on her upcoming line of custom-made organic wool suits, debuting this fall. Her perfectly spoken English proved to be helpful, and was due to the fact that all courses at the Academy are taught in English only. During our interview, Jolien graciously shed some light on the curriculum of the school, The Bachelor Program.

2. The Bachelor Program

The 4 year program consists of 4 different levels of training, called Bachelors. Students are encouraged to apply a creative approach to fashion design, by “experimentation, improvisation and formal innovation”. The focus of the training is based on creating innovative “**concepts and shapes**”. Therefore, strong drawing and graphic skills are required to facilitate their artistic expression; however technical flats are not needed for their designs. Some basic sewing knowledge is necessary, but students are free to hire professional seamstresses to produce their final garments. Rather than learning from professional designers in the industry, students are coached primarily by their instructors, for a surprisingly limited amount of time: 10 minutes, twice a week. All finished projects are showcased in their annual fashion show.

- **1st Bachelor**, or the first study year starts in September with approximately 60 students. They must complete 3 projects: a muslin skirt, a dress, and a jacket. Three months are spent on each project and require approximately 100 sketches. Research for these projects starts early in the summer, due to time limitations. Their designs push the envelope to the limit, with gravity defying forms and shapes. Students are encouraged to create new materials by using novel fabric manipulations such as padding, fusing, rubberizing, laminating and even wiring. Other required courses are History of Costume, Nude Drawing, and Art History.



1st bachelor skirt project, in molded and stringed muslin, worn with a simple white tank top



1st bachelor dress project introduces color; lilac taffeta fused and padded

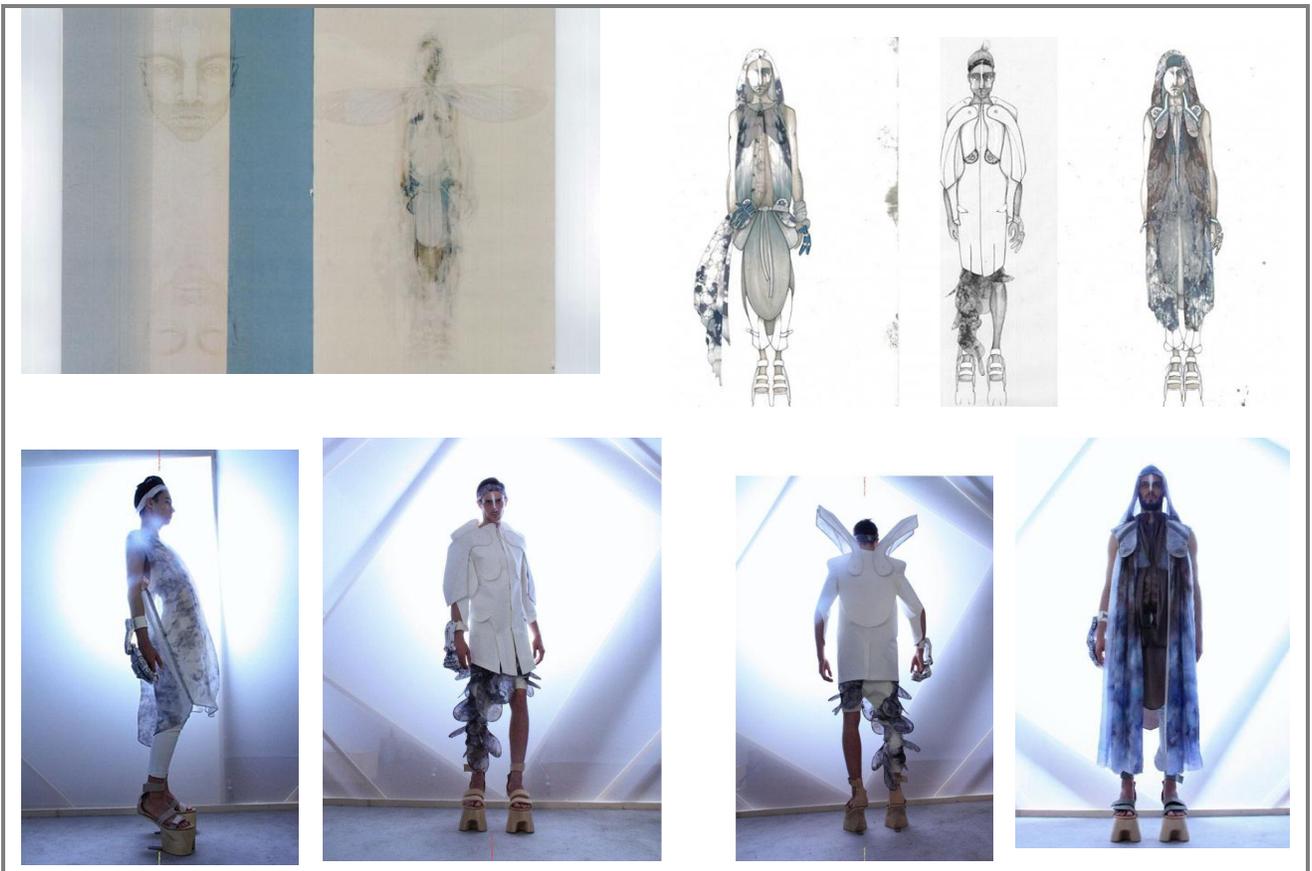


1st bachelor men's jacket project; students start mixing multiple colors; blue chambray fused onto felted wool



1st bachelor women's wool jacket project, using shredded paper over heavy fusing, worn with basic shorts

● **2nd Bachelor** sees about 25-30 students remaining. It involves two projects: a collection of 5 outfits based on one original concept, and a costume with historical background. Two instructors will mentor students who start learning about draping techniques. Cultivating a sense of individuality and distinct style in the students remains the primary focus of the program. Concept research is key. Each fashion student receives recognition during the fashion show; their names are displayed while their collections come down the runway.



2nd Bachelor student Wali Mohammed Barrech's beautiful "ADAMANTIUS" collection and concept images, inspired by dragonflies

Additional 2nd Bachelor work:



2nd Bachelor, historical costumes in monochromatic pale tones of blue, grey and taupe.

● 3rd Bachelor, with approximately 15-20 students, concentrates on creating a collection of 8 silhouettes by the end of the year. This collection must be based on a preliminary study of either a European or a non-European culture. During that time, the students expand their education in graphic design and draping. Life drawing remains an important course in the curriculum, in an effort to broaden their artistic sensibility. One design instructor mentors the students. They receive name recognition during the fashion show as well. Even more emphasis is placed on the conceptual groundwork at this stage.

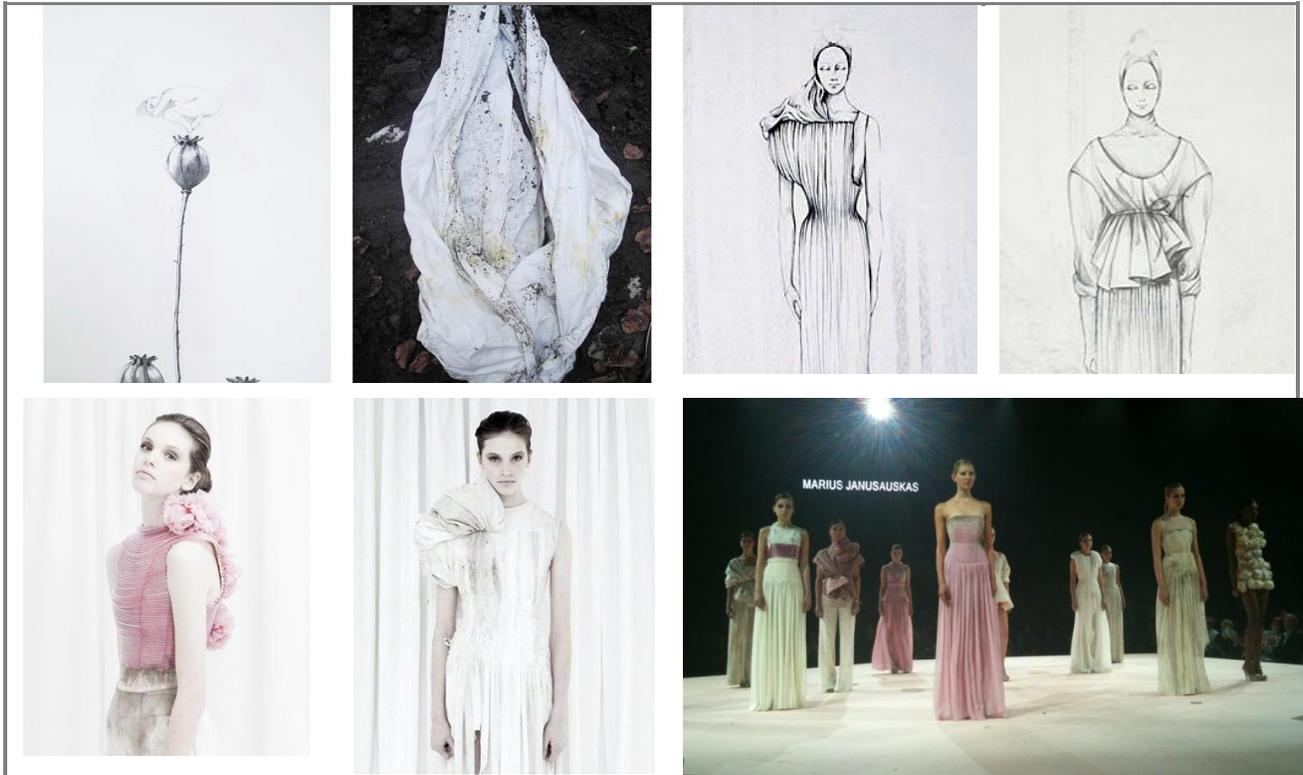


3rd Bachelor student Maddalena Annunziata's ethnic inspiration for her women's collection "I AM MARIA" (Spain)



3rd Bachelor student Umit Esbula (Turkey) used “C.R.E.A.M.-TEAM” as ethnic inspiration for his graphic menswear collection.

● **4th Master** is referred to as the fourth and final year. 5-10 students participate in the Master’s program, tutored by one design instructor. The final collection includes a minimum of 12 silhouettes culminating the skills and techniques students have acquired thus far. This time around, there’s complete freedom in selecting their concept: a favorite artist, a social or political theme, an interesting period in history. Workshops are organized with professional fashion designers such as Dries Van Noten, and Ann Demeulemeester in their studios, deepening the students’ knowledge on the realities of working in the industry. Before they embark on their journey as designers, Master students typically do internships in Paris to receive further training.



4th Master student Marius Janauskas' "SLEEPING BEAUTIES" collection and concept research combines the work of Madame Gres and sculptures by Pablo Atchugarry



Charlotte Pringels' "KNOT WORK" collection is inspired by Peruvian artist Jorge Eielson



Anissa Anouar's "A Super Drunk Hero" collection



Eva Dunis' "The Sacred Cow" collection inspired by India



Jon Sofferud's surrealistic interpretation of *The Little Prince*



So Takayama's "0+0" collection based on high speed femininity

Additional 4th Bachelor collections:



Rey Benedict Pador – “One More Try”



Tabitha Osler’s “Coal Mine Canary” collection

3. The Fashion Show

Every year, The Royal Academy holds a fashion show that exhibits all bachelor and master students’ designs. This year’s show was located in a large hangar by the Scheldt River, with about 700 guests attending. Sponsors were Audi, Coca Cola, Hilton and Yves Saint Laurent, to name a few. Guests included members of the faculty, industry professionals, the media and students’ families. They were greeted in the reception area, a large space decorated with sophisticated taste. Cocktails and hors d’oeuvres were served. The duration of the show was about 3 ½ hours, with ample time dedicated to the 4th Master students. The runway was in the shape of a circle. Each design student’s name was shown on several large digital display boards while their respective outfits or collections walked down the runway. What stood out clearly was the range of concepts which fluctuated from extreme sophistication to flat out curious. All accessories worn by the models were created by the students. As a result, models often walked in a robotic manner due to discomfort from wearing awkward shoes or headgear for example that involved dental “bite blocks”.



Above: model wearing bite block
Left: Model wearing a 6’ tall synthetic tree with antlers

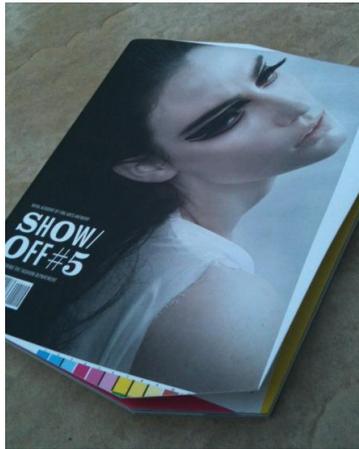


Carved wood hand-made sandals by
Wali Mohammed Barrech

One might label a few of the students' creations unwearable, unmarketable or unsellable. As stated on their website <http://www.antwerp-fashion.be> "In fashion, there is a freedom of expression which can at times be shocking, alarming, astounding or tempting."

It is obvious however that strong emphasis is placed on encouraging students to experiment with "the unknown and the new ...to open up new horizons and to overthrow existing concepts." As a result students are armed with the confidence to stretch their imagination, to defy convention. They're taught to conceptualize while they "explore innovative forms, new colour combinations and original treatments of materials." There are hardly any limits, and if there are, every attempt will be made to problem-solve any challenges and plant seeds for greater creativity, giving students a sense of accomplishment.

Another way to boost student confidence is public exposure of their finished work. Throughout the show professional look books were passed out, containing professional photographs of each student's designs. In there, each one of the 11 Master Program students had two pages dedicated to sharing their "hopes, dreams and ideas". Furthermore, the work they produced over the last 4 years is extensively displayed on the academy's website at <http://www.antwerp-fashion.be/SHOW2012/4.html#> . Posters can be seen scattered throughout Antwerp's fashion district along Meir Street, as well as in newspaper and magazine ads.



The fifth edition of *Show Off*, The Royal Academy of Fine Arts' annual lookbook, provides additional exposure and press for the fashion students. As **Walter Van Beirendonck**, Head of the Fashion Department at The Royal Academy explained, they are using "various shoots, images and texts to show how our students work and put their collections together".

4. Everlasting Inspiration

During my journey, it became clear that these young Belgian designers were directly inspired by their environment. Their creative concepts are resolute reflections of the vast cultural and artistic resources that surround them. Inspiration can be found in their architecture, in the beauty of their natural world, their eclectic culture, the array of eminent avant-garde designers, the plethora of world-class museums and artwork that can be found around every corner. The MOMU, or Mode Museum, which houses the Fashion Department of The Royal Academy, provides the students daily exposure to some of the most exquisite authentic and historical costumes from all around the world. As a result, students are blessed with a perpetual abundance of material that nurtures their creativity.



Design (on left) by 2nd bachelor Beguino Emmanuel, inspired by belgian designer Dirk Van Saene's chromatic collection (right)



2nd Bachelor Benji Wong's (above left) used flemish painter Anthony Van Dyck's portrait of Prince Charles Louis (above right) as inspiration



3rd Bachelor Lise Eerens (on left) did a modern adaptation of an 18th century crinoline (right photo) found at the MOMU's current costume exhibition



Ann Demeulemeester's Spring/Summer 2012 collection (on left) is reminiscent of an 1880 tassel skirt seen at a current MOMU exhibit

I look forward to sharing my experience in the form of a PowerPoint presentation with Otis fashion design students as well as fellow faculty members in the fashion department. Students will benefit greatly from examining The Royal Academy's creative process. They will have an opportunity to bear comparison between two schooling systems, which will provide them greater insight into this creative field. Emphasis on conceptualizing more and allowing more freedom for artistic expression opens access to an exciting new approach to fashion design, one that our fashion program, and consequently our students could greatly benefit from. In my opinion, more creative freedom is essential for instilling more confidence into our graduates as creative leaders. As Walter Van Beirendonck shared, we need to devote ourselves to the essence of education, "teaching the students to develop their own identity; because creativity and vision are the only antidote to the rat race fashion has become." I am grateful to Otis College of Art & Design for having allowed me to broaden my pedagogical knowledge thanks to this Faculty Development Grant.