

Paris: McQueen Was Here

By CATHY HORYN

Someday there will be a retrospective of the fashion of Alexander McQueen, and if it ends with the 15 pieces shown here in a small salon the survey will indeed feel complete. The final collection of the designer, who committed suicide on Feb. 11, saw him returning to the historical past, in particular medieval symbols of faith and morality.



What might have been a sad or strange occasion was handled with quiet, professional polish and dignity by the McQueen staff from London and the folks at KCD, the public relations firm. At the presentation I attended there were seven or eight other journalists, as well as François Pinault, the founder of PPR, which owns Gucci Group and the McQueen label. A handful of top models showed the clothes, one at a time, with Sarah Burton, McQueen's longtime design assistant, supervising in the back.

Mr. McQueen's clothes often embraced the historical as much as they aimed to move fashion forward. After his remarkable show in October, which realized many of his ideas about fashion and the digital age, this

collection dealt with handcraft and the role of art on a sensitive mind. Inspiration came from the work of 15th-century painters like Hans Memling, Jean Hey and in particular Heironymus Bosch, whose triptych "The

Garden of Earthly Delights" was rendered, in smart part, in the bodice of a dress. Mr. McQueen had details of paintings or wood carvings captured digitally, woven into jacquards and then engineered to fit a garment. Mr. McQueen cut the patterns for each garment himself, Ms. Burton said backstage, as she pointed to a red satin caped dress cut on a circle.

"After last season, he really wanted to go back to craft," she said.

Given the subject matter of the paintings, the images are necessarily Gothic, with surreal scenes of punishment and glory. Lions are embroidered in gold around the hem of a beautiful black silk caped dress. On the front of a long white dress are the slightly shadowed, downcast heads of two saintly figures. Above each is a dove in flight. The silk dress, with the details rendered in different shadings of gray, extends the figures' robes to the hem, duplicating their swirls and folds in jacquard chiffon.

In recent seasons, Mr. McQueen was eager to make a stiff woven fabric transform without an obvious break or seam into a fluid fabric, and he did that again in this collection. So even in a historical mode he directed fashion toward the new. For me, the most stirring thing about the clothes was how personal and incredibly reassured the work was. One hopes they gave him some satisfaction.