

Margiela, the Hermès years

To Jenny Meirens and Jean-Louis Dumas

*Martin Margiela*

**MARGIELA**  
**THE**  
**HERMÈS**  
**YEARS**

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HERMÈS, Autumn-Winter 2003-04,  
kimono sleeve in double-faced  
cashmere.

SUZY MENKES

The idea of deconstruction as an art form was a bold gesture at the end of the 1980s. Fashion was then at its most affluent and extravagant – bold, brash and shouting to be noticed. Only a still small voice of calm was speaking a different language. Instead of excess, there was distressed cloth. In the face of exaggeration was becalmed elegance. The orgy of opulence was here replaced by clothes that were deliberately deconstructed with visible darts, frayed hems and shoes with split toes.

Martin Margiela changed the course of fashion – but subtly, subversively. Even more elusive and invisible than Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons, Margiela rejected the catwalk, the supermodels and the idea of using his own persona to head up his brand. His studio was painted white from ceiling to floor and his staff wore white coats, as if they were workers in a fashion laboratory.

After graduating from Antwerp's Royal Academy of Arts in 1980, Martin Margiela spent his formative years with Jean Paul Gaultier, from 1984 to 1987. Then, in 1988, he and Jenny Meirens established Maison Martin Margiela, built on loose threads and labelled with a square of large white stitches.

It was the maverick side of this designer that gave him fashion status. His collection featured clothes wrapped in dry-cleaner plastic, shown on rough land on the outskirts of Paris; the invitation was scribbled on the outside of an envelope; wigs were used like strands of thread; and clothes were presented in two sections, one black, the other white.

Margiela's skill was to make the ordinary extraordinary. And the top note came with his unexpected collaboration with Hermès, from 1997 to 2003. This was fashion's arch-radical, facing off the noble French house. Hospital-coat white meets sunset orange. Layers of impeccable tailoring built on the V-shaped *vareuse* gave the collaboration a timeless elegance. Hand-sewn buttons, with threads stitched into an 'H' for Hermès, showed their robust attention to detail. Even after 18 years hanging in storage, the quality of the finest leather, cashmere and cloth remains exceptional.

The exhibition put together by Kaat Debo at MoMu, the Fashion Museum in Antwerp, is a fashion memory bank. Realized before the age of the Internet, smart phones or instant images on Instagram, Margiela's exceptional application of modern elegance might well have been lost. This exhibition reveals and unfurls his innate classicism – with a maverick twist.





KAAT DEBO

How exceptional it is to have the honour of presenting a designer whose work has consistently been based on infinite respect for women, at a time in which all around the world, hundreds of thousands of women are coming onto the streets to demand their rights and respect for their physical integrity. Martin Margiela's collaboration with the French house of Hermès (1997-2003) is the starting point for the book that lies before you and the eponymous exhibition at the Antwerp Fashion Museum. *Margiela, The Hermès Years* covers not only his work for Hermès, but also looks more deeply into his own label, Maison Martin Margiela, as two worlds with a single artistic DNA. For Hermès, Margiela developed a vision in which the woman herself is central, not as an ideal image of eternal youth, but a real, natural and independent woman. For her, he developed a slowly evolving wardrobe with comfort, quality and timelessness as fundamental elements. He presented his collections on women of differing ages and body types, something that was not only an exceptional statement in the late 1990s, but unfortunately still is today. And, although he designed his vision for Hermès within the well-defined segment of luxury fashion, its impact reached much further. Margiela's fashion adapted itself to its wearer, instead of forcing itself onto her body. His designs offer potential answers to the question of what it is to be a woman. In this and many other aspects, Martin Margiela was well before his time. His entire oeuvre is shaped from a great knowledge of and deep respect for the past. Craftsmanship, skill and creation are the building blocks of a vision that not only then, but still today offers an alternative to a system of fashion that is increasingly under pressure.

*Margiela, The Hermès Years* would not have been possible without the support and enthusiasm of many people. For the realisation of both this book and the exhibition, we were able to count on the loyal cooperation of Hermès and Maison Martin Margiela. My thanks go out to the administrators of the archives and the teams of both houses. In particular, I thank Axel Dumas (CEO, Hermès) and Pierre-Alexis Dumas (Artistic Director, Hermès) for their exceptional collaboration and unflinching hospitality towards my team. A special word of thanks also goes to those who have made works available on loan for the exhibition and to the authors and photographers for their indispensable contributions to the book. I am delighted, of course, to thank the entire Fashion Museum team, most especially Karen, Elisa, Robby, David, Birgit, Monica, Wim, Frédéric and Danique. My sincere thanks also to Bob Verhelst and Jelle Jespers, respectively, for the design of the exhibition and the book.

Finally, my heartfelt thanks to Martin Margiela. I hope that *Margiela, The Hermès Years* will be seen as a gesture of great respect for the exceptional creativity of an outstanding designer whose fashion heritage has continued to feed and excite the fashion world for more than three decades.

Director and curator in chief, MoMu, Fashion Museum Antwerp













HERMÈS, Autumn-Winter 1998-99, *vareuse* vest in teddy lambskin, seamless pullover and removable collar in cashmere, gloves in cashmere.







HERMÈS, Autumn-Winter 1998-99,  
sleeveless dress in tricotine with zippers in  
the side seams, which can be transformed  
into a tunic over wide trousers in the same  
material.





MAISON MARTIN MARGIELA, Spring-Summer 1997, invisible zippers in darts and seams make the narrow dress wearable. It is worn over a jacket in raw linen, in the form of tailor's dummy, jeans and leather tabi boots.

