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Aqua blue Thierry Mugler skirt suit,  
ca. 1990s. Toronto Metropolitan  
University FRC2019.03.002ABC. Gift of  
Anonymous donor. Photograph by Tori  
Hopgood, 2019.

# A MUGLER MYSTERY

By **Tori Hopgood**  
BDes Fashion Student

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## PART ONE

**Thierry Mugler (b. 1948) was once a well-known name in the world of fashion in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s with celebrities like Cindy Crawford and Kate Moss wearing his clothing.** Although he retired from fashion for a period of almost two decades, the designer recently returned to the spotlight. He loaned three vintage looks to rapper Cardi B for the 2019 Grammy Awards, designed Kim Kardashian's dress for the 2019 Met Gala and is the featured subject of an exhibition at the [Montreal Museum of Fine Arts](#) (March 2 - September 8, 2019) (notes 1-3).

**Inspired by his background in theatre and dance, Mugler is known for his futuristic and whimsical designs born out of his wildest fantasies.** The daring designer distinguishes himself with clothing of sharp shoulders and distinct waistlines which redefined the female silhouette of the latter half of the 1980s (note 4). However, Mugler's designs are not just items of clothing, but tools of communication. He said: "I invent my characters and I put them on stage. For me, clothes are a language" (note 5).

Aqua blue Thierry Mugler skirt suit,  
ca. 1990s. Toronto Metropolitan  
University FRC2019.03.002ABC. Gift of  
Anonymous donor. Photograph by Tori  
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It is with this idea of clothing as communication that inspired me to take a closer look at a 1990s Thierry Mugler skirt suit (FRC2019.03.002ABC) donated anonymously to the Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection. While I did not live through this era of power suits and skirt suits, **the vibrant colour and bold design of this Mugler suit intrigued me and I wanted to learn more about the designer and the clothing worn by women during the 1990s.**

The aqua blue skirt suit grabbed my attention as undoubtedly it would have attracted the eyes of passersby. In order to further investigate such an interesting ensemble, I used the object-based research method from *The Dress Detective* by Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim (note 6). **This series of three blog posts will consider the construction of the garment and analyze related contextual information of the 1990s in order to explore the idea of clothing as a symbol of power and method of communication.**



Aqua blue Thierry Mugler skirt suit, ca. 1990s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2019.03.002ABC. Neck detail. Gift of Anonymous donor. Photograph by Tori Hopgood, 2019.

Thierry Mugler is known for a specific silhouette when designing for women. More commonly known as the Mugler look, it is his fantasy woman brought to life with “structured silhouettes, wide shoulders, wasp waists and endless legs” (note 7). This ideal dream woman is reflected in his designs, some which push ideas of femininity to the extreme, such as a motorcycle corset from 1992 or a cyborg metal bodysuit from 1995 (note 8 and 9). **In this design lexicon, this vibrant aqua blue skirt suit is somewhat subtler, but was designed to accentuate the wearer’s figure, giving particular emphasis to the waist and hips.** The princess-seamed jacket is belted at the waist where it meets the softly gathered skirt.

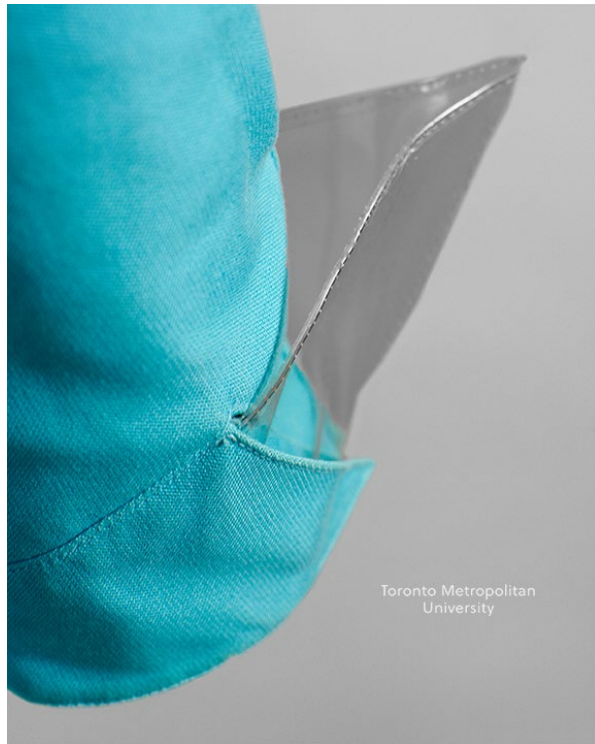
**The jacket features a plunging neckline accented by decorative top stitching and a piece of plastic in the shape of a lapel on the right-hand side.** Consistent with the styles of the time, the shoulders of the jacket are given emphasis with shoulder pads (note 10). At the bottom of the front opening, four silver snaps with plastic accents line the bottom half of the jacket. With each closure placed about 2 inches (5cm) apart, they trace the curve of the jacket opening to a unique asymmetrical design that resembles something of an upside-down wave. **This interesting shape curves into an asymmetrical peplum which flares at the waist to further highlight the hourglass figure.** The back of the peplum dips down to 5 inches (12.5cm).



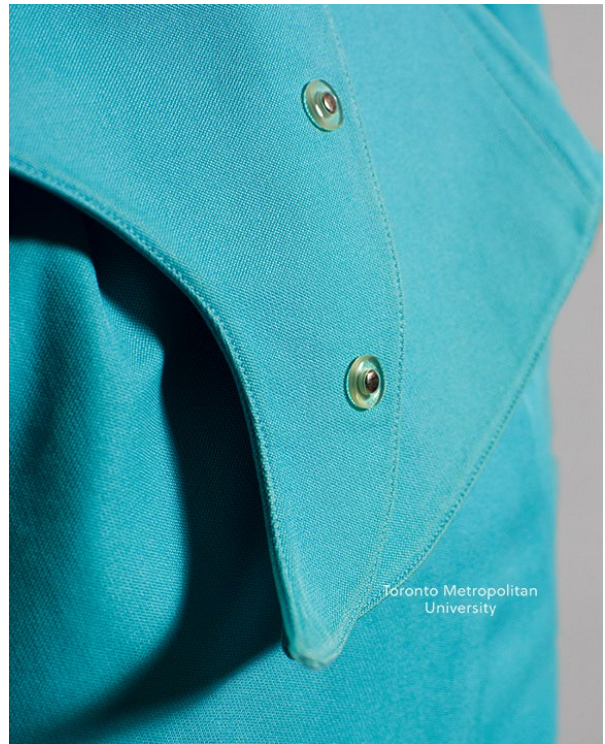
Aqua blue Thierry Mugler skirt suit, ca. 1990s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2019.03.002ABC. Belt detail. Gift of Anonymous donor. Photograph by Tori Hopgood, 2019.



Aqua blue Thierry Mugler skirt suit, ca. 1990s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2019.03.002ABC. Skirt detail. Gift of Anonymous donor. Photograph by Tori Hopgood, 2019.



Aqua blue Thierry Mugler skirt suit, ca. 1990s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2019.03.002ABC. Cuff detail. Gift of Anonymous donor. Photograph by Tori Hopgood, 2019.



Aqua blue Thierry Mugler skirt suit, ca. 1990s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2019.03.002ABC. Snap detail. Gift of Anonymous donor. Photograph by Tori Hopgood, 2019.



Aqua blue Thierry  
Mugler skirt suit,  
ca. 1990s. Toronto  
Metropolitan University  
FRC2019.03.002ABC.  
Pocket detail. Gift of  
Anonymous donor.  
Photograph by Tori  
Hopgood, 2019.

**The shape of the armhole is highly unusual in that it is not just a regular round armhole, but has been more intricately designed.** The front of the sleeve hole curves down from the shoulder in wave-like fashion and then juts out into a 90-degree angle where the sleeve then cuts straight to the side seam. Upon further inspection, the armholes would have been very difficult to construct and would require a deep understanding of pattern drafting to visualize the design in 3D. **This is one of the subtle design elements that are evidence of high-quality craftsmanship. Not only are the armholes particularly notable, the use of plastic design elements is also unique.** The cuff of the sleeve (21 inches or 52 cm) has been strategically cut and sewn to create a geometric shape that is further accented by a triangular piece of plastic.

Located on the left breast is a pocket in the shape of a skewed parallelogram shown below. It measures 3 inches (7.5cm) by 4 inches (10cm) and where the edge of the pocket rounds, the opposite side curves toward it making it appear slanted. **A piece of plastic in the shape of a wave decorates the top of the opening in pocket square fashion.**



**The knee-length skirt is gathered at the waist creating a balloon effect that tapers slightly at the side seams to emphasize the hips.** The waist of the skirt measures 26" (66 cm), however the widest part at the hips is only 33" (84cm). The outfit had to be photographed on a different mannequin than usual because the hips are so unusually small, relative to the waist. On the form, it appears that the hips are significantly bigger than the waist, hence the balloon effect, but the gathers could be responsible for this illusion. The back of the skirt features a peplum-like insert where the seam splits and flares out and a piece of plastic connects the sides of the slit. This remarkable design element causes the bottom of the skirt back to flare outwards.

The jacket features a 1 inch (2.5cm) wide belt made of the same aqua blue cotton fabric with a shark tooth-shaped plastic buckle to cinch in the waist and further emphasize the hips.

Sewn into the collar of the jacket and the waistband of the skirt is a purple and silver label which reads "Thierry Mugler Paris, Made in France, 38".

**Thierry Mugler's designs are his dreams come to life.** He is "trying to convey sensations and feelings... always telling stories" through his work (note 11). **If clothing is a language and can silently send messages, what is this outfit trying to portray? What does the colour of it say about the wearer? Who would wear such a bold outfit? What idea was Thierry Mugler trying to embody with this design? How did it fit in with the styles of the 1990s and how did it stand out? These questions will be considered in the blog posts to follow.**

Aqua blue Thierry Mugler skirt suit, ca. 1990s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2019.03.002ABC. Label. Gift of Anonymous donor. Photograph by Tori Hoggood, 2019.

**Note 1:** Cardi B's 2019 Grammy outfits: <https://www.vogue.com/vogueworld/article/cardi-b-grammys-archival-mugler-couture>

**Note 2:** Kim Kardashian's 2019 Met Gala outfit: <https://www.vogue.com/article/kim-kardashian-getting-ready-thierry-mugler-met-gala-2019>

**Note 3:** Beker, J., Bondil, N., Colmant, M., Harder, M., Lang, J., Loriot, T. M., ... Verthime, S. (2019). *Thierry Mugler: Couturissime*. Montreal, QC: The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

**Note 4:** Bott, D. (2010) *Thierry Mugler Galaxy Glamour*. New York, NY: Thames & Hudson. pp. 5.

**Note 5:** *ibid.*

**Note 6:** Mida, I., & Kim, A. (2015). *The Dress Detective: A Practical Guide to Object-based Research in Fashion*. Bloomsbury Academic.

**Note 7:** see note 4.

**Note 8:** Image of motorcycle corset: <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-1992-ready-to-wear/mugler/slideshow/collection#60>

**Note 9:** Images of cyborg metal suit: <https://thegenealogyofstyle.wordpress.com/2014/12/05/robot-suit/>

**Note 10:** Zimbalist, K. (1997, September). Vogue's view: Closet cases: A bolder shoulder. *Vogue*, 187(9), 256.

**Note 11:** see note 4.

Aqua blue Thierry Mugler skirt suit, ca. 1990s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2019.03.002ABC. Gift of Anonymous donor. Photograph by Tori Hopgood, 2019.



## PART TWO

In “A Mugler Mystery Part I,” my close observation of the Thierry Mugler aqua blue skirt suit ended with several questions, namely:

- If clothing is a language and can silently send messages, what is this outfit trying to portray?
- What does the colour of it say about the wearer?
- Who would wear such a bold outfit?
- What idea was Thierry Mugler trying to embody with this design?
- How did it fit in with the styles of the 1990s and how did it stand out?

In this post, the next step in my object-based research project using the reflection checklist from *The Dress Detective* (note 1) seeks to answer those questions **by considering related contextual information styles, colours and power dynamics of women’s fashion during the 1990s.**

**The look of the 1990s included everything from grunge to slip dresses to the flashy costumes of the Spice Girls, but one defining look in terms of the office was the feminine skirt suit** (note 2). However, the 1990s skirt suit did not come into style until the more traditional style of power suit of the 1980s had waned in popularity.





Thierry Mugler skirt suit, ca. 1980s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC1989.05.002AB. Gift of Karen Mulhallen. Front view, collar detail and label. Photographs by Tori Hopgood, 2019

**In the 1980s, women in the workplace were told that in order to be as successful as their male counterparts, they would have to dress like them** (note 3). In the widely read 1977 book, *The Women's Dress for Success Book*, author John T. Molloy advised women to wear dark suits inspired by menswear with a man-tailored blazer that would not accentuate the bust and paired with a matching below-knee length (note 4). Molloy conducted a study whose results stated the best colours for a skirt suit were navy, charcoal gray, dark brown and black, sober colours that are all associated with men's suits. (note 5). These colours were symbolic of power because this is what men were wearing (note 6).

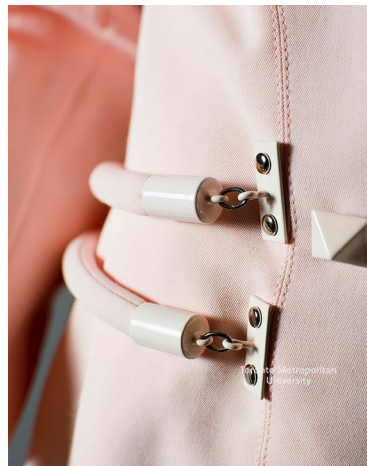
**A Vogue article from 1991 described the look of the 1980s as every woman wearing "the gray flannel suit, looking every bit as boring as the man" and "dressing for work became an exercise in de-sexing yourself"** (note 7). An example of just such a suit can be found in the Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection. This Thierry Mugler skirt suit dated to the 1980s fits this description (FRC1989.05.002AB) . Made of a dark gray wool with a subtle pink and golden yellow checked pattern, this skirt suit is not nearly as feminine as the aqua blue suit. The sober gray suit jacket covers the chest, does not accentuate the bust, waist or hips and the skirt sits below the knee. This outfit would not draw attention to the wearer. This skirt suit is important to my research because it is visual evidence of styles changing based on how women were perceived and the message they wanted to send. It reinforces the idea of women suppressing their femininity in order to be treated fairly in the workplace.



Thierry Mugler skirt suit, ca. 1990. Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. 2003.398.1A,B. Gift of Jacqueline Loewe Fowler.

Once the 1980s were over, a new style of skirt suit took over as women began to embrace their femininity in the workplace (note 8). The new decade brought a whole wave of colour according to *Vogue* (New York). **The October 1990 issue of *Vogue* declared “now that bright color is accepted - for the office, for weekends, for evening - it’s changing the look of the entire wardrobe”** (note 9). The editorial features skirt suits in every colour of the rainbow and even a dress the same aqua blue as the Thierry Mugler suit. Colour became a symbolic expression of power for women.

The Costume Institute collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art includes a Thierry Mugler skirt suit (2003.398.1a, b) that bears a striking resemblance to the one being studied. **Made of the same aqua blue cotton fabric with an asymmetrical design, the only difference is the absence of plastic accents.** With its curved center seam and wave-like design elements, it is highly likely that these two outfits are from the same collection and demonstrates what Thierry Mugler was doing at the time in terms of ready-to-wear. It tells me that Mugler was still designing skirt suits, but putting his own twist on them.



Claude Montana skirt suit, spring/summer 1992. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2019.03.001AB. Gift of Anonymous donor. Front view, belt detail and Bloomingdales ad. Photographs of Montana garment in Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection by Tori Hopgood, 2019.

**This style of skirt suit was at its height of popularity in the early 1990s and the anonymous donor evidently embraced this trend as she graciously donated another such suit by Claude Montana (FRC2019.03.001AB).** This peony pink double-breasted jacket and miniskirt from Montana's Spring/Summer 1992 collection also embodies the idea of power and femininity. Montana's skirt suit features broad shoulders, pink pyramidal metal buttons and a decorative double belt accented by metal tubular shapes. The donor also saved the Bloomingdales advertisement for this Claude Montana skirt suit from Spring 1992. This example provides further evidence that the skirt suit had undergone a radical makeover in the 1990s in which the lacklustre styles of the 1980s were left behind. **This comparison highlights that Thierry Mugler was not alone in revamping the skirt suit, Claude Montana, Chanel, Giorgio Armani and Donna Karan also did so** (note 10).

In considering the contextual information related to the Thierry Mugler aqua blue suit, namely the styles and colours of the decade, I have learned how the outfit conformed to the trends of the time and how Thierry Mugler put his own touch on the classic style. This information will be beneficial for the interpretation portion of the research. **Part III of this research project will consider how clothing can be used as a symbol of authority and what message the wearer was trying to send when sporting this chic outfit.**

**Note 1:** Mida, I., & Kim, A. (2015). *The Dress Detective: A Practical Guide to Object-based Research in Fashion*. Bloomsbury Academic.

**Note 2:** "Fashion: The best & worst looks of the '90s." (1996, January). *Vogue* (New York), 186(1), 118-131.

**Note 3:** Ibid.

**Note 4:** Molloy, J. T. (1977) *The Woman's Dress for Success Book*. New York, NY: Warner. pp. 50.

**Note 5:** Molloy, J. T. (1977) *The Woman's Dress for Success Book*. New York, NY: Warner. pp. 52.

**Note 6:** Ibid.

**Note 7:** "Vogue Beauty: Appearance at Work." (1991, October). *Vogue* (New York), 181(10), 224-236.

**Note 8:** ibid.

**Note 9:** "Dress for less: The color scheme." (1990, October). *Vogue*, 180(10), 410-417.

**Note 10:** "Fashion: The scoop on suits." (1994, August). *Vogue*, 184(8), 220-227.

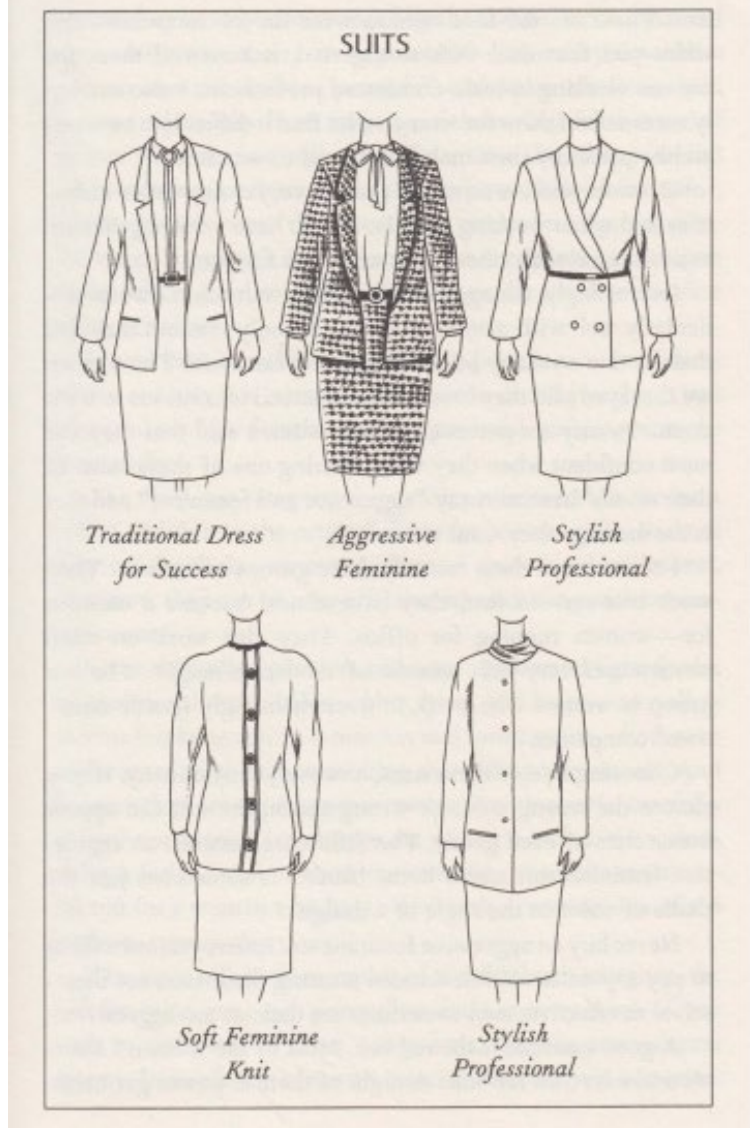
### PART THREE

My previous post reviewed the styles, colours and power dynamics of women's fashion during the 1990s using *The Dress Detective* (note 1). **This third and final blog post uses the contextual information gathered about the aqua blue Thierry Mugler skirt suit to consider clothing as a method of communication.** More specifically, I ask: **who would wear such a bold outfit and what were they trying to portray through style and colour?**

Fashions are constantly evolving and the trends are generally representative of what is happening in society. **John T. Molloy's 1975 book *The Women's Dress for Success Book* advised women to wear unstructured skirt suits inspired by menswear in order to be seen as men's equals in the office** (note 2). Molloy suggested that women wear dark colours such as navy, charcoal gray and black, colours popular in menswear (note 3). However, in the 1990s women no longer felt they had to hide their femininity and this change in society and gender perspective was reflected the clothing they wore. Nineteen years and multiple studies later, **Molloy shifted his opinion in the *New Women's Dress for Success*, to say that "both men and women respond positively to women wearing jackets with feminine styles and colours"** (note 4). These styles include jackets: "in various lengths, with and without lapels, puffed sleeves, nipped-in waists, felt collars, contrasting pockets, and so on" (note 5).

**Molloy identifies five different categories of suits: the traditional dress for success suit, aggressive feminine, stylish professional, soft feminine and the conservative feminine suit** (note 6). The Thierry Mugler outfit mostly resembles Molloy's aggressive feminine style. **This category of suits are made in strong colours or bold patterns** (note 7). Molloy illustrates this type of suit with the example of Hillary Clinton who wore a patterned burgundy skirt suit with a bold royal blue hat and jacket in 1993 at her husband's presidential inauguration (note 8). **Molloy suggested that an outfit like this sends a strong message that she is powerful and feminine**, but also claims most people do not respond well to aggressive feminine suits even though many businesswomen do wear them (note 9). **Molloy recommends this style of suit for three groups of women: those running for office; those who are thin and average height; and those who work in female-dominated environments** (note 10). While the donor was thin and of average height based on the measurements of the garments she donated, it is also possible that when she wore this suit, she may have worked in a female-dominated workplace or been in public office.

Scan of different styles of suits from  
New Woman's Dress for Success by  
Molloy, J. T. (1996). Page 53.



Colour is just as important as style when it comes to clothing as a method of communication, since colour influences how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us. Finding the right colour is as crucial as ensuring the shoulder seams sit properly or the skirt is the right length. "The colors and shades of color that help convince people that you are attractive also announce your status, effectiveness, attitude, loyalty, honesty and credibility," according to Molloy (note 11). Since aqua is a combination of blue and green, the meaning of this colour is influenced by both colours. Colour psychology expert, Angel Wright, says green is a restful colour to look at because it is "the essential balance between the mind, the body and the emotions" (note 12). Green is the colour of nature and implies an abundance of water and healthy plant life and therefore reassures us that we will not starve; and Wright reckons the reassurance of the colour is why money is green (note 13). On the other hand, blue is a thoughtful and authoritative colour that promotes active thinking. **Blue signals to others that you are confident in what you are doing and saying because you have thought it through** (note 14). Additionally, bright colours tend to draw attention according to Molloy (note 15). **The owner of this outfit must have wanted to be noticed and draw the attention and respect of others, perhaps she was in a position that required her to do so.** Since bright colours get noticed, the wearer would also have to be confident enough to have all eyes on her.



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Claude Montana skirt suit, Gucci pencil skirt and Yves Saint Laurent trousers. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2019.03.001AB, FRC2019.03.003, FRC2019.03.004. Gift of Anonymous donor. Photographs of garments in Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection by Tori Hopgood, 2019.

The quality of the colour and how it is made also sends a message. Molloy points out that dyeing fabrics in bright colours requires the use of high-quality, expensive dyes which the consumer absorbs the cost of (note 16). This is important because not only do the garments cost more, but brightly coloured pieces are very limiting and less versatile than neutral colours. The wearer of this outfit spent more money than she would have that if she had purchased a gray skirt suit since she would have been able to wear the gray suit more frequently than she would a bright aqua blue one. **Molloy advised: "if you wear a navy suit once every two weeks, no one will remember when you wore it last. However, if you wear a bright red suit every other week, after a month or two your co-workers will think it is one of your favourite suits"** (note 17). When purchasing the outfit, the wearer must have expected to only be able to wear it infrequently. This tells me she had the disposable income to buy expensive garments with limited usage. **According to Molloy, "if you have a limited budget, you have to limit your colours. Once you reach that point in your career where you can afford to buy expensive suits, you can choose subtle and vibrant colours"** (note 18). This suggests that the wearer was established in her career and held a well-paying position that allowed her to spend a lot of money on clothing.

In addition to the Thierry Mugler skirt suit, the donor also gifted a Claude Montana skirt suit, a Gucci pencil skirt, a pair of Yves Saint Laurent trousers and an Yves Saint Laurent top. All of these designer pieces tell me that the donor frequently wore expensive clothing and the Thierry Mugler skirt suit was not a splurge item, but one of many designer garments in her wardrobe.



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Aqua blue Thierry Mugler skirt suit, ca. 1990s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2019.03.002ABC. Gift of Anonymous donor. Photograph by Tori Hopgood, 2019.

**With its cinched in waist and balloon-like hips, the Thierry Mugler skirt suit is feminine yet powerful. The plastic accents, although an unusual element, add another degree of boldness and uniqueness.** They represent Mugler's out of the box thinking and show how the wearer was brave enough to wear something quite different. **The accents on the wrist that jut out resemble metal spikes, as if they are saying 'do not get too close to me'.** In combination with the lapel, pocket decoration and belt, the plastic elements make the outfit really stand out amongst the crowd. Overall, the alluring outfit would make the wearer feel confident and maybe even fearless.

Although the anonymity of the donation precludes me from knowing more about the donor, from the research I have gathered, it seems likely that she was a chic woman who held a high-paying position at a professional workplace. She must have had the disposable income to purchase designer garments and properly care for them as they are all in good condition. **She would have had to be confident in herself to wear such an eye-catching outfit and not be afraid of attention.** In the workplace, the suit is a signal of power and Molloy says **"the right suit says that the wearer is educated, successful, professional, powerful and competent"** (note 19). It is likely the donor possessed these characteristics. According to Thierry Mugler, **"a Mugler woman is a conqueror who holds the reigns of her own life"** and based on my close analysis of this avant-garde aqua blue skirt suit, I believe the wearer was a Mugler woman (note 20).

This post was edited by Dr. Ingrid E. Mida.



**Note 1:** Mida, I., & Kim, A. (2015). *The Dress Detective: A Practical Guide to Object-based Research in Fashion*. Bloomsbury Academic.

**Note 2:** Molloy, J. T. (1977). *The Woman's Dress for Success Book*. New York, NY: Warner. pp. 50.

**Note 3:** *ibid*, pp. 52.

**Note 4:** Molloy, J. T. (1996). *New Woman's Dress for Success*. New York, NY: Warner. pp. 24.

**Note 5:** *ibid*, pp. 25.

**Note 6:** *ibid*, pp. 50-52.

**Note 7:** *ibid*, pp. 50.

**Note 8:** Hillary Clinton's outfit for Bill Clinton's Inauguration: <https://americanhistory.si.edu/first-ladies/hillary-clinton>

**Note 9:** Molloy, J. T. (1996). *New Woman's Dress for Success*. New York, NY: Warner. pp. 54.

**Note 10:** *Ibid*.

**Note 11:** Molloy, J. T. (1996). *New Woman's Dress for Success*. New York, NY: Warner. pp. 147.

**Note 12:** Whittaker, A. (2018, April 27). What the Color of Your Outfit Right Now Says About You. Retrieved from <https://www.instyle.com/news/what-color-outfit-says-about-you>

**Note 13:** *Ibid*.

**Note 14:** *Ibid*.

**Note 15:** Molloy, J. T. (1996). *New Woman's Dress for Success*. New York, NY: Warner. pp. 155.

**Note 16:** *Ibid*, pp. 56.

**Note 17:** *Ibid*, pp. 57.

**Note 18:** *Ibid*.

**Note 19:** *Ibid*.

**Note 20:** Bott, D. (2010). *Thierry Mugler: Galaxy Glamour*. New York, NY: Thames & Hudson. pp. 169.