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Artfully done

The Portland Museum's Eye Candy party is a feast for the senses.

EVERY YALE KAMILA / SOCIETY NOTEBOOK

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Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer
The Portland Museum of Art is transformed by decorative touches and bathed in a warm pink light.

It's remarkable what a little sheer fabric can do to a space.

Everyone I spoke with during the Portland Museum of Art's sold-out Eye Candy party Wednesday night agreed. As the annual winter bash for The Contemporaries membership group, the black-tie affair attracted more than 300 people and transformed the Great Hall into a cross between a high-end nightclub and the Palace of Versailles.

A champagne fountain stood at the entrance, a white-draped pagoda rose in the center of the hall, a candy bar replaced the admissions desk, Phillippe Starck-style Lucite chairs provided seating and a series of backlit screens with topiary cut-outs lined the walls. Everything was bathed in warm pink light and accented by flowers designed by member Stephanie

Pilk.

All of this was the culmination of months of behind-the-scenes planning by the museum staff and a volunteer committee. I had the honor of serving on this committee, which found design inspiration for the party in Sofia Coppola's sensuous "Marie Antoinette" production. Like the tabletop subject matter of the "Objects of Wonder" still life exhibition currently on view in the museum's main gallery, the film features piles of pastries, sweets and other decadent edibles.

Much of the heavy lifting for the party's decor was done by fellow committee member and interior designer Brett Johnson, who owns Maine Street Design Co. and does work for many of Maine's blue-blooded summer residents. He arrived at 7 a.m. the morning of the party to oversee the set-up. By the time I caught up with him at the party more than 12 hours later, he and I joked that we could have been prom dates since his vest and tie coordinated with my candy pink gown. Brett's partner, Tim Waite, and my husband, Adam Hill – decked out in blue and black accents respectively – got a good laugh from our matchy-matchy ways.

Steering committee member Rob Gould also was well-dressed in a burgundy dinner jacket. He used his marketing savvy to build buzz for the event.

Committee member Linda Banks, who owns the Simply Home shop and Banks Design Associates, teamed with Brett to create the party's spectacular look. She was a big help to me and PMA's Amber Degen the day we visited the Old Port Candy Co. The shop offered to donate candy gift bags to the event and asked us to select the sweets. While Amber and I couldn't decide among all the colorful and tempting sweets (can we have one of everything, please?), Linda quickly nailed down a color scheme and a candy selection.

She provided apothecary-style jars from her shop to display some of the candy, and Brett and Kate Burnham (who serves on both the event and steering committees) were among those who helped fill the jars.

Like the "Marie Antoinette" film, the party's soundtrack had a playful, edgy vibe. Committee member Anthony Manhart coordinated the up-tempo play list with DJ Ian Paige, and the two conspired to make Bow Wow Wow's '80s cover of "I Want Candy" the party's theme song.

We certainly didn't want for sweets at this party, as Leslie Oster of Aurora Provisions – and a member of the planning committee – provided pastries, cheese and chocolates for the party. Much of it was carried on silver trays by servers sporting Marie Antoinette-esque wigs.

At the open bar, bottles of Allagash White proved popular as did a cocktail made from Maine Mead Works Lavender Mead and lemon-lime soda. Such fabulous drinks (combined with the Great Hall's tough acoustics) made quieting the crowd for a few remarks a tough sell, but museum director Mark Bessire and event committee chair Kyo Bannai soldiered on above the din with style and humor.

Near the busy bar is where I ran into Field Gallery artists Colin Sullivan-Stevens and Friederike Hamann, who created a video installation called "Electric Garden" projected above the crowd. It was also in the bar area where I caught up with committee member Bree LaCasse. Even though she recently had an adorable baby (which you'd never guess from looking at her), she still managed to help get the party off the ground.

Hilary Robbins and her husband, Bill Goodman, were among the friendly faces greeting guests at the door. Hilary, who co-chairs The Contemporaries steering committee and sits on the museum's board, has been instrumental in launching this interesting group of museum members. Contemporaries co-chair and fellow board member Chris Robinson has been equally involved in cultivating this next generation of museum supporters. He also has a great sense of humor.

After a photo op, Chris ribbed event committee member Andy Verzosa for ditching his polka-dot bow tie early. Andy claims the tie shrunk since he wore it last. I giggled. Then we all agreed even though a creative interpretation of formalwear prevails in this town, it's fun to have an opportunity to leave the jeans at home. In that vein, Chris thinks we should up the attire ante at the Contemporaries summer party and get the guys to throw on seersucker suits. Adding such a touch of Southern charm sounds fantastic to me, but then I'd love an excuse to buy a floppy hat.

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