

# *Distinction, a century of fashion photography:* an exhibition charting the history of photography and the fashion system

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The exhibition *Distinction, a century of fashion photography* is the culmination of six years of research into the fashion system carried out by a team from the Barcelona Design Museum, formerly the Textile and Costume Museum of Barcelona. Over the century that the exhibition covers, fashion has been represented not only by clothing and accessories but also through graphic and photographic documents, magazines, publications and a variety of other materials, all of which have contributed to the dissemination of novelties in fashion.

Since the 1960s, the Museum has held a sizeable collection of fashion engravings and illustrations, books including Cesare Veccelio's *Habiti antichi et moderni di tutto il Mondo* (published in 1598, containing descriptions of clothing from across the world), periodicals and magazines from the eighteenth century onwards, and photographs from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 2010, this collection was used as the basis for two exhibitions, *Fashion images* and *Outumuro Looks, twenty years photographing fashion*, which looked at how fashion images are constructed, and led to the curation of a new photographic collection, highlighting the importance and ubiquity of fashion photographs in modern society. The project was overseen by a committee that worked with the Museum team to compile a selection of 490 images representing the output of 38 photographers from the early twentieth century up to the present. The guiding criterion was to select images that showcased outfits for forthcoming seasons and were published in fashion magazines and designer or brand catalogues. In making its selection, the committee considered the outfits themselves, the designers, the media impact of the photographs, their public reception, and in particular the technical and aesthetic quality of the images. It was decided not to include work by photojournalists, reports on fashion shows, outfits on dummies or artistic photographs. The collection, the first of its type and unique in Spain, is a representation of the language of fashion, which emerges from the world of commerce but finds a second life in the cultural universe, converting immaterial and ephemeral images into items of cultural heritage.

Mannequin doll. Leather doll with porcelain head, dressed in silk, satin ribbon and lace. Catalonia, c. 1870. MTIB 103.623. Manuel Rocamora Collection. Barcelona Design Museum. ©Xavi Padrós.



Photography is the main tool through which fashion is disseminated, bringing it to the masses through magazines, television and the Internet; without these channels, the fashion system would be unlikely to survive. So fashion can be defined as a social phenomenon in constant flux, exerting its influence through images to bring about periodic changes in the way we dress and the styles that dominate a particular era. The sociologist Yuniya Kawamura suggests that fashion can be studied as an institutionalized “fashion system”, in which different professionals “engage in activities collectively, share the same belief in fashion, and participate together in producing and perpetuating not only the ideology of fashion but also fashion culture”, acting together to grease the machinery comprising the design, production and mass sale of new models (Kawamura 2005). To showcase its new products, the fashion system necessarily requires channels of diffusion that will drive consumption, transforming the garments created by designers into objects of desire and purchasable commodities.

Centuries ago, new designs were traditionally shown on mannequin dolls. In the fourteenth century, Parisian *couturiers* would send their “French dolls” to the provinces and to the courts of Europe; the mannequin dolls were dressed in the styles of the Court of Versailles and sent to potential customers to secure new orders.

In later periods, the use of engravings, hand-drawn illustrations and photographs greatly increased the reproducibility of fashion images and their circulation among the bourgeoisie. The industrial revolution of the nineteenth century brought with it mass production of textiles, which sold at a dizzying rate. By the mid-nineteenth century, department stores published illustrated catalogues, and these were followed by fashion magazines, whose low cost and ease of transportation made them the first step in the democratization of fashion, alongside engravings – the first form of graphic reproduction on a mass scale. Fashion engravings, whether as standalone images or mounted in magazines, were highly idealized, bearing little relation to the real world.

Illustrations took on a markedly artistic quality in the early twentieth century, as artists such as Xavier Gosé, Paul Iribe, Erté and Georges Lepape adopted an abstract style to depict the spirit of a new modernity, foreshadowing the contemporary approach to fashion photography.

Most recently, cinema, television and Internet – broadcasters of the visual image on a vast scale – have made access to information about the fashion world a universal phenomenon.

The sources of inspiration for fashion designers are increasingly diverse. Trend agencies provide clients with style books for each new season, which draw on themes from society, art and nature. They are presented as large-format albums that offer a particular lifestyle image, transmitted through the choice of garments, colours, patterns and finished pieces. Designers take inspiration from these portrayals when conceiving new collections, drawing also on their own intuition and on ideas the views of people on the street, particular urban tribes, blogs and Instagram, as well as the opinions of forecasters and trendsetters.

Traditionally, designers have unveiled their collections for the new season at fashion shows, where photographers and magazine editors select the most interesting themes and outfits and distribute the images around the world. It is this selection that will become the season's fashion, while thousands of outfits failing to grab the attention of the press and are quickly forgotten. This is far from an objective process; major interests are represented, and the social, economic and even political consequences can be huge.

Once collections have been put together, magazines are the main tool the fashion system has at its disposal to display and disseminate current and future fashion; they do this by transforming ideas, sketches, materials and outfits into new and unique products. Roland Barthes observed that it is not the clothes themselves that create the meaning of fashion, rather the way in which they can be portrayed through iconic and verbal representations,



*Manuscrit de la*  
La Nymphe galante dont le port est majestueux, noble et fier, court avec tranquillité, au Palais Royal, les hazards auxquels sont ex-  
posées les pertouses de son sexe: elle a un bonnet à la Richard, corset rayé, et vêtue d'une robe à la Chinoise, retrouffée.

*A Paris chez Ehnauts et Rapilly, rue d' St. Jacques, à la Ville de Constance. Avec Privil. du Roi.*



*Tourteau de satin noir ouvert sur intérieur de linon blanc plissé -  
Chapeau en peau de soie noire avec garniture blanche.*

Cover of the magazine *El Hogar y la Moda*, 25 September 1936. Documentation Centre, Barcelona Design Museum. ©Xavi Padrós.



governed by their own linguistic rules (Barthes 1967). So while a real garment may be appreciated by only a small circle of people, its iconic and verbal version is enjoyed by a great many more.

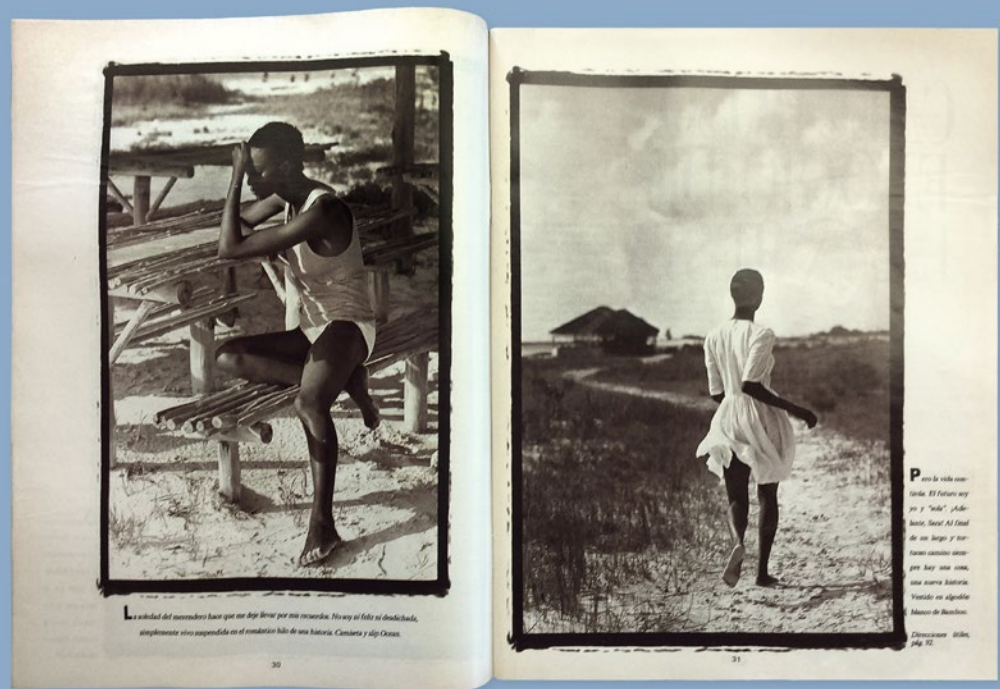
In magazines, these ideas are transmitted in the form of fashion editorials, which generally consist of a series of photographs with an underlying narrative. Most magazines contain four or five full editorials, offered alongside general articles and advertising content. These short pieces create a micro-universe in which the subject, the choice of photograph and styling, the location, the models and the clothes combine to create an atmosphere that compels and seduces, transmitting “what people are wearing” and the “mood of the time” to readers well versed in the codes of fashion.

Editorials implicitly convey the need to continually acquire new designs, using models who project attractiveness, wealth and glamour with which the reader is encouraged to identify. Our urge to imitate incites us to aspire to the beauty and lifestyle of the models, and this psychological projection impels us to consume the products seen in the images.

Susan Sontag argued that photography – the activity of producing and consuming images – was the phenomenon that heralded the advent of modern society. Of all the media in which fashion is represented, photography is the most powerful means of communicating the latest developments (Sontag 1977).

With the advent of photography, photo portraits quickly replaced paintings as the preferred medium for representing the rich and famous. Such images were printed on collectable cards distributed at social gatherings. Although they were not expressly intended to portray fashions, clothes were very much the

Fashion spread with photographs by María Espeus in *La Vanguardia* magazine, July-August 1988.

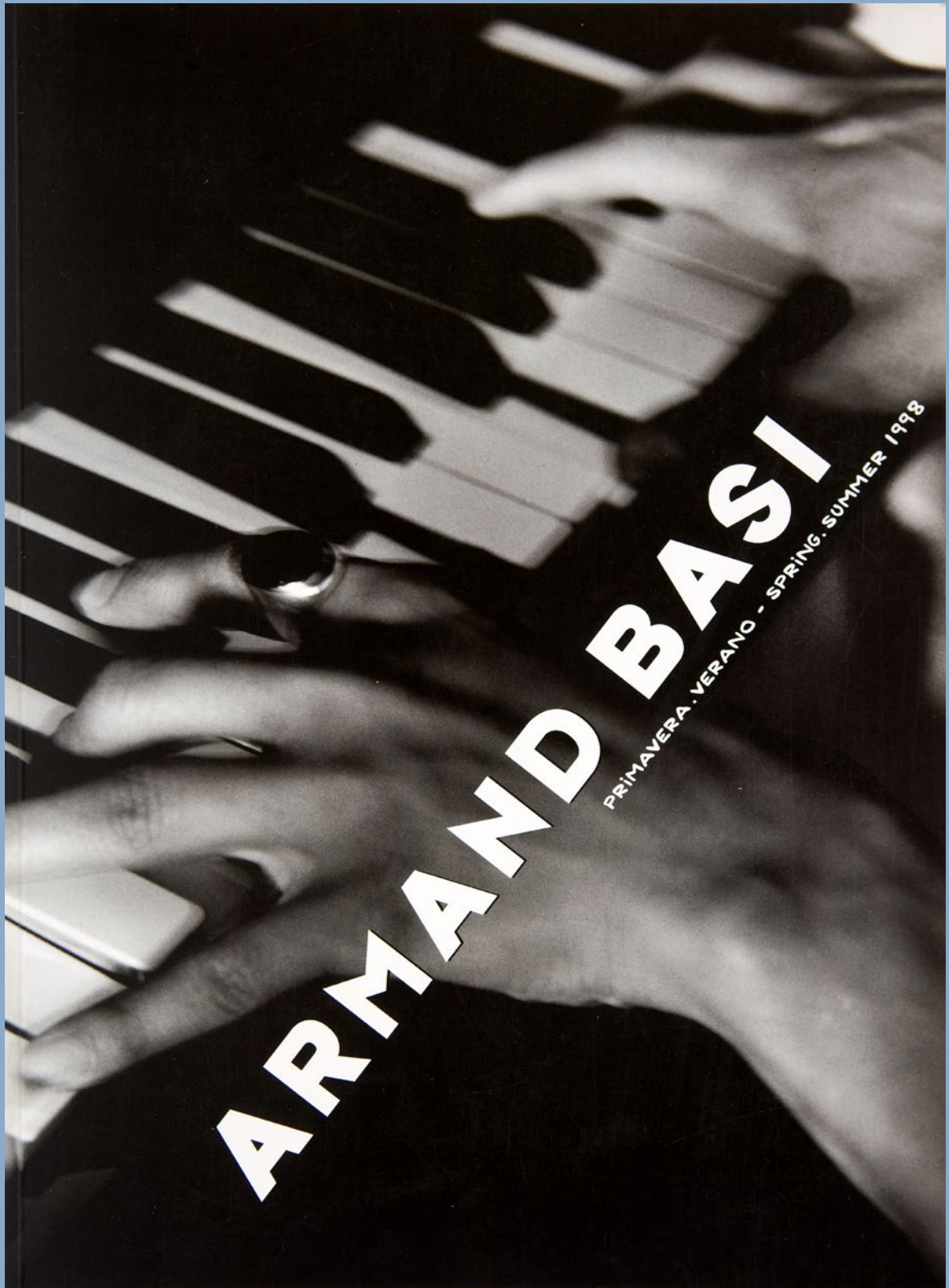


focus, and from 1881, the use of such images to accompany magazine articles was commonplace. In 1909, *Vogue* changed its focus from a society magazine to a channel of information on *haute couture* for a vast potential market – not merely those with the means to buy the outfits it showcased – and marked the birth of the modern conception of fashion as a global phenomenon (Lieberman 1979). Over the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the language of fashion has changed, from the opulent gowns and lavish homes of the 1940s and 1950s to representations of urban deprivation in the most provocative contemporary images.

Designers, meanwhile, have traditionally publicised their new collections in printed catalogues, which are being superseded by web pages.

On television and the Internet, fashion channels, sites and blogs generate extensive news and publicity about designers and forthcoming shows, drive sales, and introduce new styles to the public. They are also regularly updated spaces for the exchange of text, photographs and videos. Social media sites such as Pinterest and Instagram provide visual platforms that are accessible to the public and professionals alike, in which the immediacy and broad social impact of the images combine with rapid recycling of content. Some Instagram users tag the clothes they are wearing with the corresponding brand name, giving their followers a guide to where the outfits can be bought and establishing a similar mechanism to that of the photographs published in fashion magazines.

At a time of rapid social change, with questions over the future of traditional fashion images, the Barcelona Design Museum presents its new collection of photographs from the Spanish fashion world in an exhibition that has generated widespread coverage in traditional and social media and attracted a large number of visitors.



# ARMAND BASI

PRIMAVERA · VERANO · SPRING · SUMMER 1998



Photograph by Ramon Batlles, outfit by El Dique Flotante, published in *Tricornio*, vol. 2, Barcelona, Autumn 1934. MTIB 4.195/14.



### The exhibition *Distinction, a century of fashion photography*

According to Joana Bonet, the exhibition *Distinction, a century of fashion photography* is a tour of ‘the skin of the world’, capturing current moods and displaying photographs that have only recently become part of the Museum collection (*Distinción*, season of talks, 2016). The exhibition charts the last hundred years of fashion photography across seven chronologically and thematically ordered areas, building new dialogues between photographer and photograph.

The photographs by Pere Casas Abarca, from the early twentieth century, show women in loose-fitting clothes, announcing the modernity of the 1920s, with its short, low-cut dresses, long trousers and espadrilles, as a new simplicity and popular designs dresses brought fashion closer to the working classes; or the modernity of the 1930s, with its long gowns that speak to the excess and power of the fashion world. It was in this period that the first magazines containing fashion reports and photography began to emerge.

By the 1940s and 1950s, models had become goddesses in fictional worlds, representing an idealised construction of perfection. By contrast, the photographs from the 1960s and 1970s show women in movement, transmitting youthfulness and a new easing of social mores. Fashion editorials in the 1980s began to invite readers to imagine brief fictions in which clothing is present but, in contrast to earlier periods, is not the protagonist. The landscapes constructed in these fictions help to build an atmosphere, transmitting a language and message that readers transfer to their own worlds to achieve (or endeavour to achieve) happiness. By the time the style magazines of the 1990s emerged, fashion was one more facet of “lifestyle”, treated on an equal footing with music, architecture and food.



Photograph by Manuel Outumuro, dress by Josep Font, published in *El País Semanal*, 2005. MTIB 3.675/10, donation by Manuel Outumuro, 2010.

Contemporary fashion photography proposes a series of recurring tropes, particularly gender, ethnicity, interculturality, exotic or surprising journeys, and the mingling of social classes. New and interesting themes are also appearing, such as the age or extreme slenderness of models, skin colour and, most prominently, street style and the new subcultures of the urban youth.

Notable among the photographers represented at the exhibition are the pioneers of the 1920s and 1930s, such as Ramon Batlles or Compal, the *haute couture* photographers Juan Gyenes, Man and Josep Compte, exponents of the new photography of the 1960s and 1970s such as Oriol Maspons, Leopoldo Pomés and Antoni Bernad, and the group of photographers active since the 1980s, who include José Manuel Ferrater, Manel Esclusa, Sergi Pons, Biel Capllonch, Daniel Riera, Pep Àvila, Txema Yeste, Manuel Outumuro and Eugenio Recuenco, as well as the younger generation of César Segarra, [Sergi Jasanada](#) and Xevi Muntané (*Distinción* 2015).

Fashion magazines contain photographs that rank alongside the most creative and familiar images in our visual universe, driving trends and informing lifestyle choices and much imitated for the power with which they communicate and the atmosphere and language they create, which have proved commercially and socially effective. Fashion could no longer exist without photography, which captures its designs for a global audience. After more than one hundred years of fashion photography, the printed image is changing rapidly, reflecting the democratisation of information and of fashion itself, and thanks to new channels of diffusion that are both more freely accessible and more agile than traditional means. For all that magazines are a dwindling force and the fashion system is increasingly questioned, images will continued to be fashion's main route of transmission, supported by the power of consumers and social media. ●



Txema Yeste (1972), *Gala*, Cadaqués, 2009, *Giclée* print on Photo Rag Baryta, 2012 season, MTIB 3.807/12, donation by Txema Yeste, 2012.

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