

Fashion Ave: The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (MFIT) in New York

La Avenida de la Moda: el Museo del Fashion Institute of Technology (MFIT) en Nueva York

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Recepción del artículo 01-07-2010. Aceptación de su publicación 12-07-2010

ABSTRACT. The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (MFIT) is the only museum in New York City dedicated solely to the art of fashion. Best known for its innovative and award-winning exhibitions, which have been described by Roberta Smith in *The New York Times* as «ravishing», the museum has a collection of more than 50,000 garments and accessories dating from the eighteenth century to the present. The Museum at FIT collects, conserves, documents, exhibits, and interprets fashion. Its mission is to advance knowledge of fashion through exhibitions, publications, and public programs.

KEYWORDS: fashion, fashion history, conservation, accessories.

RESUMEN. El Museo del Fashion Institute of Technology (MFIT) es el único museo de la ciudad Nueva York dedicado exclusivamente al arte de la moda. Mejor conocido por sus innovadoras y galardonadas exposiciones, que han sido descritas por Roberta Smith en *The New York Times* como «deslumbrantes», el museo posee una colección de más de 50.000 elementos de indumentaria y accesorios que datan desde el siglo XVIII hasta el presente. El Museo del FIT colecciona, conserva, documenta, expone e interpreta moda. Su misión es la de avanzar en el conocimiento sobre la moda a través de exposiciones, publicaciones y programas didácticos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: moda, indumentaria histórica, conservación, accesorios.

A Temple of Fashion

The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City has a permanent collection of more than 50,000 garments and accessories from the 18th century to the present, with special strength in 20th and 21st century women's high fashion. Designers featured range from Azzedine Alaïa, Balenciaga, Chanel, and Dior, to Vivienne Westwood, Xuly-Bet, Yohji Yamamoto and Zoran. The Museum at FIT also has the world's best collection of Halston, an extraordinary collection of Charles James

and a great selection of Adrian designs including a number of his Hollywood costumes for MGM including the dress he designed for Joan Crawford in *The Bride Wore Red*. The museum is aggressively building its permanent collection, focusing on «directional» fashion, i.e., the kind of fashion that makes fashion history. Particular attention is paid to collecting avant-garde contemporary fashion such as Comme des Garçons, and emerging talents, such as Rodarte.



Chanel (Karl Lagerfeld), evening dress, black silk crepe with *trompe-l'oeil* beadwork by Lesage, 1983, France, MFIT 91.255.9, gift of Tina Chow. © THE MUSEUM AT THE FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, NEW YORK

Fashion and its accessories

The museum also has an extensive accessories collection that dates from the mid-17th century to present day. The collection has a particularly strong emphasis on designer accessories from the second half of the 20th century. Among the 15,000 accessories there are more than 4,000 pairs of shoes by designers such as Manolo Blahnik, Salvatore Ferragamo, Herbert Levine, Christian Louboutin, and Roger Vivier. The millinery collection contains more than 3,000 hats by notable milliners such as Lily Daché, Halston and Phillip Treacy. There are also many examples from couture designers such as Balenciaga, Christian Dior and Jacques Fath. In addition, the accessories collection houses fine examples of designer handbags by luxury houses such as Hermès, Gucci and Louis Vuitton, as well as examples by Bonnie Cashin for Coach, and Judith Leiber.



Men's 3-piece court suit, embroidered dark green and beige striped voided silk velvet, c. 1785, France, MFIT P83.19.10. © THE MUSEUM AT THE FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, NEW YORK

A Temple of Fashion Knowledge

Founded in 1967 by the Fashion Institute of Technology, the Museum at FIT serves as a «think tank» for fashion studies and is dedicated to advancing knowledge of fashion through exhibitions, programs and publications. The Museum at FIT is best known for its innovative and award-winning exhibitions, such as *Gothic: Dark Glamour* and *Madame Grès: Sphinx of Fashion*.

Serving the FIT community; the fashion, design, academic, and museum communities; and members of the public, nationally and internationally, interested in fashion. The Museum at FIT organizes four major fashion exhibitions annually, along with numerous student and faculty exhibitions, and an extensive program of specialized classes, tours, lectures as well as the annual Fashion Symposium.



Corset, red-orange wool/silk with off-white top stitching and cotton lace, 1880, France, MFIT 98.29.3. © THE MUSEUM AT THE FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, NEW YORK



Balenciaga (Nicholas Ghesquiere), «Graffiti» mini dress, black and white striped knit and printed canvas, Fall 2004, France, MFIT 2005.23.1, gift of Balenciaga. © THE MUSEUM AT THE FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, NEW YORK

Past and Present Exhibitions

THE FASHION AND TEXTILE HISTORY GALLERY

The Fashion and Textile History Gallery, on the main floor of the museum, which opened in November, 2005, is the only permanent fashion history exhibition in the United States. It features a rotating selection of approximately 200 historically and artistically significant objects from the museum's permanent collection. Every six months, the exhibition in the gallery is completely changed, although it always covers 250 years of fashion and textile history. Past exhibitions in this gallery have included *Seduction*, which explored sexuality and sensuality in fashion. *Fashion and Politics*, that focused on politics as expressed through fashion, including not only the maneuverings of government, but also cultural change, sexual codes, and social progress.

And currently on view, *Eco-Fashion: Going Green*, which examines both positive and negative environmental practices over the past two centuries, setting the historical framework to today's eco-fashion movement.

SPECIAL EXHIBITIONS GALLERY

The Fashion and Textile History Gallery provides a context for the changing thematic exhibitions in the museum's Special Exhibitions Gallery. Recent exhibitions of distinction in this gallery include *London Fashion*, which received the first Richard Martin Award for Excellence in the Exhibition of Costume from the Costume Society of America; *The Corset: Fashioning the Body*, which explored the most controversial garment in the history of fashion; *Form Follows Fashion* (which Roberta Smith of The New York Times described as «a ravishing show, even by FIT's standards»).



① **Comme des Garçons (Rei Kawakubo), Biker/Ballerina jacket and skirt set; black leather, pink and white cotton gingham, pink nylon tulle and polyester chiffon, Spring/Summer 2005, Japan, MFIT 2005.49.1.** © THE MUSEUM AT THE FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, NEW YORK

② **Jean-Paul Gaultier, shirred velvet «corset» dress, Fall 1984, France, MFIT P92.8.1.** © THE MUSEUM AT THE FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, NEW YORK

③ **Charles James, evening dress, pink taffeta, 1955, USA, MFIT 91.241.127.** © THE MUSEUM AT THE FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, NEW YORK

In 2008, MFIT mounted its most ambitious and compelling exhibition in twenty years, *Gothic: Dark Glamour*. It was the first exhibition devoted to the gothic style in fashion and was set in a dramatic mise-en-scène suggesting iconic gothic settings, such as the labyrinth, the ruined castle, and the laboratory, more than 75 ensembles were on display.





④ Louis Vuitton (Marc Jacobs), Oxfords, gold tooled leather, silk and mink, Autumn/Winter 2004, France, mfit 2005.53.1, gift of Louis Vuitton. 📷 © THE MUSEUM AT THE FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, NEW YORK

④ Paul Poiret, evening dress, white, pink and orange bugle beads on gold chiffon, c. 1926, France, mfit P83.5.9. 📷 © THE MUSEUM AT THE FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, NEW YORK

Currently on view is *Japan Fashion Now*, the first exhibition to explore contemporary Japanese fashion in all its radical creativity, from avant-garde high fashion to street and subcultural styles, from menswear to new designers. Approximately 100 ensembles are on display, some two dozen in an introductory gallery devoted to the Japanese «fashion revolution» of the 1980s that highlights designs by Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons, Issey Miyake and Yohji Yamamoto, the rest of the exhibition is set in a vivid *mise-en-scène* evoking the iconic cityscape of 21st century Tokyo. Among the new Japanese designers featured are Jun Takahashi of Under-



Rodarte, dress, black, red, white and metallic knit wool blend, Fall 2008, usa, mfit 2009.53.1. © THE MUSEUM AT THE FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, NEW YORK

cover, Chitose Abe of sacai, Hiroyuki Horihata and Makiko Sekiguchi of matochu, and Hiroki Nakamura of visvim as well as directional menswear by Number (N)ine and Phenomenon. Equally compelling is the range of Japanese street fashion, from the elegant and bizarre costumes called Kamikaze suits worn by members of Japan's Speed Tribe to the hyper-cute outfits of the Princess Decoration Style. Japan's iconic school uniforms are also on display as well as famous Lolita brands such as Baby, the Stars Shine Bright, and the latest Forest Girl looks.

STUDENT AND FACULTY EXHIBITIONS AT GALLERY FIT

There is also a third exhibition space, Gallery FIT, which is dedicated to student and faculty exhibitions. Students from FIT's School of Graduate Studies collaborate with the museum's staff to mount a professional museum exhibition. Recent exhibitions include *Christian Louboutin*, *Muriel King* and *Scandal Sandals and Lady Slippers: A History of Delman Shoes*. The Museum at FIT also organizes the annual Art and Design Graduating Student Exhibition, which fills the lower level gallery and the student space gallery, as well as lobbies across campus.