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The Museum at FIT Presents *Elizabeth Hawes: Along Her Own Lines* March 1-26, 2023



Elizabeth Hawes wearing a pair utilitarian suspender slacks, photographed by Mary Morris Lawrence, 1941.

The Fashion Institute of Technology's (FIT) School of Graduate Studies, in collaboration with The Museum at FIT (MFIT), presents *Elizabeth Hawes: Along Her Own Lines*. Conceived and organized by MA Fashion and Textile Studies graduate students, this will be the first contemporary exhibition fully dedicated to Elizabeth Hawes (1903–1971), a gifted American clothing designer, a prolific author, and a vocal labor activist. The exhibition aims to revive Hawes's legacy and introduce her work to new audiences. As an outspoken critic of the very industry she was a part of, Hawes's values are reflected in both her designs and writings. Using

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her designs, texts, unpublished manuscripts, and media coverage, the exhibition explores her ideas on fashion, dress reform, and politics and her aspirations for the future.

The exhibition opens at a crucial moment, when today's culture and concerns correspond to Hawes's activism and many of her forward-thinking ideologies around clothing. Hawes recognized, criticized, and fiercely fought against the classism and elitism of the fashion industry, while foreseeing the liberating possibilities of mass-manufactured fashion. She attempted to dismantle the confines of gender binary in fashion through her designs. Hawes used her writing and journalism to challenge the fashion industry as an insider, calling for people to think consciously about what they wear – thoughts that are still influential today. Hawes's highly modern work was influenced by her friendships with other modern artists such as Isamo Noguchi, Joan Miró, Rudi Gernreich, and Alexander Calder.



Elizabeth Hawes, multicolor silk man's kimono-style jacket, circa 1962, USA. Gift of Barnes Riznik.



Elizabeth Hawes, multicolor cotton, handknit man's swim trunks (front view), 1964, USA. Gift of Barnes Riznik.



Elizabeth Hawes, multicolor cotton, handknit man's swim trunks (back view), 1964, USA. Gift of Barnes Riznik.

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Elizabeth Hawes: Along Her Own Lines is divided into four themes, with titles taken from chapter headings in her books, that explore Hawes's radical politics, design philosophy, and visionary expression. "Clothes with a Purpose" highlights what fashion historian April Calahan called Hawes's "iconoclasm through the lens of social reform" regarding gender, labor, and race relations. This portion of the exhibition is dedicated to her political activism, which included her interest in unionization and writings for radical left-leaning publications, which culminated in an FBI investigation. The garments displayed in this section demonstrate Hawes's preference for practicality, durability, and style rather than adhering to current fashion trends.



Elizabeth Hawes, purple wool coat with red-orange and purple satin lining, circa 1950, USA. Gift of Charlotte Adams.



Elizabeth Hawes, ivory, purple, and lavender striped brocade evening dress (detail), circa 1936, USA. Gift of Mrs. Dudley Schoales.

Her disregard for trends and popular values is further explored in the section "Men Might Like Skirts," which includes clothing that further explores Hawes's design philosophies. She emboldened her clients to question social mores around "acceptable dress," encouraging them to develop a style based on creative self-expression and believed that men had as much right to feel beautiful in their own clothes as women do. This section includes brightly colored menswear and gender nonconforming garments that confronted male mid-twentieth-century dress norms.

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“Who the Hell Are You?” explores her design style through the lens of her connections with her couture clientele. The innovative construction and unique details in the garments in this section display the playful relationships she had with her clients, as well as her deep understanding of the body. Hawes’s views on body positivity were ahead of their time, as evidenced by her designs and written work, which encouraged women to embrace their natural shape and experiment with color and lines.



Elizabeth Hawes, blue and green wool ensemble, circa 1968, USA.
Gift of Dee Klarich.

“I Leave You Here” centers on Hawes’s legacy and visions for the future. This section examines the later years of her life that saw a transition from the creation of couture to quality mass production and ready-to-wear. This shift is evidence of her futuristic vision in which large scale fashion production became a great equalizer.

She believed that ready-made clothes could resolve the classist exploitative aspects of the fashion industry that she had battled against throughout her life as a writer and activist.

Hawes was born on December 16, 1903, in Ridgewood New Jersey. She studied economics and English at Vassar College, graduated in 1925, and began designing clothes for her friends. Later that year she sailed to Paris and began working for Doret. In 1928, she returned to New York to partner with Rosemary Harden and launched the couture fashion company Hawes-Harden on West 56th St., later becoming Hawes Inc. in 1930. In 1931, she was one of the first American designers to hold a fashion show in Paris. Hawes closed her company in 1940 and became the

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editor of *PM Weekly*, a left-leaning newspaper. Three years later, she moved to Detroit to work for the United Auto Workers union in the education department. In 1952, she moved to California to relaunch her design business. Her design venture was unsuccessful because, unbeknownst to her, the FBI had begun investigating her. She formed a strong friendship with fashion designer Rudi Gernreich, and in 1967, FIT and the Brooklyn Museum showcased both designers in *Two Modern Artists of Dress: Elizabeth Hawes and Rudi Gernreich*. Hawes died at age 67 in 1971.

Hawes called herself a “seer-witch” and a “she-wolf,” and time has proven her right. She foresaw the future and fought tenaciously for a better time to come. Through her designs, union activism, and writing, she envisioned a world in which ready-to-wear fashion could champion a movement for fair labor and be a vehicle for creative gender and self-expression. Half a century after her death, the ready-made industry is in full swing, but its democratizing power faces the same classist, heteronormative, censoring culture, and politics as those she challenged.

Elizabeth Hawes lived her life, made her clothes, and wrote her books very much along her own lines, and this exhibition celebrates these many facets of her maverick individuality and rebel spirit.

In conjunction with the exhibition, a panel discussion, *Fashion Is Spinach: The Life and Work of Elizabeth Hawes*, will be held as part of MFIT’s Spring 2023 Fashion Culture programs. In a conversation moderated by author and podcaster April Calahan, professors and fashion historians Lourdes Font (FIT) and Francesca Granata (The New School) will discuss the importance of Hawes in American fashion. The event will be held at FIT’s Katie Murphy Amphitheatre on Tuesday, March 7, at 5:30 pm.

Part of FIT’s School of Graduate Studies, the Fashion and Textile Studies: History, Theory, Museum Practice MA program builds knowledge in fashion and textile history, object conservation, and exhibition theory over the course of two years. During their second year, students utilize the interdisciplinary skills they have acquired through the program to collaborate with The Museum at FIT, developing and installing an exhibition of fashion objects from MFIT’s collection.

The School of Graduate Studies at FIT provides advanced professional education in seven distinctive areas, promoting excellence in the post-baccalaureate study of fashion, business, art, and design. The school offers programs leading to the MA, MFA, and MPS degrees and is dedicated to advancing research in the creative industries and fostering innovative collaborations that link students and faculty with industry and professional partners worldwide.



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About The Museum at FIT (MFIT)

The Museum at FIT, which is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums, is the only museum in New York City dedicated solely to the art of fashion. Best known for its innovative and award-winning exhibitions, the museum has a collection of more than 50,000 garments and accessories dating from the 18th century to the present. Like other fashion museums, such as the Musée de la Mode, the Mode Museum, and the Museo de la Moda, The Museum at FIT collects, conserves, documents, exhibits, and interprets fashion. The museum's mission is to advance knowledge of fashion through exhibitions, publications, and public programs.

The museum is open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays from noon to 8 pm, and Saturdays and Sundays from 10 am to 5 pm. Admission is free. All visitors are requested to [review the latest safety guidelines and protocols](#). For more information and the latest MFIT updates, [visit fitnyc.edu/museum](http://fitnyc.edu/museum); [register for the MFIT newsletter](#); and follow the museum on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), and [Facebook](#).

About the Fashion Institute of Technology

A part of the State University of New York, FIT has been a leader in career education in art, design, business, and technology throughout its history. Providing its approximately 9,000 students with an uncommon blend of hands-on, practical experience, theory, and a firm grounding in the liberal arts, the college offers a wide range of affordable programs that foster innovation and collaboration. Its distinctive curriculum is geared to today's rapidly growing economy, including fields such as computer animation, toy design, production management, film and media, and cosmetics and fragrance marketing. Internationally renowned, FIT draws on its New York City location to provide a vibrant, community in which to learn. The college offers nearly 50 majors and grants AAS, BFA, BS, MA, MFA, and MPS degrees, preparing students for professional success and leadership in the new creative economy. Calvin Klein, Michael Kors, Reem Acra, Brian Atwood, Dennis Basso, Francisco Costa, Norma Kamali, Nanette Lepore, Bibhu Mohapatra, Ralph Rucci, John Bartlett, Peter Do, Daniel Roseberry and Michelle Smith. Other prominent graduates include Leslie Blodgett, creator of bareMinerals; international restaurant designer Tony Chi; and Nina Garcia, editor in chief, *Elle*.

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