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Statement Sleeves
January 24–August 25, 2024
Curated by Colleen Hill

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Cover: Afternoon dress, circa 1830.

Interior Illustrations (top to bottom, left to right):

Dressing gown, circa 1935; Afternoon dress, circa 1830; Dinner gown, circa 1895;
Mae and Hattie Green, coat, circa 1929; Christian Dior, evening coat, 1953-54;
Milgrim, evening ensemble, 1924; Evening dress, circa 1929; Christian Dior (Marc Bohan),
evening dress, fall 1968; Rudi Gernreich, dress, circa 1967

STATEMENT



SLEEVES

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What is a statement sleeve? The fashion media has used the term for less than a decade, yet many of us can conjure images of what it describes: a sleeve style that is exaggerated, embellished, elaborately constructed, or otherwise eye catching to the extent that it defines a garment. Statement sleeves have been spotted on innumerable fashion runways in recent years—a trend with no sign of waning. From puffed to ruffled, split to sheer, there is a style for everyone.

Designers often transform fundamental sleeve styles such as the bell, the bishop, and the raglan into new sizes and shapes. A cape back may open into an elegant, draped petal sleeve, or pin tucks might first extend into fashionably wide shoulder before curving down the length of the arm. In other instances, sleeve construction is simple, but its embellishment (such as ruffles, feathers, and sequins) or asymmetry (including one-sleeve styles or the use of contrasting fabrics) characterize the design. Some examples are removable or fully detached for reasons of functionality or adaptability—or simply for novelty.

Statement sleeves are an essential component of the contemporary wardrobe, but fashionable and dramatic sleeve styles have a long history. The discovery of an Egyptian dress that is more than 5,000 years old (now in the collection of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology in London) revealed that its linen fabric had been stylishly pleated over the shoulders and upper arms. In Renaissance Europe, sleeve styles announced the wearer's social status and affiliations. Our knowledge of these designs, much of which is understood through portraiture, reminds us of the importance of statement sleeves in paintings and photography, when seated at a desk or a table or—more recently—on video calls. When the representation of personal style is confined to a computer screen, striking sleeves allow us to stand out.

Some decades demonstrated a particular affinity for elaborate sleeves. The enormous, puffed sleeves that defined dresses of the 1830s returned to fashion during the 1890s. Designers in the 1930s exhibited a fondness for sleeves of many types—but the more intricate, the better. The opulence and excess of 1980s fashion was often expressed through outsized sleeves in

luxurious fabrics. Current statement sleeves are both playful and fashion forward. They are also democratizing—styles are not confined to a particular gender, economic status, or body type. As the fashion editor Jess Cartner-Morley explained, “There is an uncomplicated joy in a trend that pulls focus away from the body on to the actual clothes.”

Statement Sleeves features more than 70 examples of spectacular fashions from the eighteenth century to the present. They are organized thematically or by complementary aesthetics rather than chronologically, celebrating the myriad creative variations on this fundamental element of fashion. Already by 1838, a home sewing guide declared that “there are so many ways of finishing sleeves, and so many fancies about them, that to describe them all would be equally impossible and useless.” The exhibition highlights how sleeves serve as a vital mode of self-expression that reflects our gestures and movements, showcases their ability to indicate specific fashion eras and their related trends, and proclaims their role as signifiers of status, taste, and personality. Past and present, statement sleeves allow us to explore the drama, allure, and fun of fashion.

Colleen Hill, curator

