

Fashion New York

SUZY MENKES SPECIAL REPORT



Valerie Steele, left, has created a series of memorable exhibits in her role as director and chief curator at the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, including, in 2000, "The Corset: Fashioning the Body," above, a topic she studied for more than 20 years.

The Freud of fashion

"I was puzzled and intrigued at this level of hostility. In academia, it was the 'F' word," says Valerie Steele about attitudes toward fashion in her years studying for a doctoral degree at Yale — when fellow students either dismissed, despised or ignored what they kept in their closets.

Now as director and chief curator of The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, Ms. Steele has brought the intelligence and rigor of her university education to the students at New York's premier fashion college and to the exhibitions she has mounted over the last decade.

They include a study of corsets, the sensual objects that once lay hidden beneath a sober surface. That subject gave her an epiphany that transformed her working life.

"I read two articles in a scholarly feminist journal that argued about the meaning of the Victorian corset. Was it oppressive to women or liberating?" says Ms. Steele. "It was just as though a light bulb went on. I had gone to graduate school to do cultural and intellectual history — and I suddenly realized that fashion was part of culture and I could do fashion history."

"It also intrigued me to investigate a garment as controversial as the corset," she said. "I soon realized that fashion in general was controversial, in part because of its relationship to the body — and to women's bodies and identities in particular."

Ms. Steele, 56, is now preparing a book, "Fashion Designers, A-Z," with the publisher Taschen. It will define and

celebrate 100 of the most important designers of the last century and feature 500 masterpieces from the 50,000 items of clothing and accessories in the F.I.T. collection. In a trenchant introductory essay, the author will discuss the rise of the fashion museum from historic beginnings to today.

Ms. Steele, with her slim face and eager smile, has been described as "brainy." But she might more accurately be called "the Freud of fashion" — her quick mind forever analyzing the meaning of clothes, with a penchant for subcultures and for outfits from the edge of society.

From her desk in a solid academic building in Midtown, she has dreamed up some intriguing ideas for significant exhibitions at the F.I.T. museum, including "The Corset: Fashioning the Body" in 2000, "Love & War: The Weaponized Woman" in 2006 and "Gothic: Dark Glamour" in 2008.

"I worked off and on for 20 years on the history of the corset, and all of that passionate research went into the exhibition, which interrogated myths like the 16-inch waist or the idea that only ladies of the leisure class wore corsets," the director explains. "The exhibition also explored how diverse fashion designers have re-envisioned the corset in many different ways: as a symbol of erotic femininity, a trope of Victorianism, a sign of the sexually dominant woman, an image of the wounded body."

"And I really loved working on 'Gothic' because I could investigate so many layers of imagery from the Victorian cult of mourning to the vampire film. I also

had a lot of fun with the mise en scène, which incorporated iconic gothic settings such as the ruined castle," she adds.

"I had a section on 'goth' sub-cultural style but I also showed how fashion designers like Alexander McQueen, Riccardo Tisci, Yohji Yamamoto and Rick Owens have explored themes such as dark glamour, beauty and terror, and even fashion and death."

Next year's exhibition will be called "Queer Style," covering a topic that the curator claims has never before been the focus of a museum show. "On some level everyone knows gay people — gay, bi, lesbian and transgender — but nobody has done the relationship between homosexuality and fashion," the curator says.

Right now, she is looking for themes "like sailor outfits, which are very iconic homoerotic," and for a relationship like leather and sex or the androgynous style of the 20th century, as found in a collection of Marlene Dietrich's clothes that Ms. Steele has traced to Berlin.

Another coming exhibition is "Ivy Style," the preppy, Ivy League look that the curator describes as having "huge impact" on fashion.

Whatever the subject, the clothes have to be found before an exhibition can be mounted. Ms. Steele joined F.I.T. as a historian in 1985 and was appointed director in 2003. In order to inform students about fashion's long past, Ms. Steele created in 2005 a fashion and textile history gallery, which required a search for more historic pieces than the overwhelming 20th and 21st century collection now at the museum.

"It is the hunt that is the most fun

thing," says the director, referring both to the search for specific elements of costume or to the decision making involved in choosing pieces to invest in — which are often very costly — as symbolic of their time.

"It is not just that museum budgets are constrained. We also have space constraints. Nevertheless, it is important to try to build the collection," she says. "And it is especially important to acquire contemporary fashion. But this necessarily involves making judgments, educated guesses, about what fashions might turn out to be especially influential. We also collect with an eye to upcoming exhibitions. Thus, while working on 'Japan Fashion Now,' we made a special effort to acquire contemporary Japanese fashion" for the late 2010 event.

Hamish Bowles, the Vogue editor who is also a passionate collector of fashion's past, has systematically lent clothes to F.I.T., especially for a 2008 exhibition on "Madame Grès: Sphinx of Fashion" and for another on women designers between World Wars I and II.

"Valerie brings a very particular area of interest and engagement: counter-culture fashion, gender identity and fetish clothing," says Mr. Bowles. "Garments are brought in to use as elements to propagate and explain."

Last year, Ms. Steele surprised the fashion world by analyzing the style of Daphne Guinness, whose apparently extrovert extravaganza — in fact rigorous clothes, dramatically embellished — have fascinated front-row watchers. From that collaboration came a serious

50 years of U.S. style



From "Impact: Fifty Years of the CFDA," from top: A Traina-Norell evening set from 1958, a gift from the actress Lauren Bacall; a Geoffrey Beene gown from 1990; and the Narciso Rodriguez dress worn by Michelle Obama on election night 2008.



THE MUSEUM AT F.I.T.

"Impact: Fifty Years of the CFDA" is the latest exhibition to open at the Fashion Institute of Technology during this New York fashion week. It celebrates 50 years of the Council for Fashion Designers of America.

Using styles chosen by designers themselves, the museum aims to show the spirit of American style with 70 outfits and many more on iPads throughout the installation.

Oscar de la Renta, a C.F.D.A. president in the 1970s and '80s, chose a lace and gilded ball gown from the current spring season, while the span of clothing starts with a graphic 1960s coat from Pauline Trigère.

Donna Karan's "easy pieces" from the 1980s are as emblematic of the designer's style as is Diane Von Furstenberg's famous wrap dress.

As president of C.F.D.A. since 2006, Ms. Von Furstenberg said that the organization had helped designers "who worked in the back rooms of Seventh Avenue manufacturers" emerge in front of a public and present themselves as genuine creative forces.

"Designers supported each other and a new level of confidence emerged," she said. "They felt pride in their ideas and work and became originals."

C.F.D.A. was the collective force behind this movement and continues to be present as technology expands and "the global economy has enlarged the horizon of opportunities," she said.

Ms. Von Furstenberg also praises C.F.D.A. for supporting young talent. When Perry Ellis was president, he created the first C.F.D.A. scholarship for design students.

In recent years under the patronage of Anna Wintour, editor of American Vogue, the CFDA/Vogue Fashion Fund was created, allowing an impressive pool of talent to emerge. SUZY MENKES



A contact sheet of images from Cecil Beaton's shoot with the royal family at Buckingham Palace in 1942, with King George VI; his wife, Queen Elizabeth; and the princesses Elizabeth and Margaret Rose. Mr. Beaton is credited with creating a modern, yet romantic, image of the royals after the abdication of Edward VIII.

V&A IMAGES

Cecil Beaton: Burnishing the royal image

LONDON Could a dress, a jewel, a military cap — or a babe in arms — save the monarchy?

Cecil Beaton, the romantic photographer who became the image maker for two British queens, can claim much of the credit for stabilizing the rocking royal throne after the abdication of Edward VIII in 1936.

The images tell the story in "Queen Elizabeth II by Cecil Beaton: A Diamond Jubilee Celebration" (until April 22). The exhibition opened at the Victoria and Albert Museum on Wednesday to mark Queen Elizabeth II's ascension to the throne 60 years ago.

The official jubilee events will kick off on June 5, but meanwhile a public eager to see the making of a new monarchy can gaze at Queen Elizabeth, later the Queen Mother, transformed at the end of the 1930s from a dumpy figure, derided by the hyper-fashionable Duchess of Windsor, into a fairy tale vision with a sweeping skirt, a mother lode of diamonds (Garrard is the exhibition's sponsor) and a grandiose backdrop.

Although the word "abdication" is not mentioned in the exhibit's wall texts, the fact that the glamorous Edward VIII gave up the throne for Wallis

Simpson and handed it to his dull and dutiful brother was the making of Mr. Beaton as a court photographer. He was given the task of transforming George VI and his wife to noble king and queen.

"There was very little reality in the early, fairytale pictures. It was about Beaton's own romantic vision, but it was also very much a sense of realigning the status of the royal family after the constitutional crisis," says Susanna Brown, the exhibition's organizer and curator of photographs at the V & A.

Ms. Brown also emphasizes a royal revolution, as Mr. Beaton succeeded in redirecting the regal family image to a softer, sweeter and more accessible position. It was only fortified by his treatment of then-Princess Elizabeth and her sister Margaret Rose (as she was then known, although the exhibition identifies her only as Margaret).

Mr. Beaton deliberately used as a template a portrait by the 18th-century artist Thomas Gainsborough to create a painterly aura for his image of the young princesses. He suffused Queen Elizabeth with the light seen in Franz Xaver Winterhalter's royal portraits. And he built lush, floral, arcadian landscapes, using flowers from his own

garden, à la Fragonard (but without the French artist's gentleman gazing up the skirt of a lady on a swing).

Mr. Beaton was respectful, even reverential, but he also managed to insert a humanity into monarchy. He photographed Princess Elizabeth at 16 in military uniform as the war broke over England; and later captured all four of her children as babes in arms in a way that was revolutionary for a previously ultraformal monarchy.

The royal family themselves were opening up at that time, and the sound of the high, precise voice of Princess Elizabeth addressing children throughout the Commonwealth in 1940 at the start of the war is a touching detail.

Throughout the exhibition, the Beaton diaries of these insider visions — to describe Prince Charles as an excitable and energetic toddler and to record Princess Elizabeth's laughing reaction to the Beaton team trying to force her sleepy daughter — the baby Princess Anne — to open her eyes.

In the section devoted to the 1953 coronation, a film plays over and over

BEATON, PAGE 15

The Freud of fashion, at F.I.T.

FREUD, FROM PAGE 14
study of a style icon and a personal friendship.

"It is very unusual to meet someone at this stage in life and to find a sort of kindred spirit," says Ms. Guinness. "The first thing that struck me about Valerie was how lightly she wore her immense depth and breadth of so much knowledge, not just fashion history but all forms of art and literature. She combines and embodies a sort of Sixties intellectual — a liberal enlightenment with the humor of someone who is constantly curious and academically rigorous."

Ms. Guinness was, at first, reluctant to show her personal wardrobe but soon realized that her new mentor was prepared to take a risk and even encouraged her subject to be involved in dressing the mannequins and to form a relationship with the exhibit team and its leader.

"I had some sudden ideas and she was always ready to hear," Ms. Guinness explains. "I think she must inspire that in her students. She is so obviously a proponent of individualism, which is the mark of an extremely sophisticated and civilized human being."

However good her relationships with designers and lenders, the museum at F.I.T., part of the huge college and its 10,000 students, risks playing second fiddle to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and its Costume Institute. Its annual gala and exhibition opener has become a Manhattan social fixture, drawing a



The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. Ms. Steele, who joined the school in 1985, has been director and chief curator of the museum since 2003.

Hollywood crowd — even though the celebrities might not get around to looking at the museum presentation.

Ironically, the Met's recent reputation has been built on the work of Harold Koda and the late Richard Martin, who were trained by and then plucked from F.I.T. "Richard and Harold put F.I.T. on the map with a probing, intellectual approach to fashion history, enlarging cultural ideas and intellectual work," says Mr. Bowles. "But it was living history because F.I.T. is linked to a living fashion college and the life of a student body, with people using the archives."

Ms. Steele says that she sees her approach to fashion exhibitions as quite

similar to that taken by curators at the Costume Institute.

"Although I am at a fashion museum, I don't think that my work is necessarily more like the work done at, say, the Musée de la Mode in Paris or the Mode Museum in Antwerp," she says. "The personalities and interests of individual curators are probably more important than the type of museum."

Nathalie Bondil, director and chief curator of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, praises her colleague for having "an independent view of fashion as a global culture."

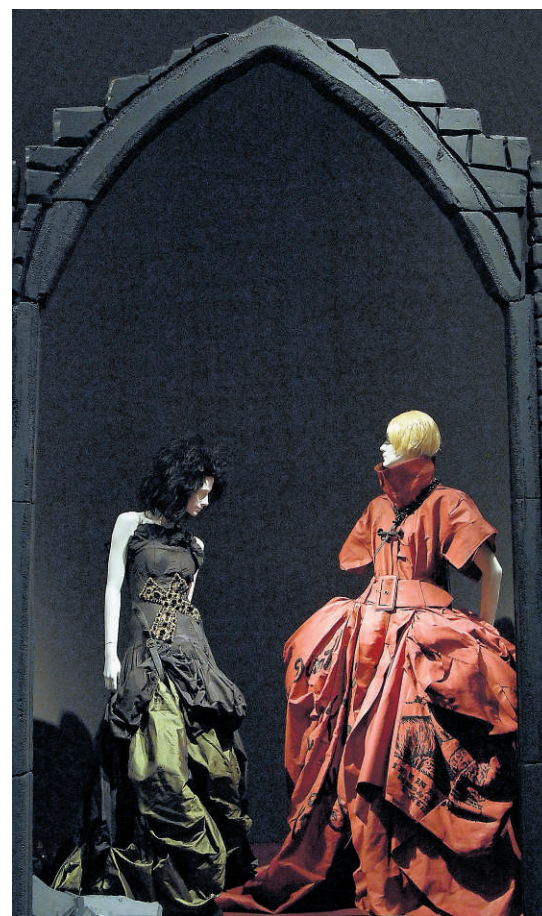
"Valerie Steele's interest in a social, gender and contextualized interpreta-

tion of fashion grabs me precisely because she is trying to interest a wider public, not just fashionistas," says Ms. Bondi. "Like in the fine arts programming, it is easier to attract public attention with familiar names — Monet is money — and more risky to create thematic exhibitions."

In her coming book, Ms. Steele follows the history of the fashion exhibition and museum but does not discuss fashion brands' current enthusiasm to mount their own self-promotional, museum-style shows, with none of the rigor or research of a serious institution. How does Ms. Steele feel about this?

"Exhibitions devoted to a single designer tend to be very popular, and some of them are outstanding," she says. "The Alexander McQueen exhibition was one of the best I've ever seen. The problem is that such exhibitions tend to be hagiographic — the individual designer is presented in isolation, as a 'genius.' To some extent, that may be built into the genre. If you focus on one person, his or her contributions will necessarily be emphasized. Scholarly, impeccably funded exhibitions on individual painters often have the same problem."

Hence Ms. Steele's enthusiasm for themes and subjects rather than people. In the great tradition of Freudian psychoanalysts, she prefers to look into fashion's soul and to analyze its meaning, rather than merely to hold up a mirror to its surface. SUZY MENKES



The "Gothic: Dark Glamour" exhibit in 2008 included gowns by Alexander McQueen, left, and John Galliano at Christian Dior.



Beaton: Burnishing the royal image

BEATON, FROM PAGE 14
the moment when the hefty crown was put on the 27-year-old queen's head. In the deeply religious and historical ceremony, the young Elizabeth is surrounded by the priestly trappings of Westminster Abbey with the peers of the realm doffing their headgear.

Mr. Beaton describes in his diaries the exhaustion of the six ladies-in-waiting, all of them aristocrats with a long string

of names and titles; and how he managed to photograph them just before their energy gave out.

In contrast to the lofty grandeur and religious ceremony on view, there is a personal and touching display: contact sheets of black-and-white photographs of Elizabeth, her husband, Philip, and their children, with the chosen images marked. They suggest a warmer family life than the frigid reputation of the monarchy in the Princess Diana years.

How much really changed in the early part of Queen Elizabeth II's reign? The system of a society built top down from the crown, through the aristocracy to the ordinary folk, was still in place when Mr. Beaton and his team received tickets to Buckingham Palace marked "tradesmen's entrance."

Surely that would not now be the case for the photographer Mario Testino, the current court favorite, who writes an appreciation of Mr. Beaton as an afterword in the exhibit catalog?

But if Mr. Beaton changed the image of the monarchy, he also understood that there was a real, underlying shift in British society after the youth quake and sexual liberation of the 1960s. The exhibit's final display is devoted to a royal session by the photographer in 1968. Gone are the early flowers and furbelows in favor of a stark background on which the figure of Queen Elizabeth II is silhouetted in an admiral's black boat cloak.

Ms. Brown points out that Mr. Beaton never had to contend with the contemporary situation, born of the Diana period and digital cameras, in which paparazzi pressure has made it impossible to control royal imagery. Back in the coronation year official pictures were sent from the court to the colonies — or even printed for British subjects as collectibles.

Even now exhibit prints of the V&A's display are slated for display in Australia and Canada. It will offer loyal royal followers a chance to relive an era of pre-digital innocence — and to celebrate Elizabeth at 85, her dysfunctional family reunited and with a new dynasty to catch the camera's eye.

● Art Gallery of Ballarat in Ballarat, Australia, Feb. 25-April 15.
● The Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria, British Columbia, June 1-Sept. 3
● McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario, from September, dates to be announced.



V&A IMAGES

Images of Queen Elizabeth II taken by Cecil Beaton: From top, a coronation portrait taken in June 1953; the queen with her son, Prince Andrew, in 1960; a well-known 1968 portrait of the queen in a black naval boat cloak.

G-STAR RAW

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Clémence Poésy
Actress

RE Tailored arc vest

arc
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photographed by Anton Corbijn

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