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Fashion Unraveled
May 25–November 17, 2018
Curated by Colleen Hill

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#FashionUnraveled
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All photographs MFIT unless otherwise indicated.
Cover: Yohji Yamamoto, dress, muslin and cotton, spring 2000, Japan.

FASHION
Unraveled

Fashion Unraveled is not your typical fashion exhibition. Rather than feature pristine clothes that exemplify a theme, a time period, or a designer’s aesthetic, it explores the roles of memory and imperfection in fashion. The exhibition also highlights the aberrant beauty in flawed objects, giving precedence to garments that have been altered, left unfinished, or deconstructed. These selections underscore one elemental fact about clothing: that it is designed to be worn and has, in some cases, been worn out.

Traces of wear, shortened hemslines, and careful mends can be found even on haute couture designs. These alterations signify the lasting emotional and sentimental value of clothing and, in some cases, challenge the concept of fashion as a strictly ephemeral, disposable commodity. Unless such imperfections are intentional — as they are in deconstructed fashion — these garments are often overlooked within museum collections. If they are selected for exhibition, curators rely on the expert work of a conservator, a gallery’s low lighting, or strategic placement to cleverly obscure flaws. In recent years, however, as interest in the “biographies” of garments has grown, fashion historians have begun to reassess imperfect objects. Studies of specific items may reveal intriguing histories about their wearers and/or makers, poignant reminders of emotional value that exemplify a theme, a time period, or a designer’s aesthetic, or for use as a theater costume. Others reconditioned their clothes for emotional value of clothing and, in some cases, challenge the concept of fashion.

The exhibition also explores the roles of memory and imperfection in fashion. The economic value of clothing often ensured its long-term maintenance, and many objects owned by MFAH show signs of mending and alterations. A set of stays from circa 1750 was enlarged by adding panels of mismatched fabric at the waist, reshaping it for a changed figure or a new wearer. An owner might have myriad reasons to modify a garment — to keep pace with newly fashionable silhouettes, for example, or for use as a theater costume. Others reconditioned their clothes for sentimental reasons. A Chanel suit worn by fashion photographer Louise Dahl-Wolfe shows evidence of alterations and replacement components, revealing her ongoing affection for the ensemble.

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Repurposed garments are made from existing clothing or textiles into something new. Such designs highlight both the resourcefulness of their makers and the lasting value of the materials. Charles Frederick Worth, a couturier who was well known for using luxurious fabrics, fashioned a circa 1890 evening cape from eighteenth-century lace. A 1966 jumpsuit designed and worn by Betsey Johnson takes a more colorful approach: It was cleverly remade from rugby shirts worn by her then-partner, musician John Cale. By the 1990s, repurposing was often used to make a statement about overconsumption and obsolescence in fashion.

Stays, silk brocade, circa 1750, France; and detail.

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Charles Frederick Worth, cape, lace, circa 1890, France.

Robert Johnson, jumpsuit, cotton jersey, 1966, USA.

Hayden, cotton shirt, 1966, USA.

Maison Martin Margiela, boots, painted canvas, spring 1990, Belgium.

Giorgio di Sant’Angelo fashioned garments from bleached, irregularly stitched panels of suede during the late 1960s. By the early 1980s, Rei Kawakubo’s work for her label Comme des Garçons took those ideas to a new extreme: a black knit T-shirt was intentionally faded, and its asymmetrical pieces were haphazardly assembled, leaving gaps and unfinished edges. Martin Margiela’s spring 1990 “tabi” boots were heavily varnished with thick white paint. He intended the boots to continually crack and deteriorate over time — calling attention to fashion’s ephemeralism.

— Colleen Hill, curator