



NEWS

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From

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Fashion Unraveled *Fashion and Textile History Gallery* May 25–November 17, 2018

The Museum at FIT presents *Fashion Unraveled*, an innovative exhibition devoted to the concepts of imperfection and incompleteness in fashion. Garments that are altered, unfinished, or deconstructed, in addition to clothing that shows signs of wear, will highlight the aberrant beauty in flawed objects. Unless such imperfections are intentional—as they are in the case of deconstructed fashion—these items are often overlooked in museum collections. *Fashion Unraveled* includes a selection of more than 65 garments, accessories, and textiles from the museum’s permanent collection, highlighting objects that are not only visually compelling, but that often also tell intriguing stories about their makers and/or wearers.



Yohji Yamamoto, dress, muslin and cotton, spring 2000, Japan, museum purchase.



Jean Dessès, evening gown, silk chiffon, 1956, France, gift of Lady Arlene Kieta.

It is only in recent years that imperfect or inauthentic objects have been given greater consideration, as interest in their “biographies” has grown. Signs of repeated wear, shortened hemlines, and careful mends can be found even on haute couture garments, and they highlight the lasting economic and emotional worth of many clothes within museum collections. These findings—which are often unseen and unknown by museum visitors—challenge the concept of fashion as a strictly ephemeral, disposable commodity. *Fashion Unraveled* will also reveal how the appearance of aged clothing, with its flaws and signs of

wear, has been embraced by many designers as an aesthetic choice, furthering the reconstruction of notions about beauty and value in fashion.

The exhibition opens with a section titled “Behind the Seams,” with the first group of objects devoted to the dressmaking process, including a toile for a late 1950s coat by Cristóbal Balenciaga. This type of garment, commonly made from inexpensive, unbleached muslin, allows a designer to test a new pattern. The example featured in *Fashion Unraveled* remains pinned together in several places and retains traces of the couturier’s pencil markings. It is shown beside a spring 2000 dress by Yohji Yamamoto that intentionally mimics the look of a toile. Red and black topstitching on muslin replicates the look of basting stitches, while a loosely draped, asymmetrical overlay in black cotton gives the appearance of a work in progress. Yamamoto’s inspiration for this collection came from his study of toiles by another great couturier, Charles James.

“Behind the Seams” also includes several garments that came to the museum with compelling histories. These include a 1956 evening dress in periwinkle and yellow silk chiffon by Jean Dessès, donated by Lady Arlene Kieta, the model who wore it in a couture presentation for the designer. She disclosed that the dress was made from 66 yards of fabric and sold for \$15,000 at the time of its creation. A deep red chiffon evening dress by Halston, dating to the late 1970s and worn by the fashionable socialite Jane Holzer, is paired with a quilted silk jacket of the same hue by Thea Porter—an ensemble that Halston himself put together. This portion of the exhibition is accompanied by entries from “Wearing Memories,” a crowdsourced project that invites contributors to share photographs and stories about garments that hold special meaning to them.



Stays, silk brocade, circa 1750, France, gift of Miss Adele Simpson.



Chanel, suit, double knit wool, circa 1935, France, gift of Louise Dahl-Wolfe.



Elsa Schiaparelli, suit, wool, circa 1937, France, gift of Theodora Pierce.

The exhibition continues with “Mended and Altered,” which highlights the signs of wear and modifications to clothing that are common within museum fashion collections. A pair of stays (corset) from circa 1750, made from white silk floral brocade, has been expertly expanded through the addition of panels of fabric at the waist in mismatched coral silk. While this subtle yet unmistakable alteration underscores the value of clothing during the 18th century, similar practices continued into later centuries. A Chanel suit worn by the fashion photographer Louise Dahl-Wolfe shows evidence of alterations, and

components of the suit were replaced over time. A circa 1937 suit by Elsa Schiaparelli, worn by a *Vogue* editor, was donated to the museum in pieces. The jacket had been let out, and the original waistband of the skirt had been removed entirely. Through the meticulous work of museum conservators, the suit was restored to its original appearance.



Dress, Spitalfields silk, circa 1840, France, museum purchase.



Betsey Johnson, jumpsuit, cotton jersey, 1966, USA, gift of Betsey Johnson.

The subsequent section, “Repurposed and Remade,” examines mends and alterations in more extreme forms, featuring garments that have been entirely repurposed from existing clothing or textiles. This includes a circa 1840 dress that was refashioned from a gown dating to nearly a century earlier. The gown’s fabric came from Spitalfields, a weaving center in London that was renowned for its beautiful, high-quality silks. The bodice of the original gown was turned back to front, and a belt was added to give the appearance of a fashionably pointed waistband. Patchwork—a technique that frequently relies on the use of leftover scraps of fabric—is featured in several ways within *Fashion Unraveled*, but there is no more charming example than a 1966 jumpsuit made and worn by the designer Betsey Johnson. It was crafted from the colorful striped rugby shirts of her then-partner, musician John Cale.



Lawrence Scott, suit, cotton, 1994, USA, gift of Lawrence Scott.



XULY.Bët (Lamine Kouyaté), ensemble, acrylic and nylon, fall 1994, gift of XULY.Bët.

By the 1990s, repurposing had become a means to make a statement on overconsumption and obsolescence in fashion. A 1994 woman's suit by Lawrence Scott is made from feed sacks, an unmistakable nod to the reuse of printed cotton bags that began during the late 19th century and proliferated during the Great Depression. For his label XULY.Bët, contemporary designer Lamine Kouyaté has made clothing from discount store sweaters and discarded pantyhose, resulting in an edgy, fashion-forward look that belies the humble origins of his materials.



Dress, wool and taffeta, circa 1880, USA, museum purchase.



Oscar de la Renta, dress, tweed, ostrich feathers, and beads, 2002, USA, gift of Elizabeth Graham Weymouth.

The exhibition next explores the concept of “Unfinished” fashion. The Museum at FIT collection includes several unfinished objects, such as a circa 1880 bustle dress that is embellished with an unusual, raw-

edged trim. Even more intriguingly, this stylish dress was never completed. In several areas, the trim was left basted on, rather than properly stitched. Several other garments in this section examine how designers have come to use a raw, unfinished appearance as a design element, exemplified by a 2002 dress by Oscar de la Renta made from black-and-white wool tweed. The skirt was embellished with ostrich feathers and beads, and its hem was unwoven to create a dramatic fringe, resulting in an appearance that is at once disorderly and luxurious.



Comme des Garçons, T-shirt, cotton knit, 1983, Japan, gift of Ms. Terry Melville.



Vivienne Westwood, jacket, rayon satin, spring 1991, England, museum purchase.



Maison Martin Margiela, boots, painted canvas, spring 1990, Belgium, gift of Richard Martin.

Fashion Unraveled concludes with a section titled “Distressed and Deconstructed,” featuring objects that are intentionally made to appear worn or imperfect. Rei Kawakubo’s early work for her label Comme des Garçons is represented by a faded, black knit T-shirt from 1983, the asymmetrical pieces of which have been haphazardly assembled, leaving the gaps and unfinished edges that were integral to her design aesthetic. A red satin jacket by Vivienne Westwood references the Renaissance fashion for “slashing,” a technique created through a series of small cuts made to the outer fabric of the garment that reveals the lining beneath.

Also on view in this section are two items from Martin Margiela’s spring 1990 collection, which was presented in a derelict, far-flung region of Paris. His papier-mâché bustier, covered in a thin layer of gesso, would be ruined after several wearings had it not been carefully preserved within a museum collection. Similarly, a pair of his now-signature “tabi” boots, heavily varnished with thick white paint, was intended to continually crack and deteriorate over time—embodying the concept of fashion’s ephemerality.

Fashion Unraveled is organized by Colleen Hill, curator of costume and accessories at The Museum at FIT. The exhibition is on view May 25–November 17, 2018.

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. The museum’s mission is to educate and inspire diverse audiences with innovative exhibitions and programs that advance knowledge of fashion. Visit fitnyc.edu/museum. The

museum is part of the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), a State University of New York (SUNY) college of art, design, business, and technology that has been at the crossroads of commerce and creativity for nearly 75 years. With programs that blend hands-on practice and a strong grounding in theory with a broad-based liberal arts foundation, FIT offers career education in 36 areas, and grants associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees. FIT provides students with a complete college experience at an affordable cost, a vibrant campus life in New York City, and industry-relevant preparation for rewarding careers. Visit fitnyc.edu.

The Couture Council is a philanthropic membership group that helps support the exhibitions and programs of The Museum at FIT. The Couture Council Award for Artistry of Fashion is given to a selected designer at a benefit luncheon held annually. For information on the Couture Council, call (212) 217-4532 or email couturecouncil@fitnyc.edu.

Museum hours: Tuesday–Friday, noon–8 pm; Saturday, 10 am–5 pm. Closed Sunday, Monday, and legal holidays. Admission is free. *Fashion Unraveled* is supported by the Couture Council.