PARIS
CAPITAL OF FASHION

September 6, 2019–January 4, 2020

Seventh Avenue at 27th Street, New York City

Hours:
Tuesday–Friday, noon–8 pm
Saturday, 10 am–5 pm
Closed Sunday, Monday, and legal holidays
Admission is free.

#ParisCapitalofFashion
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Paris, Capital of Fashion has been made possible thanks to the generosity of the Couture Council of The Museum at FIT, The Colby Foundation, and the New York State Council on the Arts, with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature. This project is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional support was provided by Chargeurs Philanthropies and Leach, a Chargeurs subsidiary.

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Photos:
Cover: Karl Lagerfeld for CHANEL’s Advertising campaign for the 1987/1988 fall/winter haute couture collection with Ines de la Fressange. Photo by Karl Lagerfeld ©CHANEL.
Paris has long been regarded as the international capital of fashion. According to The New Yorker, Paris remains, despite competition, “the most glamorous and competitive of the world’s fashion capitals.” Paris has unquestionably played a very important role in the history of fashion. But Paris has also been mythologized, and this exhibition explores how the “aura” of Paris fashion was constructed over many generations.

“Fashion is to France what the gold mines of Peru are to Spain,” declared Louis XIV’s minister of finance, Jean-Baptiste Colbert. The statement may be apocryphal, but already by the 1670s, fashion and luxury goods were a source of wealth and “soft power” for the French state. The splendor of the French royal court at Versailles contributed greatly to French fashion prestige — or what critics called “French fashion hegemony over Europe.”

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A capital is defined by the concentration of power, whether political, financial, or cultural. Philosopher Walter Benjamin famously described Paris as “the capital of the 19th century,” although London was a much better candidate. Not coincidentally, by the 1830s London had replaced Paris as the capital of men’s fashion, and New York would emerge later as the leader in ready-to-wear. Yet Paris was more than ever the capital of women’s fashion. Paris = La Parisienne = La Mode.

The rise of the haute couture was crucially important to the consolidation of Paris as a modern fashion capital. In 1858, when Charles Frederick Worth established his couture house on the Rue de la Paix, Paris was already home to many “little” dressmakers, but Worth created grande (big) couture, which was soon known as haute (high) couture. Elite American women were attracted by the prestige of Parisian fashion, and Worth recognized their importance as clients, saying they had “the faces, the figures, and the francs.”

Just as the image of the chic Parisienne speaks to transnational ideas about luxurious femininity, so also does the idea of Parisian fashion “work” across fashion cultures. Manufacturers and retailers in other countries have often profited by creating inexpensive imitations of Paris styles. Alternatively, they could present, say, New York fashion as a “liberating” alternative to Parisian “dictatorship.”

Moving into the 20th century, as Paris faced growing international competition, the French increasingly presented the haute couture as the epitome of art and luxury, and a part of the unique patrimony of France. During World War II, when Paris was occupied by the Nazis, New York and London were forced to draw on their own resources. In 1945, the haute couture gained legally protected status, and in 1947 Christian Dior’s New Look inaugurated a new golden age for the Parisian couture.

Over the years, London, New York, and Milan have repeatedly challenged the dominance of Paris — without ever permanently dethroning it. The Japanese fashion revolution of the 1980s ended by reinforcing the prestige of Paris. Today, many of the world’s most acclaimed designers choose to show their collections in Paris. More importantly, the headquarters of many luxury conglomerates, such as LVMH and Kering, and private luxury fashion companies, like Chanel and Hermès, are based in Paris. More than any other city, Paris has produced and maintained its brand image as the international “capital of fashion.”

Valerie Steele
Director, The Museum at FIT