



NEWS

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Pink: The History of a Punk, Pretty, Powerful Color

September 7, 2018–January 5, 2019

The Museum at FIT

The Museum at FIT presents *Pink: The History of a Punk, Pretty, Powerful Color* (September 7, 2018–January 5, 2019), *Pink* features approximately 80 ensembles from the 18th century to the present, with examples by designers and brands such as Elsa Schiaparelli, Christian Dior, Yves Saint Laurent, Alessandro Michele of Gucci, Jeremy Scott of Moschino, and Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons. The exhibition will be accompanied by a book published by Thames & Hudson and a free symposium on October 19, 2018, that will be livestreamed.



Céline, dress, spring 2017, France, gift of Céline.

Pink provokes exceptionally strong feelings of both attraction and repulsion. Indeed, it has been called the most divisive of colors. “Please, sisters, back away from the pink,” urged journalist Petula Dvorak in *The Washington Post* when she learned that tens of thousands of protesters were planning to wear pink pussy hats at the Women’s March of 2017. The issues facing women are “serious,” she added, and “cute” pink hats risked trivializing these issues. Yet attitudes towards pink are changing, and the color is increasingly regarded as cool and androgynous.

Although pink is popularly associated with little girls, ballerinas, and all things feminine, the stereotype of pink for girls and blue for boys only really gained traction in the United States in the mid-20th century, and the symbolism of pink has varied greatly across world history. By placing men's, women's, and children's pink clothing from both Western and non-Western cultures—including India, Africa, Mexico, and Japan—in a historical context, *Pink: The History of a Punk, Pretty, Powerful Color* corrects popular misconceptions, encourages viewers to question clichés and received opinion, and demonstrates that “It is society that ‘makes’ color, defines it, gives it meaning”—to quote the great color historian Michel Pastoureau.



Dress, 18th century, museum purchase.



Comme des Garçons, ensemble, fall 2016, “18th-Century Punk” Collection, fall/winter 2016, Japan, museum purchase.

The exhibition is divided into two sections. The introductory gallery focuses primarily on the theme “Pretty in Pink” with approximately 35 examples of traditionally “feminine” pink clothes organized chronologically from the mid-19th century through the 20th century. It begins by juxtaposing an 1857 bright pink crinoline dress with a black 1860 man's suit, illustrating the feminization of color in the 19th century.

Subsequent dresses demonstrate how different shades of pink came in and out of fashion, evoking different ideas about femininity. Around 1900, for example, pale pinks implied delicate, aristocratic femininity, while by 1912 a vibrant cherry pink indicated a more exotic image. The 1920s, famous for the Little Black Dress, actually saw a rise in popularity for a range of pinks, crowned by Schiaparelli's aptly named Shocking Pink of the late 1930s.



Charles James, dress, 1937, USA, gift of Mrs. John Hammond.



Christian Dior, dress, 1960, France, museum purchase.

The 1950s are notorious as the era of the “feminine mystique” when gender stereotyping was reinforced throughout society and the pink-for-girls, blue-for-boys gender coding took off. Naturally, there are many 1950s feminine pink dresses for girls and women, although Brooks Brothers also sold pink shirts for men. The 1960s continued to witness the popularity of many “pretty in pink” dresses, such as a 1960 cocktail dress by Yves Saint Laurent for Christian Dior. The 1970s saw a decline in pink fashion, although fluorescent pink appeared. By the 1980s, pink was back in fashion, although often, as with a 1980 hot pink “power suit” by Claude Montana, it also served to acknowledge women’s growing social authority.

In addition to the clothing and accessories on display, there is a fascinating diorama of pink toys and dress-up clothes for girls, dating from the 1950s to the present, including dolls, “princess” costumes, My Little Pony, and other highly gendered commodities.



Zandra Rhodes, ensemble, 1978, England, museum purchase.



Gucci, dress, spring 2016, Italy, gift of Gucci.

In contrast to the chronological layout of the introductory gallery, the main gallery is organized thematically to highlight key concepts in the history of pink. The first section, “Pompadour Pink,” features several 18th-century ensembles, including a woman’s pink *robe à la française*, a man’s pink *habit à la française*, and a man’s pink banyan. These objects show how pink was a new and highly fashionable unisex color in 18th-century Europe—in contrast to the 19th and 20th centuries when pink was coded as a “feminine” color. In the 18th century, pink was also important in painting and interior design.

Nearby, on the left side of the gallery, there is a small section on the pink-versus-blue gender coding in children’s wear, a binary that was still in flux in the late 1920s, when opinion was divided as to whether pink was for boys or for girls. The final decision seems to have been influenced by publicity surrounding a millionaire’s purchase of the paintings *Blue Boy* and *Pinkie*. Reproductions of these are featured along with that of another 18th-century painting, *Pink Boy*.



Baby, the Stars Shine Bright, ensemble, 2009, Japan, museum purchase.

The exhibition places pink in a global context, exploring how the color has been used in non-Western cultures. In India, for example, pink has long been worn by both men and women, while in Mexico the color Rosa Mexicano is associated with national identity. Western designers have drawn on these associations; as Diana Vreeland once said, “Pink is the navy blue of India.” Schiaparelli’s Shocking Pink was explicitly associated, in her mind, with Asia and Latin America.

In the center of the gallery is a grouping of platforms, “Rose/Eros” and “Pink: The Exposed Color,” exploring the erotic connotations of pink, which are both significant and overdetermined. Among the reasons why pink is widely regarded as an erotic color are the pinky-beige of Caucasian skin, which has led to the idea that pink is associated with nudity. Added to this are the fact that certain eroticized zones of the body such as the mouth, genitals, and nipples are known as “pink parts”; the fact that flowers, long associated with feminine beauty, are the sex

organs of plants; and that pink-colored cosmetics are used to simulate blushing. Lingerie, corsets, and evening gowns, often produced in shades of pink, are featured in this section.

Pink has played a notable role in both political protests and popular music associated with rebellious youth. The transgressive role of pink is emphasized across several platforms featuring both men's and women's clothes, ranging from vernacular garments to avant-garde high fashion. Featured items include pink pussy hats, and looks associated with music genres ranging from punk to hip-hop.

The second gallery expands audience perspectives on pink and shows how contemporary designers are increasingly challenging traditional ideas about sweet, pink femininity. Rei Kawakubo, the radical designer behind Comme des Garçons, has been especially influential with collections ranging from "Biker/Ballerina" to "18th-Century Punk." Even the house of Valentino has produced T-shirts asserting that "Pink Is Punk."

Contributors to the book, along with other speakers, will participate in a daylong symposium, discussing the changing significance of the color pink.

Publication

Pink: The History of a Punk, Pretty, Powerful Color will be accompanied by a multi-author book of the same title, published by Thames & Hudson on September 4, 2018 (208 pages, 120 color illustrations, \$50 hardcover). Valerie Steele authored the title essay and edited the book, which also includes essays by Deborah Nadoolman Landis ("Panavision Pink: Deceptively Demure"), Cassandra Albinson ("Feminine Desire and Fragility: Pink in Eighteenth-Century Portraiture"), Regina Lee Blaszczyk ("Pink Predictions"), Dominique Grisard ("In the Pink of Things: Gender, Sexuality, and Color"), Tanya Melendez ("Mexican Rose"), and Masafumi Monden ("The Color of the Day: Many Shades of Pink in Japan").

Symposium

In conjunction with the exhibition *Pink: The History of a Punk, Pretty, Powerful Color*, The Museum at FIT will hold a symposium on October 19, 2018. Confirmed symposium speakers include all of the contributors to the catalogue:

- Dr. Valerie Steele, director, MFIT, "Pink: The History of a Punk, Pretty, Powerful Color"
- Dr. Deborah Nadoolman Landis, chair of Film Costume, University of California at Los Angeles, "Panavision Pink: Deceptively Demure"
- Dr. A. Cassandra Albinson, curator, Harvard University Museums, "Feminine Desire and Fragility: Pink in Eighteenth-Century Portraiture"
- Dr. Regina Lee Blaszczyk, professor of Business History, University of Leeds, UK. "Pink Predictions"
- Dr. Dominique Grisard, professor of Gender Studies, University of Basel, Switzerland. "In the Pink of Things: Gender, Sexuality, and Color"
- Tanya Melendez, curator of Education, MFIT, "Mexican Rose"
- Dr. Masafumi Monden, research associate, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia. "The Color of the Day: Many Shades of Pink in Japan"

Barbara Nemitz, professor of Fine Arts, Bauhaus University, Weimar, Germany, and editor of *Pink: The Exposed Color in Contemporary Art and Culture*, will also speak, along with fashion designers and stylists. “Pink - The Exposed Color.”

The Museum at FIT

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 projects which advance the knowledge of fashion. Visit fitnyc.edu/museum.

The museum is part of FIT, a State University of New York (SUNY) college of art, design, business, and that fosters innovation, collaboration, and a global perspective. With programs that blend experiential learning, a strong grounding in theory, and a broad-based liberal arts foundation, FIT offers career education in nearly 50 programs, 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.

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 every September. 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.

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