



The Museum at **FIT**

Seventh Avenue at 27th Street
New York City

Proust's Muse, the Countess Greffulhe
September 23, 2016–January 7, 2017

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

#ProustsMuse
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Proust's Muse is based on the exhibition *La Mode retrouvée: Les robes trésors de la comtesse Greffulhe*, which was developed by the Palais Galliera, Fashion Museum of the City of Paris, Paris Musées.



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New York Council for the Humanities

Exhibition design by Kimberly Akert. Graphic design by Matthias Kern.

- 1 Photograph by Otto. Countess Greffulhe in a ball gown, circa 1887. © Otto/Galliera/Roger-Viollet.
 - 2 Soinard, day dress, circa 1887, pink silk satin with brown silk velvet. © Julien Vidal/Galliera/Roger-Viollet.
 - 3 Charles Frederick Worth, garden-party dress, 1894, pink silk crêpe Mousseline, silk taffeta printed with orchid floral motif. © Julien Vidal/Galliera/Roger-Viollet.
 - 4 House of Worth, evening dress called the "Lily Dress," 1896, black velvet with ivory silk in the form of lilies, embroidered with pearls and sequins. © L. Degrâces et Ph. Joffre/Galliera/Roger-Viollet.
 - 5 Charles Frederick Worth (1825-1895), cape, circa 1895. Palais Galliera, Musée de la Mode de la Ville de Paris. © Patrick Pierrain/Galliera/Roger-Viollet.
 - 6 House of Worth, tea gown, circa 1897, blue cut velvet on a green satin ground, Valenciennes lace. © Stéphane Piera/Galliera/Roger-Viollet.
 - 7 House of Worth, "Byzantine Gown" worn by the Countess Greffulhe at the marriage of her daughter, 1904, taffeta lamé, silk and gold thread, silk tulle, sequins. © L. Degrâces et Ph. Joffre/Galliera/Roger-Viollet.
 - 8 Nina Ricci, evening ensemble (dress and bolero), circa 1937, wool and silk muslin in cream and black, ostrich feathers. © Julien Vidal/Galliera/Roger-Viollet.
- Cover: Photograph by Paul Nadar, 1896. Palais Galliera, musée de la Mode de la Ville de Paris. © Nadar/Galliera/Roger-Viollet.

PROUST'S MUSE

The Countess Greffulhe



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Proust's Muse

The Countess Greffulhe

Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) is arguably the greatest novel of the twentieth century. To create it, Proust drew on everything that he had experienced and thought over the course of a lifetime – about art, love, society, time,...and fashion. Indeed, fashion was one of the ways that he came to understand the mystery of time. Many people influenced him, including Élisabeth de Caraman-Chimay, the Countess Greffulhe. A famous beauty, celebrated for her “aristocratic and artistic elegance,” she was one of the primary inspirations for his immortal fictional character, Oriane, the Duchesse de Guermantes, of whom he wrote: “Each of her dresses seemed like...the projection of a particular aspect of her soul.”

The Countess Greffulhe patronized the greatest couturiers of her day, but her audacious personal style was very much her own. As the press observed: “Her fashions, whether invented for her or by her must resemble no one else's,” adding that she preferred to look “bizarre” rather than “banal.” In this, she resembled her uncle, the dandy-poet Count Robert de Montesquiou, who inspired the Baron de Charlus. The Countess Greffulhe, like her fictional counterpart, the Duchesse de Guermantes, represented, for Proust, the aristocrat as a work of art. But elements of her style also influenced characters as diverse as the courtesan Odette de Crécý (later Madame Swann) and the Narrator's bourgeois lover, Albertine.

Proust's Muse, the Countess Greffulhe is based on *La Mode retrouvée: Les robes trésors de la comtesse Greffulhe*, an exhibition organized in Paris by Olivier Saillard, director of the Palais Galliera, Musée de la Mode de la Ville de Paris, which is the repository of the countess's wardrobe. From the moment that Olivier Saillard told me that he was planning an exhibition, I was determined that people in New York City would also have the opportunity to see masterpieces such as the “Lily Dress,” to appreciate the life of a legendary fashion icon, and

to understand how Proust helps us interpret the “mute language of clothes.” For the Countess Greffulhe and for Marcel Proust, fashion was not only a social and cultural sign, it was also a mark of individuality, an emotional language, and a form of art. Proust himself declared that if he could not build his work like a cathedral, he would construct it “like a dress.”

In 1878, at the age of 18, the beautiful and aristocratic Élisabeth de Caraman-Chimay married the wealthy Count Henry Greffulhe. Most of the bride's wardrobe was made by the Maison Soinard. In 1887, she commissioned from the same couture house an elegant day dress in one of her favorite colors, old rose. She chose a shade of pink lilac for a Worth dress that she wore on May 30, 1894, to a garden party given by her uncle, Count Robert de Montesquiou. It was there that she met Marcel Proust, who would later transfer her love of pink and mauve to his character Odette, who first appears in *À la recherche du temps perdu* as the mysterious “lady in pink.”

Her famous “Lily Dress” is also attributed to Worth, but the Countess Greffulhe clearly contributed ideas about its design and decoration. The princess line is unusual for the period, but very flattering to her figure, while the motif of lilies refers to a poem composed in her honor by Robert de Montesquiou.

The Countess Greffulhe studied photography with Paul Nadar and collaborated with him on at least two images of herself posing in front of a full-length mirror and wearing the “Lily Dress.”

“A photograph is a mirror that remembers,” wrote Robert de Montesquiou. Since photographs were very important for both Marcel Proust and the Countess Greffulhe, the exhibition includes a number of photographs of the countess and her contemporaries. Proust collected and treasured photographs of his friends and acquaintances, and he repeatedly requested a photograph of the Countess Greffulhe, saying that it would be “the effigy of a youth that is eternal.” But she always refused to give him one. It was “tiresome” that he kept asking for photographs of her, she complained, adding that “one didn't give them to outsiders.”

During his visit to Paris in 1896, Tsar Nicolas II of Russia gave to the Countess Greffulhe a rich court robe from Bukhara, which she had

transformed into an evening cape. Another extraordinary garment is a tea gown, circa 1897, in peacock-blue velvet on a brilliant green satin ground. (The countess loved green, because it complemented her auburn hair.)

At the wedding of her daughter, Éleine, in 1904, the Countess Greffulhe wore a “sensational Byzantine empress gown,” allegedly designed by Paul Poiret for the House of Worth. A great supporter of the arts, the Countess Greffulhe raised funds for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, and with the rise of Orientalism in fashion, she began wearing exotic clothes by

Fortuny and Babani. Even as she became older, the countess continued to wear cutting-edge fashions. In an early draft of his great novel, Proust attributes an anecdote told of the Countess Greffulhe to a fictional character, the Princesse de Guermantes, who says, “I shall know I've lost my beauty when people stop turning to stare at me” – to which another character replies, “Never fear, my dear, so long as you dress as you do, people will always turn and stare.”

Dr. Valerie Steele

*Director and chief curator
of The Museum at FIT*

