

**First Exhibition to Explore the Cultural History of Fashion and
Psychoanalysis Opens this Fall at The Museum at the Fashion Institute of
Technology (MFIT)**

***Grounded in Five Years of Research, Dress, Dreams, and Desire: Fashion and
Psychoanalysis Brings Together Almost 100 Looks from the 19th Century to
Present***



*The artist Alisa Gorshenina wearing artificial eyes and a jeweled mouth.
Photo by Elizaveta Porodina (@elizavetaporodina)*

New York, NY, June 23, 2025 - The first exhibition to explore the cultural history of fashion and psychoanalysis opens at **The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (MFIT)** in September. ***Dress, Dreams, and Desire: Fashion and Psychoanalysis*** draws on key psychoanalytic concepts about the body, sexuality, and the unconscious to interpret almost 100 items of dress by designers including Azzedine Alaia, Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel, Willy Chavarria, Bella Freud, John Galliano for Christian Dior, Jean Paul Gaultier, Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons, Alexander McQueen, Thierry Mugler, Rick Owens, Olivier Rousteing for Balmain, Sonia Rykiel, Elsa Schiaparelli, Jeremy Scott for Moschino, Jun Takahashi of Undercover, Gianni and Donatella Versace, Viktor & Rolf, Grace Wales Bonner, Vivienne Westwood, and Yohji Yamamoto.

Curated by **MFIT Director and Chief Curator Dr. Valerie Steele**, who was dubbed “*the Freud of Fashion*” by critic Suzy Menkes, the exhibition is the result of five years of research, reflecting the museum’s commitment to original inquiry and creative thinking about the cultural significance of dress. ***Dress, Dreams, and Desire: Fashion and***

Psychoanalysis is on view at MFIT **September 10, 2025, to January 4, 2026**, and coincides with the release of Steele’s exhibition companion book in November.

“Fashion is a primary lens through which we see ourselves—and how others see us. Far from being superficial, fashion can be regarded as a ‘deep surface’ that communicates our unconscious desires and anxieties, with none of us fully aware of the messages we send,” said **Dr. Valerie Steele**. *“The Museum at FIT is dedicated to advancing knowledge of fashion, and psychoanalysis provides important clues about the power and allure of fashion, as well as the ambivalence and hostility that fashion also attracts.”*



Elsa Schiaparelli, evening jacket, spring 1939. Francesca Galloway, London. Image © Francesca Galloway (Photograph Katrina Lawson Johnston).

Organized both chronologically and thematically, the exhibition begins by tracing the historical relationship between fashion and psychoanalysis. The introductory gallery opens with Freud’s personal style circa 1900, as well as his radical ideas about sexuality and the unconscious, and his problematic theories about women’s “exhibitionistic” and “narcissistic” relationship with fashion. The exhibition then takes visitors through the 1920s and 1930s, when psychoanalysis was popularly associated with sexual and personal freedom, especially for women and sexual minorities. In contrast to Freud, the British psychoanalyst J.C. Flügel envied women’s freedom to adorn and expose themselves, whereas Joan Riviere, one of a growing cohort of female psychoanalysts, theorized that femininity was a “masquerade” necessitated by male

prejudice. It is widely recognized that by the 1950s, most psychoanalysts, especially in the United States, were virulently homophobic and misogynistic. However, beginning in the second half of the 20th century, some feminists and LGBTQ+ activists stopped rejecting Freud as “the enemy” and instead called for an inclusive, liberatory psychoanalysis.

Following this historical overview, the exhibition continues thematically with various interpretations of fashion through the lens of psychoanalytic ideas about dreams, desire, sexual difference, and death. Freud interpreted most dreams as disguised sexual wishes—visualized by Moschino’s chocolate bar dress, evoking the pleasure principle, the drive to seek pleasure and avoid pain. By contrast, Carl Jung interpreted dreams in terms of eternal archetypes from the collective unconscious. While many designers represent the feminine prototype of the queen or lover, Rick Owens created a more esoteric collection dedicated to the “priestesses of longing”. Later, Freud would go “beyond the pleasure principle” to include the death drive, characterized by aggression, destruction, and hatred. Josephus Thimister referenced the slaughter of World War I in his collection, “1915 Opulence and

Bloodshed,” while Jun Takahashi of Undercover created a collection featuring roses and razor blades that could be interpreted as evoking Eros (life and love) versus Thanatos (death and destruction).

The exhibition also explores the development of body image and personal identity, through the lens of Jacques Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage—the lifelong process through which an individual develops a self-image—and Didier Anzieu’s concept of the skin ego, or a sense of self formed initially through the sensations on the skin. Elsa Schiaparelli’s famous mirror jacket, for example, could be interpreted partly in terms of her ambivalent attitude towards her own mirror image, or the body image created through internalizing the gaze of the other. Dress scholars have also recently drawn on Anzieu’s skin ego to interpret clothing as a changeable, renewable second skin that provides both physical and psychological protection. The exhibition further investigates psychoanalytic ideas about the object of desire and sexual fetishism as well as the movement towards nonbinary and gender-fluid dress, which is related to contemporary openness in society about sexuality and gender.

Dress, Dreams, and Desire: Fashion and Psychoanalysis has been made possible thanks to the generosity of the Couture Council of The Museum at FIT. This project is supported in part by The Coby Foundation. The MFIT programs are made possible in part by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature.

Public Programming

The Museum will convene the ***Fashion and Psychoanalysis Symposium*** on **Nov. 14** at the Katie Murphy Amphitheatre at FIT (300 7th Ave, New York, NY 10001). This daylong program, free and open to the public, will feature a talk by actress and activist Laverne Cox, as well as a conversation between Dr. Steele and designer Bella Freud, creator of the podcast *Fashion Neurosis with Bella Freud*. It will also include presentations from psychoanalysts and scholars such as Dr. Christine Anzieu-Premmereur, Dr. Patricia Gherovici, Chanda D. Griffin, LCSW, Anouchka Grose and Dr. Simona Segre-Reinach.

Publication

The exhibition is accompanied by the publication *Dress, Dreams, and Desire: A History of Fashion and Psychoanalysis* (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, November 2025), The publication features eight new chapters by Dr. Steele that draw on key psychoanalytic concepts about the body, sexuality, and the unconscious—from the dream theories of Freud and Jung to Lacan’s mirror stage and Anzieu’s skin ego—to interpret the work of designers such as Elsa Schiaparelli, Gianni Versace, and Alexander McQueen.

About The Museum at FIT (MFIT)

The Museum at FIT, which in 2022 received its second accreditation 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. Like other fashion museums, such as the Musée de la Mode, the Mode Museum, and the Museo de la Moda, The Museum at FIT collects, conserves, documents, exhibits, and interprets fashion. The museum's mission is to advance knowledge of fashion through exhibitions, publications, and public programs. Visit fitnyc.edu/museum.

The museum is open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays from noon to 8 pm, and Saturdays and Sundays from 10 am to 5 pm. Admission is free. For more information and the latest updates, visit the museum's website at fitnyc.edu/museum. To subscribe to the Museum's newsletter, [register here](#). Follow MFIT on [social media](#).

About FIT

A part of the State University of New York (SUNY), FIT has been a leader in career education in art, design, business, and technology throughout its history. Providing more than 8,000 students with an uncommon blend of hands-on, practical experience, theory, and a firm grounding in the liberal arts, the college offers a wide range of affordable programs that foster innovation and collaboration. Its distinctive curriculum is geared to today's rapidly growing creative economy, including fields such as computer animation, toy design, production management, film and media, and cosmetics and fragrance marketing. Internationally renowned, FIT draws on its New York City location to provide a vibrant, creative community in which to learn. The college offers nearly 50 majors and grants AAS, BFA, BS, MA, MFA, and MPS degrees, preparing students for professional success and leadership in the new creative economy. Among notable alumni in fashion are Calvin Klein, Michael Kors, Norma Kamali, Reem Acra, Brian Atwood, Stephen Burrows, Dennis Basso, Francisco Costa, Nanette Lepore, Bibhu Mohapatra, Ralph Rucci, John Bartlett, Peter Do, Daniel Roseberry, and Michelle Smith. Other prominent graduates include Leslie Blodgett, creator of bareMinerals; international restaurant designer Tony Chi; and Nina Garcia, editor-in-chief of *Elle*. Visit fitnyc.edu.

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