

NEWS

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From Cheri Fein
Executive Director of Public and Media Relations
212 217.4700; press@fitnyc.edu

Elegance in an Age of Crisis: Fashions of the 1930s

On view from February 8, 2014 through April 19, 2014

The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) presents *Elegance in an Age of Crisis: Fashions of the 1930s*, an exhibition that celebrates the most innovative and beautifully designed clothing made in the twentieth century. This is the first exhibition to concurrently examine both men's and women's fashion of the 1930s, specifically objects made by the era's finest dressmakers and men's clothiers. Haute couture and bespoke tailoring are equally represented by the approximately 80 ensembles and 30 accessories that are arranged thematically in an exhibition environment designed to evoke the restrained style of the era.



Wood Carlson Co., tailcoat, black wool, 1935, USA. The Museum at FIT, 89.65.9. Gift of Kay Kerr Uebel. Evening dress, silk and metal, circa 1935, USA. The Museum at FIT, 93.71.12. Gift of Mrs. Jessie L. Hills.



Madeleine Vionnet, evening dress, ivory silk organza with black lace insets, 1937, France. Collection of Beverley Birks.



Knize, evening jacket, blue wool herringbone twill, 1937, Austria. The Museum at FIT, 2000.14.2 Gift of Francis Knize.

The 1930s was a time of grand transformations, when fashion truly began to reflect the streamlined *art moderne* aesthetic. Garments were softer, minimally ornamented, elegantly proportioned, and markedly different from the preceding periods: the Edwardian era with its stiff, structured clothing, and the shapeless, boxy styles of the 1920s.

Elegance in an Age of Crisis investigates how clothing creators of the 1930s, despite the crippling financial crisis and dire political environment, spearheaded new stylistic ideas and wed them to emerging technologies. Technical innovations in textile production transformed what was possible for couturieres: looms were wider, dying vats larger, and fibers more tightly twisted. These expansive and flexible new materials gave dressmakers larger “canvasses” upon which to rethink and refine draping techniques, while featherweight textiles lent their garments new suppleness and flexibility. Tailors in both northern and southern Europe simultaneously began to “deconstruct” the jacket and to create a garment that was shapely, yet pliant. Lighter materials, such as linen, were used to make softer jackets.

A synthesis of cutting-edge technology and the finest hand-craftsmanship was necessary to forge a truly modern aesthetic in clothing. But these were not the only driving forces of the new look of the 1930s. Artistic influence—mainly the revival and full embrace of classicism across all the plastic arts—spurred a lean, elegantly proportioned aesthetic. It inspired master dressmakers and tailors to experiment with new techniques in order to achieve clothing that enhanced movement and highlighted the “natural,” well-proportioned, and classically idealized body.



Augustabernard (attributed), evening dress, ivory tulle, 1934, USA (licensed French copy). The Museum at FIT, 93.71.4. Gift of Mrs. Jessie L. Hills.



London House (founder: Gennaro Rubinacci, tailor: Vincenzo Attolini), classic Neapolitan jacket, silk thussor, 1930s, Italy. Lent by the Rubinnaci Museum.

The look of the 1930s was an international phenomenon. Menswear tailoring innovations in London and Naples paralleled breakthroughs in haute couture draping in Paris as well as custom design in New York, Havana, and Shanghai. Hollywood, too, played a role in defining and popularizing the glamorous new look. On view in the exhibition is clothing made in these cities for clients from the United States, Latin America, Europe, and Asia.

The first section of the exhibition displays active wear and resort wear. The burgeoning modern lifestyle brought with it increased leisured time, which necessitated a fresh array of garments. The newfound interest in participatory sports, such as swimming, tennis, golf, and skiing, accompanied a growing consciousness of the body and health. The look and feel of many sports clothes, such as swimwear, underwent profound change in the 1930s due to the creation of new synthetic materials. The softening of the man's suit for sports such as golf can be seen in a tweed ensemble made by Peter Sheppard, of Anderson & Sheppard in London.



McGregor, man's beach robe, cream printed cotton, circa 1935-1940, USA. The Museum at FIT, P92.11.4. Museum purchase.
Man's swim suit, wool knit, circa 1929, USA. The Museum at FIT, 89.143.1. Gift of Mike Dykeman.



Munchen, swim suit, wool, circa 1930, Germany. The Museum at FIT, P83.8.9. Museum Purchase.

The second section examines simultaneous developments in men's tailoring and women's couture from around the world. On view is clothing—mainly, but not exclusively, daywear—from Naples, London, Paris, New York, and Shanghai. Linen jackets and wool coats on loan from the Rubinacci Museum reveal the revolutionary innovations of legendary Neapolitan tailor Vincenzo Attolini, who worked for Gennaro Rubinacci's firm, London House, and who was the first to create “deconstructed” jackets and coats. Also on view are highly original designs for women, such as a bias-cut brown wool tweed coat by Charles James (1936); hand-made day dresses and ensembles by couturiers such as Louiseboulanger and Augustabernard; and from Shanghai, versions of the silk *qipao*, a truly new fashion hybrid that blended the body-conscious western silhouette with traditional Chinese design elements.



Suit, Anderson & Sheppard,
1935, London.
Collection of Steven Hitchcock.



Charles James, coat, brown wool
tweed, 1936, London.
The Museum at FIT, 96.5.1.
Gift of Mrs. W. A. Birge.



Qipao worn by Mrs. Wellington
Koo, black silk, fox fur, late
1930s.
Collection of Patricia Koo Tsien.

The third section of the exhibition displays the dramatic and varied formal wear of the decade. The gowns—long, streamlined, and minimally adorned—illustrate a strong connection to classicism. They highlight the “natural” body and simultaneously sever stylistic and structural connections to the corseted fashions of the early twentieth century, as well as to the tubular chemise dress of the 1920s. Featured couturieres include Madeleine Vionnet, Auguste Bernard, Louise Boulanger, Balenciaga, and Alix, as well as American designers such as Elizabeth Hawes, Valentina, and Claire McCardell. They are presented in groupings that illustrate important trends, such as the predilection for black and white, draping and cutting gowns on the bias, and the use of new and innovative materials, such as silk jersey and silk crepes. Although this exhibition focuses on creators who were artisans and masters of their craft, the work of other important designers (those who were either stylists or illustrators) will also be represented. These include Jeanne Lanvin, Coco Chanel, Lucien Lelong, Jean Patou, and Muriel King. The gowns will be paired with elegant evening suits for men, made in Naples, London, Vienna, and New York.

The final section of the main gallery is a *mis-en-scène* of a couture atelier and a woman’s boudoir, as well as a tailor shop and a man’s dressing room. Here, informal clothing worn in private quarters is presented. Men’s robes and at-home jackets and women’s negligées, were meant to be seen only by one’s most intimate family and friends, but nonetheless are exquisite examples of the clothier’s art. A silk Charvet robe and a green velvet jacket with exquisitely plush cashmere trousers by Gardner and Wooley (1936) are on view, along with the pattern of a jacket that belonged to the Duke of Windsor (likely cut by the legendary Savile Row tailor, Frederick Scholte). The exhibition concludes with a woman’s gown and short jacket, made of silk chiffon and constructed with dozens of rows of hand-pleated pintucks, on view with intimate muslins of period designs.



Gardner and Wooley LTD,
smoking jacket, green velvet,
satin, 1936, London.
Collection of Alan Bennett,
Davies and Son



Hélène Yrande, negligee
ensemble, coral and peach
pleated silk chiffon, 1932,
France.
The Museum at FIT, 75.69.9.
Gift of Sophie Gimbel.

The exhibition also includes a number of accessories from the 1930s. These hats, handbags, and shoes were fashion essentials in an era of economic crisis, allowing women to parlay a dress—or men a suit—into multiple uses and settings. A highlight is an array of shoes worn by the legendary dancer and movie star, Fred Astaire.



Perugia, pumps, green suede, gold metallic painted leather,
circa 1930, France.
The Museum at FIT, 2008.84.5. Gift of Frank Smith Collection.

Although most of the objects in the exhibition come from The Museum at FIT's permanent collection, the exhibition has been richly enhanced thanks to the generosity of key lenders. They include: rare examples of Neapolitan tailoring from the archives of the Rubinacci Museum; a range of period menswear made in Savile Row and collected by contemporary tailors such as Mr. Alan Bennett of Davies & Sons, and Mr. Steven Hitchcock; and examples of bespoke footwear made by George J. Cleverley, and loaned by George Glasgow of G. J. Cleverley. Exquisite haute couture was lent by collector Beverley Birks of New York and fashion editor, Hamish Bowles. Patricia Koo Tsien is lending rare *qiapos* worn by the legendary woman of style, Mrs. Wellington Koo.

This exhibition is organized by Patricia Mears, deputy director of The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, and G. Bruce Boyer, leading menswear writer and editor.

The exhibition will be on view from February 7, 2014 to April 19, 2014.

The Publication

A more in-depth study of fashion in the 1930s will be articulated in the accompanying book, also titled *Elegance in an Age of Crisis*, edited by exhibition curator Patricia Mears and published by Yale University Press. Content will include essays by Patricia Mears; leading menswear writer and exhibition co-curator G. Bruce Boyer; MFIT associate curator of accessories Colleen Hill; MFIT assistant curator Ariele Elia; and emerging fashion scholars Mei Mei Rado and William di Gregorio.

The main essays of the book are written by Patricia Mears and G. Bruce Boyer. Each is a historical overview that focuses on the technical and aesthetic developments in women's high fashion and menswear. The introduction addresses how the evolution of the *art moderne* style in fashion was influenced by devastating economic and political events, as well as artistic styles, mainly classicism. The essay by Mears, entitled "The Arc of Modernity: Paris London, New York, Hollywood, Latin America and Shanghai," and the one by Boyer ("Tailoring the New Man: London, Naples, and Hollywood in the 1930s"), view stylistic and technical developments from an international perspective.

The other essays include: "'Great Chic from Little Details Grows': Women's Accessories in the 1930s" by Colleen Hill; "The Wardrobe of the Modern Athlete: Activewear in the 1930s," an overview of sports clothes for both men and women by Ariele Elia; "Augustabernard: The Connoisseur's Dressmaker," a case study on a great but nearly forgotten couturiere, by William DeGregorio; and "The *Qipao* and the Female Body in 1930s China" by Mei Mei Rado, an essay that documents the dynamic fashion environment in the boom city of Shanghai.