



NEWS

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From

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The Museum at FIT Presents *Fabric In Fashion*

Fashion and Textile History Gallery
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The Museum at FIT presents *Fabric In Fashion*, an exhibition that explores the vital role textiles have played in creating Western women's fashion over the past 250 years. Exhibitions often focus on either flat textiles or garments, but by exploring both in relation to each other, this show illuminates the fascinating connections between fabrics, silhouettes, and the cultural movements that have shaped Western fashion throughout history. *Fabric In Fashion* invites a close examination of more than 65 garments and accessories as well as more than 30 flat textiles.

Historically, textiles were highly valued luxury goods, traded around the globe. Wearing the latest fabrics was as important as showcasing the newest silhouette. However, when materials increased in variety and decreased in cost during the Industrial Revolution, knowledge of textiles became less common. Today, few consumers consider how fabrics shape fashionable silhouettes. When so much of fashion is disposable, a look at materials can give fresh perspectives on its value.



Silk organza overdress,
circa 1825, USA (possibly).
MFIT, gift of Titi Halle.
© The Museum at FIT.



Organdy dress with silk satin trim,
circa 1830, England. MFIT, museum
purchase. © The Museum at FIT.



Yoshiki Hishinuma, sheer
polyester dress with rosettes,
2000, Japan. MFIT, gift of
Hishinuma Associates Co., Ltd.
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Fabric In Fashion begins with an examination of fibers. Four objects on display—a circa 1825 silk organza overdress, a cotton organdy dress from circa 1830, an open-weave wool dress from around 1855, and a 2000 polyester design by Yoshiki Hishinuma—set the stage. Each fabric is made from a different fiber, yet all four dresses have a light, airy, translucent appearance. These four fibers—silk, cotton, wool, and synthetics—are the most prevalent in women’s fashion. And although they carry certain connotations (silk is considered luxurious and formal and cotton is viewed as casual and comfortable), these fibers are surprisingly versatile.

Silk brocades, damasks, and other ornate fabrics were first imported to Europe from China via the Silk Road, and then woven by hand on complex draw looms in Italy, France, and England. They were a major source of inspiration for Asian-inspired design in Western fashion. A lushly brocaded floral round gown from England, circa 1760, illustrates the expansive silhouettes that were used to showcase these expensive fabrics.

Later examples of the recurring Orientalist trend in Western fashion include a circa 1870 pink silk taffeta morning robe with kimono silk inserts and Norman Norell’s mid-20th-century dinner dress of sari-inspired silk brocade.



Silk brocaded taffeta robe a l'anglaise circa 1760, England. MFIT, Museum purchase. © The Museum at FIT.



Silk taffeta morning robe with silk crepe kimono panels, circa 1870, USA. MFIT, gift of Florence Anderson and Mary A. Seymour. © The Museum at FIT.



Traina-Norell, silk brocade evening dress. circa 1955, USA. MFIT, gift of Mildred Morton. © The Museum at FIT.

Cotton was little used in European fashion until the 18th century, when it was imported in increasing amounts from India. Delicate white cotton muslin became a luxurious fashion fabric during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, which is illustrated by a rare, circa 1795 “silver muslin” gown. The dress was made in America, but the fine fabric was handwoven and embroidered with real silver in India.

Eager to manufacture cotton fabrics domestically, England was a front-runner in the development of new production technologies leading into the Industrial Revolution. Mechanized production made cotton textiles less expensive and more accessible. However, the British demand for raw cotton from the American South dramatically increased slavery, which ultimately led to the Civil War.



Cotton “silver muslin” round gown with silk taffeta sleeves, 1795–1800, USA (probably), textile from India. MFIT, museum purchase.
© The Museum at FIT.

Wool textiles were the first industrially produced fabrics, dating back to ancient civilizations. Wool was also Europe’s predominant clothing material prior to the 19th century. Wool’s unique scaled and crimped structure enabled the creation of the tailored suit, one of the West’s most prominent contributions to world fashion. Although both men and women wore wool, tailored garments were mostly reserved for men until the mid-19th century.

Wool’s malleability makes it well suited to a variety of silhouettes. A 1968 Mod coat designed by Mila Schön gets its flared shape from the thickness of double-faced wool. Ruchika Sachdeva’s design for her label Bodice incorporates recycled and metallic wools, all made in India, in a modern bomber jacket–and–joggers ensemble that won the International Woolmark Prize in 2017.



Mila Schön, double-faced wool dress and coat, 1968, Italy. MFIT, gift of Mrs. Donald Elliman. © The Museum at FIT.



Bodice Studio, ensemble with recycled wool yarn and metallic wool, fall 2018. MFIT, gift of Ruchika Sachdeva. Photo: Porus Vimadalal, courtesy of Bodice Studio.

Manmade fibers entered Western women's wardrobes during the early 20th century, beginning with rayon in the 1920s and followed by true synthetics, such as nylon and polyester, in subsequent decades. Textile designers such as Nigel Atkinson worked with synthetic fibers during the 1990s to pioneer new techniques and fabrics blends. Atkinson's "Edelweiss Smocking" fabric, made by applying heat-reactive polyurethane ink to velvet, can be seen in Romeo Gigli's fall 1991 coat. Issey Miyake embraced the thermoplastic characteristics of synthetic materials to create the unique silhouette of his 1982 metallic, pleated cape.



Romeo Gigli, ensemble with rayon and cotton velveteen coat heat-embossed with polyurethane, fall 1991, Italy. MFIT, museum purchase. © The Museum at FIT.



Issey Miyake, ensemble with synthetic metallic ruffled cape 1982, Japan. MFIT, gift of Jun Kanai. © The Museum at FIT.

Fabric In Fashion also examines fabric structures. For centuries, most high fashion for women was made from textiles woven on looms. Different weaves create dramatically different effects in textiles, ultimately determining the silhouette. Although an open-knitted, empire-waist evening dress, circa 1810, is a rare early example, knitted designs did not make a significant impact in women's high fashion until the 1920s. At that time, Lucien Lelong created his modern, sport-inspired wool jersey suit and sweater, introducing the comfortable jerseys that would become ubiquitous in all levels of women's fashion.



Knitted silk empire-waist evening dress, circa 1810, England. MFIT, museum purchase. © The Museum at FIT.



Lucien Lelong, wool jersey suit and sweater, circa 1927, France, MFIT, gift of Mrs. Georges Gudefin. © The Museum at FIT.

Other sections of the exhibition explore the cultural impact of textiles. Sumptuous and colorful fabrics, especially of silk, were worn by European elites—both men and women—during the 18th century. Yet during the 19th century, these fabrics were mostly restricted to women. Such “feminized fabrics” were made more complex, yet more accessible, by mechanized and steam-powered production. This is exemplified by fabric that shifts weave structures to create various scales of velvet, looped pile, and fringe in an extravagant circa 1859 silk ottoman dress. The 19th-century gendering of fabrics influenced fashion into the next centuries; James Galanos’s fall 1955 silk satin, distinctly feminine cocktail dress takes its silhouette from a century earlier.



Two-piece dress of silk ottoman with fringe and novelty velvet, circa 1859, USA. MFIT, museum purchase. © The Museum at FIT



Galanos, silk satin cocktail dress, fall 1955, USA. MFIT, gift of Barbara Torelli. © The Museum at FIT

Increasingly sophisticated production helped create the exceptional fabrics that are a hallmark of Parisian haute couture. Lyon was established as France's luxury textile center during the 15th century, and the city's weavers provided 19th- and 20th-century couturiers with the outstanding materials that made couture distinctive. Couturiers also developed their own fabrics. A dramatic Cristóbal Balenciaga evening cape (circa 1962) was designed with the light yet structural gazar fabric that he invented with the textile firm Abraham. This example perfectly illustrates how the right textile is vital to the realization of a fashion designer's vision.



Balenciaga, silk gazar evening cape, circa 1962, France. MFIT, gift of Mildred S. Hilson. © The Museum at FIT

Fabric In Fashion is organized by Elizabeth Way, assistant curator of costume at The Museum at FIT. The exhibition is on view December 4, 2018, to May 4, 2019.

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 programs that advance knowledge of fashion. Visit fitnyc.edu/museum.

The museum is part of the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), a State University of New York (SUNY) college of art, design, business, and technology that has been at the crossroads of commerce and creativity for nearly 75 years. With programs that blend hands-on practice and a strong grounding in theory with a broad-based liberal arts foundation, FIT offers career education in 36 areas, 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. Visit fitnyc.edu.

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 annually. 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. *Fabric In Fashion* is supported by the Couture Council.