

Fairy Tale Fashion



January 15–April 16, 2016



Fairy Tale Fashion

“The Paris openings have really opened something. They have opened a desire in the feminine heart for more beauty, more elegance, and more luxury. They have suddenly awakened the Sleeping Beauty slumbering in all of us, turning every woman into a fairy-tale princess. It is so easy to imagine what such a princess would do!”

—*Vogue*, October 1, 1933

The term “fairy tale” is often used to describe clothing that is especially lavish, beautiful, and seemingly unattainable. Yet in spite of its ubiquity within the fashion lexicon, connections are rarely made between our perception of a “fairy tale” gown in fashion editorials or on the runways, and the texts of classic fairy tales. The significance of Cinderella’s glass slippers is widely known, but they represent only a fraction of the references to clothing in these stories. Each of the 15 tales included in *Fairy Tale Fashion*—based on the work of prominent writers such as Charles Perrault, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, and Lewis Carroll—was selected for its direct references to clothing or its mention of important recurring motifs, such as blonde hair or red roses.

Since fairy tales are rarely set in a specific time period or place, the stories in the exhibition are illustrated using garments and accessories that date from the 18th century to the present—with particular emphasis on extraordinary 21st-century fashions by designers from around the world.

While fairy tales have a long history within fashion, the arts, and popular culture, they have proven in recent years to be more pervasive than ever. In her 2014 publication *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale*, the mythographer Marina Warner wrote that people of various professions, including couturiers, performance artists, photographers, and even therapists “are losing themselves in the forest of fairy tale in order to come back with baskets of strawberries picked in the snow.” But why is this? And why have fairy tales been so important to fashion in particular? Some theorists believe that designers are creating fantastical and escapist clothing in an attempt to counteract an increasing emphasis on technology, functionalism, and globalization.

Not all the imaginative designs in *Fairy Tale Fashion* were inspired directly by the tales they represent, but they can be easily linked to the stories’ texts. A pristine, white fur cape by J. Mendel is used to fashion “The Snow Queen,” Dolce and Gabbana’s lavish ball gown with hand-painted roses illustrates “Snow White and Rose Red,” and a pair of Christian Louboutin stilettos, crafted in the shape of a bear’s paw, signifies “Beauty and the Beast.” This is an imaginative and subjective approach to organizing an exhibition, but it mirrors our experience of fairy tales. Beyond its basic written description, the appearance of clothing in fairy tales is entirely up to our imaginations. Perrault’s Cinderella wears a gold and silver dress, dotted with jewels, but we will all envision this dress differently. Even Little Red Riding Hood’s cloak—seemingly the most straightforward of all fairy tale fashions—has been subjected to countless variations. Observing the myriad ways in which illustrators have drawn fairy tales over the centuries underscores that fairy tale characters, and the clothes they wear, need not be defined by a single image.

Depictions of sartorial splendor serve to enhance the sense of wonder and fantasy that is integral to the fairy tale genre, but fashion within these tales often holds a deeper meaning. It can be symbolic of a character’s vanity, power, privilege, or transformation. In real life, we are frequently encouraged to believe that with the acquisition of the right wardrobe, we will lead better lives—a “fairy tale”-like existence. We hope that a change in the way we dress can act as a means to reinvent and reimagine ourselves, as it works in fairy tales. Perhaps we can truly fashion our happily ever after.

—Colleen Hill, curator





Cinderella

(Based on the tale by Charles Perrault)

Lovely, sweet-tempered Cinderella is forced to keep house for her cruel stepmother and stepsisters. When the prince announces that he will be hosting a ball,

Cinderella's tattered clothing precludes her from attending. In Charles Perrault's version of the tale, a fairy godmother visits Cinderella, and transforms her rags into a splendid gown with a tap of her wand.



Giorgio di Sant'Angelo, dress, *The Summer of Jane and Cinderella* collection, 1971.

Giorgio di Sant'Angelo's 1971 collection was directly inspired by Cinderella's ragged beauty. Purportedly, he decided to slash the chiffon fabric of his dresses only the evening before his fashion show.

Little Red Riding Hood

(Based on the tale by Charles Perrault)

Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother fashions a scarlet hood for her pretty, charming granddaughter. When her grandmother falls ill, Red Riding Hood is sent to her house in the forest to deliver a basket of food. On the way, she meets a wolf who suggests that she take one path to her grandmother's house and he take another. While Red Riding Hood dawdles in the woods, the wolf eats her grandmother, dresses in the old woman's clothing, and waits for the girl to arrive—eventually devouring her, too.



Cloak, late 18th century.

Of all the descriptions of clothing in fairy tales, Red Riding Hood's ensemble is perhaps easiest to envision in real life. The red, hooded cloak commonly used to illustrate this character was a fashionable outer-garment during the late 18th and early 19th centuries.



The Fairies

(Based on the tale by Charles Perrault)

A fairy disguises herself in order to test the character of two sisters. The kind sister receives a strange but valuable gift: flowers and gems spill from her lips each time she speaks. The mean sister is cursed, so that snakes and toads spring from her mouth. Although readers learn that the fairy disguises herself first as a peasant and then as a rich woman to fool the sisters, her everyday appearance is never described.



Prada, ensemble, spring 2008.

Fairies have been portrayed in countless ways—both physically and temperamentally—in literature and artwork. Miuccia Prada’s spring 2008 collection featured illustrations by the renowned artist James Jean, whose fairies were simultaneously beautiful and sinister.

Sleeping Beauty

(Based on the tale by Charles Perrault)

A young princess is cursed by a wicked fairy to sleep for one hundred years. She can be awakened only by her one true love, a prince. In Charles Perrault's version of the story, there are several references to Sleeping Beauty's luxurious surroundings, but her clothing is little described.



Marchesa, evening gown, spring 2012.
Lent by Marchesa.

The prince does notice that Sleeping Beauty's opulent yet outmoded clothing resembles that worn by his grandmother—but to him she looks beautiful all the same. Many illustrators of the story show Sleeping Beauty in pale, flowing gowns that resemble this stunning example by Marchesa.

Beauty and the Beast

(Based on the tale by Madame de Villeneuve)

Beauty leaves her life in the countryside to live with a formidable Beast in his castle, offering her company as payment for a rose her father stole from the Beast's garden. In the Beast's stately home, she is provided with countless fashionable luxuries.



Robe à la Française, 1755-60.

Although the Beast is cursed to look like a hideous animal, he is actually a prince. Within his royal castle, Beauty would have likely worn an opulent gown. This example dates to circa 1755, the same time period in which the story of “Beauty and the Beast” was abridged and popularized. In addition to its design of flowers and feathers, it features a subtle, “beastly” motif of leopard spots.

Rapunzel

(Based on the tale by the Brothers Grimm)

Rapunzel is so beautiful that her caretaker—a powerful enchantress—feels compelled to lock her in a tower with no stairs and no door. When the enchantress wants to visit the girl, Rapunzel lets down through a window her splendid, golden hair for the woman to climb. Rapunzel is later discovered by a prince, who also climbs her hair to enter the tower, and the two fall in love. When the enchantress discovers their relationship, she lops off Rapunzel's braids, stripping her of her most valuable asset.



This evening gown by Alexander McQueen, densely embellished with a cascade of beaded golden tresses, was part of a collection inspired by witches. This reference further illustrates the power associated with hair—especially blonde hair—in folklore and mythology.



Snow White

(Based on the tale by the Brothers Grimm)

Snow White's vain, wicked stepmother realizes that her stepdaughter has become fairer than she, and arranges for the girl to be killed by a huntsman. He takes pity on her and leaves her in the forest, where she takes refuge in the cottage of seven dwarfs. When her stepmother realizes that Snow White is still alive, she disguises herself and makes three attempts to kill her stepdaughter: first by lacing the girl's stays too tightly, then by arranging her hair with a poisoned comb, and finally by giving her a bite of a poisoned apple.



Judith Leiber, *minaudière*, fall 2013. Lent by Judith Leiber.
Photograph © Judith Leiber.

Abridged versions of the tale often include only the apple, which puts Snow White into an unconscious state from which she is later awakened. Judith Leiber's glittering *minaudière*—hand-beaded with Austrian crystals—evokes this enticing fruit.



Furrypelts

(Based on the tale by the Brothers Grimm)

In an effort to deter her father's proposal of marriage, a beautiful young princess demands that he provide her with four seemingly impossible garments: dresses that shine like the sun, the moon, and the stars, and a fur cloak made from the pelts of every animal in the kingdom. When the king manages to obtain these clothes, the princess flees into the woods, disguising herself in the cloak and packing her three magnificent gowns. She later uses the gowns to awe a king in another land.



Mary Liotta, evening dress, early 1930s.

The princess is wearing her glittering star dress when she finally wins the other king's affection. The spectacular star motif on this early 1930s gown was intricately crafted from tiny silver beads, highlighted by rows of silver sequins.

Snow White and Rose Red

(Based on the tale by the Brothers Grimm)

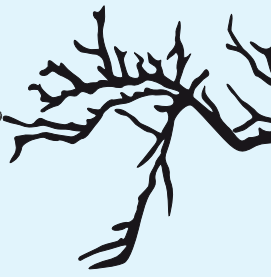
Snow White and Rose Red are kind, cheerful sisters who live with their mother in a little cottage. One winter's night, a black bear knocks at their door, and asks to come into the house to warm himself. The sisters befriend the bear, who later transforms into a handsome prince. He marries Snow White, and Rose Red marries his brother.



Dolce and Gabbana, evening gown, 2012.

The beautiful white and red roses that grow outside of Snow White and Rose Red's cottage provided the inspiration for their names. Illustrations often show Snow White as a blonde, dressed in white, and her sister as a brunette, dressed in red. The roses on this one-of-a-kind, ivory taffeta gown by Dolce and Gabbana are meticulously hand-painted.

The Little Mermaid



(Based on the tale by Hans Christian Andersen)

A young mermaid's love for a human prince leads her to make a drastic decision. She visits a terrifying sea witch, who offers to transform the mermaid's tail into legs—but at a steep price. When the mermaid is unable to win the prince's hand in marriage, she dissolves into sea foam.



Rodarte, dress, spring 2015.

The fantasy of the mermaid is inspiring to many designers. Speaking about their spring 2015 collection, designers Kate and Laura Mulleavy of Rodarte said, “Mermaids poignantly remind us of all the great mysteries of the ocean, all of its beauty and melancholy... [they] poetically capture the spirit of the sea.”

The Snow Queen

(Based on the tale by Hans Christian Andersen)

The Snow Queen first appears at the window of a boy named Kay, “dressed in the finest white gauze, which appeared to be made of millions of starry flakes.” She is beautiful, but Kay is terrified by her bright, restless eyes. The Snow Queen later reappears in the town square, wearing white furs, and she takes Kay with her to her castle. Distraught over Kay’s disappearance, his best friend Gerda begins a long journey to retrieve him.



J. Mendel, hooded cape, 2011. Lent by J. Mendel.

Numerous illustrations of the Snow Queen show her in pristine white furs. This luxurious, hooded cape from J. Mendel—a furrier established in 1870—features a combination of six different pelts.

The Red Shoes

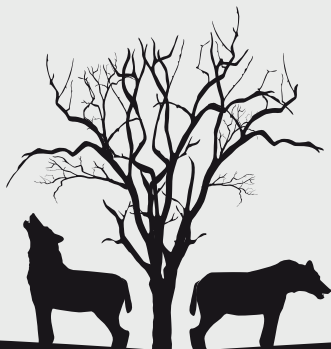
(Based on the tale by Hans Christian Andersen)

A young girl named Karen becomes obsessed by a pair of red shoes. She inappropriately wears them to her confirmation, and later wears them to dance at a ball, leaving behind the gravely ill old woman who cares for her. Karen soon finds that she cannot stop dancing, nor can she remove the red shoes. The only way to be freed from them is to have her feet chopped off at the ankle.



Morocco leather shoes, circa 1805.

Andersen specifically describes a pair of red shoes made from Morocco leather, a thin, supple material commonly used for bookbinding and footwear during the 19th century. Prior to the development of chemical dyes during the 1850s, bright red was a difficult color to achieve—meaning that red shoes were a luxurious commodity.



The Swan Maidens

(Based on the tale by Joseph Jacobs)

A huntsman steals a swan maiden's feathered robe as she bathes in a lake, rendering her unable to fly. She is obliged to marry the huntsman, and settles into life with him and their two children. One day, their daughter discovers the robe and takes it to her mother, who puts it on and flies away. Her husband must then embark on a difficult journey to find his wife and bring her back home.



Charles James, *Swan* evening gown, 1954-55.

Swans have figured prominently in Western literature, music, and ballet, and they have also been represented in fashion in myriad ways. Charles James's *Swan* dress—considered by some fashion historians to be his greatest masterpiece—is named for the graceful silhouette of its skirt, which extends like the wings of a bird.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

(Based on the tale by Lewis Carroll)

Seven-year-old Alice follows a white rabbit into his hole, and finds herself in a strange and perplexing Wonderland. It is there that she encounters a cast of idiosyncratic characters, including a hookah-smoking caterpillar, a mad Hatter, and the Queen of Hearts.



Manish Arora, dress, 2010 (remade 2015).

Manish Arora created this dress in 2010, for a window display at the Printemps department store in Paris. Arora, Haider Ackermann, Alexander McQueen, and several other designers each made an ensemble to celebrate the release of Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* film. The playing card motif—referencing the King and Queen of Hearts and their playing card attendants—is an integral part of the “Wonderland iconography.”

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz

(Based on the tale by L. Frank Baum)

Dorothy's Kansas farmhouse is swept up in a tornado, eventually touching down in a strange place called Munchkinland. Before Dorothy leaves for her journey to see the Wizard of Oz, whom she is told can help her return home, she changes into a clean dress made from blue and white gingham. She pairs the dress with the silver shoes that formerly belonged to the Wicked Witch of the East, who was crushed by Dorothy's house.



The beloved 1939 film version of *The Wizard of Oz* featured costumes by Gilbert Adrian, including Dorothy's iconic gingham dress. This humble fabric embodied a sense of Americana, and the designer used a similar material in his high-end fashion collections during the World War II era.



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The Museum at

Seventh Avenue at 27th Street
New York City

Fairy Tale Fashion

January 15–April 16, 2016
#FairyTaleFashion

Hours:

Tuesday–Friday, noon–8 pm

Saturday, 10 am–5 pm

Closed Sunday, Monday, and legal holidays

Admission is free.

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