



Mars of Asheville, dress, light brown paper printed with red NIXON and navy stars, 1967–1968, USA, gift of CITICORP.

James Sterling, dress, paper printed with image of Hubert Humphrey, 1968, USA, gift of Ellen E. Conovitz.

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An elite membership group, the Couture Council helps to support the exhibitions and programs of The Museum at FIT. Members receive invitations to exclusive events and private viewings. Annual membership is \$1,000 for an individual or couple and \$350 for a young associate (under the age of 35). For more information, write to [couturecouncil@fitnyc.edu](mailto:couturecouncil@fitnyc.edu), or call 212 217.4532.

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Through the Design Membership program, designers and other industry professionals gain unique access to the museum's holdings for the purposes of research and inspiration. Current members include fashion and home furnishing designers, manufacturers, merchandisers, and forecasters. Design membership includes unlimited visits to the costume, textile, and accessory collections; the privilege to borrow up to 30 swatches at a time from over 300,000 catalogued textile swatches; and access to the Françoise de la Renta Color Room. Both individual and corporate memberships are available at \$425 and \$1,250, respectively. For more information, call 212 217.4578.

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The museum has a permanent collection of over 50,000 garments and accessories and 30,000 textiles, plus 300,000 textile swatches and some 10,000 fashion photographs. A changing selection is put on display every six months in the Fashion and Textile History Gallery, on the museum's ground floor. Tours of the Fashion and Textile History Gallery, as well as the Special Exhibitions Gallery, may be arranged for a sliding fee of approximately \$350. Donations of museum-quality fashions, accessories, and textiles are welcomed. For more information about tours or donations, call 212 217.4551.

## The Museum at FIT

Seventh Avenue at 27 Street  
New York City 10001 5992

### *Fashion & Politics*

July 7–November 7, 2009

### Hours:

Tuesday–Friday, noon–8 pm

Saturday, 10 am–5 pm

Closed Sunday, Monday, and holidays

For more information, visit [www.fitnyc.edu/museum](http://www.fitnyc.edu/museum) or call the exhibition information line at 212 217.4558.

*Fashion & Politics* was organized by Jennifer Farley and Melissa Marra, with support from Colleen Hill (accessories) and Harumi Hotta and Lynn Weidner (textiles), as well as Fred Dennis and Ann Coppinger. Special thanks to Karen Cannell, Julian Clark, Molly Sorkin, and Valerie Steele. The exhibition has been made possible thanks to the generosity of members of the Couture Council.

Brochure design by Angela Middleton

Photography, MFIT

### Cover:

American Flag costume, printed cotton, circa 1889, USA, gift of Stephen de Pietri.

# FASHION & POLITICS



## THE FASHION AND TEXTILE HISTORY GALLERY

## The Museum at FIT

JULY 7–NOVEMBER 7, 2009





Dress, white cotton with red 'IKEE' print, circa 1956, USA, museum purchase.



Catherine Malandrino, *Flag* dress, printed silk chiffon, Spring 2009, gift of Catherine Malandrino.



Liberty of London, dress, brown silk velvet, circa 1910, England, museum purchase.

Historically, fashion has often been a medium for conveying political ideologies and related social values, addressing issues such as nationalism, feminism, and class. As sociologist Elizabeth Wilson has noted, through its changeable nature, “fashion is freed to become both an aesthetic vehicle for experiments in taste and a political means of expression for dissidence, rebellion, and social reform.”

This exhibition certainly includes explicitly political garments such as those associated with presidential campaigns. But the role of fashion in politics encompasses far more than campaign buttons, election t-shirts, and the sartorial choices of politicians.

The meaning of even as enduring a symbol as the American flag is not static. When fashion embraces visual iconography, it does so within the context of the social and political climate. During the nineteenth century, the flag was often proudly displayed on costumes worn for patriotic parades. Likewise, as the United States approached its bicentennial in the 1970s, flag printed sneakers playfully commemorated the nation’s long history. More recently, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, heightened the flag’s associations with strength, perseverance, and unity. Catherine Malandrino’s *Flag* dress, which debuted that year, was worn by many notable women as a show of patriotism, and was recently reissued in celebration of the historic 2008 presidential election.

The politics of class are often clearly expressed in clothing. Utilitarian denim fabrics were traditionally a hallmark of the working class. Menswear was relatively uniform, however, in comparison with the class distinctions visible in women’s fashion.

Dress reform movements of the nineteenth century were subversive of certain societal norms. Aesthetic dress, for example, rejected the rigid silhouette of Victorian fashion in favor of loose-fitting garments. Some women also promoted bloomer reform styles and divided skirts as a healthier, more rational approach to dressing. By the late nineteenth century, bifurcated styles had found their way into sportswear, although they were never widely adopted as fashionable dress.

The social and political landscape in the early twentieth century was fundamentally changed by progressive movements like woman’s suffrage, as well as epic events such as the First and Second World Wars. During World War II, national commitment to the cause was sartorially expressed in a variety of ways—from the functional denim jumpsuits worn by real life Rosie the Riveters to the military uniforms designed by American couturier Mainbocher for enlisted members of the U.S. Navy WAVES division.

Postwar America saw a rise in the development of the suburban lifestyle. Much of popular culture encouraged women to relinquish their wartime jobs and focus again

on family—promoting social roles for women that were, to a degree, reminiscent of the nineteenth century. Fashions such as Claire McCardell’s famous “popover” dresses were designed for a range of women’s domestic activities—from cooking to at-home entertaining—enabling women to stay chic while keeping house. The teenager also emerged as an important cultural and consumer force in the 1950s, setting trends in music and fashion. Yet beneath the bright suburban façade existed tensions—an intense fear of Communism, the beginnings of youth rebellion, sexual repression—that were poised to explode in the 1960s.

Futuristic fashions by designers such as André Courrèges and Pierre Cardin captured the mood of the Cold War era and the space race. Sexual liberation and youthful exuberance were expressed by designer Rudi Gernreich, who believed that his fashions, particularly his famous “Monokini” topless bathing suit, were a form of social commentary. Rebellious “hippie” anti-fashion of the 1970s channeled antiwar sentiment by adopting counterculture iconography—the peace sign, for example. Meanwhile, the wearing of pants by women became a symbol of modernity and the women’s liberation movement. Designer Yves Saint Laurent declared: “Modern woman is a woman in pants.”

As the twentieth century progressed, the use of political and social imagery in fashion became increasingly explicit, addressing such issues as gay rights, AIDS, environmentalism, and global politics. Vivienne Tam’s controversial Mao collection of 1995 used a highly charged propagandist image the face of Communist leader Mao Zedong—to comment on Chinese political history. Set against a camouflage background, Stephen Sprouse’s subversive homage to the Declaration of Independence alludes to the complex relationship between government and military.

Many contemporary designers are now using fashion as a medium for raising political, social, and environmental awareness. In light of the 2008 U.S. presidential campaigns, French designer Jean-Charles de Castelbajac paid homage to then-candidate Barack Obama with a sequin jersey minidress emblazoned with Obama’s likeness. “I made it because for me, Barack Obama is the most charismatic leader in politics today,” he explained. “He is incarnate of hope, changes, and youth.” The Danish fashion brand NOIR works with sustainable materials and fair-trade practices to blend luxury and sophistication with social responsibility. Mexican fashion designer Carla Fernández collaborates with indigenous communities to create jobs for local artisans and preserve traditional crafts. These designers’ approaches are varied, but all demonstrate fashion’s continued ability to articulate both the concerns and aspirations of our society.

*Jennifer Farley and Melissa Marra*  
Curators, *The Museum at FIT*



Mainbocher for United States Navy, WAVES uniform, navy blue wool, 1942, USA, gift of Mrs. C.W. Vernon Jr.



Rudi Gernreich, Monokini topless bathing suit, yellow and white wool, 1964, USA, gift of Rita Watnick and Michael Stoyla.



Vivienne Tam, suit, black and white polyester in checkerboard pattern of “Mao” portraits, 1995, USA, gift of Vivienne Tam.