

The Museum at FIT FASHION CULTURE Podcast
CBK: Carolyn Besette Kennedy: A Life of Fashion

Event held on October 17, 2024 and edited for this podcast in February 2025.

[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES IN]

[VALERIE STEELE]

Hi, I'm Valerie Steele, Director and Chief Curator of The Museum at FIT, the most fashionable museum in New York City.

[UPBEAT MUSIC CONTINUES]

[VALERIE STEELE]

Welcome to our Fashion Culture Podcast Series, featuring lectures and conversations about fashion.

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[VALERIE STEELE]

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[MUSIC CONTINUES FADES OUT]

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

Welcome to the Museum at FIT's Fashion Culture Series. My name is Tanya Melendez-Escalante and I am Senior Curator of Education and Public Programs. It is my honor to introduce fashion creative director Sunita Kumar Nair and CFDA CEO Steven Kolb. Tonight they will discuss her book, *CBK: Carolyn Besette Kennedy*, which gathers the greats of the fashion world to speak about Besette Kennedy's timeless style. And please join me in welcoming Sunita Kumar Nair and Steven Kolb.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

Thank you Tanya and FIT for hosting us tonight. And thank you, New York, for joining us here. It's the city that means so much to me. So it's great to be back. And of course, to Steven Kolb for being here tonight for being part of this event. My book, *CBK: Carolyn Besette Kennedy: A Life in Fashion* was the first book of its kind, a celebration of Carolyn's life then and now. Steven, it feels particularly noteworthy speaking in one of the renowned fashion institutions here in New York on Carolyn's fashion life, a posthumous fashion honor for her. So thank you for giving her this moment.

[STEVEN KOLB]

Well, thank you for including me today, tonight.

[SUNITA CHUCKLES]

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

So I guess one of the reasons that we're here is the book that I have written and why I wrote it. So, quite simply, there wasn't one out there. Carolyn for me, had popped up intermittently in my life, in my magazine fashion life, and she would be there when I was... I was working sometimes alongside her colleagues. Sometimes I would see Carolyn on mood boards for designers after their shows. And I had the first epiphany moment when I was sitting in a dark, dusty WWD archive room and looking supposedly for some research items for a Vuitton show where I found a stack of newspapers documenting Carolyn's social life during her very short public life.

Actually, I realized looking through it, what a master super stylist she was and what an incredible eye she also had. It also occurred to me that not many people had probably seen something like that, and that kind of... those images for her stuck in my mind. Fast forward to around COVID, and I am speaking to a friend of mine who's the lead lecturer at Central Saint Martins, and she mentioned to me that at least one of her students, once a year, uses Carolyn as their inspiration.

And so I kind of pondered on that. And then she was again popping up in my life, and I thought, "Why isn't there a book written on Carolyn's fashion life?" And so I kind of had this vision of seeing a book of hers in a fashion library. And also on people's coffee tables. I did want it to be relevant to everyone in different ways. So when I came up with the idea of doing the fashion book and speaking to the fashion leaders Yohji Yamamoto, Mario Sorrenti, and to you, Steven, it was this floodgate because everyone wants to speak about their feelings on Carolyn has significance to them creatively and personally. So my first question to you, Steven, is what does Carolyn mean to you, and being part of the book when you agreed to be part of the book?

[STEVEN KOLB]

Well, thank you for asking me to be part of the book. I think the book is really wonderful, and I like how you curated people in the industry's perspective. The truth is, for me, I was more about her husband, I guess, than her so much because I didn't work in fashion when Carolyn was alive. But I think we all have the Kennedy family as this royal American entity that we admire and we follow, we love, we hate. And even their relationship was very kind of combative at times, right? And so they were in what was then page six or the column. So most of my knowledge about her was really his girlfriend and or his wife or the woman who died in the plane with him.

So fast forward when I came to CFDA, I think that's when I really kind of moved away from that kind of drama and more about who she was as an executive. As someone, as you said, had great style and influence and also just in her position, at Calvin, in PR. I think she represented,

kind of a shift where the person on the team, the employee was the muse as much as they were the person working for the designer.

And if you think about what that would look like today, she'd probably have been called an influencer back then, right?

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

Right.

[STEVEN KOLB]

Whether she would have liked that term, or whether she would have embraced what influencers do or how they present themselves through social media or or oversharing, I'm not quite sure.

[SUNITA CHUCKLES]

[STEVEN KOLB]

But she really very naturally embodied the brand. And also, I think she was the quintessential American woman.

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

Yeah.

[STEVEN KOLB]

You mean, Truth is, she didn't wear a lot of American designers, but she dressed like an American woman. There was a rich casualness about her. We often now talk about quiet luxury. That was the beginning. Or she was quiet luxury at such a level. And so, I think when you kind of focused on her as a woman, as a businesswoman, as a muse and really as a style icon, and move away from some of the, you know, the page six drama, she really was an extraordinary influence in, in design fashion, the business, the fashion and generally style.

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

Yeah, I agree, I mean, I agree, I don't think she would have enjoyed being called either muse or influencer, but that was one of the directives for me when I was writing the book, was what makes the muse material? What? Why are we talking about Carolyn today? Why is she still a point of interest 25 years on? And to me, I agree she was an influence during her lifetime in that she was Calvin Klein's muse. He would often ask her to try out looks. There are Polaroid pictures of her with Kelly Klein.

You know, she lived and partied and worked with him. And also she had a very beautiful bond with the in-house designer at Calvin Klein, Zack Carr. And she was his ad hoc model, as well as, I guess he would cite her when he would be thinking about her designs. She was an influence also during her public life as Mrs. John Kennedy Junior.

And I think the fact that she chose to issue the usual patrician labels that Kennedy women previously to her, such as Chanel and deal with the signature hardware and fabrics, she kind of decided to just go for her own path, right? And just make it her own. And, she just stands out when you look at her in these public Met Gala or these public black tie events where all the women are quite decked out, quite opulently. And then she's just this, like, breath of cool coming in, you know? And you don't know what the designer is. Who's who is she wearing? And just as your point, she wears it with this American sensibility, this kind of... it's conceptual fashion because Yohji Yamamoto and Ann Demeulemeester were considered designers that were quite avant garde. But she applies it with this kind of American classicism sportswear that we... That's still celebrated today, right?

I mean, Peter Muller just showed at the Guggenheim and spoke about American Beauty and how he felt that it was, such an example of purity and modernity and, and straightforwardness, which is very Carolyn.

[STEVEN KOLB]

Yeah. And I think, for her, her style was much about, not what she wore, but how she wore it. And I think you were, you know, really hit the head. I mean, she kind of emerged in the mid 90s, right? And so the 80s was very bold and the 90s was really about maximalism. And she went in the opposite direction—direction. And she, you know, she really was a minimalist. And you see that influence today how people dress or some of the collections we talked about that. I think the row is a good example. I think she would probably wear the row, you know, oversize blazers or, you know, tailored pants, cashmere, muted colors and that influence still, is there: Phoebe Philo, Celine and others...

But I think really for women in general, it's easy to put a label on or it's easy to wear what is kind of, of the moment, but it's how you wear it and the confidence that you have and wear. And that's what I think people really reacted to or responded to.

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

I agree, I think, this quiet luxury tag, which has kind of bubbled up over the past few years, it is kind of harking back to the days of old money where you would have these investment pieces. I mean, while I was writing, *CBK*, the TV series *Succession* came out and of course, there were so many members of the cast who were wearing this quiet luxury as a kind of flex of their wealth. But to me, I think when you are doing quiet luxury, it is anti logo, it is anti trend and it is asking the wearer to define their identity through their clothing as opposed to the clothing, making your personality. And Carolyn Carolyn did that in advance right?

[STEVEN KOLB]

Yeah. I mean if you look at something like quiet luxury, it's an investment piece. These are things that live in women's closets. She would have been very much against fast fashion and while circularity and sustainability wouldn't have been something back then that the industry was even thinking about or addressing, it really is now. And if you think about what is the best way to

kind of really slow fashion down and its impact on the planet, it's to buy things that you hold on to when you wear that, you're just not turning over. And so in some ways, she was an activist.

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

Yeah.

[STEVEN KOLB]

Before we really put attention to that in our industry. And I think that is reflected even in designers of today like Gabriela Hearst and others who really have that as a core part of their business model.

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

I agree, I think, I think what's interesting about this is that for me, it's more important to address the slow fashion to to think about being a considered buyer or a conscious buyer. And I see quiet luxury as a kind of statement of your social class, whereas slow fashion is just being more considered and really taking into consideration what it is you actually like and what it is you want to wear. And this could be a piece that you could pass on. What do you think about the cost of these pieces, Steven? Because Geoffrey Beene, once said that "Only the immensely rich can afford to dress so simply."

[SUNITA LAUGHS, AN AUDIENCE MEMBER APPLAUDS]

[STEVEN KOLB]

Yeah. There you go, Lauren Levinson clapping. Wow. Okay. And there is a woman who has style and dresses how she wants and doesn't really let necessarily the label or the style define or it's how she puts it together. So I'm always impressed by how you look.

I think there are many levels of fashion right. And I think there's a lot of way that we can access that style that isn't about going to fast fashion. Upcycling, repurpose is more and more people look at sites like The RealReal or if you're a real adventurous shopper and you kind of dive into Housing Works or whatever the thrift store is in your community, or even down to the Salvation Army. I know for me, even when I'm in the country and I'm going through the racks, I found something beautiful, like a cashmere Brooks Brothers cardigan sweater. Right. So I think that it's possible to kind of, connect to that type of dress or kind of further a sense of style. But then also, you know, I think brands... those, you know, again, not fast fashion, but lower price or midlife prices, that there's really something more about the transparency of how things are being made and the quality of how they're being made, because it's important to the consumer.

So yeah, sure, not everyone's going to spend \$5,000 on a sweater, but I do think there's a way to connect to, a sense, of well-made, beautiful items that you're going to hold on to.

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

Yeah. And, and which you could essentially pass down to, say, you know, your daughter or you or your son and it's and it's an heirloom to keep in a way. You know, I think when I read what

Phoebe Philo said about her brand and that she was thinking about considered pieces and that it usually takes time and it costs. That was her explanation for these prices and why it's rising so high. But just as Carolyn had lived, she had spent what she needed and borrowed for some of these public events, as we well know. And she was a great thrift store, keeper, which I thought was really interesting that she would hang out and what goes around comes around and spend the whole afternoon looking for the right pair of corduroy pants that was worn in, you know, so I think there's there's a lesson to be learned in the way that Carolyn had lived and what her fashion life was. And a lot of friends spoke about how she had about 30 to 40 pieces within her wardrobe and would borrow or thrift buy from there.

[STEVEN KOLB]

Yeah, I mean, I think again, the upcycling or the thrift store approach, What Goes Around, The ReaReal... We have a new partnership at CFDA with eBay, and during fashion week they did, they called it Repurpose Fashion Week. And they did a show and they had a stylist and he shopped eBay, and it was the most beautiful fashion show because you had Ralph Lauren, you had, Tom Ford, you had all of these great designers, and it was all stuff that just came right off of eBay. So I think more and more businesses that haven't even focused on that, repurposed item, are moving in that direction.

And even recently I met a young man on Monday. And his whole thing is he's making these beautiful suits. He's just going to thrift stores, but he's then embroidering them and making them quite special. And these are kind of, you know, pieces that he'll have and share with friends and family.

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

Yeah. I think I wanted to ask you about her bridal dress, because that was quite a big moment, wasn't it, for the, for the American fashion industry? I remember speaking to Fern Mallis about it, and she said that it if she broke the internet, if there was an internet, the time kind of thing. Well, what do you have any memories of, of that wedding dress?

[STEVEN KOLB]

Yeah, I think she would have broke the internet.

[SUNITA LAUGHS]

[STEVEN KOLB]

If there was an internet at that time, kind of like the paper magazine cover with Kim Kardashian that broke the internet. I guess my connection to the dress is through the designer Narciso Rodriguez, who had worked at Calvin. That's how she knew him. And they were friends. And I guess even the last time we spoke, we talked about the dress. We had done, in the beginning of the year, that we had an auction at Sotheby's where we had asked American designers to donate classic pieces, iconic historic pieces to as a, as part of a fundraiser we're doing. And I wanted him to give... because there were two dresses.

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

There were, yes. Right.

[STEVEN KOLB]

He still has one of the other dresses. And I wanted him to donate the dress, but that didn't work out.

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

Good try, though.

[SUNITA LAUGHS]

[STEVEN KOLB]

Yeah, I did try. You know, again, I think that the, you know, the dress was very modern for the time. It was very simple. And it spoke to her sense of minimalism and, and she looked beautiful. Obviously. That was like a royal wedding of its sort. So it got a lot of attention and a lot of photographs and a lot of play. But it did influence American Bridal.

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

Yeah.

[STEVEN KOLB]

I think a lot of folks who were bridal designers kind of really maybe stepped back a little bit. And that's like any important dress. It really did influence how women wanted to get married and what they wanted to wear when they got married. So,

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

Yeah.

[STEVEN KOLB]

It was a dress that came from a friendship. And I think you, you know, that... there's so much emotion in that dress because of their friendship. And, and so that's what I know or or think about the dress or remember about the dress.

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

Yeah. Well, from my point of view, when I was doing research for the book, I was surprised to learn that a lot of her friends had said that Carolyn had loved shift and slip dresses and would wear them in various, various ways. I guess this was part of her super styling. Sometimes she'd wear it with a white t shirt underneath or she'd let one of the straps fall off her shoulders and the dress would kind of drag on the floor, which I can't imagine her doing, but I guess she went through a sort of grunge phase there, or she would wear it, play with proportions and wear a big sweater.

And then, of course, with her long, thin legs, you would see the silhouette of the dress. I mean, the slip dress and the bias dress was a big day.

[STEVEN KOLB]

Bias cut dress, yeah.

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

It was a big deal in the 90s with Galliano. And I actually spoke to Val that we spoke about it, and, and the evolution of the bias cut dress. We know that it came from, of course, Madame Vionnet, who had pioneered the technique. And Halston and Alaia continued that. But it was Galliano who kind of took up the mantle, the design mantle of the bias cut dress. And it was a very 90s moment. In fact, there were quite a lot of designers who did their own interpretations of the bias cut. But I think for Carolyn to be so bold, to choose it as her bridal dress did really break the supposed internet if it were there and it had such an extraordinary effect with the bridal industry, no one wanted to wear, as we call it in England, the meringue dress, right?

[SUNITA LAUGHS]

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

So, yeah, I think that was also a major influencer moment for her, or a muse moment where she took something that she loved and that she enjoyed, and felt comfortable in wearing and made it into her own for it, for a major event for herself.

Moving on to Carolyn's career in fashion, being as we're talking about, all the parameters of Carolyn's fashion life. She started off in a mall, which was quite unusual, and she was handpicked by, corporate who kind of discovered her confidence and style. And she had an uncanny resemblance to the Calvin Klein campaign model at the time, Elaine Irwin. So she was kind of cherry picked there and moved to New York, where she worked in the VIP sales at Calvin Klein. And I like to call it the kind of university of minimalism, because Calvin Klein then really did take on that, that, side of American fashion. And then from there she graduated to PR and then working with creative. It was a small company. Then when I'm speaking, I was speaking to Calvin Klein colleagues. And American fashion has changed, obviously, so much from that time.

When we're thinking about Seventh Avenue, I remember speaking to Donna Karan about her sharing the building with Calvin Klein and how she would see employees in the elevator, and you could guess who worked for who in the elevator, which I thought was just very telling of how employees really embodied what the brand's aesthetics was about. What are your thoughts about where we are today with American fashion? I read in my little London study about M&J trimming, closing down, and I felt a bit of a sad feeling of where the kind of industry, the kind of, you know, establishments that we love and adore, are slowly shutting down. Well, what are your thoughts about where it's going? And is there a new Seventh Avenue?

[STEVEN KOLB]

Yeah. Well, how extraordinarily, though, her career started by getting picked at a mall and you go to New York. I think that's very indicative. The opportunity in American fashion and a good example, what I think is a very democratic industry and always has been. Right. So, unlike the, say, counterparts in Europe that are more gated AND guarded and more difficult to penetrate.

I think whether you're in the business, whether you're in PR, or your designer, you have more opportunity here. And I don't think that's changed from those days. I still think there is this sense of entrepreneurial spirit. And, everybody has a spark in fashion. And so even know that when you look at some of the designers that are currently using Joseph Balthasar as an example, he won. He started his business 20 years ago. He could have started that business anywhere, Paris, London, New York. His family lived in London, but they intentionally chose New York because they knew that the access and the support for a young designer is greater here. We talked backstage a little bit last night. We celebrated the 20th anniversary of the CFDA Vogue Fashion Fund, which is a young talent program, where we award grants, business grants and mentorship to promising, next talent. And I think that sense, support or camaraderie in Diane von Furstenberg when she was the chair of the CFDA board, she always said, it's, you know, it doesn't exist like that in Europe. And so in American fashion, we have that community, that sense of family.

But look, any industry, if it doesn't change, it becomes irrelevant. And so whether we like it or not, we're, we're forced to change. And where we can really be more about innovation, always about creativity. My current chairman, Tom Brown, that's the one thing he's always like. Everything we do has to start with creativity, right? And so that hasn't changed. But yes, manufacturing has shifted. But then, you see a resurgence, made in New York or, or made in America. We've done a lot of work with the factories in the garment district, but just to really kind of make them more, tapped into technology that allows designers to experiment and do something different. And because of technology, we don't all need to be clustered in the same building that Donna and Calvin were in. You can be a designer in Memphis, Tennessee, and still have that.

If you have creativity, you could still have a valid business. And so, I think it's just a matter of rolling with the change or leading the change so that there is a sense of relevancy. But at the core, the accessibility, the democracy and the creativity of the industry hasn't changed at all.

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

Yeah, that The Row has recently been valued right at 1 billion, which is quite extraordinary for an American brand. And I know that they moved their production to Italy. Hopefully there's a chance now with the new investment that they will move to America. Right. And I think there's always the hope, right?

[STEVEN KOLB]

Early on when they started at Mary-Kate and Ashley, they were passionate advocates for the garment district. And what that garment district provides for a young brand is access, fight? So if

you're a young designer and you had to go to Italy to manage your production, that's a lot harder than having to go to like 33rd Street. And it's also, for a young designer or a young brand, you want that proximity because you want to really keep an eye on the control, the quality control of the product, but also your numbers, what you're actually able to produce. There's more leeway if you are local, right?

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

Yeah.

[STEVEN KOLB]

And so I doubt they'll bring it back. I think they're probably at a point where they're working with mills and factories there that kind of supports that million dollar valuation. But what's really great about them and, and, and as a brand is that they just, they're so consistent with what they do. And, they show in Paris, they don't show in New York anymore. And I think that's a really good thing. Some people would say that's a bad thing because they're American designers, so they should know New York. But I just think when you can have an American designer be on the Paris calendar and represent not just their own brand, but American fashion generally, it just shows the way and the talent that we have here.

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

Well you just recently did Americans in Paris, didn't you, for the CFA and highlighting new designers within Paris, which is a great...

[STEVEN KOLB]

Yeah, we brought eight designers with us for a showroom. We had a party at the American embassy. The American ambassador at the time at right, now she loves fashion. She wore a beautiful dress by Bibu. And it is an opportunity for those designers that don't have The Row budget to be part of a program that brings them to the end of the season when there's still money to spend with buyers, and editors are doing last look to kind of either reconnect to someone who had seen them in New York or be introduced to somebody who didn't get to New York.

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

Yeah. So it's a great program for the new designers. And speaking of which, we're here in the city with students, and they're all probably thinking what their next move is and where their jobs would lie. Well, what's your key forms of advice for them as they embark on their fashion life?

[STEVEN KOLB]

Well, I think it's great when you have the privilege and the opportunity to attend school and get an education, and that's something we should never take for granted. As we enter in or as people enter into the workforce, I think it's just taking time, and being really thoughtful about what you want to do. Okay. I know when I graduated college, I had to get a job, right? So there is some urgency about getting a job. But what I mean about being slow is, when I talked to a lot of, say, young designers where people are just early in their career and you ask them what they

want, they're like, I want to be, a global lifestyle brand, right? Well, you know, Ralph Lauren is a global lifestyle brand, but it took them 60 plus years to do that. So it's just I think school and education is just one part of their journey. So if you're graduating, you can get a job working at Michael Kors or Tory Burch, no matter what that job is. Being a receptionist, being someone's personal assistant, running errands. You're in a big company. So much knowledge that you can absorb, you can get a better sense of how to source fabric, where to source fabric. How things are shipped, what relationships exist with retailers. And it's just another way to spend some really good time to take that, like, quote unquote, the next level of education.

And for a lot of people, you can grow within those companies and get really wonderful, fulfilling, creative jobs that allow you to live a life. And sometimes that's good enough, right? Not everybody needs their name on a label. But for that person who aspires or who, you know, wants to take that leap, it's just... everyone knows this. And anyone else who's a designer here, you know, it's not easy. You know, it's a role. And you're always faced against a wall. So you have to just want to really do it and love it and know that there's a lot of sacrifice and no one will come and hand you an order or write you a check.

You have to make it all happen. And so without that drive, it's probably just not going your own direction. I spend a lot of time with Tom Brown doing visits to young designers, and they see Tom Brown, who is 20 years in business and, and, you know, they think he sold this company to Xenia, right?

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

Right.

[STEVEN KOLB]

And they think like, wow, he had it easy. But, you know, he says there was a point where he almost went out of business and everything he did. And even when he got creative work with Brooks Brothers or Moncler, every dollar he made went back into that business. So it's just not a profession for someone who's weak of heart. It's just you really have to love it and drive it, and nobody's going to hand you to anything. You're going to have to go and fight for everything that you want to succeed.

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

And it is about being adaptable as well, isn't it? I mean, when I think back to my experience, you know, it's not really a straight road when you think about working in fashion, you do as you said, take, take whatever job you have and take what, whatever access you have. Because no experience is bad experience, as far as I'm concerned. I feel like everything you learn is a conduit to what you eventually become.

[STEVEN KOLB]

Yeah. And I think it's like, you know, it's to do it your own way. And there's so much opportunity now for, I think, people to build their own identity. You know, social media is not a bad thing. It's a good thing, right? You know, so many brands, get new followers, people who see what they do

and be your own muse, right? I was again with this young guy, and, you know, he makes his own things, and he goes out and sometimes, like, where'd you get that? I want that, so I just think there's a lot of ways that it's a little bit more fluid than maybe it was in the past where you had to deal with a certain... right now, you can kind of do it your own way.

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

Yeah. The world, the world literally is our oyster in that way. Or your oyster in that way.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

Will everyone join me in thanking Sunita for her talk today?

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

[SUNITA KUMAR NAIR]

Thank you so much, guys.

[APPLAUSE FADES OUT]