



NEWS

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Minimalism/Maximalism

Fashion & Textile History Gallery
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Fashion's world of extremes, where sartorial expression ranges from the simple to the elaborate, is presented in one of The Museum at FIT's 50th anniversary shows, *Minimalism/Maximalism*, the first museum exhibition specifically devoted to the historical relationship between minimalist and maximalist aesthetics in fashion. After years of being driven by minimalist fashion (championed by Phoebe Philo), fashion is experiencing a rise in maximalist design ... while some fashion trendsetters are already predicting the imminent return of minimalism—again. This has prompted conversations around minimalist vs. maximalist aesthetics across varied disciplines from fashion to interior design. Yet even though they represent opposing principles, the two aesthetics are inextricably linked to one another, as well as to the times in which they occur.



Narciso Rodriguez, evening dress, spring 2011, USA. The Museum at FIT, gift of Mr. Narciso Rodriguez.



Comme des Garçons, ensemble, *Multidimensional Graffiti* collection, spring 2018, Japan. The Museum at FIT, museum purchase.

Minimalism/Maximalism examines various expressions of these aesthetics over history and shows how they have served to move fashion forward. The exhibition also explores the sociocultural, technological, and economic factors that contribute to a rise in minimalist or maximalist aesthetics in fashion. Some designers identify almost exclusively with one aesthetic or the other. Calvin Klein was known for fashion minimalism—the idea that “less is more”—an approach that celebrates purity and restraint. Maximalism, on the other hand, emphasizes eclecticism and the beauty in excess. Christian Lacroix and later Alessandro Michele of Gucci have been known for maximalist fashions.

Spanning the 18th century to the present, the exhibition features more than 90 garments, accessories, and textiles exclusively from the permanent collection of The Museum at FIT. The introductory gallery explores the various ways that minimalist and maximalist aesthetics can manifest in fashion. For example, a maximalist ensemble from Rei Kawakubo's spring 2018 "Multidimensional Graffiti" collection is juxtaposed with a minimalist, bias-cut, evening dress by Narciso Rodriguez from 2011 so that the differences between the two fashion extremes stand in direct contrast.



Man's suit, circa 1785, France. The Museum at FIT, museum purchase.



Man's suit, circa 1790–1800, France or England. The Museum at FIT, museum purchase.

The exhibition's chronology begins during the 18th century, with the opulence of the Rococo era. Featured is a highly ornamented man's court suit, a symbol of masculinity and power that projects an ethos of "more is best." By the close of the 18th century, a new social order began to emerge—especially in France—that favored an egalitarian approach over ostentatious sartorial displays of wealth. In this section, an unadorned man's green suit emphasizes fashion's shift toward a natural simplicity, inspired in part by English modes of dress.



Frock coat, circa 1870, USA. The Museum at FIT, gift of Mrs. Cora Ginsburg.

Charles Frederick Worth, evening dress, circa 1883, France. The Museum at FIT, gift of Jessie L. Hill.

During the 19th century, minimalist and maximalist fashions began to diverge along gender lines. Men's dark business suits, sober and sensible in appearance, contrasted with the highly ornamented styles and extreme silhouettes of women's fashions. To illustrate this difference, this section includes a man's 1870s frock coat and an elaborate couture evening gown by Charles Frederick Worth.



Suit, circa 1916, USA. The Museum at FIT, museum purchase.



Evening set, circa 1928, USA. The Museum at FIT, gift of Mrs. John A. Birch.

World War I disrupted established norms and allowed women to participate more fully in society. As a result, women sought more functional clothing, comparable to men's tailored styles, as seen in a 1916 woman's suit made of durable denim. This aesthetic shift is seen in a 1920s jersey dress by Gabrielle Chanel, which exemplifies an emergent minimalist look that married comfort and simplicity with postwar modernity. Maximalist tendencies were prevalent at the same time, however, conveying the dynamism of the decade. Art Deco style, for example, fused the modernist tendencies of the Machine Age with visually stimulating eclecticism. The new freedoms experienced by women in both their clothing and their lifestyles culminated in the excesses and *joie de vivre* of the flapper, who is represented in the exhibition by a vivid yellow chiffon and gold-sequined evening dress, circa 1928.



Evening gown, circa 1930, USA.
The Museum at FIT, gift of
Lucinda S. Day.

Adrian, suit, circa 1945, USA. The
Museum at FIT, gift of Jeannette
Swift.

The exhibition also addresses the continued interplay between minimalist and maximalist fashion during the following decades with the understated luxury of a Depression-era, bias-cut evening gown and a World War II–era suit designed by Adrian that “registers taste without extravagance.” Post WWII, the fashion cycle again turned toward ornamentation and hyper-femininity. Designers evoked nostalgia for full skirts and cinched waists, as seen in a Hardy Amies evening gown with an elaborate bustle.



Hardy Amies, evening dress, circa
1948, England. The Museum at FIT,
gift of Dolores Gray.



Michael Mott, mini-dress, circa
1968, USA. The Museum at FIT,
gift of Beauregard Houston
Montgomery.

As the exhibition progresses into the second half of the 20th century, it turns to the emergence of minimalism as an art movement across media. Designer Michael Mott echoed the reductive approach of Minimalist art with a 1960s black-and-white mini-dress created for the boutique Paraphernalia. Andre Courrèges’s white Space Age dress alludes to youth culture and optimism for the future; it is characterized by a streamlined silhouette and monochromatic palette typically associated with minimalist fashion. By the end of the decade, the psychedelic movement was promoting a maximalist sensory experience—often through the use of mind-altering drugs—that found expression in fashion, as seen in a maxi-dress by Thea Porter.



Larry Le Gaspi, man's vest and pants, 1979, USA. The Museum at FIT, gift of Valerie Le Gaspi.



Thierry Mugler, evening dress, 1979, France. The Museum at FIT, gift of Clarins Fragrance Group/Thierry Mugler Perfume.



Versace, ensemble, fall 1991, Italy. The Museum at FIT, gift of Hans, Kazuko and Siv Nilsson.

By the 1980s, ostentatious glamour and fashionable self-confidence had become evident in a variety of extravagant looks. Featured is a gold-studded suit by Gianni Versace, exemplifying the period's celebration of luxury. The unapologetic hyper-sexuality that came to be associated with 1980s fashion is represented by a man's glam-inspired leather ensemble by Larry Le Gaspi and a body-conscious silver lamé evening dress by Thierry Mugler.



Calvin Klein, evening dress, 1996, USA. The Museum at FIT, gift of Calvin Klein.

Prada, backpack, 1990s, Italy. The Museum at FIT, gift of anonymous.

By the 1990s, a sensuous slip-style dress by Calvin Klein and a Prada nylon backpack stood apart from the conspicuous consumption of 1980s fashion. These garments underscore a stark aesthetic with greater emphasis on “invisible luxury.” Fashions by Helmut Lang and Martin Margiela, on the other hand, introduced a variant on the decade’s minimalism, defined by a detached and edgy aesthetic with an artistic flare.



Undercover, ensemble, spring/summer 2005, Japan. The Museum at FIT, museum purchase.



Jil Sander (Raf Simons), spring/summer 2011, Germany. The Museum at FIT, gift of Jil Sander.

Technology, social media, and globalization have greatly affected fashion during the 21st century, causing the fashion cycle to spin ever faster. The exhibition features designs by Alexander McQueen and Jun Takahashi of Undercover, whose penchants for drama, fantasy, and decadence exemplify a new direction for maximalism that was initiated at the start of the millennium. A look by Raf Simons for Jil Sander’s spring 2011 collection pushes aesthetic boundaries by combining maximalism and minimalism within the same garment.



Céline, ensemble, fall 2015, France. The Museum at FIT, gift of Céline

Balenciaga, Triple S sneaker, 2018, France. The Museum at FIT, museum purchase.

Richard Quinn, ensemble, fall 2018, England. The Museum at FIT, museum purchase.

The exhibition culminates with a look at present-day fashion, which is in the midst of a push toward maximalism, consistent with an overstimulated “anything goes” society. The popularity of Balenciaga’s Triple S sneaker underscores this current trend, in which bigger is always better. Recent minimalist looks by Phoebe Philo and Ellery experiment with proportion and pattern, but looks by Gucci, Richard Quinn, and Comme des Garçons represent the new maximalism, inviting observers and wearers alike to explore what excess in fashion means in the contemporary consciousness.

Minimalism/Maximalism has been made possible thanks to the generosity of the Couture Council of The Museum at FIT.

couture council

The Museum at FIT

The Museum at FIT (MFIT), which is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums, is the only museum in New York City dedicated solely to the art of fashion. 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 projects which advance the knowledge of fashion. Visit fitnyc.edu/museum.

MFIT celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2019 with a series of events that will explore the institution’s contributions to fashion, culture, and scholarship. Over the past 50 years, MFIT has educated and inspired audiences with more than 200 innovative, award-winning fashion exhibitions, accompanied by free public programs. Accredited by the American Alliance of Museums in 2012, MFIT is New York City’s only museum dedicated solely to the art of fashion. The museum was founded in 1969 by the Fashion Institute of Technology.

The museum is part of FIT, an internationally recognized leader in career education in design, fashion, business, and technology for nearly 75 years. Providing an uncommon blend of practical experience and theory on a foundation of arts and sciences, FIT, a college of the State University of New York (SUNY), offers a wide range of affordable programs that foster innovation, collaboration, and a global perspective. FIT draws on its New York City location to provide a vibrant, creative environment for learning, exploration, and research. The college offers nearly 50 programs and grants AAS, BFA, BS, MA, MFA, and MPS degrees, preparing students for professional success and leadership in the new creative economy. In 2019, the college will celebrate its 75th anniversary. To learn more visit fitnyc.edu.

Museum hours: Tuesday–Friday, noon–8 pm; Saturday, 10 am–5 pm. Closed Sunday, Monday, and legal holidays. Admission is free.