¡Moda Hoy! Latin American and Latinx Fashion Design Today
May 31–November 12, 2023
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¡Moda Hoy! Latin American and Latinx Fashion Design Today has been made possible thanks to the generosity of the Couture Council of The Museum at FIT and by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature.

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Cover: The Ballroom Chino presented in Willy Chavarria’s SS22 runway show in New York. Photographer: Selwyn Tungol, courtesy of Willy Chavarria.

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For decades, fashion designers of Latin American descent such as Carolina Herrera, Oscar de la Renta, and Haider Ackermann have been central figures of the fashion industry. Their successes have paved the way for new generations of talented designers, including Gabriela Hearst, Willy Chavarria, and Kika Vargas. These names represent only a sliver of the emerging designers who are making their mark on the fashion industry by creating for famous fashion houses, winning design awards, and dressing celebrity clients. The English-language media has often viewed Latin American fashion from an outsider’s perspective—as an exoticized other, representing the region as a homogenous entity. However, there is no singular Latin American style but rather a diversity of cultures that shape contemporary fashion. For example, Moctezuma, Teotl, Apapachik and Latin Fashion Today includes creative American countries, as well as designers of Latin American heritage living and working in the United States who are often referred to as Hispanic, Latino/ Latinx, or the gender-neutral term Latinx.

The exhibition takes a decentering approach to fashion studies, shifting perspectives away from a single cultural viewpoint. The region, with its shared histories of colonialism, globalization, imperialism, industrialization processes, and local modes of modernity, has historically been dismissed by dominant Eurocentric fashion voices as underdeveloped. However, Latin American fashion is a powerhouse.

During the 20th century, a number of Latin American and Latinx designers gained global recognition while the region served as an inspiration for designers from Europe and North America, functioning as a background in fashion publica
tions and becoming a source of talent. In the exhibition, the work of Adolfo, Victor Alfaro, Maria Cornejo, Oscar de la Renta, Luis Estévez, Carlos Falchi, Carolina Herrera, and Isabel Toledo exemplifies this era.

The exhibition is organized thematically into sections that address issues such as Indigenous heritage, sustainability, art, gender, politics, elegance, craftsmanship, and regionalism. Indigenous heritage highlights the influence of native cultures on Latin American fashion of today. Emphasizing collaborations between designers and Indigenous artisans, it features work by Colombia Vargas of 1/8 Takamura and artisan Paula Pérez Vásquez who together created the blues Cuadro Tlahui. Also featured in this section is Ricardo Saco, Naílmo, Carla Fernández, Casilda Saldaña, and artist Mauricio Carrillo. Gender explores how ideas about femininity and masculinity are expressed, challenged, and celebrated through fashion design. For instance, with her pink embroidered leather Momodomo pantsuit, Mexican artist and fashion designer Barbara Sánchez-Kane satirizes the phyllodes of the male bodybuilder. Other designers featured in this section are Victor Barraqué, Suki Cohen, Narciso Rodriguez, and Roberto Capucci.

Women’s rights, immigration, colonial political relations, and racial histories are topics central to the section on politics. A fashion film by designers Juan Carlos Perezera and Andrés Jordan of the Bolivian fashion label Juan de Paz, centered on the rumored “Black Legend,” which brought Great Britain into conflict with Bolivia, leading to Queen Victoria allegedly crossing out that country on her world map. This legend notoriously underscores the asymmetry of power in North-South relations. Designs by Apartmento 03, Alexandra Herczogovitch, and Yohana Lopez are also included. The section on sustainability examines the ways in which Latin American and Latinx designers have incorporated handmade processes into their work, thereby preserving local artisanal techniques. Designs by Aurélia, Julia y Renata, Carlos Miele, Johanna Ortiz, and PatBo are featured.

Another section focuses on elegance as a social construct that varies depending on mora
graphy, and cultures, using the work of Heider Ackermann, Edmundo Costell, YTH, Thomas Wylde, and Yakamoot as examples. Art presents the fluid boundaries that exist between artistic practice and fashion. A look by Rick Owens celebrating his Mexican heritage was inspired by pre-Hispanic architecture and modern art. Other designers in this section are Andriak Chaves, Francisco Costa, Jorge Duque, Laura and Kats Kiilasau of Byordax, and Isabel Toledo with artist Ruben Toledo. The exhibition also features an investigation into the ways in which Latin American and Latinx designers have incorporated popular culture into their work. Brenda Equihua’s Devotion coat plays homage to the blankets used in her Chicana childhood home in Los Angeles. Additional designers contend with music, sports, and even cultural icons. Brands featured include Barraqe, Willy Chavarria, Estaban Cortáz, Gypsy Sport, Luar, and Opening Ceremony.

In order to incorporate diverse perspectives, we collaborated with an advisory committee and campus focus groups. In October 2022, we held a pre-exhibition symposium that enriched the exhibition narrative on Latin American and Latinx designers as fashion by incorporating opinions from diverse communities. We hope to continue to decenter the study of fashion by looking beyond the traditional Eurocentric narrative. Tanya Meléndez-Escalon and Melissa Maro-Arias, co-curators.