



NEWS

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Norell: Dean of American Fashion

February 9–April 14, 2018

The Museum at FIT

The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (MFIT) presents *Norell: Dean of American Fashion* (February 9–April 14, 2018), a retrospective exhibition of work by pioneering designer Norman Norell, who created some of the finest and most innovative clothing ever crafted in the United States. On view in *Norell* will be approximately 100 ensembles and accessories from MFIT’s permanent collection, as well as a compelling selection of objects borrowed from the stellar private collection of Kenneth Pool. The exhibition is organized by Patricia Mears, MFIT deputy director, and designer Jeffery Banks, guest curator.



Photograph by Milton H.
Greene © 2017 Joshua Greene,
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The exhibition emphasizes key Norell designs that were developed early on and remained constant throughout his career. Many examples of his day and evening wear are on view. These garments, accessories, and related objects are organized thematically to illustrate the range of Norell’s extraordinary output and the consistently outstanding quality of work produced by his atelier. Although some of the objects date back to the early 1930s, most were designed during the last 12 years of Norell’s career—from 1960 to 1972. This phase is notable because Norell bought out his investors in the 1960s, and from then on, his name alone appeared on his label. It also was arguably his most innovative period, perhaps reflecting his freedom from manufacturing demands.

The centerpiece of the exhibition features Norell’s dazzling evening wear. While some of his designs had dramatically plunging necklines and were embellished with sable trim or jeweled buttons for contrast, all his formal clothing was noted for its clean lines and comfort. Most representative of Norell’s work were his glittering “mermaid” gowns, generously but carefully frosted with thousands of hand-sewn sequins. The base of these formfitting evening dresses was knitted jersey. The flexible fabric was cut with rounded necks and a variety of sleeves. Of his necklines, Norell proudly said: “I hope I have helped women dress more simply.”



Norell, sequined evening dress, 1965. Photograph of Kenneth Pool Collection © Marc Fowler.



Norell, wool crepe evening dress, 1962. The Museum at FIT, gift of Claudia Halley.



Norell, evening ensemble with striped duchesse satin ball skirt trimmed in black fox, fall 1967. Photograph of Kenneth Pool Collection © Marc Fowler.

It is no wonder that Norell's sleek, sophisticated, American glamour was visible in all his work, from daytime suits to jersey separates and from menswear-inspired outerwear to his hallmark "mermaid" dresses. His designs attracted an A-list clientele that included Lauren Bacall, Babe Paley, Jacqueline Kennedy, Lena Horne, Dinah Shore, Marilyn Monroe, and Lady Bird Johnson. Some of his clothes can be seen in such films as *A Sainted Devil*, *That Touch of Mink*, and *The Wheeler Dealers*. Being both classic and modern, Norell's vintage garments are still worn today by film stars and even former first lady Michelle Obama.

His love of wool jersey began with the creation of solid or color-blocked shirtwaist dresses that were the antithesis of the splashy, floral, day dresses popular during the 1940s. Later, he paired wool jersey with fabrics like organza to make dramatic but comfortable evening clothes. Norell also made coats and suits using jersey, sometimes in contrasting colors. The effect was bold but also highly wearable.

Norell's favorite period was the 1920s, the decade he began his career. World War II fabric restrictions inspired him to consistently craft lean, narrow silhouettes that echoed the Jazz Age, a full decade before Paris couturiers popularized the chemise in the 1950s.

The sailor suit—an outfit he wore as a child—was another idea Norell embraced throughout his career. On view in the exhibition will be versions made from cotton, wool, and even silk organza.



Norell, wool jersey shirtwaist with leather belt and silk taffeta bow, 1971. Photograph of Kenneth Pool Collection © Marc Fowler.



Norell, Prince of Wales tweed reefer coat, late 1960s. Photograph of Kenneth Pool Collection © Marc Fowler.



Norell, giraffe-print sequin dress, 1965. Photograph of Kenneth Pool Collection © Marc Fowler.

Another section of the exhibition consists of suits and daywear inspired by both couture and menswear. Striking in their simplicity, Norell suits would skim the body, making the wearer the focus of attention rather than the clothes. Daytime drama came in a range of colors, from inky dark shades such as black and navy to warm neutrals like beige and camel, as well as a range of jewel tones and bright, clear pastels. The colors were deftly mixed, while the garments were punctuated by large, plain, contrasting buttons. On occasion, Norell opted for stripes, dots, and checks.



Traina-Norell, Roman-striped, sequined evening sheath worn by Dovima, 1959. Photograph by William Helburn.



Norell, cotton organdy sailor dress, spring 1968. Photograph of Kenneth Pool Collection © Marc Fowler.



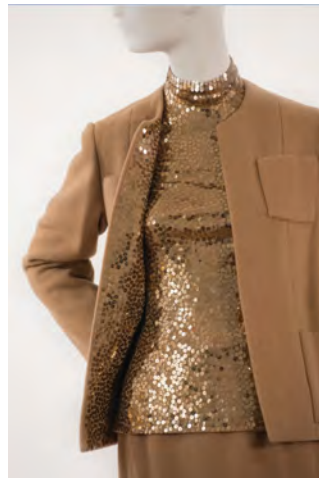
Norell, belted dresses with mini capes in pink linen and black wool, 1964. Photograph of Kenneth Pool Collection © Marc Fowler.

Inspiration from menswear was another key element of Norell's oeuvre. As in men's clothing, pockets and buttons were always functional, yet every Norell buttonhole and pocket was beautifully finished. Norell created a sensation with a culotte-skirted, wool flannel day suit in 1960. His plaid, double-breasted coats were jaunty and feminine, but also durable, comfortable, and functional like bespoke menswear. And just as men's dress was traditionally slow to change, Norell retained many of his basic designs, continually refining them year after year. On view will be a wide array of daywear with select menswear details and ensembles that clearly evoke the look and style of men's clothing.

Norell was born Norman David Levinson in Noblesville, Indiana, on April 20, 1900. The son of a haberdasher father and fashion-obsessed mother, young Norman moved to New York to study illustration at Parsons School of Design in 1919. The following year, he transferred to the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York, where he studied fashion design from 1920 to 1922. It was there that he renamed himself Norman Norell: "Nor" for Norman and "el" for Levinson, with an extra "l" to give the new moniker élan.



Norell, obi dress, spring 1965.
Photograph of Kenneth Pool
Collection © Marc Fowler.



Norell, camel hair and paillette
theater suit, 1971. Photograph of
Kenneth Pool Collection © Marc
Fowler.



Norell, Pilgrim collar wool coat,
fall 1968. Photograph of Kenneth
Pool Collection © Marc Fowler.

A lover of the theater, Norell moved seamlessly from student to costume designer when in 1922 he began working for Paramount Pictures, which was located in Long Island, New York. By 1928, Norell transitioned into clothing design and began his career at Hattie Carnegie, one of the leading fashion houses in New York. As an elite purveyor of licensed copies of Parisian haute couture, Norell learned much during his tenure under Carnegie. He remained the company's chief designer until 1941, when he entered into a business partnership with Anthony Traina, a manufacturer of high-quality clothing for a mature clientele. Their partnership lasted until 1960 when the designer became sole owner and devised the company's new label, which read, simply, Norell.

Norman Norell was one of the greatest American fashion designers of his age and was appropriately lauded during his lifetime. He won numerous prestigious industry awards including: Neiman Marcus Award for Distinguished Service in the Field of Fashion in 1942; Coty

American Fashion Critics' awards in 1943, 1951, 1956, 1958, 1966; Parsons medal for distinguished achievement in 1956; *Sunday Times* of London International Fashion Award in 1963; City of New York Bronze Medallion in 1972; and an honorary doctorate of fine arts from the Pratt Institute in 1962. In 1965, Norell was elected the second president of the Council of Fashion Designers of America.

Norell was the subject of a retrospective organized at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1972. Sadly, Norell was unable to attend the gala dinner held in his honor at the Metropolitan Museum. He had suffered a stroke the day before, and he died ten days after the opening on October 25, 1972, in New York. In his obituary, *The New York Times* bestowed Norman Norell with an esteemed sobriquet—"Dean of American Fashion Designers"—because of the consistently remarkable designs he produced during his six-decades-long career.

Although Norell was not the first American designer to employ couture techniques, he was arguably the most important creator to codify them at the ready-to-wear level. He was one of the primary designers to profoundly alter existing perceptions about New York's Seventh Avenue garment industry, at the time derisively referred to as the "rag trade." So outstanding was the quality of his ready-made dresses, coats, and suits that critics deemed his designs "the equal of Paris," earning him another title—"The American Balenciaga"—after the greatest haute couturier in the world. Year after year, Norell embraced the process of evolutionary design that not only allowed for consistent quality and workmanship, but also the subtle incorporation of sometimes radical innovation.

The exhibition is accompanied by a book titled *Norell: Master of American Fashion*. Written by Jeffrey Banks and Doria de La Chapelle, it is the first monographic study of this groundbreaking designer. It is published by Rizzoli.

The Museum at FIT

The Museum at FIT, which is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums, is the only museum in New York City dedicated solely to the art of fashion. Best known for its innovative and award-winning exhibitions, 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 programs that advance the knowledge of fashion. Visit fitnyc.edu/museum.

The museum is part of the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), a State University of New York (SUNY) college of art, design, business, and technology that has been at the crossroads of commerce and creativity for over 70 years. With programs that blend hands-on practice, a strong grounding in theory, and a broad-based liberal arts foundation, FIT offers career education in nearly 50 areas, and grants associate, bachelor's, and master's degrees. FIT provides students with a complete college experience at an affordable cost, a vibrant campus life in New York City, and industry-relevant preparation for rewarding careers. Visit fitnyc.edu.

The Couture Council is a philanthropic membership group that helps support the exhibitions and programs of The Museum at FIT. The Couture Council Award for Artistry of Fashion is given to

a selected designer at a benefit luncheon held every September. For information on the Couture Council, call 212 217.4532 or email couturecouncil@fitnyc.edu.

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

Admission is free.

Norell: Dean of American Fashion is made possible by the support of the Couture Council.

couture council