Proust's Muse, the Countess Greffulhe
September 23, 2016–January 7, 2017

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

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Proust's Muse is based on the exhibition La Mode retrouvée: Les robes trésors de la comtesse Greffulhe, which was developed by the Palais Galliera, Fashion Museum of the City of Paris, Paris Musées.

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Exhibition design by Kimberly Akert. Graphic design by Matthias Kern.

3. Charles Frederick Worth, garden party dress, 1894, pale silk, rose Chantilly lace. © Julie Vidal/Galliera/Roger-Viollet.

Marcel Proust’s À la recherche du temps perdu (In Search of Lost Time) is arguably the greatest novel of the twentieth century. To create it, Proust drew on everything that he had experienced and thought over the course of a lifetime—about art, love, society, time—and fashion. Indeed, fashion was one of the ways that he came to understand the mystery of time. Many people influenced him, including Élisabeth de Caraman-Chimay, the Countess Greffulhe. A famous beauty, celebrated for her “aristocratic and artistic elegance,” she was one of the primary inspirations for his immortal fictional character, Oriane, the Duchesse de Guermantes, of whom he wrote: “Each of her dresses seemed like…the projection of a particular aspect of her soul.”

The Countess Greffulhe patronized the greatest couturiers of her day, but her audacious personal style was very much her own. As the press observed: “Her fashions, whether invented for her or by her must resemble no one else’s,” adding that she preferred to look “bizarre” rather than “banal.” In this, she resembled her uncle, the dandy-poet Count Robert de Montesquiou, who inspired the Baron de Charlus. The Countess Greffulhe, like her fictional counterpart, the Duchesse de Guermantes, represented, for Proust, the aristocrat as “bizarre” rather than “banal.” In this, she resembled her uncle, the dandy-poet Count Robert de Montesquiou, who inspired the Baron de Charlus. The Countess Greffulhe, like her fictional counterpart, the Duchesse de Guermantes, represented, for Proust, the aristocrat as “bizarre” rather than “banal.”

The Countess Greffulhe studied photography with Paul Nadar and collaborated with him on at least two images of herself posing in front of a full-length mirror and wearing the “Lily Dress.” A photograph is a mirror that remembers,” wrote Robert de Montesquiou. Since photographs were very important for both Marcel Proust and the Countess Greffulhe, the exhibition includes a number of photographs of the countess and her contemporaries. Proust collected and treasured photographs of his friends and acquaintances, and he repeatedly requested a photograph of the Countess Greffulhe, saying that it would be “the effigy of a youth that is eternal.” But she always refused to give him one. It was “tiresome” that he kept asking for photographs of her, she complained, adding that “one didn’t give them to outsiders.”

During his visit to Paris in 1896, Tsar Nicolas II of Russia gave to the Countess Greffulhe a rich court robe from Bukhara, which she had transformed into an evening cape. Another extraordinary garment is a tea gown, circa 1897, in peacock-blue velvet on a brilliant green satin ground. (The countess loved green, because it complemented her auburn hair.)

At the wedding of her daughter, Éléonore, in 1904, the Countess Greffulhe wore a “sensational Byzantine empress gown,” allegedly designed by Paul Poiret for the House of Worth. A great supporter of the arts, the Countess Greffulhe raised funds for Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, and with the rise of Orientalism in fashion, she began wearing exotic clothes by Fortuny and Balencià. Even as she became older, the countess continued to wear cutting-edge fashions. In an early draft of his great novel, Proust attributes an anecdote told of the Countess Greffulhe to a fictional character, the Princesse de Guermantes, who says, “I shall know I’ve lost my beauty when people stop turning to stare at me” – to which another character replies, “Never fear, my dear, so long as you dress as you do, people will always turn and stare.”

Dr. Valerie Steele
Director and chief curator of The Museum at FIT