

“Fashion is a little like radium . . .
or like essence of roses,
which if undiluted would asphyxiate.”

CHARLES JAMES,
couturier, 1958



The Museum at FIT

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Ravishing: The Rose in Fashion

August 6 – November 28, 2021

Curated by Amy de la Haye and Colleen Hill

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#RoseinFashion

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Cover: Noir Kei Ninomiya, ensemble, red wool, resin-treated faux fur, and nylon, spring 2020. Photograph courtesy Comme des Garçons. Inner flap: Charles James, *La Sylphide* debutante dress, off-white silk organza and satin with grosgrain ribbon and silk roses, 1937, USA, gift of Mrs. John Hammond.

Back cover: Comme des Garçons pantsuit (detail), dark red cotton velvet, fall 2013, Japan, museum purchase.

RAVISHING

THE ROSE IN FASHION

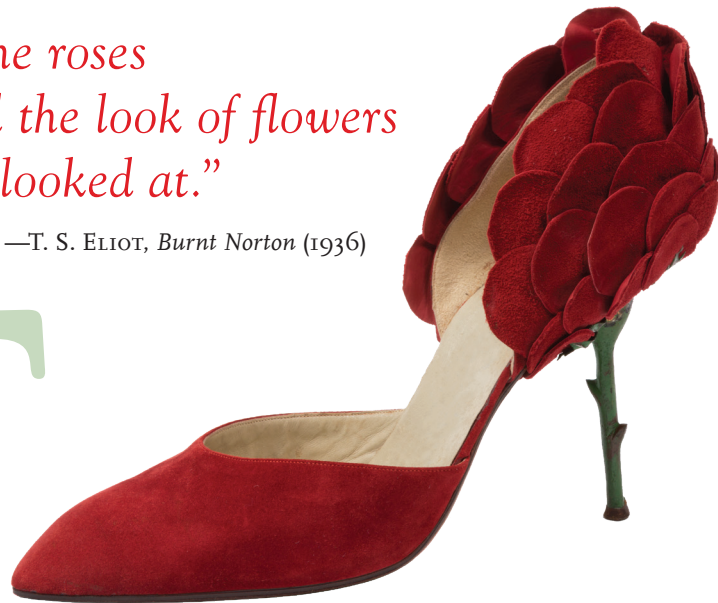


August 6 – November 28, 2021

The Museum at FIT

“... for the roses
Had the look of flowers
that are looked at.”

—T. S. ELIOT, *Burnt Norton* (1936)



The rose—widely considered the most beautiful and fragrant of flowers—is inextricably entwined with fashion and dressed appearances, including perfume, grooming, jewelry, and body adornment. Roses are like fashion: they are a luxury, they are ephemeral, they are “shown” (on catwalks/digital platforms and at flower shows), their appeal is multisensorial, they are avidly collected, and they incite passion and obsession. The rose and the savage thorns that guard it—a convergence of opposites—have provided a fertile source of inspiration for designers, artists, and writers, who have drawn parallels with love, beauty, sexuality, sin, gender identities, rites of passage, transgression, degradation, and death. In turn, roses are often named after people; fashion designers Christian Dior, Valentino, and Vivienne Westwood have varieties named after them.

Ravishing: The Rose in Fashion presents rose-themed fashions dating from the eighteenth century to the latest gender-neutral catwalk designs, all drawn from The Museum at the FIT’s world-leading collection. While these innovative, refined, and challenging fashion items may not be accessible to all people, almost everyone



can potentially feel transformed by wearing or holding one or more fresh or artificial rose. As the author of the popular book *Le langage des fleurs* (1819) made explicit, although the rose is undoubtedly the queen of flowers, it is also the most common one. A display of studio portrait photographs, dating from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, in the exhibition reveals how diverse people chose to be immortalized by wearing or holding the flower.

A striking design of entangled thorny rose branches greets the visitor upon entering the museum, leading to a journey down the stairwell and into the dreamlike “Garden of Hats.” Some seventy-five examples, many never before shown, are displayed on millinery stands that resemble shrubs. Highlights include a recently conserved, black horsehair hat from circa 1908, with a crown adorned with a profusion of deepest-red silk roses and buds; Mr. John’s “Primavera” hat from circa 1950, which is formed like the flower and strewn with fabric roses and other spring flowers; examples of millinery by top Parisian haute couture houses Balenciaga, Christian Dior, Lanvin, and Schiaparelli; and a dashing top hat bedecked with a single, exquisite, pink silk rose by Stephen Jones from 2008.

Flowers have long been associated with sexuality. More than any other flower, the rose has been personified and analogized with the human body, sexuality, and female fertility. Near universal is the association of the white rose bud and flower with female virginity, the red rose with love and romance, and the black rose to mark death and mourning rituals. (There are no truly black roses in nature, only the deepest red.) Since at least Ancient



◀ V. Buso, stiletto pumps, red suede, green painted metal, circa 1960, Italy (top). Studio photographic portrait of two men, each wearing a rose boutonniere, United Kingdom, circa 1915. Studio photographic portrait of a woman wearing a large real or silk rose in her hair, United States, circa 1910, private collection (center). The standing man touches the rose of his companion, private collection (bottom).

▲ Man’s waistcoat, ivory silk brocade with gold metal embroidery, circa 1780, France, gift of Thomas Oechsler (top). Stephen Jones Millinery, “Limo” top hat, black panne velvet and pink silk, fall 2008, England. Photograph © Peter Ashworth (bottom).

▶ Harry Gordon, “Poster” dress, non-woven “paper” material with rose print, 1968, England, gift of Ruth Ford.

Rome (founded in 753 B.C.), roses in their various colors, in bud or full bloom, have become integral to the dress and ceremonies that mark rites of passage, including marriage and death.

The second gallery in the exhibition presents apparel classified by and displayed in a color palette of roses—crimson red, white and palest pink, black, and a “mixed bunch.” Objects include striking eighteenth-century rose-embroidered menswear; an empire line dress in the finest cotton embroidered with an intricate design of roses, dating from circa 1810; a corseted evening gown with a bodice brimming with silk roses, designed by Charles James in 1937; Harry Gordon’s radical “Rose” poster dress from 1967; a tailored suit with woven red and pink roses by Gucci; and Alexander McQueen’s knuckle-duster roses box clutch bag.

Since the late twentieth century, the exquisite fragility and paradoxical beauty of the rose, with its potential to rupture and draw blood, has been harnessed by an unprecedentedly mobilized and politicized global fashion industry. Designers have explored the rose in relation to racial equality, identity, sexuality, fair trade, the environment, and sustainability. Designs by Charles Jeffrey, Noir Kei Ninomiya, Kenzo, and NIHL variously reference these critical issues.

AMY DE LA HAYE and COLLEEN HILL,
curators

