



John Rawlings, Carmen Dell'Orefice modeling for *Vogue* photoshoot, October 15, 1947, gift of the Estate of John Rawlings.

S U P P O R T T H E M U S E U M

COUTURE COUNCIL

An elite membership group, the Couture Council helps to support the exhibitions and programs of The Museum at FIT. Members receive invitations to exclusive events and private viewings. Annual membership is \$1,000 for an individual or couple and \$350 for a young associate (under the age of 35). For more information, write to couturecouncil@fitnyc.edu, or call 212 217.4532.

DESIGN MEMBERSHIP

Through the Design Membership program, designers and other industry professionals gain unique access to the museum's holdings for the purposes of research and inspiration. Current members include fashion and home furnishing designers, manufacturers, merchandisers, and forecasters. Design membership includes unlimited visits to the costume, textile, and accessory collections; the privilege to borrow up to 30 swatches at a time from over 300,000 catalogued textile swatches; and access to the Françoise de la Renta Color Room. Both individual and corporate memberships are available at \$425 and \$1,250, respectively. For more information, call 212 217.4578.

TOURS AND DONATIONS

The museum has a permanent collection of over 50,000 garments and accessories and 30,000 textiles, plus 300,000 textile swatches and some 10,000 fashion photographs. A changing selection is put on display every six months in the Fashion and Textile History Gallery, on the museum's ground floor. Tours of the Fashion and Textile History Gallery and of the Special Exhibitions Gallery may be arranged for a sliding fee of approximately \$350. Donations of museum-quality fashions, accessories, and textiles are welcomed. For more information about tours or donations, call 212 217.4551.

The Museum at FIT

Seventh Avenue at 27 Street
New York City 10001-5992

Seduction

December 9, 2008–June 16, 2009

Hours:

Tuesday–Friday, noon–8 pm

Saturday, 10 am–5 pm

Closed Sunday, Monday, and holidays

For more information, visit www.fitnyc.edu/museum or call the exhibition information line at 212 217.4558.

Seduction was organized by Colleen Hill, with support from Harumi Hotta and Lynn Weidner (textiles), as well as Fred Dennis and Ann Coppinger. Special thanks to Julian Clark and Valerie Steele. The exhibition has been made possible thanks to the generosity of the members of the Couture Council.

Brochure design by Angela Middleton
Photography, MFIT

Cover:

Cristóbal Balenciaga, cocktail dress, black net lace, black silk crepe, pink satin ribbon, circa 1957, France, gift of The Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art from the Estate of Ann E. Woodward.

Seduction



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Corset, black embroidered cotton sateen, black lace, pink silk, circa 1903, USA, gift of the Strouse, Adler Company.



Jane Régny, evening dress, nude silk satin-back crepe, circa 1931, France, museum purchase.



Halston, evening dress, light blue silk jersey, 1972–73, USA, gift of Lauren Bacall.

Seduction is often defined as an act of temptation and enticement, usually sexual in nature. Traditionally, the word has carried a negative connotation, suggestive of a cunning *seducer* luring an unsuspecting victim into wrongdoing. In a contemporary context, however, seduction tends to be viewed as a display of charm that appeals to the senses. There are, of course, many different ways in which fashion can be seductive—from daring, sexy ensembles to subtly revealing clothes that merely allude to sensuality and romance. The proximity of clothing to the body is inherently sensual, and thus at its most basic level, fashion is intrinsically erotic. With close ties to gender identity, beauty, morality, and social norms, the complex relationship between sexuality and dress is constantly being redefined.

Through a strategic interplay of exposure and concealment, the seducer strives to entice, yet remains appropriately (and perhaps teasingly) modest. As one of the earliest means of power for women, seductive dress is most commonly linked to femininity. Terms such as the Temptress and the Vamp have been used to describe women who wear seductive dress. However, men have also played important roles in the art of seduction, asserting their own power, social status, and physical beauty through dress intended to attract admirers. The style of the male seducer is characterized by such terms as the Rebel and Macho. These terms, and the images they evoke, often personify the moods of their respective eras.

Provocative displays of fashion played an accepted and essential societal role in the eighteenth century. The *toilette*, for instance, was a semipublic ritual of dressing and undressing that the historian Aileen Ribeiro describes as “a kind of witty strip tease.” However, it was still imperative that dress conform to appropriate levels of concealment and decency—for example, form-revealing dresses were actually considered to be more modest than loose gowns, which were too closely aligned with undress. Until the middle of the century, men’s clothing was as extravagant as women’s and held similarly seductive qualities. After 1770, suits were tailored to highlight a man’s figure, and luxurious fabrics suggested status. Women’s fashion, meanwhile, enticed through beauty, adornment, and a degree of artifice created by corsetry.

Seductive fashions of the nineteenth century, particularly those of the Victorian era, were linked to changing ideals of beauty and an increasing distinction between male and female dress. Frivolity in men’s fashion had all but disappeared and would not make a comeback until the next century. Although generally modest, women’s fashions did convey subtle displays of sexuality. The flirtatious swing of a crinoline, for example, provided a brief but pleasing glimpse of the ankle and lower calf. The ideal hourglass figure was enhanced by the corset, and was considered to be both beautiful and erotic.

The allure of the crinoline was soon replaced by the first bustle style in the 1870s. By the end of the decade, the design of the bustle skirt created a tension that distinctly outlined the shape of the wearer’s legs. Furthermore, a new technique in corsetry now molded a woman’s body from the bust through the hips, highlighting the sexually dimorphic

curves of the female torso. The increasing importance of robes and teagowns allowed women to entertain at home in a seductive, but still socially appropriate, form of undress.

The twentieth century brought forth a wealth of new, sensuous fashions that revealed more of the body than ever before. Beginning with the statuesque, hyper-feminine Edwardian temptress, fashion soon progressed to the shockingly spare flapper dresses of the 1920s, which showcased a woman’s legs in an enticing new way. These dresses indicated more than just a slender, fashionable new silhouette—they also served to symbolize the newly liberated sexuality of the modern woman.

The sensuously draped gowns of the 1930s, often rendered in pale silk fabrics, appeared almost as extensions of the skin. The bias cut technique was mastered by designers such as Jane Régny, whose clothing implied undress through an uninterrupted revelation of the wearer’s shape. Christian Dior’s New Look of 1947 advocated a voluptuous silhouette that contrasted with the sylph-like ideal of the 1930s, as well as the austerity of wartime fashions. An hourglass figure was achieved by corsetry that circled the waist, enhanced the bust, and rounded the hips. Long, full skirts, often using an excess of fabric, added a graceful femininity. This new silhouette set the standard for the 1950s, a decade defined by its ladylike yet highly sexualized fashions.

The cultural revolution of the 1960s ushered in more brazenly sexual styles than ever before, led by the mini skirt. Designers such as Rudi Gernreich combined innovation with unprecedented daring, resulting in some of the most boldly revealing clothing of the era. Young men took a renewed interest in fashion that included the adoption of sensual and flamboyant fabrics. Borrowing from clothing first worn by gay men, this dramatic change in menswear is often referred to as the “peacock revolution.” Clothing from later in the decade explored a romantic nostalgia that renewed interest in body-conscious silhouettes for women. These styles evolved into the glamorously seductive fashions of the 1970s, epitomized by designers such as Halston.

By the 1980s, attitudes toward the display of a woman’s body had shifted dramatically. Female sexuality was increasingly considered a sign of empowerment. Exceptionally body-conscious styles emphasized a woman’s sensuality and personal pleasure in displaying her figure, while designers such as Jean Paul Gaultier and Vivienne Westwood took a new interest in the concept of underwear-as-outerwear. These ideas were furthered and refined in the highly body-conscious fashions of the 1990s, as designers such as Azzedine Alaïa created ensembles that were at once chic and revealing.

In the twenty-first century, the concept of seductive clothing is becoming more varied than ever. Because of fashion’s ability to provide mystery and charm, the clothed body is often regarded as sexier than nudity. Renewed interest in a romantic form of sexuality focuses on the use of soft fabrics and feminine silhouettes. However, trends such as underwear-as-outerwear continue to be explored, and the exposure of skin still plays an essential role in seductive fashion. These choices allow for multiple expressions of sensuality, ensuring that in an increasingly sexualized culture, we are free to articulate our desires through fashion in nearly any way we choose.

Colleen Hill, Curator



Vivienne Westwood, evening dress, silver and pink leather, silver metallic silk, white chiffon, 1988, England, museum purchase.



Costume National Homme (Ennio Capasa), man’s suit, black cotton, blue/black polyester, 2004, Italy, gift of Costume National.



Šárka Šišková, “Goddess” evening dress, light pink silk chiffon, 2008, Czech Republic, gift of Šárka Šišková.