



NEWS

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From

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The Body: Fashion and Physique

The Museum at FIT

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The Museum at FIT presents *The Body: Fashion and Physique*, an exhibition that examines the complex history of the “ideal” body in fashion and considers the relationship between the fashion industry and body politics from the 18th century to the present. *The Body* features more than 50 objects from the museum’s permanent collection, many of which have never been on view. Within the exhibition, garments are supplemented with images from the popular press, fashion media, film, and other sources to highlight how the fashion industry has contributed to the marginalization of certain body types within our culture.

Fashion is inextricably linked to the physical form of the wearer. The cut of a garment draws the eye to zones of the body, simultaneously accentuating and concealing in order to achieve a desired silhouette. Elaborate undergarments, diet regimens, exercise routines, and plastic surgery have all been promoted as tools for attaining the ideal fashion figure. However, the fashionable body is a cultural construct that has shifted and changed throughout history to emphasize different shapes and proportions.



Martin Margiela, tunic,
linen, 1997, Belgium,
museum purchase.



Stays, silk brocade, 1750-
1760, England, museum
purchase.

The Body: Fashion and Physique opens with a dress by Martin Margiela that mimics the look of dress forms, which are used to fit garments as they are designed. By transforming the wearer into a dress form, Margiela highlighted the artificial nature of the idealized fashion physique. Also on view in the introductory gallery is a video featuring interviews with industry insiders discussing key themes explored in the exhibition. Among them are designer Christian Siriano, model Iskra Lawrence, and activist Sara Ziff, founder of the Model Alliance.

The exhibition's chronology begins with an example of stays (now referred to as corsets) from the 18th century. Stays were constructed to artificially narrow the wearer's waist and push up her bust. During the 19th century, the cultural obsession with a narrow waist intensified, and corsets became available to a wider demographic through mail order catalogs and department stores. Examples of corsets from throughout the 19th century are on view, including a maternity corset and a child's corset.

Skirt silhouettes changed a number of times during the 19th century. By the late 1850s, the diameter of a fashionable skirt had widened to an extraordinary degree, thanks to a hooped understructure called a crinoline. An example from circa 1865 shows how use of a crinoline created an illusion, making the waist appear narrow. Within a couple of decades, skirts began to slim at the sides and front, yet protrude considerably at the back. Equipped with caged understructures known as bustles, these skirts created a silhouette that suggested the wearer had a full and pert posterior, as seen in an ensemble from circa 1887.



Dress, silk taffeta, circa 1865, Scotland, gift of Mildred R. Mottahedeh.



Dress, silk crushed velvet, circa 1887, England, museum purchase.



Dress, silk chiffon, satin, lace, velvet, and fur, circa 1913, USA, museum purchase.

During the first decades of the 20th century, designers experimented with new silhouettes that did not need to be worn with a corset. A brown velvet dress by Liberty of London from 1910 is on view alongside an elaborate, fur-trimmed tea gown from the same period. Together, they illustrate the wide variety of uncorseted styles that emerged during this period.

By the 1920s, the fashionable ideal had shifted completely away from the corseted waist to favor a long, lean body with slim hips and a small bust. Two 1920s dresses are displayed side-by-side, along with a rubber girdle, a popular undergarment worn to slim the hips during this period—indeed, rubber girdles were advertised as a way to “melt” unwanted fat away from the region.

The interest in a slender body continued through the 1930s, but with a new focus on an athletic and classically proportioned physique highlighted by the bias-cut gowns that filled couture salons and Hollywood screens. A shimmering gold example from the House of Paquin demonstrates the body-skimming quality of these dresses. However, the Paquin gown (with a waist measurement of 31 inches) and a pair of evening pajamas from the same period (with a waist measurement of approximately 40 inches) demonstrate that designers were creating fashions for a variety of body shapes and sizes.



House of Paquin, dress, metallic silk, circa 1935, France, gift of Marilyn Ludtke.



Adrian, dress, silk, circa 1945, USA, gift of Maybell Machris.



Christian Dior, dress, silk satin, 1951, France, gift of Despina Messinesi.

The dominant silhouette of the 1940s was still slim in the hips, but included broad, padded shoulders. This look was popularized by the designer Adrian, who was based in Hollywood. An Adrian evening dress illustrates how strong shoulders were used to create the illusion of a narrow waist. However, by the end of the decade, Christian Dior had introduced his “New Look” silhouette, which removed the padding from the shoulders and exaggerated the narrowness of the wearer’s waist by reintroducing boned corsetry and a full skirt, reminiscent of the 19th-century crinoline. A Dior cocktail dress and a Charles James evening gown show how this sculptural treatment of the body evolved during the 1950s.

In reaction to the structured styles of the 1950s, a wave of young designers began making clothes that were much shorter and looser. While the new, 1960s styles “freed” the wearer from constricting boned undergarments and petticoats, they were cut to emphasize a lithe, youthful physique, which imposed a new expectation on the female body. Creations from designer Rudi Gernreich, including a mini dress with clear vinyl side panels, show the ways the fashionable body became far more exposed at this time.

The interest in “freeing” the body continued during the 1970s as clothing—and undergarments—became still less constricting. The ideal continued to be a thin, young body, but the girdle was rejected, giving rise to dieting as a modern way to control the fashionable physique.



Rudi Gernreich, dress, wool and plastic, 1968, USA, gift of Pamela and Belden Daniels.



Thierry Mugler, dress, velvet, 1981, France, museum purchase.



Jean Paul Gaultier, sweater, wool, 1991, France, gift of Richard Martin.

By the start of the 1980s, a new culture of physical fitness had begun to develop for both men and women, with aerobics at its core. A selection of menswear in the exhibition includes a Jean Paul Gaultier sweater with a padded torso that mimics the idealized muscular body that became fashionable during the late 20th century. Also during the 1980s, the strong-shouldered proportions of the 1940s returned, along with a tight, structured silhouette that emphasized a fit body. Designs by Thierry Mugler and Donna Karan illustrate the different ways these proportions were interpreted.

The toned body of the 1980s gave way to a waifish ideal during the 1990s. Concerns about obesity have been on the rise since the 1980s, which has likely influenced body ideals, making the extreme opposite more desirable. Calvin Klein pioneered the waifish trend with provocative ads and slinky slip dresses. Klein’s aesthetic was dubbed “heroin chic” for the gaunt appearance of his models. Examples of both his ads and garments are on view.

At the start of the 21st century, the waifish physique continued to dominate much of the fashion industry, but a renewed interest in prominent buttocks began to emerge as well, which some scholars have connected to the globalization of the fashion industry and the influence of different ideals of beauty from around the world. A Roberto Cavalli ensemble from 2002 includes a dramatic cut-out just above the posterior, drawing the eye to this particular zone of the body.



Chromat, ensemble, spandex and plastic boning, spring 2015, USA, museum purchase.



Christian Siriano, custom dress for actress Leslie Jones, faille crepe, 2016, USA, gift of Christian Siriano.

The rise of the internet and social media, including personal style blogs and platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, have changed the way people consume and engage with fashion and opened up the industry to an ever-widening cross section of people. Certain brands have embraced this diverse view of the fashionable body. Becca McCharen-Tran is one such designer. The runway presentations for her label Chromat are some of the most diverse in the industry with models from across races, sizes, and gender identities, including some who wear prosthetics. A look from the Chromat spring 2015 collection plays on historical undergarments, demonstrating McCharen-Tran's interest in the ergonomic, mobile body of all shapes. Likewise, designer Christian Siriano includes plus-size models on his runway, produces his eponymous line up to size 26, and outfits celebrities of all sizes, including actress Leslie Jones. Jones took to Twitter in the summer of 2016 to expose the fact that no fashion label was willing to dress her for an upcoming premiere. Siriano responded, saying he would be proud to dress her, and he designed a glamorous red dress that is featured in the exhibition.

The Body: Fashion and Physique is organized by Emma McClendon, associate curator of costume. It is on view from December 5, 2017 to May 5, 2018.

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 projects 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 and a strong grounding in theory with 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.

The Body: Fashion and Physique is supported by the Couture Council.

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