



NEWS

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Ballerina: Fashion's Modern Muse

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The Museum at FIT

The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (MFIT) presents *Ballerina: Fashion's Modern Muse*, the first large-scale exhibition to illustrate the profound and enduring influences of classical ballet and its most celebrated practitioners—ballerinas—on modern high fashion.



Christian Dior gown, 1947,
photography by Louise Dahl-Wolfe,
The Museum at FIT

Although ballet is a centuries-old art form that consistently reflected and absorbed prevailing fashions, it was not until the interwar years of the twentieth century that this dance form took its place in the Western pantheon of modern high culture and began to influence many areas of creativity, including fashion. At the same time, the ballerina, the art form's most celebrated practitioner, blossomed into a revered figure of beauty and glamour, and her signature costume—the corseted tutu—inspired many of fashion's leading designers for the first time.

Organized by Patricia Mears, deputy director of MFIT, *Ballerina: Fashion's Modern Muse* presents objects that reflect this phenomenon—from tutu-inspired haute couture gowns to American ready-to-wear

designs based on leotards and other ballet practice clothing—all interspersed with a dazzling selection of costumes. Dating mainly from the 1930s to the early 1980s, the approximately 90 objects were selected from MFIT’s permanent collection and from British institutions such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Museum of London, and the Fashion Museum Bath. Many of these objects will be on view in the United States for the first time. Additional lenders include the New York City Ballet, the Dance Theatre of Harlem, and the private holdings of fashion editor and collector Hamish Bowles.

Among the glamorous array of evening gowns in the exhibition are works by couturiers such as Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel, Christian Dior, Pierre Balmain, and Charles James. They are interspersed with a choice selection of tutus worn by ballerinas such as Anna Pavlova and Margot Fonteyn as well as innovative costumes designed by Christian Bérard for the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, Barbara Karinska for the New York City Ballet, and Geoffrey Holder for the Dance Theatre of Harlem. American ready-to-wear designs are also prominently featured. Knitted separates, activewear, and dresses by creators such as Claire McCardell, Vera Maxwell, Stephen Burrows, and Bonnie August of Danskin resembled ballet leotards and tights and reflected ballet’s widespread popularity in the mid-century.



Pierre Balmain, painted white tulle debutante gown with painted velvet “feathers,” spring 1960. Lent by Hamish Bowles ©The Museum at FIT



Charles James, black silk and synthetic net and satin evening dress, 1954. The Museum at FIT, Gift of Robert Wells in memory of Lisa Kirk. ©The Museum at FIT



Maggie Norris Couture, “Angelique” gown, 2012. Modeled by NYCB principal dancer Lauren Lovette. Photograph by Isabel Magowan

Few art forms have been as decidedly female as classical ballet. George Balanchine, the great choreographer and co-founder of the New York City Ballet, succinctly stated that “ballet is woman.” Today, most know that the dance’s supreme practitioner is the ballerina, a universally respected artist who embodies modern ideals of beauty and grace, seamlessly encased in a sleek and enviably toned physique. Her elevated position, however, is a relatively recent phenomenon. For centuries, most ballerinas were relegated to the margins of society and exploited throughout their careers. After the triumphant 1909 Parisian debut of the Ballets Russes, her circumstances begin to improve. This company, founded by impresario Sergei Diaghilev, and the eponymous troupe of fellow Russian émigré ballerina Anna Pavlova, reinvigorated classical dance in the West and ignited the widespread and profound craze for ballet, or “balletomania.”

The two Western countries that most enthusiastically embraced classical, Russian-style ballet were Great Britain and the United States. By the 1930s, intellectuals, socialites, artists, and the working classes flocked to performances. For the next half century, from the early 1930s to the 1980s, ballet became a highly influential art form. Home-grown ballerinas blossomed into aspirational figures and inspired many of fashion’s leading designers. From the interwar years through the mid-century, haute couture turned to classical ballets such as *Swan Lake* and *Sleeping Beauty* for stylistic and aesthetic inspiration. At the same

time, fashion magazines regularly featured images of ballerinas modeling the latest creations while leading women of style dressed in gowns inspired by classical tutus.



Barbara Karinska, “Emeralds” costume from *Jewels*, original designed in 1967. Lent by the New York City Ballet. ©The Museum at FIT



Barbara Karinska, “Diamonds” costume from *Jewels*, original designed in 1967. Lent by the New York City Ballet. ©The Museum at FIT

The primary way in which ballet inspired fashion was the appropriation of the ballerina’s costume by leading designers. The exhibition is divided into sections that clearly show how materials such as silk tulle and chiffon, silhouettes inspired by the bell-shaped tutu and fitted bodices, specific ballerina roles, and colors such as white, black, and ballet pink all found their way into mid-century fashion.

The exhibition opens with a small selection of footwear, including the flat-heeled “ballerina” slipper, a shoe style worn by millions today. This novel appropriation first appeared in New York during World War II, when stringent wartime regulations made acquiring new shoes difficult. Designer Claire McCardell, unable to procure shoes for a fashion presentation in 1942, paired her designs with real ballet slippers (which were not restricted) by the dancewear company Capezio.



Claire McCardell swimsuit and ballet flats by Capezio, 1950, photograph by John Rawlings. The Museum at FIT

Another featured shoe style is the fetishistic, high-heeled version of the ballerina’s pointe (or toe) shoe. Examples include Christian Louboutin’s “Fetish Ballerine,” Noritaka Tatehana’s extreme version originally designed for Lady Gaga, and couturier Victor de Souza’s fetish pointe shoes paired with his tutu-inspired tulle gown.



Noritaka Tatehana, pink leather ballerina pointe-style shoes, 2012. The Museum at FIT. ©The Museum at FIT



Christian Louboutin, black patent leather “Fetish Ballerine” shoes, 2014. The Museum at FIT, Gift of Christian Louboutin. ©The Museum at FIT



Victor de Souza, black ballerina dress and shoes, 2016. Lent by Victor de Souza. Modeled by Lauren Lovette. Photograph by Isabel Magowan

The main gallery of the exhibition features a costume from the 1919 production of *Les Sylphides*, which was worn by the Russian ballerina Lydia Lopokova. Gowns dating from the 1930s by Norman Hartnell, the 1950s by Pierre Balmain, and the 1980s by Christian Lacroix all reflect the ballerina’s aesthetic.



Norman Hartnell, ivory silk tulle gown embroidered with metal sequins, 1939. Lent by Beverley Birks. ©The Museum at FIT



Pierre Balmain, ivory tulle evening dress, circa 1955. The Museum at FIT, Gift of Mrs. John Thomas Trippe. ©The Museum at FIT



Christian Lacroix, black and pink silk tulle evening dress with silk satin ribbons, circa 1990. The Museum at FIT, Anonymous Gift. ©The Museum at FIT

A rare costume designed by artist Christian Bérard for the 1932 production of *Cotillon* and choreographed by George Balanchine—with its star-covered tulle skirt—may have inspired the abundance of romantic-style gowns designed by Coco Chanel during the 1930s. The couturiere was a patron of the Ballets Russes

and a friend of Bérard, and her tulle evening dress embroidered with sequined stars featured in the exhibition clearly echoes the ballerina's costume.



Tamara Toumanova wearing Christian Bérard's costume for *Cotillon*, choreographed by George Balanchine for the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, 1932.

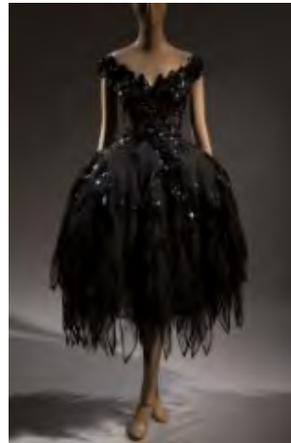


Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel, "Etoiles" navy blue tulle and sequin evening dress 1937. Lent by Beverley Birks. ©The Museum at FIT

Couturiers also made direct reference to ballet productions. One example is Charles James's 1937 "L'Sylphide" [sic] gown. Another garment named for a specific ballet character includes "Odile" (one of two roles danced by a single ballerina in *Swan Lake* and better known as the "Black Swan") by Hollywood costumier Howard Greer. An actual Odile costume worn by Margot Fonteyn is included in the section.



Charles James, "La Sylphide" silk organza and satin debutante dress, 1937. The Museum at FIT, Gift of Mrs. John Hammond. ©The Museum at FIT



Howard Greer, "Odile" black silk tulle and sequin evening dress, circa 1951. Lent by Beverley Birks. ©The Museum at FIT

Other "ballerina-as-bird" roles included in the exhibition are the *Firebird*; Odette, the white swan in *Swan Lake*; and the *Dying Swan*. Feather-laden couture creations by Balmain and Chanel, dating from the 1920s to the 1950s, are positioned next to the Dance Theatre of Harlem's brilliant *Firebird* ensemble designed by Geoffrey Holder and the circa 1920 "Dying Swan" costume worn by the legendary ballerina Anna Pavlova, on loan from the Museum of London.



Pierre Balmain, pink and off-white evening dress with coq feathers, 1949. The Museum at FIT, Gift of Barbara Louis. ©The Museum at FIT



Anna Pavlova, costumed as “The Dying Swan,” from *Swan Lake*, 1905. Photograph by Herman Mishkin. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library Digital Collections.

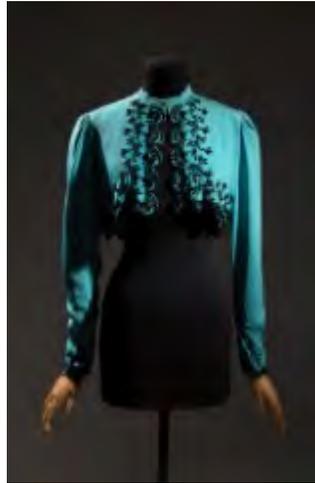
Color is another theme in the exhibition. Along with white, no color is as closely associated with ballet as pink. Nearly all knitted tights and silk satin pointe shoes were made in either a warm “flesh” pink or a cool “ballet pink,” and designers on both sides of the Atlantic have long been appropriating these hues for their feminine dresses and gowns. Alongside a small selection of pink garments and accessories are bronze and brown pointe shoes made by the British company Freed that illustrate ballet’s slowly increasing diversity.



Tina Leser, pink rayon evening dress, circa 1950. Lent by Beverley Birks. ©The Museum at FIT

Ballets such as *The Sleeping Beauty* helped popularize two trendy fashion colors: bluebird blue and lilac. The vibrant blue costume worn by the Bluebird likely inspired Elsa Schiaparelli’s second signature color, “Sleeping Blue” (after her famous “Shocking Pink”). In 1940, she debuted her “Sleeping” perfume and the accompanying collection was filled with blue garments, such as the boleros on view. Pale purple was the signature hue of the *Sleeping Beauty*’s savior, the Lilac Fairy. After World War I, pale purple hues were no longer the color of half mourning as they had been during the Victorian era. Lilac became a

popular color for springtime tea and cocktail dresses. Designers embraced and fashion magazines promoted the youthful spirit of lilac from the 1930s to the 1950s.



Elsa Schiaparelli, “Sleeping blue” wool, beaded bolero jacket, spring 1940. Lent by Hamish Bowles. ©The Museum at FIT

Another important theme in the exhibition is the ballerina as “woman of style.” Major stars such as Margot Fonteyn popularized the idea that ballerinas were mirrors of fashion. Wearing high fashion, in turn, elevated the social standing of star ballerinas. The exhibition includes nearly one dozen garments from Dame Margot’s enviable wardrobe, ranging from severe but beautifully cut day suits and coats to lavishly embroidered evening dresses. Although her dancing was a stellar example of the restrained British style, Fonteyn loved Parisian haute couture and became a devoted Christian Dior client soon after his debut collection in 1947.



Christian Dior, black wool “Daisy” suit worn by Margot Fonteyn, spring/summer 1947. Lent by Fashion Museum Bath. Photograph by William Palmer



Christian Dior, black wool “Goemon” coat worn by Margot Fonteyn, fall/winter 1947. Lent by Fashion Museum Bath. Photograph by William Palmer



Christian Dior, off-white silk satin “Marigny” evening dress worn by Margot Fonteyn, fall/winter 1949. Lent by Fashion Museum Bath. Photograph by William Palmer

Fonteyn's career was reinvigorated after the 1961 defection of Soviet star Rudolph Nureyev; it led to their partnership, one of the greatest in ballet history. They soon became the rock stars of the dance world and, together, donned the latest youthful looks. Several examples of Fonteyn's elegant daywear and flamboyant evening attire designed by Yves Saint Laurent are on view.



Yves Saint Laurent, sequined silk gauze mini-dress worn by Margot Fonteyn, 1966. Lent by Fashion Museum Bath. Photograph by William Palmer



Yves Saint Laurent, ostrich feather ensemble worn by Margot Fonteyn, 1965. Lent by Fashion Museum Bath. Photograph by William Palmer



Yves Saint Laurent, wool jersey, "Mondrian" dress worn by Margot Fonteyn, 1965. Lent by Fashion Museum Bath. Photograph by William Palmer

Fonteyn was not the only ballerina who loved Dior. Fellow British star Dame Alicia Markova; American dancer, choreographer, and company director Ruth Page; and prima ballerina of the New York City Ballet Maria Tallchief also wore Dior.

Fashions worn by ballerinas who rose to prominence during the 1970s are also included. A Lanvin gown by Alber Elbaz, worn by Carole Divet of the New York City Ballet stands alongside dresses worn by Debra Austin and Virginia Johnson. Austin, a pioneering ballerina, was the first African American woman asked by George Balanchine to dance with the New York City Ballet. In 1982, she became a principal dancer with the Pennsylvania Ballet, the first African American ballerina to attain that rank outside of Dance Theatre of Harlem. Johnson was a founding member of the Dance Theatre of Harlem and, for the next 28 years, reigned as the company's prima ballerina before becoming the director of DTH. Regal, tall, and as beautiful as a fashion model, Johnson wore her Halston gowns on view with aplomb.

The work of mid-century ballet costumiers also had an impact on fashion. Russian émigré Barbara Karinska was arguably the greatest among them. She constructed ballet costumes for European artist/designers such as Christian Bérard and Cecil Beaton and worked as a couturiere before forming her legendary collaboration with fellow émigré, choreographer George Balanchine. During her tenure at the New York City Ballet, her innovations included tutus made with different-colored layers of tulle that influenced couturiers such as Charles James.



Barbara Karinska, black lace and peach silk organza evening dress, 1941. The Museum at FIT, Gift of Irene Averbrook Weissman. ©The Museum at FIT



Barbara Karinska, *La Valse* costume, gray satin bodice with rhinestones, gray, pink, red tulle skirt. Lent by the New York City Ballet. ©The Museum at FIT

Succeeding Karinska at NYCB is Marc Happel. Best known for collaborating with leading fashion designers who create costumes for newly commissioned ballets featured at NYCB's annual fall fashion gala, Happel is also a creator in his own right. The exhibition features his redesigned tutu for the company's signature work, *Symphony in C*. Alongside the costume are two gowns that inspired it: a 1950 gown by Cristóbal Balenciaga (which resembles the 1946 *Sleeping Beauty* costume worn by Margot Fonteyn that is also in the exhibition) and an iridescent sequined Dior gown worn by Dame Margot Fonteyn.



Mark Happel, *Symphony in C* costume, white silk satin, synthetic net, Swarovski crystals, 2012. Lent by the New York City Ballet. ©The Museum at FIT



Cristóbal Balenciaga for Hattie Carnegie, pink silk tulle and satin evening dress with silver metal embroidery, 1950. Lent by Beverley Birks. ©The Museum at FIT



Oliver Messel, Margot Fonteyn's "Princess Aurora" costume from *The Sleeping Beauty*, 1960s, original designed in 1946. Lent by Victoria and Albert Museum, London. ©Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Christian Dior, “Debussy” sequined evening gown worn by Margot Fonteyn, spring/summer 1950. Lent by Fashion Museum Bath. Photograph by William Palmer

The great choreographer George Balanchine spearheaded the trend of ballets performed in leotards and tights instead of traditional elaborate costumes. This choice not only highlighted ballerinas’ extended leg line, it also mirrored the activewear worn with increasing frequency throughout the United States.



Allegra Kent and Arthur Mitchell in *Agon*, choreographed by George Balanchine, Photograph by Martha Swope ©Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

At the same time, separates made for the increasingly active and mobile American woman took their cues from both ballet and modern dance. Dancers’ knitted sweaters and legwarmers, leotards, and wrap dance skirts found their way into designs by Claire McCardell, Tina Leser, and ballet dancers–turned–designers Valentina Schlee and Vera Maxwell. McCardell made rompers, swimsuits, and separates that resembled leotards while all of these female creators made day and evening dresses that were lean and body enhancing with none of the corsetry used in haute couture.



Claire McCardell, black nylon knit bathing suit, 1948. The Museum at FIT, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Adrian McCardell. ©The Museum at FIT



Vera Maxwell, gray and black wool knit top and pants set, circa 1959. The Museum at FIT, Gift of Vera Maxwell. ©The Museum at FIT

The intersection between fashion and streamlined dancewear reached its apogee in New York City during the 1970s. Despite rising crime rates, electrical blackouts, and near bankruptcy, the Big Apple was a cultural fantasyland where both fashion and dance thrived. The creator who best expressed this phenomenon was Bonnie August, design director of Danskin, Inc., then the largest dancewear manufacturer in America. Her easily wearable, day-to-evening leotards, leggings, and wrap skirts, as well as the company's catchy slogan—"Danskin, not just for dancing"—perfectly described the dresses and separates that moved seamlessly from the ballet studio to the street.



Danskin Advertisement, 1982

Another reason for this creative boom was increased diversity in both ballet and fashion. Black ballerinas garnered rave reviews on stages around the world while African American models graced the pages and runways of leading fashion magazines and haute couture shows. Young black designers made inroads too. Stephen Burrows and Scott Barrie were turning out jersey dresses and separates that took their cues from ballerinas and disco queens alike.

Public Programs

The exhibition will include a selection of public programs including a daylong symposium featuring dance historians and experts such as Laura Jacobs, Joel Lobenthal, Jane Pritchard, and Lynn Garafola. It will take place on March 6, 2020, during Women's History Month.

While the exhibition presents the international impact of ballet on fashion, it also addresses the lack of diversity in both creative fields. In order to expand knowledge about pioneering ballerinas who broke barriers, MFIT will present a special public program on the topic. A panel featuring the first generation of African American ballerinas who rose to national and international stardom will feature Virginia Johnson and Lydia Abarca of Dance Theatre of Harlem, Aesha Ash of the New York City Ballet, and Debra Austin, who danced with the New York City Ballet before becoming a principal dancer at the Pennsylvania Ballet, one of America's leading dance companies, in 1982. This panel discussion will take place on February 27, 2020, during Black History Month.

Book

The exhibition is accompanied by a lavishly illustrated book, published by Vendome Press. In addition to the main essays written by Patricia Mears, deputy director of MFIT, the publication also includes contributions by leading dance and fashion specialists. They include dance critic and author Laura Jacobs, dance curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum Jane Pritchard, dance critic and fashion writer Joel Lobenthal, and manager and fashion curator of the Fashion Museum Bath Rosemary Harden.

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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. Like other fashion museums, such as the Musée de la Mode, the Mode Museum, and the Museo de la Moda, The Museum at FIT collects, conserves, documents, exhibits, and interprets fashion. The museum's mission is to advance knowledge of fashion through exhibitions, publications, and public programs. 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 75 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.