Ballerina: Fashion’s Modern Muse
February 11–April 18, 2020
Curated by Patricia Mears
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Ballerina: Fashion’s Modern Muse has been made possible thanks to the generosity of the Couture Council of The Museum at FIT and the New York State Council on the Arts, with the support of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo and the New York State Legislature. Additional support was provided by the Society of Antiquaries of London and The Gainsborough Bath Spa.

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Few art forms have been as decidedly female as classical ballet. As George Balanchine, the legendary choreographer succinctly stated: “Ballet is woman.” Even those who have little knowledge of this dance form recognize that its supreme practitioner, the ballerina, is a highly trained and accomplished artist who embodies modern ideals of beauty and grace, seamlessly encased in a sleek and enviable toned physique. Her elevated position, however, is a relatively recent phenomenon. For centuries, ballerinas, like other performing artists, were relegated to the margins of society and exploited throughout their careers. After the successful 1909 Parisian debut of the Ballets Russes, however, her circumstances begin to improve. That company, founded by impresario Sergei Diaghilev, as well as the eponymous troupe led by a fellow Russian émigré, ballerina Anna Pavlova, reinvigorated classical dance in the West and ignited a widespread and enduring craze for ballet, or “balletomania.”

So profound was ballet’s impact that itasserted influence on many fields of creativity, one of the most important being fashion. At the same time, the ballerina blossomed into a revered and aspirational figure of beauty and glamour, and her signature costume—the corseted tutu—would inspire many of fashion’s leading designers. Beginning in the 1930s and lasting through the 1970s, ballerinas were frequently featured in leading high fashion magazines. Not only were their performances covered, a number of the most beautiful ballerinas regularly modeled the latest modes. Many of the costume objects in Ballerina: Fashion’s Modern Muse were designed and made in Paris. However, the popularization of classical ballet throughout the twentieth century owes much to the British and Americans. Imperial Russian classical ballet would not only survive, it went on to become the most popular performing arts in the United Kingdom and the United States from the early 1930s to the middle of the century. During that golden age, haute couture looked to classical ballets such as Giselle, Swan Lake, and Sleeping Beauty, while sportswear designers took their cues from contemporary ballets performed in streamlined practice wear.

The more than 90 objects on view include: a dazzling array of tutu-inspired couture gowns with boned bodices and voluminous skirts; American ready-to-wear separates based on leotards and tights and leg warmers; and footwear ranging from “ballerina” flat slippers to fetishistic “pointe”-style high heels. Ballet-inspired materials became increasingly important: the silk netting known as tulle became one of the standard materials used to craft evening gowns, while knits were the preferred material for sportswear. Colors emblematic of ballerinas, such as her “ballet pink” tights and pointe shoes, as well as hues popularized by specific ballets such as “Sleeping” blue and lilac in Sleeping Beauty, also found their way into the collections of ballerina costumes of couture designers throughout the mid-century. To elucidate fashion’s appropriations of balletic elements inspires interpersed with selection of ballet costumes worn by legendary ballerinas such as Anna Pavlova and Margot Fonteyn, stars of the New York City Ballet Dance Theatre of Harlem.

The exhibition also presents the idea of the ballerina as a “worn style.” Over one dozen ensembles designed and made in Paris by leading couturiers such as Elsa Schiaparelli, YSL, and Halston and worn by star ballerinas Margot Fonteyn, Alicia Markova, Maria Tallchief, and Virginia Talley illustrate the important role fashion played in the ballerina’s career. Ballet’s sway on fashion slowly diminished by the onset of the 1980s. Its great, mid-century influence waned with the rise of youth culture and the simultaneous decline of high fashion. Even so, ballerinas were from the shifting cultural winds that elevated their art, and they retained the emancipated position to them by earlier generations of dancers. Revering the ballerina, fashion’s modern muse, remains an ethos we embrace to this day.