



## NEWS

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### *Eleanor Lambert: Empress of Seventh Avenue*

March 3–28, 2020

**The Museum at FIT**



Eleanor Lambert at her desk in New York City, 1963. ©Associated Press

The Fashion Institute of Technology's School of Graduate Studies and The Museum at FIT (MFIT) presents *Eleanor Lambert: Empress of Seventh Avenue*, on view March 3–28, 2020, the first exhibition to explore the life of Eleanor Lambert (1903–2003) and her tireless advocacy for American fashion designers and the New York fashion industry. Lambert is widely recognized as the original fashion publicist and, over the span of her 75-year career, she worked passionately to legitimize New York and the United States as international fashion centers.

Curated by the students of FIT's Fashion and Textile Studies: History, Theory, Museum Practice Master of Arts program, the exhibition features items from the collection of MFIT and archival materials from Gladys Marcus Library's Special Collections and College Archives (SPARC) at FIT. SPARC serves as the repository for Eleanor Lambert's papers.

*Eleanor Lambert: Empress of Seventh Avenue* begins with an archival film of Lambert greeting attendees at New York Press Week in 1947, an event she established to help promote American fashion designers and their collections during World War II. Lambert and her many contributions

to the American fashion industry are highlighted, including the establishment of the International Best-Dressed List (1940), the founding of the Coty American Fashion Critics' Award (1942), the formation of the New York Dress Institute's Couture Group (1953), and the establishment of the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) in 1962.

A photograph of Lambert at work greets visitors, along with a Bill Blass-designed coat from her personal wardrobe, donated to MFIT. "To tell you the truth," said Blass, "I really don't know what she does, but it works." Although the job of a fashion publicist was little understood during the mid-20th century, this exhibition explores the intricacies of Lambert's promotional work and uncovers the impact she made as the "Empress of Seventh Avenue," which helped to establish New York as an international fashion capital.



Bill Blass, coat, circa 1970.  
Gift of Eleanor Lambert.  
© The Museum at FIT.



Stephen Burrows, jacket, fall 1970. Gift of Stephen Burrows.  
© The Museum at FIT.

The exhibition includes five sections. The first, "Organizations," features the initiatives that Lambert began, including the CFDA and the Coty Awards. The Coty Awards were esteemed as Seventh Avenue's highest honor for decades, and are the precursor to today's CFDA awards. A copy of the original announcement of the formation of the CFDA is displayed, along with an original program from the first Coty Awards ceremony.

The second section, "Fashion Meets Politics," explores Lambert's connection and involvement with prominent political figures, including a number of presidents and first ladies. When Jacqueline Kennedy, the soon-to-be first lady, was criticized in *Women's Wear Daily* for buying French fashions, she turned to Lambert for help managing the negative press. Lambert proposed her client Oleg Cassini, an American designer, dress Kennedy. On display is the *Women's Wear Daily* article, Kennedy's response letter, and a letter from Lambert complimenting Kennedy on her appointment of Cassini as her "secretary of style."

The third section, “Creative Society,” focuses on Lambert’s collaboration with individuals beyond the fashion landscape. Before her career as a fashion publicist, Lambert worked to promote museums and artists, including Salvador Dalí. In 1949, after Lambert’s move into the fashion realm, she facilitated Dalí’s commission to design a campaign for the International Silk Congress, a promotional organization for the silk industry. Dalí’s design was featured on the cover of *American Fabrics* magazine in 1950, and this project influenced his later work in fashion. The magazine is on display beside a 1951 Dalí design for a tie, both showing a similar butterfly motif. These objects illustrate how Lambert connected and influenced her two worlds: fashion and art.

The “Black Fashion Support” section highlights Lambert’s support for black fashion models, designers, and publications. A jacket designed by client and FIT alumnus Stephen Burrows and press coverage on the “Battle of Versailles” are featured. Lambert organized this iconic fashion show fundraiser in France in 1973, and it served as an important event to bring international recognition to both black models and American ready-to-wear designers, including Burrows.

The final section, “Eleanor Lambert’s Vision of Seventh Avenue,” displays Lambert’s clients’ work and illustrates how they created a range of styles, all recognized today as American fashion. This section also highlights Lambert’s commitment to her clients as their publicist. Her actions helped glorify the American fashion designer who, prior to the mid-20th century, had gone largely unrecognized in favor of manufacturers and department stores.



Traina-Norell, evening gown, circa 1947. Gift of Beatrice Renfield. © The Museum at FIT.



Oscar de la Renta, caftan, 1967. Gift of Diana Vreeland. © The Museum at FIT.



Halston, evening gown, 1972. Gift of Lauren Bacall. © The Museum at FIT.

On display is a 1947 Traina-Norell evening gown designed by Norman Norell, one of Lambert’s most esteemed clients. When establishing Traina-Norell, Anthony Traina, Norell’s business partner, offered the designer more money in exchange for his name not appearing on

the garment label. Lambert advised Norell to instead opt for name recognition even though it resulted in a lower salary. In 1943, Norell, won the very first Coty Award for Womenswear, known colloquially as a “Winnie.” During his 42-year career, Norell won more “Winnies” than any other designer.

Also on display is a Hattie Carnegie skirt suit, circa 1949. Carnegie’s suits were admired for their feminine, hourglass-shaped silhouettes. Carnegie, Lambert’s friend as well as her client, was considered a pioneer in the New York industry for labeling her clothing with her own name and for her early adoption of “lifestyle” branding by providing a range of products to her customers. Carnegie’s ethos aligned with Lambert’s desire for increased recognition for American fashion designers.

Lambert’s commitment to promoting American fashion extended beyond her own clients. Lambert was one of the first people to recognize Oscar de la Renta’s talent, so much so that she promoted his work for free. Touched by her early support, de la Renta sent her “back pay” checks for years in thanks, even after he established an in-house promotional team. Oscar de la Renta’s caftan from 1967 is included in the exhibition.

Lambert’s career spanned seven-and-a-half decades and she witnessed dramatic changes in American fashion. A blue sequined dress by client Halston represents the 1970s as a period in which designers rebelled against the rigid fashion system. The dress is similar to designs that Halston showed at his fashion show at the Coty Awards. The show, considered shocking in 1972, was an onstage “happening,” inspired by performance art, and included a range of unorthodox displays, such as models cooking eggs and bacon. Although Diana Vreeland proclaimed that the smell was “the most optimistic fragrance in the world!” other members of the fashion establishment were outraged. Despite the controversy, Lambert defended and continued to support Halston.

Eleanor Lambert was a pioneer in the advocacy of both American fashion and the American fashion designer. Her tireless efforts laid the groundwork for the recognition of New York as an international fashion capital. Her impact is still felt in the fashion industry as well as the culture at large. Today, designers are elevated to celebrity status and honored annually at the CFDA Awards. The biannual New York Press Week is now known as New York Fashion Week, and the Best-Dressed List, established in the United States by Lambert in 1940, continues today overseen by fashion journalist Amy Fine Collins, who was gifted the stewardship of the list by Lambert herself. These and other innovations are a testament to Eleanor Lambert’s enduring legacy.

#### Public programs and tours:

In addition to the exhibition, as part of MFIT’s Fashion Culture programming:

“In Conversation: Amy Fine Collins” will be a discussion with the author on her new book, *The International Best-Dressed List: The Official Story*, as well as the societal implications of best-dressed lists will be held on Wednesday, March 4 at 6 pm at the Katie Murphy Amphitheatre.

Additionally, there will be two public, curator-led tours:

- Monday, March 16, 6 pm
- Wednesday, March 25, 11 am

### **Fashion and Textile Studies: History, Theory, Museum Practice Master of Arts Program**

In their second year of study, students in the Fashion and Textile Studies: History, Theory, Museum Practice Master of Arts program in FIT’s School of Graduate Studies work in collaboration with The Museum at FIT to create and install an exhibition. This yearlong course prepares students to enter the workforce as curators, conservators, registrars, or museum educators. The class handles every aspect of the exhibition process from concept to completion, including research, design, publications, and related events. The students draft proposal ideas in the spring of the previous year, and the museum selects the most viable topic. In-depth research begins in the summer, and the class formally begins to review and refine their exhibition thesis collectively in the fall. They are then divided into groups with specific roles and responsibilities.

The editorial team consists of writers, editors, and researchers. They drive the final object selection and generate the bulk of the written materials for the exhibition. This group works closely with the design and education teams to ensure the narrative of the topic is properly represented.

The design team is responsible for the exhibition and graphic design as well as serving as the conservation consultants. Their goal is to create a visitor experience that reinforces the curatorial focus, while ensuring that the objects are shown in a manner that addresses consideration of appropriate conditions. They work closely with the other teams to create a unified vision for the exhibition.

The public team crafts the public message for the exhibition through educational programs, publications, and press coverage. This group also acts as the class support team, assisting with research, image rights, and budgeting. They work closely with the curators to ensure that the public has a richer experience and understanding of the exhibition topic.

This process is a unique experience and a key feature of the Fashion and Textiles Studies graduate program at FIT.

The School of Graduate Studies at FIT provides advanced professional education in seven distinctive areas, promoting excellence in the post-baccalaureate study of fashion, business, art, and design. The school offers programs leading to the MA, MFA, and MPS degrees, and is dedicated to advancing research in the creative industries and fostering innovative collaborations that link students and faculty with industry and professional partners worldwide.

### **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. 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](http://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](http://fitnyc.edu).

Museum hours: Tuesday–Friday, noon–8 pm; Saturday, 10 am–5 pm. Closed Sunday, Monday, and legal holidays. Admission is free.

### **About FIT**

In September 1944, FIT opened its doors to 100 students. It was a radical experiment to create the first college devoted to the apparel industry, and founders Max Meyer and Dr. Mortimer C. Ritter advocated tirelessly for this essential education. Now, 75 years later, as the creative industries have evolved, so too has FIT. An educational authority for the new creative economy, the college has expanded exponentially in size and scope, and is committed to research and innovation, drawing on the insight and influence of faculty, students, alumni, and industry partners to solve the world's most pressing challenges. FIT nurtures unconventional minds and independent thinkers eager to help transform the creative industries. A pioneering institution from the start, FIT builds on its rich history while embarking on a future of visionary leadership and uncommon achievement.

A part of the State University of New York, FIT has been a leader in career education in art, design, business, and technology throughout its history. Providing its 9,000 students with an uncommon blend of hands-on, practical experience, theory, and a firm grounding in the liberal arts, the college offers a wide range of affordable programs that foster innovation and collaboration. Its distinctive curriculum is geared to today's rapidly growing creative economy, including fields such as computer animation, toy design, production management, film and media, and cosmetics and fragrance marketing. Internationally renowned, FIT draws on its New York City location to provide a vibrant, creative community in which to learn. The college offers nearly 50 majors and grants AAS, BFA, BS, MA, MFA, and MPS degrees, preparing students for professional success and leadership in the new creative economy. Among notable alumni in fashion are Calvin Klein, Michael Kors, Reem Acra, Brian Atwood, Dennis Basso, Francisco

Costa, Norma Kamali, Nanette Lepore, Bibhu Mohapatra, Ralph Rucci, John Bartlett, Peter Do, and Michelle Smith. Other prominent graduates include Leslie Blodgett, creator of bareMinerals; international restaurant designer Tony Chi; and Nina Garcia, editor in chief, *Elle*.