The Museum at FIT

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Admission is free.
fitnyc.edu/museum
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The Body: Fashion and Physique
December 5, 2017–May 5, 2018
Curated by Emma McClendon

exhibitions.fitnyc.edu/the-body
#FashionandPhysique
#MuseumatFIT

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All photographs MFIT unless otherwise indicated.

Cover: Chromat, ensemble, spandex and plastic boning, spring 2015, USA.
The fashion industry has historically treated the body (particularly the female body) as malleable, something that can be molded and changed with the cut of a garment, sculpting underwear, diet, exercise, and even plastic surgery, depending on the period. Before the twentieth century, the ideal female figure was a mature, curvaceous body, punctuated by a narrow waist. To emphasize the narrowness of their waists, women wore boned undergarments called corsets, or stays.

During the eighteenth century, stays were largely reserved for women and girls of the elite. Technological innovations during the nineteenth century made corsets available to a much wider demographic of women. By the end of the century, women of all classes were expected to wear them, including pregnant women.

Skirt silhouettes changed a number of times during the nineteenth century to emphasize particular proportions. By the late 1850s, a hooped understructure called a crinoline allowed the diameter of a fashionable skirt to widen to an extraordinary degree creating an illusion of a narrow waist. During the 1870s, skirts became slim at the sides and front, yet protruded considerably at the back. Equipped with understructures known as “bustles,” they suggested the wearer had a full posterior. Skirt silhouettes changed a number of times throughout the first half of the twentieth century. By the late 1850s, a hooped understructure called a crinoline allowed the diameter of a fashionable skirt to widen to an extraordinary degree creating an illusion of a narrow waist. During the 1870s, skirts became slim at the sides and front, yet protruded considerably at the back. Equipped with understructures known as “bustles,” they suggested the wearer had a full posterior.

At the start of the twentieth century, the female body ideal began to shift from a soft, curvaceous figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thinner, younger physique — what Dr. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT, has described as the change “from an opulent figure to a thin waist. But the internet and social media have changed the way people engage with fashion. The industry has opened up to a growing cross section of people, and certain designers have embraced a diverse view, including Becca McCharen-Tran and Christian Siriano. On the runway, they use models from across races and sizes, including transgender models and some who wear prosthetics. They also produce their lines in a variety of sizes, rejecting “straight” and “plus” divisions. They are setting an example for the industry with the message that all bodies are beautiful and deserve to be included in fashion.

Emma McClendon, curator

Concerns about obesity have been on the rise since the 1980s, which has likely influenced body ideals, making the extreme opposite more desirable. Thus the toned body gave way to a waifish ideal during the 1990s. Teenage model Kate Moss (nicknamed “the waif”) pioneered the look in provocative ads that ignited a fashion photography aesthetic dubbed “heroin chic” for the gaunt appearances of the models.

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