

Oh, yes, my sexuality has been very important to my creativity.

Yves Saint Laurent

The Museum at FIT

Fashion Institute of Technology
Seventh Avenue at 27th Street
New York City 10001-5992
fitnyc.edu/museum

For more information, visit:
fitnyc.edu/museum.

Hours:
Tuesday–Friday, noon–8 pm
Saturday, 10 am–5 pm
Closed Sunday, Monday,
and legal holidays

Admission is free.

A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk was co-curated by Fred Dennis and Valerie Steele, with exhibition design by Joel Sanders and graphic design by Matthias Kern.

A multi-author book, **A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk**, published by Yale University Press, will accompany the exhibition. Edited by Valerie Steele, the book will feature essays by eminent fashion and gay history scholars Christopher Breward, Shaun Cole, Vicki Karaminas, Jonathan D. Katz, Peter McNeil, and Elizabeth Wilson. There will also be a free symposium (November 8-9, 2013) and a special website with video interviews, illustrations and excerpts from the publication, installation photographs, contact information for LGBTQ organizations, and other information useful to a global audience. To register for the symposium and for more information, see www.fitnyc.edu/museum.

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A Queer History of Fashion

From the Closet to the Catwalk



Alexander McQueen, dress, spring 2010, England

A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk is the first museum exhibition to explore in depth the significant contributions to fashion made by LGBTQ (lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-queer) individuals over the past 300 years. “This is about honoring the gay and lesbian designers of the past and present,” says exhibition co-curator Fred Dennis.

For many years, gays and lesbians were hidden from history. By acknowledging the historic influence of gay, lesbian, and bisexual designers, and by emphasizing the important role that fashion and style have played *within* the LGBTQ community, we see how central gay culture has been to the creation of modern fashion. This, in turn, transforms our entire understanding of fashion history.

From Christian Dior to Yves Saint Laurent to Alexander McQueen, the importance of gay men as fashion designers is undeniable in the twentieth-century. But scholars have demonstrated that, as early as the eighteenth-century, men who loved other men were pioneers in challenging sex and gender roles. Drawing on this research, the exhibition begins with the eighteenth-century, when cross-dressing “mollies,” foppish “macaronis,” and “men milliners” created controversy.

Oscar Wilde was a key figure in both the history of homosexuality and the history of style. Known for his influence on Aesthetic dress, Wilde was also identified with a dandyism of the senses, celebrating the “dangerous and delightful distinction of being different from others.” The history of oppression and consequent secrecy contributed to the development of a queer perspective on fashion, emphasizing both “otherness” and aestheticism.

Lesbian elegance also influenced fashion, as menswear looks became an important stylistic signifier by the late 19th century. The *garçonne* look of the 1920s brought lesbian style into high fashion. The bisexual actress Marlene Dietrich was notorious for transgressive cross-dressing, and her tuxedo would later inspire Yves Saint Laurent’s iconic *Le Smoking*.

By the 1930s, gay, lesbian, and bisexual designers played a significant role in fashion, although most were discrete, even “closeted,” since they faced discrimination, and even arrest. The sight of women in Christian Dior’s New Look gowns or Cristobal Balenciaga’s Velasquez dresses threw Coco Chanel into a homophobic rage. Franco Zeffirelli recalls her hissing at girls: “Look at them! Fools dressed by queens living out their fantasies.”



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- 1. Man’s three piece suit, 1790-1800, France.
- 2. Day dress, circa 1882, USA.
- 3. Tuxedo worn by Marlene Dietrich in Morocco, 1930, USA. Deutsche Kinemathek – Marlene Dietrich Collection, Berlin. Photo by Michael Lüder.

In reaction to societal homophobia, many gays and lesbians adopted a style best described as discrete and invisible. By the 1960s, however, a more openly gay look began to influence “Mod” menswear styles. Rudi Gernreich, a founding member of the pioneering gay liberation group, the Mattachine Society, advocated unisex styles, such as caftans.

In New York City, the Stonewall Riots that took place on June 28, 1969, marked the beginning of a more open movement. Drag queens were among the leading participants in the riots, and the first gay pride parades took place the next year. Gay vernacular styles changed after Stonewall—becoming increasingly “butch.” Lesbian style also evolved, moving from the “butch-femme” paradigm toward an androgynous, anti-fashion look, which was, in turn, followed by various diversified styles that often referenced subcultures like punk.

The AIDS crisis marks a turning point in the exhibition, as it did in reality. Many designers died of AIDS, including Perry Ellis, Halston, and Bill Robinson. But the LGBTQ community united in protest, as witnessed by activist T-shirts for ACT UP, Queer Nation, The Lesbian and Gay March on Washington DC, and the iconic “Read My Lips.”

The second half of the exhibition encompasses a range of fashions and styles from the 1980s to the present. Some fashions, such as Jean Paul Gaultier’s skirts for men, deliberately violated sex and gender taboos. Other high-fashion looks, by designers such as Gianni Versace, have drawn on queer subcultural styles, like leather and uniforms. But not all gay and lesbian designers have embraced transgressive and political styles. Many have a strongly idealizing aesthetic that focuses on the creation of beauty and, especially, beautiful things for women.

Emphasizing that gay rights are human rights, the exhibition concludes with a section on wedding fashions as the sartorial expression of marriage equality.

Valerie Steele
Director and Chief Curator
The Museum at FIT



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- 4. Charles James, *La Sirène* dress, circa 1940, USA.
- 5. Jean Paul Gaultier, cone-bra mini-dress, 1984, France.
- 6. John Bartlett, ensemble Fall/Winter, 2000-2001, USA. The Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute, 2004.146.a-f. Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image Source: Art Resource, NY.