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Ballerina: Fashion's Modern Muse

February 11–April 18, 2020

Curated by Patricia Mears

exhibitions.fitnyc.edu/ballerina

#ballerinaexhibition

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Cover: Christian Dior gown, 1947, photo: Louise Dahl-Wolfe, The Museum at FIT.
Inner flap: NYCB ballerina Lauren Lovette in Behnaz Sarafpour's evening dress, 2003. Photo: Isabel Magowan.



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BALLERINA

FASHION'S MODERN MUSE

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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 enviably 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



Left: Cristóbal Balenciaga for Hattie Carnegie evening dress, 1950. Lent by Beverley Birks. Right: Claire McCardell, black bathing suit, 1948. The Museum at FIT.

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 it asserted 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 couture 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 would go 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 for the first time 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 separates. Colors emblematic of ballerinas, such as her “ballet tights and pointe shoes, as we popularized by specific ballets as “Sleeping” blue and lilac from *Sleeping Beauty*, also found their way into the collections of couturiers and ready-to-wear designers during the mid-century. To elucidate the appropriations of balletic elements, garments are interspersed with a selection of ballet costumes worn by legendary ballerinas such as Anna Pavlova and Margot Fonteyn, stars of the New York City Ballet and the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

The exhibition also presents the idea of the ballerina as a “wonky style.” Over one dozen ensembles by Christian Dior, Yves Saint Laurent, and Halston and worn by stars such as Margot Fonteyn, Alicia Markova, Maria Tallchief, and Virginia Madsen illustrate the important role fashion played in the ballerina’s career.

Ballet’s sway on fashion began to slowly diminish by the onset of the 1980s. Its great, mid-century popularity waned with the rise of youth culture and the simultaneous decline of haute couture fashion. Even so, ballerinas benefited from the shifting cultural winds that elevated their art, and they lost the emancipated position to them by earlier generations of dancers. Revering the ballerina as fashion’s modern muse, remains an ethos we embrace to this day.



Top left: Elsa Schiaparelli, “Sleeping” blue gown, spring 1940. Lent by Hamish Bowles. Bottom left: Norman Hartnell evening dress, circa 1950. Lent by Beverley Birks. Right: Christian Dior “Dior” gown worn by Margot Fonteyn, spring 1950. Fashion Museum Bath. Photo: William F.