

# Old Masters of Fashion

Beautiful old clothes have a ghostly magic. No inlaid cabinet or jeweled cup can convey the thousand suggestions that a precious garment from another day continues to exude after its time is over. Only ritual vestments or woven lengths of cloth that bear no traces of an individual wearer escape the intense personality that lingers in the folds of an old dress. In these, the soul of the wearer seems to be present, though hardly more so than the souls of those who made it—the embroiderer, the seamstress, and the designer, whose combined work flattered and praised one woman in the endless language of wool, linen, and silk.

In earlier centuries, the woman herself often conceived the idea, chose the materials, and supervised the realization of the design or, if her means were modest, designed and made the dress herself. Homemade clothes can be moving objects, uncelebrated milestones in the history of applied self-imagery founded on a high ideal. In sharp contrast to such nameless artisans are the great designers who came into existence toward the end of the last century. Certain works of their unfettered imagination are significant phenomena in the history of modern design.

As clothes are accepted in museums, so exceptional is their appeal that they require special means of display and a different kind of public attention from that demanded by tapestries and ceramics. They are the cast-off personal fantasies of living organisms, and in some way they are still alive, uncannily infused with past vision and feeling. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York City, was a pioneer in establishing and developing its great Costume Institute, where the art of dress has been given the chance to demonstrate some of its aesthetic scope in the context of other artistic endeavor. Specially designed exhibition space and brilliant showmanship present garments as true vessels of imagination, provocative artifacts laden with a unique blend of material beauty, social meaning, and private importance. Behind the scenes, the thousands of undisplayed clothes are available to individual scholars and designers seeking a closer look, perhaps a privileged touch.

Last autumn, to commemorate its founding, in 1937, the institute mounted an exhibition of sixty-seven masterpieces in its collection. However they differ, a direction can be seen in the flow of taste across three centuries, a development in the art of cutting and fitting, certain leaps in the progress of sartorial imagination. Simplicity has been discovered more than once in fashion history.

◆ The earliest example in the show, an English wool dress dating from around 1695, is covered with delicately embroidered silver-gilt flowers, but its real beauty is in the completeness of its effect. Not so much tailored as folded, the dress is in two pieces, a bodice

*Detail of a presentation dress  
worn at the Court of St. James's  
before King George V in 1928,  
by Boué Sœurs of Paris.*



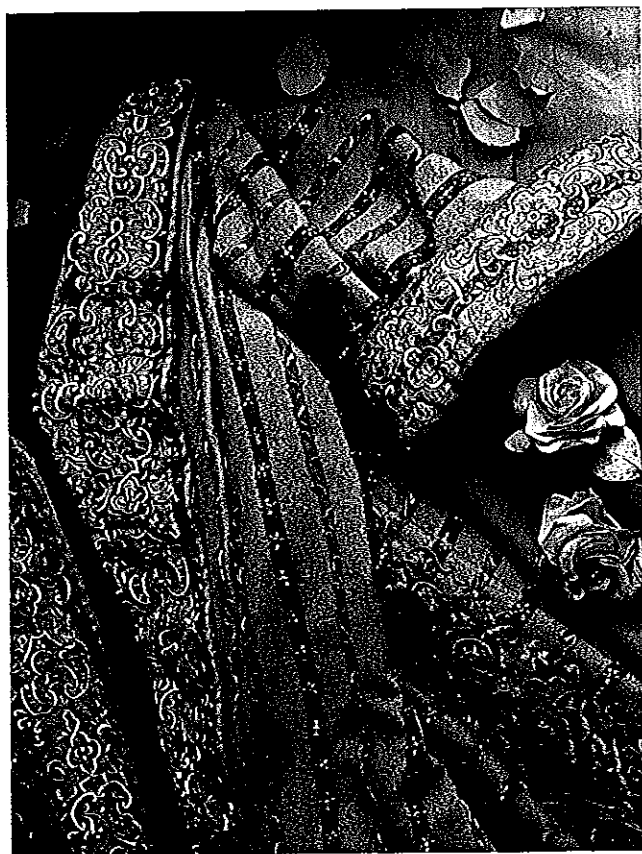
## The Met's new attitude toward costume

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*Connoisseur*

# The soul of the wearer is present.



with cuffed, pleated sleeves attached to an overskirt drawn back to expose a separate underskirt. The gray-brown serge, with its muted indigo stripes, is folded into pleats that emphasize the stripes, following them on the bodice and overskirt, going against them on the underskirt and sleeves. The silvery embroidery runs over it all, softening the dim stripes and pleats like fresh vines on a stone building. The dress is in near-perfect condition, unfaded and untarnished. The breathing Englishwoman who wore it nearly 300 years ago seems only steps away.

◆ A mideighteenth-century English court dress of blue silk trimmed in silver, also in two pieces, carries the same theme to extremes, with little clever cutting, either to fit the figure or make interesting shapes, but with an enormously wide skirt extended on either side over panniers. A blue-and-silver stomacher fills the front of the bodice. The air of elegance is carried by the broad expanse of glittering trim and the luster of the silk. The dress is both exquisite and primitive, awkward and rich, thoroughly embellished in every part. These two dresses lie in drawers in the institute's storeroom, wrapped like sleeping beauties until they are occasionally awakened for our pleasure.

◆ These are nameless gowns, despite their aristocrat-

ic origins. The same is true of some American cotton dresses from early in the nineteenth century. A handkerchief-thin tubular dress from about 1805, of white mull embroidered in white cotton, has a breathtaking economy of shape and texture. There is no lace, no silk or silver, no cut, no folds or pleats, and very minimal sleeves. But it has a train: this is not a nightgown but a formal dress.

◆ More romantic still, less simple but more delicious, is a full-skirted dress from about 1844, of fragile cotton printed with an all-over pattern in golden yellow, trimmed with delicate frills of the same stuff on sleeves and skirt. With its bodice smocked at the waist, its skirt gathered to burst out below, the dress is like a daffodil, its ruffles trembling in every current of air.

◆ A later cotton dress shows the forthrightness associated with American girls of the 1860s. Jo March might have worn such a plain white piqué costume with black buttons, its bell-like skirt and sleeves sparsely adorned with arabesques of narrow black sou-tache. Paintings and photographs suggest that such dresses were the fashion everywhere in the 1860s. The look is one of bright clarity, a hint of emergent female self-expression.

◆ In its crisp candor, this dress contrasts vigorously with a pair of French silk dresses of the same date, both professionally made for one unknown woman by a Paris couturier called Depret, whose name is sewn into the waistband. Dressmakers were now signing their work as couture became a recognized art in Paris. These dresses are in vivid colors, one blue, one bright caramel. They are designed and cut, fitted and finished with complex elegance inside and out, although they appear at first to be quite simple. It is now apparent that the sign of a masterwork of dressmaking was to be found in its perfect taste, perfect tailoring, and perfect finish rather than in expanses of metallic embroidery. Display of costly fabric, however, still mattered, and dresses took up more room than ever. The age of Worth had begun, and women who could afford it were being imagined and perfected by men of genius in whose famous hands they were glad to place themselves.

◆ An American wedding dress from 1880 shows how ostentation sometimes overwhelmed taste after the Civil War. This heavy damask gown is weighed down with a bushel of pearls applied liberally both on top of the silk and dangling from it in fringes on the draped overskirt, the sleeves, around the bottom of the cuirass bodice and all around the train. The wearer must have clicked when she walked, although the visual effect is certainly one of Renaissance splendor.

◆ A more sophisticated woman than this unknown bride was Mrs. Andrew Carnegie, who was married in 1887 in a gray wool ensemble trimmed with beige braid. It has a high-necked, smoothly molded bodice, with very high armholes and tight sleeves surmounting a pleated skirt stiffly held out by a bustle. The wearer would have fitted in among the ladies promenading on La Grande Jatte, where perfectly achieved outline took precedence over color, shine, or surface motion.


◆ A Worth evening dress from the turn of the century shows a new freedom approaching, a slimmer and more unified line. The big bust and bustle have been tamed into a sleek fore-and-aft tilt of the figure. Fashion was abandoning the fitted bodice and double skirt, of which each part had to be constructed and trimmed separately and the whole put together like a ceremonial cake. Worth implemented the change, aiming to harmonize the total clothed figure to suit the emergent modern temper. This Worth evening dress is of black velvet scrollwork on a white satin ground, the black pattern moving over the whole dress from top to bottom in one sweeping arrangement ending in a train. When the

*Above: Detail of a striped wool dress embroidered in silver-gilt thread (English, ca. 1695).*

*Opposite: Afternoon dress of silk faille, made by Depret of Paris (ca. 1867).*







*Right: Evening dress of satin,  
faillé, and velvet, by Charles  
James (American, 1953). Oppo-  
site: Promenade dress of piqué  
trimmed with soutache braid  
(American, ca. 1862-64).*



# *The staff refers to each as "she."*



designer varied the treatment of his idea, his own aesthetic plan was more important than the individuality of the client.

◆ Another sober English costume makes a nice contrast to Worth's art nouveau bravura. This is a suit made circa 1909 in brown silk trimmed in brown braid, a neat daytime ensemble much like a modern suit. The tailored jacket skims the figure, the skirt clears the ground; no fuss or fantasy is in evidence. Even comfort seems to have been invoked—a revolutionary notion. England had long been famous for masterly masculine tailoring. Women were just beginning to take advantage of it, not only for riding habits but for daytime clothes.

◆ In France, at the same time, the great Paul Poiret was creating bold new fantasies. His yellow satin theater coat of 1912 wraps loosely, its huge silver-lace cuffs contrasting with an enormous black velvet medallion that clutches the satin over one hip. The lining is pale blue, a taste of cool water in the sultry atmosphere. This designer was the first to make deliberate use of an overlooked fact in the history of visual life—that the image of the clothed figure can have more power over the eye and feelings than does the living clothed figure itself. Poiret cannily launched his own fashion house with the publication in 1908 and 1911 of two exquisite pam-

phlets, in which his clothes were rendered in the chic, abstract illustrative style of the moment by Paul Iribe and Georges Lepape. His designs thus spoke first to the public not in cloth and cut but in a decorative idiom that was soon to speak for all fashion.

◆ Some modern masterpieces are still best seen directly, however, clothes with a tactile subtlety and freshness that the camera can never quite convey. The museum has a court presentation dress by Boué Soeurs from 1928 that is like a fairy costume—white tulle over a slip of pink chiffon floating back in a haze of silver, with clusters of sculptured satin roses. It was meant to waft weightlessly toward the throne like an approaching dream.

◆ Chanel was famous for the sense of physical pleasure her clothes deliver to both wearer and viewer. A simple, straight dress and coat from about 1927 show her sensuous instinct in the astonishing juxtaposition of the dress's thin chiffon, densely printed in small carmine and orange flowers outlined in black, with the coat's rough beige tweed. On the dress, the sharp little petals at the edges of neck and sleeves were articulated against the wearer's skin. The enveloping coat is lined in them, and they climb out from inside to show their pointed shapes against the turned-back cuffs and lapels. The whole seems to make the woman into a fragile wicker basket overflowing with deep red blossoms—and hidden thorns, perhaps—a discreet emblem of female passion.

◆ During the wartime eclipse of the Paris couture, American designers came into their own. Claire McCardell, the greatest of them in this century, almost single-handedly created a totally American fashion idiom at the very highest level, an irreversible challenge to the old authority of Paris. Her designs express a straightforward zest and ease and a strong sexuality devoid of oblique erotic tricks. The McCardell in the museum show is a black jersey evening dress of 1937 with a waist that rises high in front and drops low behind, worn under a straight velvet coat in vertical red and black stripes—an indirect echo of the white mull dress of 1805, that earlier utterance in simple American speech.

◆ France and America are contrasted in some grand ball dresses from the spacious postwar era marked by the ascendancy of Christian Dior. One 1949 Dior example in this exhibition is the dress he called "Junon," a glittering calyx and corolla of pale gray tulle petals edged in dark, iridescent blue sequins, another unearthly apparition celebrating the French sense of feminine mystery. Charles James seems to reply to Dior in his "Abstract" dress of 1953, a masterpiece in black velvet and ivory satin, cut, curved, and suspended like a Calder mobile, yet also glorifying the woman. James, however, refrained from any bewitching shimmer. His dresses create allure with pure shape, suggestive silken forms that involve the wearer in an intense erotic game.

Except on occasions like the present exhibition, all these great dresses wait in the hushed and temperate safety of the Costume Institute storeroom, along with hundreds of their kin—the staff refers to each as "she." Not only their flounces and sequins but the individual souls of these great dresses are in good keeping in this well-appointed limbo, but their moment for real life in the turning world is past. Now and then they emerge to dumbfound us once more with their beauty, bathed in light, still inviting the response of eager eyes. And we do respond, not just to the flair and skill that went into them, but personally, to those living women who floated down the stairs, strolled on the lawn, or conversed at the dinner table wearing these garments, every step and every word enhanced by the enveloping presence of a masterpiece, each life perhaps a little better for that. Our own lives, too, are enhanced as we look. □

Anne Hollander wrote *Seeing through Clothes*.

*Above: Detail of court dress, silk, brocaded with silver rosettes (English, ca. 1760). Opposite: Evening dress of satin voided with velvet, by Worth (French, ca. 1898–1900).*



