



Yeohlee, white Teflon® Egyptian cotton harness dress, spring 2007, USA, lent by Yeohlee.
Photograph by William Palmer.

A FASHION MUSEUM

The Museum at FIT is the only museum in New York City dedicated solely to the art of fashion. Best known for its innovative and award-winning exhibitions, which have been described by Roberta Smith in *The New York Times* as "ravishing," the museum has a collection of more than 50,000 garments and accessories dating from the eighteenth 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. Its mission is to advance knowledge of fashion through exhibitions, publications, and public programs. For more information, visit www.fitnyc.edu/museum.

SUPPORT THE MUSEUM

COUTURE COUNCIL

An elite membership group, the Couture Council helps to support the exhibitions and programs of The Museum at FIT. Members receive invitations to exclusive events and private viewings. Annual membership is \$1,000 for an individual or couple and \$350 for a young associate (under the age of 35). For more information, write to couturecouncil@fitnyc.edu or call 212 217.4532.

TOURS AND DONATIONS

Every six months, a changing selection of garments, accessories, and textiles from the museum's permanent collection is put on display in the Fashion and Textile History Gallery, located on the museum's ground floor. Tours of the Fashion and Textile History Gallery, as well as the Special Exhibitions Gallery, may be arranged for a sliding fee of approximately \$350. Donations of museum-quality fashions, accessories, and textiles are welcome. For more information about tours or donations, call 212 217.4550.

The Museum at FIT

Fashion Institute of Technology
Seventh Avenue at 27 Street
New York City 10001-5992
www.fitnyc.edu/museum
Museum information line:
212 217.4558

Hours

Tuesday-Friday, noon-8 pm
Saturday, 10 am-5 pm
Closed Sunday, Monday,
and legal holidays
Admission is free

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Cover: Halston, American Beauty Rose evening gown, red silk organza, 1980, USA, gift of Mrs. Chris Roter. Photograph by William Palmer.

AMERICAN BEAUTY

Aesthetics and Innovation in Fashion

November 6, 2009–April 10, 2010

The Museum at FIT



Elizabeth Hawes, evening dress, lavender, violet, and ivory striped silk brocade, 1936, USA, gift of Mrs. Dudley Schoales. Photograph by Irving Solero.



Pauline Trigère, cloqué dress and coat, navy blue and white cotton, circa 1964, USA, lent by Beverley Birks. Photograph by William Palmer.

American Beauty

explores innovative clothing construction in the United States. The goal of the exhibition is to demonstrate that the work of American fashion designers has been groundbreaking—not limited, as is sometimes assumed, to the production of casual and functional clothing such as denim jeans and sportswear. The exhibition covers the period from the 1930s to the present, and it focuses on the relationship between the technical aspects of modern dressmaking in the United States and aesthetics, or the “philosophy of beauty.” The interdependence of technique and beauty is evident in the work of a group of American fashion designers—selected especially for this exhibition—who have created a broad spectrum of clothing types, from highly innovative yet affordable ready-to-wear to luxurious and exacting couture.

Each object on view was created by a designer who focused primarily on the craft of dressmaking as the point of departure in his or her design process. Many of the creators in the exhibition, such as Jessie Franklin Turner, Elizabeth Hawes, and Charles Kleibacker, are all but unknown; others, including Claire McCardell, Halston, and Charles James, are more widely recognized. A number of famous designers who consistently create garments that are inarguably exquisite have not been included in the exhibition. This is because these designers have chosen to approach their work from another angle, or because they focus more on



Charles James, Tree evening dress, pale pink silk taffeta, 1955, USA, gift of Robert Wells in memory of Lisa Kirk. Photograph by Irving Solero.



Ralph Rucci, Infanta gown, graphite gray duchesse satin, fall 2004, USA, lent by Ralph Rucci. Photograph by William Palmer.

developing their styling and marketing skills, and therefore don’t fall within the scope of this inquiry into the relationship between hands-on dressmaking and the elusive achievement of beauty.

The approximately 90 objects on view are arranged according to their specific methods of construction. These include the use of geometric forms, dressmaking, tailoring, highly structured or “engineered” eveningwear, and embroidery and other surface embellishment. Each category juxtaposes the work of designers from the past with that of designers working today. For example, grand and structurally imposing gowns made in the 1950s by Charles James stand alongside contemporary *Infantas* by Ralph Rucci. 1930s gowns by Claire McCardell intermingle with those made in the 1970s by Halston and Charles Kleibacker, as well as contemporary garments by Jean Yu, and a dazzling 1930s sequined gown by Adrian is shown with a Norman Norell sequined “Mermaid” gown from the 1960s. Such comparisons show that, over the decades, the vital relationship between aesthetic ideals and dressmaking techniques has continued to evolve and to shape American design. These juxtapositions also prove that impeccable design is—and always has been—at the core of innovative American fashion.

Just as there is no single “American” style, there is no typical American designer. Most of the designers chosen for *American Beauty* come from every corner of the



Charles Kleibacker, evening caftan dress, white nylon jersey, 1969, USA, gift of Charles Kleibacker. Photograph by Irving Solero.



Jean Yu, dress, white jersey with black grosgrain ribbon, circa 2006, USA, lent by Jean Yu. Photograph by William Palmer.

United States, and those who hail from places abroad have adopted this country as their home. All of them have produced the vast majority of their work in the United States; even while the total amount of clothing actually manufactured in this country has been steadily and drastically dwindling. Still, despite the economic challenges of doing so, many of these designers continue to create garments in their own workrooms, using a blend of ready-to-wear techniques and handwork.

Each of these artists brings a unique synthesis of mass production and couture elements into his or her work, yet by virtue of their common, unwavering, and continued dedication, they do share a national ideal. And dedication to craft is not the only quality that unites the designers of *American Beauty*: their points of origin may be all over the map, as it were, and their personal histories may differ as much as night from day, but every one of these designers notes that he or she could have realized the full scope of his or her creative vision only in the United States of America.

It is to them, this diverse assemblage of creators, that *American Beauty* is dedicated.

Patricia Mears, Curator