

The Museum at FIT Fashion Culture Podcast Series on Paris

Dr. Valerie Steele: Fashion, Art, and Luxury in Paris

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[Dr. Valerie Steele] Fashion today is created and shown in cities around the world from New York to Shanghai. Yet Paris is still widely regarded as the most glamorous and competitive of the world's fashion capitals.

Hello, I'm Valerie Steele, director and chief curator of The Museum at FIT. In this series of podcasts, I'll be exploring how and why Paris became the capital of fashion. I'll explore the history and mythology of Paris as "City of Light" and the city of fashion, in conjunction with our exhibition *Paris, Capital of Fashion* which runs through January 4th, 2020.

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We're back for episode five on Fashion, Art, and Luxury in modern and contemporary Paris. We've seen how fashion in Paris was associated with art and how it was associated with femininity. I'm going to look a little more closely at what happened in the later part of the 20th century when menswear gradually started to creep back into the fashion repertoire. As I said, in the 17th and 18th centuries Paris was the capital of fashion for men and women. But by the end of the 18th century and certainly by the 19th century, it was no longer the capital of menswear. The reasons are complicated but you could simplify it by saying it's because men's fashion changed and became much simpler and more sober as a result of the rise of democracy and the rise of capitalism.

London became the new capital of menswear associated with work, capitalism, seriousness. New York also as the ready-to-wear capital of menswear. Paris was the capital of pleasure, art, luxury, feminine fashion. Paris being seen as being a woman. Paris is a blonde. Paris is the Parisienne.

Women's fashion continued to become more and more important. And by the late 19th century, you see references to Paris as the capital of feminine fashion. Menswear went to London. It went to New York. Later it went to Milan with Armani. Remember at one point, I mean Pierre Bergé was asked by an American journalist, what about Milan. And he said Italians haven't contributed anything to culture except for spaghetti. The reporter said hey, but what about Armani and relaxed fashion and all this relaxed menswear. And it's true. Milan really revolutionized menswear.

Well in recent decades, Paris has begun to take the first baby steps and then big steps getting back menswear. At first in the 80s, you had a big fashion moment. Fashion was fashionable and it really exploded in France. Everybody was interested in fashion. You not only had new couturiers like Lacroix, but you also had a new breed of stylists. A new kind of creator like Jean Paul Gaultier who were making fashions for men as well as for women. Just as he made cone-bras for women, he made skirts for men. He made really beautiful tailored jackets. Thierry Mugler also emerged. Again, very famous for kind of sex bot outrageously theatrical and

fabulous fashions for women. But also a very successful career making tailored suits for both men and women.

So you had these baby steps forward. In addition, of course, you had the influence of menswear on womenswear in the work of people like Yves Saint Laurent and Gaultier as well when Gaultier went to Hermès. But what's been really striking is that in the last 10 years the steps toward having big companies like Dior have also Dior Homme, Men's Dior.

And nowadays the menswear week in Paris has become more and more important. You have menswear weeks in other cities but they haven't really taken off. Often they're merged with the womenswear weeks. But Paris menswear is really working. First Hedi Slimane and then now people like Kim Jones at Dior have really made menswear important. So then that way something they lost almost more than 200 hundred years ago, they're starting to back.

Meanwhile though this art luxury nexus is also important. Because if fashion was fashionable in the 1980s, luxury has become more fashionable in the 21st century and increasingly we're looking back at the heritage of big luxury fashion companies. It could be luxury companies like Hermès or fashion brands like Chanel which emphasize luxury and heritage more and more. And this is one place where Paris has unquestionably greater status than any other city. The majority of luxury companies like Hermès and Chanel and luxury conglomerates, groups of companies together, such as LVMH and Kering are based in Paris. There are also some in Italy but overwhelmingly in Paris.

Companies like LVMH and Kering have bought Italian companies, have invested in American companies. But their headquarters are based in Paris. This is super important just as having banks and auction houses based in New York has made New York a financial capital and an art capital so has this made Paris a luxury capital. And America oddly enough has never really been able to set up an internationally recognized luxury conglomerate. There have been companies which have been more or less associated with luxury fashion but for the Europeans, it's still hard to accept that any luxury fashion comes out of America, that a luxury corporation could be based in New York. New York is still seen in terms of sportswear.

Now ironically you find many of the luxury companies producing luxury sportswear in Europe just as luxury sportswear, menswear, sneakers are occurring on the Paris runways for men as well as for women. Various things which really emerged in America have been brought over to Paris. Now you have menswear at Louis Vuitton run by an African-American man who started creating sportswear fashion for men in America with his company Off-White. That is something which again indicates that influence from America, influence from African-American culture, has moved into the highest echelons of high Paris fashion. But it still has the prestige coming from Paris.

And this is an interesting thing because reputation and prestige depend on belief. If you believe it, it's true. To some extent, although theoretically another city like New York or Shanghai could become the next Paris, the next capital of fashion. It's kind of unlikely to happen because we still think of fashion and luxury in terms of Paris. Even when Shanghai has become more and more successful you think of it as yes Shanghai, the Paris of the East. It's a regional fashion capital. Like there's no question that New York is the capital of American fashion but it just doesn't have the international prestige to be regarded as the capital of international fashion.

When you have Paris Fashion Week buyers come from all over the world. Reporters and journalists come from all over the world. It's much less true for New York fashion. Now Tom Ford has an idea that you can build that by subsidizing more journalists to come in and cover New York Fashion Week. If they come and we help pay for it, then they'll write about it and maybe people will see there are exciting things happening in New York. He's instituted a stricter list of who gets to show on the official calendar of New York Fashion Week. That's taking a page from the Paris rule book. Yes, you can show on the subway if you want in Paris too. But the official list is curated by a government fashion authority. We don't have the government involved in the US. But at the Council of Fashion Designers of America, their new leaders saying that we need to put some of that same kind of order into New York Fashion Week to compete.

It may be that fashion weeks, in general, will disappear and some new online method of getting news out is possible. But again the idea of having those knowledgeable fashion performers and spectators just as they performed and watched each other at the Court of Versailles or the Opera in Paris, they're still watching each other in the audience at the runway shows in Paris. That's a really important thing that helps make Paris continue to be perceived to be the most glamorous and competitive fashion capital in the world.

Thank you very much.

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