

The Museum at FIT Fashion Culture Podcast Series on Paris

Dr. Valerie Steele: Cult of the Designer

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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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Welcome to episode four, the Cult of the Designer. We've seen how Worth put his signature onto labels and his clothes. And as a matter of fact, even before he did that in the middle of the 19th century, French milliners, hat makers, had already put their signatures into the ribbons inside their hats because although they were just working-class artisans, they thought of themselves and were thought of by their contemporaries as artists of fashion and were creating something beautiful, a lovely object which would be worn by a stylish woman. This idea of the Parisienne being fashionable was something that applied not only to the great lady but also to the couturier, the hat maker, even the glover. The little artisans were seen as being part of this great world of fashion which was Paris, that women in Paris lived either on fashion or for fashion or both.

Now we've seen how Worth brought in the idea of the male artistic creator, the couturier. But this was an idea which was quickly picked up by the female couturiers as well. So Jeanne Paquin, Jean Lanvin, Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel. These women also took on the role of being the creator of haute couture.

There've been many exhibitions on Paris fashion but they've tended to assume that it was just natural that Paris was the capital of fashion. That there was something in the air, a sort of *je ne sais quoi* about Paris that made it fashionable. Or perhaps it was something to do with a long heritage of craftsmanship and aristocratic style. This is really the first exhibition which has looked at the cultural construction of Paris as the capital of fashion. That genius designers don't just spring up like mushrooms after the rain along the Seine. If that were true, they could spring up along the Hudson just as easily. In fact, you need a system. You need a set of networks working together that create fashion designers who are internationally successful.

If you consider someone like Chanel, she was a brilliant woman, a very hard worker. But she did not single handedly invent quote-unquote the little black dress. Nor did she single handedly abolish the corset, create costume jewelry or invent the modern women's dress. As a matter of fact, when she emerged in the early 20th century, she was one of a generation of well-known women designers who became extremely popular and important in Paris. At this point between

roughly the beginning of the First World War and just before the Second World War, it was the age of the new women and everyone started to think, who better than a new woman to create clothes for the new woman. You're looking for women designers. Great male designers like Jean Patou had to say, hello, you don't have to be a woman to be a great designer.

Chanel's success as Lagerfeld admitted was in part because she was her own best fashion model. She did great clothes. But other people were doing little black dresses. Lagerfeld said, if you look at her clothes and the clothing of her contemporaries, they often look really almost the same especially in the 1920s. So we look back and we go Chanel the iconic name of fashion. But if she'd retired in 1939 when she first closed her house, we probably would just remember her as being one of a regiment of women. Her competitors Schiaparelli, Madame Grès, Augusta Bernard, Louise Boulanger, Nicole Groult, Jane Régny. Many, many others. But she reopened again in 54. She became successful once again. She lived a very long time until 1971 and told generations of people how important she was to fashion. And then after she died, the house started becoming boring and bourgeoisie. The perfume still sold. But her name is still so famous today in part because Karl Lagerfeld woke up the sleeping beauty of the House of Chanel and applied shock treatment to the tropes like the little black dress and costume jewelry and made it relevant again for a new generation and continued to make it relevant for decades.

Most of the regiment of women weren't that lucky. There've been attempts to revive the House of Vionnet, the House of Schiaparelli. They may succeed occasionally but for the most part, there's no House of Augusta Bernard anymore, no Louise Boulanger. It's very difficult to revive sleeping beauties.

After the Second World War, it became much more expensive to set up your own couture house. You needed often to have considerable backing and so backing tended to go to male designers who were seen more as being businessmen and creative artists. As Fath said, fashion's an art and men are the artists. The most famous designer after the war was Christian Dior. Now like many of the designers who emerged then, he'd been working already for other designers like Lucien Lelong. When Paris ceased to be occupied after the war and American journalists started to come back, people like Carmel Snow, the editor of *Harper's Bazaar*, said you know you gotta get back. I know Paris is still a mess. It's still cold and there's hardly any food but there's a great new designer Lelong and you've gotta see what he's doing.

When Dior got money from the big textile company Boussac, he was able to launch his own couture house in January 1947. Mrs. Snow came in and she saw it and she said, oh Christian you've got such a new look and the phrase went around the world and suddenly everywhere from New York to Tokyo, London to Rome, everyone was copying the "New Look" style. Either they were licensing it or they were just copying it. They were taking curtains down at home and sewing them together to make a big dress. Within a few years, he really helped revive the whole French couture and his fashions then for ten years until his early death in 1957, they changed the A-line, the H-line. Every season something new and exciting but something which would recall the glamour of Paris fashion.

If Dior was the king of Paris fashion, Jacques Fath was the crown prince. He was young, good looking. The clothes were a little flashy, a little sexy. At first, people worried they were too theatrical but pretty soon they had an international following just as Dior's did. Fath died even younger of leukemia in the early 1950s. He's mostly been forgotten because his house has not

been successfully revived. When Dior died, Yves Saint Laurent, his assistant, was ready to step in and save the House of Dior and save French couture. Everybody knew who he was immediately. He was the savior just as Dior had been the savior. And then when they fired Saint Laurent, they brought in Marc Bohan who'd already been designing for Dior's London house. Then later John Galliano and now, of course, we have Maria Grazia Chiuri at the House of Dior. So again a house continues to be famous, a name continues to be famous because new designers come into work for a famous couture house.

In a way, it's kind of a crazy idea because when Picasso died you didn't say oh we're going to bring in Julian Schnabel to be the new designer for the house of Picasso. Instead, you assume that an artist lives and dies and then another artist emerges. But couture houses, the heritage of the house implies you need to bring in a new designer, a new creative director who will work with the quote-unquote DNA of the brand and bring it to a new generation. In this way, of course, Paris which is always thought of in terms of a genealogy of genius, a line of the great Paris designers from Chanel to Dior to Yves Saint Laurent and on. The heritage of these names is incredibly powerful.

Other great names in 1950s Paris have continued because they found great designers to go with them. The exhibition also shows, for example, the House of Pierre Balmain. Started when he was very young, he'd also worked for Lelong. He worked for other designers and now that house too is continued. We have Olivier Rousteing at Balmain. Again, he was very young when he started, less than 25, and at first people were kind of shocked that he said that in an interview. People said this is a minority person, a Black person at the House of Balmain, a French fashion house. But of course he realized being a very young person that he could communicate with audiences in a new way through social media and now he has millions of followers for the Balmain army.

In the same way, Hubert de Givenchy founded his own house before he was 25 years old, became world-famous. He worked closely with Audrey Hepburn. After he sold his house and retired, other great designers moved in there too and today we have Clare Waight Keller, an English woman, who is there in charge. She took over from Riccardo Tisci, an Italian. Just as Didier Grumbach told *Women's Wear Daily* a few years ago, Paris fashion has changed. Everything has changed. Everything has to be international. We have international creators. The production has to be international and we can no longer can or want to be 100% French anymore.

In a way, of course, this is not just a product of recent globalization, it's always been true from Worth on that you had designers and workers from other countries who came to Paris to work. In America, we've promoted ourselves as a nation of immigrants. The French tended to downplay this but now if you go there it's not just that you had great designers like Schiaparelli. Schiaparelli could never have become famous internationally if she stayed in Rome in the 1930s. She had to go to Paris to be internationally famous as a designer. During World War II when Paris was occupied, she fled to the United States but she annoyed American journalists by insisting during the war that New York would never take over as the capital of fashion. It had to be Paris. After the war, she went back and reestablished herself there. Although her time had really passed.

In our look at the great names of fashion, the cult of the designer, we move from Worth and

Doucet through Chanel and Dior through people like Fath and Balmain, as well as others who have been forgotten. The story of Jacques Heim is one of tragedy and triumph. He was one of the relatively few French couturiers who was Jewish. During the four years when the Nazis occupied Paris, they quote-unquote Aryanized any business that had been run by Jews. The fascist newspapers proudly announced in 1940 that the couture house of Jacques Heim had been Aryanized. It no longer belonged to a Jewish person. But Jacques Heim escaped from the Nazis, joined the resistance, and also before he disappeared he set a Christian quote-unquote Aryan friend of his in charge of the house. After the defeat of Nazi Germany, he was able to come back to Paris and reestablish himself and we have a beautiful 1950s Jacques Heim dress on display.

Sadly, of course, many other Jewish people who also played a very important part in the ready-to-wear industry, in the tailoring industry in France, in the fur industry, were not so lucky. If they were able to escape the country or survive the war that was great. But many of them didn't, particularly if they were not French-born Jews. If they were Eastern European Jews who had come over fleeing the Holocaust there, they came and discovered that they were facing a hostile environment in occupied Vichy, France.

Today, we have American designers also who are known by name. We have in the section about Cult of the Designer, we see in contemporary Paris, we have designers like Bouchra Jarrar, French but with Moroccan parents. We had until recently Phoebe Philo, an English woman, at the French luxury ready-to-wear House of Céline. We have the American Rick Owens who set up his business in Los Angeles. Not even in New York. He showed for a nanosecond in New York and then went to Paris. In Paris, he felt is the place really where you're judged to the highest standard of are you going to make it as a designer if you could make it in Paris.

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Our next episode will be on fashion, art, and luxury in contemporary Paris. Thank you for listening.

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