

## The Museum at FIT Fashion Culture Podcast Series on Paris

### Dr. Valerie Steele: From the Splendor of the Royal Court to the Spectacle of Haute Couture

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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.

[Music concludes]

In this episode, I'll be discussing the trajectory from splendor at the royal court to the spectacle of the haute couture. I will be looking at the history of the beginning of Paris being a capital of fashion.

Most historians believe that by the late 17th century, in other words by the 1680s, Paris really was the capital of fashion for western Europe. In a sense, though we were talking about a two-headed fashion capital because in a few years Louis XIV moves his palace from Paris to Versailles and so you have the city of Paris, the historic capital of France, and the court at Versailles, which is the center of the king's realm. And fashion exists between these two places which are really only about 20 miles apart.

Fashion had political, economic, and social significance in 17th and 18th century France. To begin with, Louis XIV's finance minister Colbert supposedly said, "fashion will be for France what the gold mines of Peru are for Spain." In other words, this is going to be where we make our money. And even today the Comité Colbert is the main luxury organization in Paris. So this idea that fashion and luxury were going to be central to the French economy was something established in the 17th century and which continues to be important today.

But fashion was also an important source of soft power for France because the court of Louis XIV at Versailles was the most magnificent court in Europe. It was the court that everybody wanted to have in their kingdom and they wanted everyone to dress, and look, and behave as the courtiers did at Versailles. So everything that was worn at Versailles became fashionable at courts throughout Europe. And even things that are a crucial part of fashion in today's world like seasonal fashion shows, in a sense, had their origins back then because already the little newsletter produced in Paris would say well the spring fashions being shown at court are such and such. While the fall and winter fashions being shown at court are so and so. So already you had the idea that the year was divided into new legitimate fashions.

And by the 18th century, foreigners who came to Paris were absolutely stunned by the way they said people here invent new fashions every day. A fashion that's 40 days old is already considered out of style. In fact, it wasn't quite that fast. The silhouettes stayed the same for quite a while. But it's true that the decorations, the prints on fabric, all of that changed about every six months. So this was really unprecedented. Already fashion seemed like novelty and the Parisians were known for it.

The media, of course, has always been important in spreading fashion. And in the days before there were real fashion magazines, the fashion news came out from Paris in the form of dolls. The famous *poupée de la rue Saint-Honoré*, dolls that were fashion dolls that were dressed, on the rue Saint-Honoré, even today a highly fashionably street in Paris. These were sent to the court in Russia, to England, to German courts, to Italy, even to North America where milliners in cities in Virginia, in Massachusetts, in New York would get these fashion dolls. So they were widely copied then and the fashion spread. In the same way, when fashion newspapers took up you would have fashion illustrations, which would be reproduced in other countries, spreading the idea of French fashion.

The success of Paris fashion wasn't only due to government support, it was also due to the fact that French people in general thought that fashion was really important. And society at court and in Paris consisted of many knowledgeable fashion performers and spectators. So whether they were showing off or watching each other in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles or at the opera in Paris, fashion was always very much a part of the social and artistic scene. And it was something that people regarded as incredibly important for men as well as for women. So that two of the greatest contributions of French culture were the *robe à la française*, the French style dress for women, and the *habit à la française*, the French style suit for men. Both of them were luxurious, structured, very body-conscious.

One of the things in the show that I'm most pleased to have been able to borrow is a wonderful pair of bone stays and panniers or hoops that were worn as foundation wear by French ladies. So it formed in a sense a triangular corset shape and then hoops on either side which would hold out the skirt and would allow you to see more and more of the expensive fabric which was woven, brocaded, embroidered, at great expense mostly in Lyon. But the Lyonnaise merchant set up investigators, spies, to see what people were wearing in Paris and at Versailles and then they would rush back to Lyon and weave, and embroider, and brocade the styles that they'd seen up in the city. So in this way clearly by the 18th century, Paris was the capital of fashion. Not only for France but for Europe and the western countries in general.

In the exhibition, we have a kind of arcade which shows certain 18th-century fashions next to some of their modern examples of haute couture which looked back referentially at The Old Regime fashions to emphasize and reinforce this idea that for centuries Paris has been the capital of fashion. So for example, we have the beautiful stays and panniers and then we have next to it an amazing haute couture dress designed in 1987 by Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel haute couture inspired by the "Enchanted Island," a several-day performance piece put on at Versailles at the court of Louis XIV which included dance, music, theatricals. Karl Lagerfeld, of course, loved the 18th century but by having Chanel haute couture emphasize this as a theme makes a connection between the spectacle of the haute couture in the late 20th century and the splendor of the royal court centuries before and this connection has

become very important for the French fashion industry. If you look at fashion photography, you'll see that Chanel, Dior, often have fashion photography, fashion videos now, which are filmed or shot at Versailles to emphasize this connection. We find this as well in the 1950s when again couture houses would send their models out with fashion photographers to Versailles to emphasize this link that fashion, high fashion, is part of the patrimony of France, part of the heritage of France which gives them a headstart on other countries. Paris being really then the first capital of fashion.

Nowadays, of course, we have fashion that's produced and shown all around the world but to be first always gave Paris an edge then. Other examples of this connection in the exhibition include a beautiful *robe à la française* from the permanent collection of The Museum at FIT. Brocaded with roses and with ribbons showing leopard print and we put this next to a haute couture piece from Christian Dior designed by John Galliano in 2000 which was inspired by the idea of dreams and nightmares and in this case the dreams and nightmares of Marie Antoinette because on one edge of the skirt is an embroidery of Marie Antoinette playing shepherdess at Trianon, her little sub palace at the chateau of Versailles, and on the other side she's wearing a liberty cap from the French Revolution and she's being led off in a tumbrel to be guillotined. So again dreams and nightmares of The Old Regime.

We have a beautiful fan showing Versailles from the 18th century and as one Italian writer put it in the late 18th century, for foreigners a fan has to be made in Paris, a dress has to be produced in Paris, diamonds have to be set in Paris if they're going to be considered fashionable, anything else is not of interest. It has to have that Paris seal of approval.

Menswear also inspired 20th and 21st-century fashion designers so the man's formal French suit has been taken up. Alexander McQueen has designed fashions for women inspired by it. So has John Galliano. So has Nicholas Ghesquière for Louis Vuitton. Just a couple of years ago he did a beautiful collection which mixed sportswear, like shorts and sneakers, with beautiful elaborately embroidered frock coats like the kind of coats worn by men in 18th century Paris.

In addition, we have a beautiful film costume from the 1938 film *Marie Antoinette* with the costumes designed by Adrian because it's not just a question of French propaganda, Americans and people in other countries were very much involved in emphasizing the glamour of France so that Hollywood films with costumes by Adrian or the recent Sophia Coppola *Marie Antoinette* film have also emphasized the glamour and fashionability of France.

John Galliano has been inspired not only by Old Regime France but also by Revolutionary France. During the French Revolution, there were a variety of different styles. The revolution lasted 15 years from 1789 in the fall of the Bastille to 1804 when Napoleon crowned himself emperor. In the beginning, there might be patriotic things like jewelry with diamonds and rubies showing the fall of the Bastille or with little pieces of stone to commemorate that or red, white, and blue cockades which would show that you supported the new revolutionary government as many aristocrats did because they admired the government in England and in America. But as the revolution became more radical, if you wore fashionable dress, you were liable to be denounced as a counter-revolutionary. You

might be imprisoned or even guillotined.

When Robespierre, the leader of the radical group in the revolution, was himself guillotined, the revolution took a more conservative turn. Not yet the return of the king, not even the return of Napoleon, but a conservative revolutionary government which allowed more wealth and class differences to flourish. So now the *jeunesse dorée*, the gilded youth, the more wealthy young people could dress up again without fear of being accused of being counter-revolutionaries and when they did they adopted extreme fashions. The men's styles were made them known as the *incroyables*, the incredible ones, and their scantily dressed female companions were known as the *merveilleux*, the marvelous ones. And from the beginning of his career, even as a fashion student, John Galliano replicated or was inspired by *incroyables* and *merveilleux* fashions to create modern avant-garde fashions.

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In our next episode, we'll be talking about the birth of the haute couture. Thank you for listening.