

The Museum at FIT Fashion Culture Podcast Series on Paris

Dr. Valerie Steele: New York vs 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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In episode three, we're going to be talking about Paris and New York and other fashion capitals. I talked before about how in France fashion was thought of as something important. Poets, artists, businessmen, government officials, they all thought fashion was important.

In America, because of our Puritan heritage there tended to be much greater ambivalence not to say hostility towards the idea of fashion. After all, fashion was a lie. It was making you look prettier and richer than you might really be. And fashion was a waste of time. So it was vanity. It was discriminatory. It wasn't egalitarian; after all, we are a democracy something that came from elite European countries. So American dress reformers would often start frothing at the mouth talking about how could it be that the granddaughters of Puritan ancestors were wearing clothes that were designed for courtesans in the wicked city of Paris. American women should be rescued from this terrible scourge of Paris fashion. Unfortunately, they showed a reluctance to be rescued. They tended to want to be wearing either Paris fashion if they could afford to go over there, or at least copy some Paris fashions.

So in a poetic book called *Nothing to Wear*, there's an account of Miss Flora McFlimsey of Madison Square who made six separate journeys to Paris. Her father assures me that each time she was there that she and her friend Mrs. Harris spent six consecutive weeks without stopping in one continuous round of shopping. So the poem goes on and on about how they shopped for hats, and shoes, and ball gowns, and day dresses, and capes, and lace, and mantillas, which she then smuggles back home to New York. And yet she still has nothing to wear.

So this idea that if you could afford it, you went with your chaperone to Paris to go shopping. If you couldn't, you'd buy it in New York. And we have on display a beautiful couture piece from Paris. So if you could afford to go over but also we have one from a New York dressmaker who called herself Madame Victorine. We don't know if she was really French or not. She might just have chosen that because it sounded more fashionable to

have a French name. But later you could also get illegal or licensed copies of French fashion in New York. So, for example, we have a hilariously bad totally illegal copy of a Madeleine Vionnet dress. Her famous "Little Horses" dress which in the original was beautifully embroidered by Lesage with elegant images of horses. Here it's very crudely embroidered with a flagrantly false label inside. Poor Madeleine Vionnet struggled her whole life to copyright and protect her clothes from being counterfeited. She eventually had a label inside which didn't just have her signature, it had her thumbprint inside and yet she continued to be plagiarised by other dressmakers and manufacturers around the world.

Next to it, we have the highest level of licensed copy. A Lanvin copy made for a prestigious New York department store completely licensed because couturiers in Paris had a system whereby if you would pay a certain fee to them you could arrange to license a copy. You'd get an actual couture outfit. They'd give you the instructions on how to make it. You could buy the fabric, the buttons, the fastening, everything and then sell it in New York or in Detroit or wherever your store was as a licensed copy.

We also have on display in this New York section an amazing Chanel couture original from the early 1960s and an Ohrbach's licensed copy. So Ohrbach's was buying an original and copying it. And they had fashion shows in which they would parade their wonderful perfectly made copies. And they would often show them in the windows next to the original and it'd say Chanel original four hundred fifty dollars, Orbach's copy forty dollars. So it was extraordinary.

We also have a copy of a Dior "New Look" dress. His wonderful "Columbine" dress. We have a dress that was inspired by Dior's "New Look" by an American manufacturer. In fact, even if you couldn't get a licensed copy, you could get a copy of a copy of a copy of a Dior and in that way hope to get some of the prestige of it.

As David Gilbert who contributed an essay to the catalog for *Paris, Capital of Fashion* put it, the idea of Paris worked across borders. Manufacturers in New York could make a lot of money making copies of Paris fashion. Jacques Fath entered into an even more egalitarian partnership with Joseph Halpert, an American manufacturer, who mass-produced designs that Fath created together with Halpert so they weren't exact copies of Paris originals. They were special Fath for America designs. Beautifully made. I mean they really look gorgeous. They look as good as any luxury ready-to-wear today but they were mass-produced then in New York.

In fact, New York did such a good job at copying Paris fashion that some British manufacturers decided it was easier to come to New York and buy the American copies and bring those back to London to copy then go through all the expensive rigmarole with dealing with the French themselves.

Now meanwhile, as we said, there were people who thought that New York ought to have its own fashions. If only to make money instead of losing it by having to license things with France. As well as with a sense of pride. America was a great democracy why didn't we have our own fashion? We hear most about this in the 1930s when particularly department stores like Lord & Taylor. But also many New York writers started promoting the idea of fashions made in America. Unfortunately, they didn't want to bother to mention the names

of any Americans as the American designer Elizabeth Hawes complained bitterly. She said, "clothes made by Americans – whoopee – perfectly anonymous Americans, robots maybe." Because of course, the French had been putting their names on fashion. It was Worth. It was Chanel. But in America that wasn't the case. Claire McCardell who's world-famous now as the founder of American sportswear had to really fight to get her name put on the label because normally the label would have the name of the store or the label of the manufacturer. Not the label of the American designer.

As late as the 1960s Bill Blass complained, the American designers kept in the backroom. Nobody wants to talk to him. They don't want his name on anything. It's all the store or the manufacturer. So this was a big difference because in Paris it was all about the name of the designer. The great genealogy of genius. We'll come back to that later.

The Americans though did eventually start producing American style sportswear. It tended to be, well, first of all, it was ready-made. It was not couture. It was not handsewn. Claire McCardell if you look at her notes, you'll see that she'll say buttons three dozen for a dollar. So she was taking account of how much each piece cost. Could she get away with three buttons? Could she do hooks instead of buttons? She wanted to get, as did Elizabeth Hawes, the glamour of French couture but at prices that any American women could theoretically afford. In that way, American fashion was always even by its best designers seen as an industry, a business. This was a commercial product that you were producing. Meanwhile, the French Jacques Fath was going fashion is an art and men are the artists. The only role for a woman in fashion, he said, is to wear the clothes. So very different idea of what's going on with fashion.

American designs started to be emphasized in the 1930s but it really was launched during World War II because when Paris was occupied by the Nazis for four years, news of Paris fashion was cutoff. You couldn't get dresses to license anymore. Paris fashion was only available to twenty thousand French women who had special cards which permitted them to buy Paris couture and about two hundred Germans who had these cards which permitted them to buy French couture and members of neutral countries like Spain and Switzerland. If they came to Paris, people could buy couture. But Americans could no longer buy couture and the British could no longer buy couture. So we were on our own and as a result American designers really had to start thinking for themselves and looking for new sources of inspiration and new kinds of training. It's not accidental that the Fashion Institute of Technology was founded in 1944 because that was a point in history when we really thought American fashion can and must take off on its own. It can't rely on copying Paris anymore.

In the 1970s you had another moment when American fashion really came to the fore. In part because you had a new generation of designers. The museum shows a little section on the famous "Battle of Versailles" in 1973 when a half dozen American designers were put up against a half dozen French couturiers to have a competition at the theater of Versailles to raise money to help repair the chateau of Versailles. And everyone assumed the French would just mop the floor with the Americans but in fact, at the end, the Americans and the French visitors agreed that the Americans had won. Their clothes weren't necessarily better quote-unquote but the show was certainly so much more dynamic and modern. In large part because the heavily African-American models for the Americans were just so much livelier

and more evocative and real than the stiffer French models. So in that way you started to get a sense that American design possibly New York design could have something special that the French didn't.

In the same way in the 1960s London had its moment when London was swinging with Mary Quant mini skirts and Courrèges, of course, said Mary Quant just popularized the miniskirt, I'm the one who invented it. But historically as Mary Quant said it wasn't me or Courrèges, it was the girls in the street who did it first and the girls on the street in London did it first, copied second by New York, and eventually, the French caught on and started doing miniskirts too as a high fashion.

What you find in the 60s though in France is you do start to find younger French women who go couture is for grannies. You know they're seeing all this hip fashion coming out of London and New York and so they start to create their own hip mini dresses, pantsuits, sweaters, and it's extraordinary how many of these young ready-to-wear designers are women. So we have a wonderful look by Sonia Rykiel in there who is part of this generation of young women who seized the opportunity to have ready-to-wear. If men were claiming that couture was an art and they were the artist, then they took ready-to-wear.

We also wanted to look at who the players were in all of these fashion cities and although African-Americans have had a tremendous impact on style and fashion, they were historically totally marginalized because of segregation and prejudice in the United States. So some of them went abroad like Patrick Kelly who like generations of African-American creatives from Josephine Baker on decided there'd be more freedom for them in Paris and went to Paris to set up a fashion business.

Jewish immigrants to the United States and their descendants played a tremendously large part in the American fashion industry. Initially because in Europe many of them had been peddlers of used clothes so here they started selling clothes. They started tailoring, fur making. But then gradually moved into womenswear and then eventually over the generations became designers like Isaac Mizrahi and Calvin Klein.

In recent years, Asian-Americans particularly Chinese Americans have come to the fore in the United States and in New York in particular. So you have many designers from Anna Sui to Alexander Wang who were part of the American fashion industry. So different nationalities have come into fashion because it offers opportunities for immigrants.

Meanwhile, other cities around the world were also popping up. Tokyo became a center of avant-garde fashion in the 1980s and for a while, there was talk about Tokyo being the fifth fashion capital after Paris, New York, Milan, and London. But it didn't really take off in large part because all of the most exciting Japanese designers moved to Paris and ended up just reinforcing Paris.

The proliferation of fashion capitals around the world has ironically tended to reinforce the oligarchy of the big four and in particular, Paris has become stronger and stronger. Now Milan which is another of the big four fashion capitals is very strong and the French were very worried about Milan particularly in the 1990s. Partly because Milan also did luxury fashions. They were comfortable real clothes like American sportswear was but they were

luxury versions by named designers and so that seemed competitive. And Italy has a long history of fashion. If anything longer than Paris going back to the renaissance. But Italy was very late to unite as a country. It only became a nation-state in the second part of the 19th century so there was no one fashion capital. Fashion capitals in Italy moved around over the years. First Turin, then Florence, then Rome, even little old Capri had a moment and so did Venice. And it finally only in the 70s landed at Milan because they had all the factories and the manufacturing and financial capabilities. So we have this beautiful Versace to represent the thread of Milan.

We see that New York and Paris in many ways were not just competitors they were collaborators that whether American manufacturers or designers said we can do Paris better and cheaper than Paris or if they said to hell with Paris, American fashion is free. It's better. It's more democratic. It's more youthful. In one way or another, they were always comparing themselves to Paris.

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Our next episode will be on the cult of the designer. Thank you for listening.

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