

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

### Dr. Valerie Steele: Birth of the 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.

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Hello, I'm Valerie Steele here for episode two. We'll be talking about the birth of the haute couture. Now couture just means sewing. That's all it means. Contrary to popular belief haute couture does not mean that something is unique to you, that it is made just for you and no one else. That might or might not be true with old fashion couture. But it's definitely not the case with modern haute couture. So let's explore.

What's the history of the couture? As early as the 17th century you had couturiers, women, who were organized into a guild of dressmakers. That's all they were. They were dressmakers. They were allowed to make clothes for women and children. Tailors made clothes for men and tailors also made women's riding hats.

By the 19th century after the French Revolution, the guilds had broken up. Anyone with a needle and thread could set themselves up as a dressmaker. Dressmakers were overwhelmingly women in the early 19th century, usually working-class, and they were artisans. They had a tiny little shop, maybe with one or two assistants, and they were very much subordinate to their clients.

In slave countries, like the United States before the Civil War or Brazil, dressmakers were often enslaved women who sewed for the ladies of the household and it wasn't that dissimilar for couturiers in Paris. They were working-class women who served middle and upper-class clients. That changed in the middle of the century when an Englishman, Charles Frederick Worth, moved over to Paris, worked for a while as a salesman in a mercer store selling expensive fabric, and then set himself up as the first grand couturier, big couturier. His innovation was to transform the couture from a small scale feminine artisanal craft into big business and high art increasingly dominated by men.

How did it happen? For start, he designed a whole collection and he wasn't making a dress just for you madam or you mademoiselle. He had his collection and madam came in and he would say choose which of these models you would like and choose what color fabric you'd like it in. We have the fabric here. My fabric which I've chosen and increasingly that he also designed in conjunction with weavers in Lyon. And then he had a team of women. In one area, they would be sewing the bodices and in another they would be sewing the skirt, etcetera. Soon he had

hundreds of workers. Hence the idea grande couture, big couture, big business. He also thought of himself as an artist. He wore a beret to look like Rembrandt. He told the press, I am an artist. A great artist of color like Delacroix. At first, they laughed at him for his pretention, after all he was just a worker, a tradesman, a furnisher of dresses to real middle class and upper-class people. But soon he was making so much money that people started to give him more respect and he had many foreign clients ranging from Empresses and Queens to American wealthy women. He loved the Americans. He said they had the "the faces, the figures, and the francs." And he could tell them what to wear and they'd buy dozens of dresses from him. So in that way it was big couture.

How did it become haute couture? Industrial ready-to-wear fashion that was mass-produced, sewn with sewing machines, sold in big department stores that was taking over the world and other countries were in advance of France. Particularly, cities like New York, London, a little bit later Berlin, were huge industrial powerhouses. Much more so than Paris. But the French were worried. If you could get a nice cape or dress that was mostly mass-produced, where did that leave France which was based on luxury? So they said well it's haute couture, it's high sewing. This is artistic high sewing. And just as Worth had put his own name, his signature like an artist in a label inside his dresses, now everyone was saying French Paris fashion is artistic, made by artist couturiers, for ladies who are real connoisseurs of fashion, who are not just wearing mass-produced industrial fashion. So in this way even though he would set it up as an industry like a big business and he would even sell licenses to have things produced in other countries using his models and he would get a percentage, it was seen as being something still special and luxurious.

On display in the couture section, we have three marvelous Worth dresses. One from early in his career when he had a Swedish backer, Worth and Bobergh. A later one from the 1880s, beautiful ice blue satin couture dress, just magnificent, next to a pretty good ready-to-wear dress from the Bon Marché, same period 1880s, which would've had to be fixed up a little bit to fit you by your own little dressmaker. And then a very special dress because although the vast majority of haute couture was not made just for you madam, occasionally if it was a client like the Empress Eugénie of France or Mrs. Vanderbilt of New York, Worth might make an exception and go into a state of inspiration to think about what exactly he could make say for Mrs. Vanderbilt's fancy dress party that she held in New York and for which she herself dressed as electricity. It's an amazingly gorgeous dress. We're not showing her actual torch which she had at her original party which was lit with an electric battery. So that's not functioning anymore. But we have the dress which is an incredible unique example of the haute couture by Worth. It's on loan from the Museum of the City of New York like our other two Worth's.

Meanwhile, Paris was also in the forefront of setting up the new retail revolution. The first real department store was in Paris, the Bon Marché. And although if you made a dress, you still had to take it to your little dressmaker on the corner to have her fit the dress that you bought at the department store. But most of it was already pre-made and you could buy ready-made corsets or you could still go to a private corsetier and have it fitted to you. But now they were made in sizes, different sizes of course so you could buy them readymade. You could buy capes and fans in department stores. Everything was there flat priced. You didn't have to haggle with a salesperson anymore and things were out on display. You didn't have to say excuse me, could you take that ribbon out from inside the drawer. It was all out on the counters. So a new quote-unquote disease developed kleptomania, as all these middle and upper-class women at the department store started stealing stuff because it was out in the open. Now if you were poor and you stole, you were a thief and you were sent to jail. But if you were an upper-middle-class lady who couldn't help pocketing a few things from the Bon Marché, your husband was then called in

to reimburse them and you were maybe sent off to a psychiatrist to talk about why you were doing this.

But it was a new form of shopping and a form that took over. Even the windows of department stores were little theaters where there were human-like mannequins wearing fancy clothes. Fabric would come rippling down luxuriously like waterfalls. There would be an avalanche of parasols in a window. So it was just like a theater and peasants would come to the city and they would be startled. They'd think is that a person in the window? Who's that lady? Because it would be a mannequin. So again things we think of now as being a typical part of modern fashion were invented more than a hundred years ago in Paris.

The couture became integral to Paris because it was organized and institutionalized. In the beginning, the first couture organization was also an organization of ready-to-wear manufacturers. But by 1911 that was broken off, two separate organizations. And increasingly in the 20th century, there were more rules. If you wanted to be an accepted member of the haute couture, you had to be based in Paris. You had to have all your clothes made in Paris. You had to show there. You had to show a certain number of clothes in each collection. Foreigners, if they did good enough work, could apply to be accepted as guest members of the haute couture. So someone like Ralph Rucci in America was a guest member. Valentino from Italy was a guest member. We don't have that in America. Therefore although we have individual dressmakers and they may sell you expensive handmade clothes which are fitted to your body, the French would argue, it's not haute couture because it's not part of the haute couture system which is unique to France.

So this became important as another reason why Paris was special. They had the haute couture and no one else did. They had fashion as art and not just as industry. They were way behind in ready-to-wear fashion but gradually when they started to catch up after World War II when they would do visits to New York and see how things were done here, a new form of ready-to-wear emerged in France. And they did a literal translation. They called it *prêt à porter*, ready-to-wear. In the 19th century, they'd called ready-to-wear *confección* which was different than couture. But now that ready-to-wear took over, now almost all fashion coming out of Paris is ready-to-wear. It may be luxury ready-to-wear. Your ready-to-wear luxury dress may cost you 6, 8, 10 thousand dollars. It's not couture. Couture is in the 10s of thousands of dollars and more. The prices of couture have gone way up. We'll talk about that more later. But the point is Paris was able to associate the prestige of the couture even with their luxury ready-to-wear today. So the term luxury, as well as the term art and fashion, became tied into that matrix of what made French fashion, Paris fashion so special.

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Our next episode will be talking about New York versus Paris. Thank you for listening.

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