

# THE MUSEUM AT FIT TURNS 50

*“Exhibitionism” celebrates a half-century of collecting and curation at the Manhattan fashion mecca*

BY VAL CASTRONOVO

FIT alum Michael Kors calls it the “fashion insider’s fashion museum.” After seeing the “Jocks and Nerds” exhibit in 1989, he started doing menswear, he says in a tribute video created to mark the half-centennial of one of the most unique museums in a city full of them.

Founded in 1969 as The Design Laboratory and Galleries at FIT, it was initially housed in a “teaching building,” explained director and chief curator Valerie Steele at a preview the day before New York Fashion Week kicked off. The name was changed in 1994, but the museum discovered its mission decades before.

It all began when the first director, Robert Riley, had the idea to honor 20th century American costume designer Gilbert Adrian (“Adrian”), creator of the outfits for the Wizard of Oz. “It wasn’t a real exhibition,” Steele said. “It was a live fashion show.”

And what a show it was. When MGM got wind of the event, it gifted garments worn by Hollywood icons Joan Crawford, Greta Garbo and the like. Think of these costumes as the seeds of the collection, now comprising some 50,000 items of clothing and accessories (they have 4,000 pairs of shoes!), from the 18th century to the 21st century, stored in two climate-controlled rooms in the museum’s home on Seventh Avenue and 27th Street.

Garbo’s gown from *Camille* (1936), with shoulder wings in tulle, is on view in the first room and evokes Depression-era, damn-the-torpedoes glam. It’s fabulously retro and sets the tone.

“Exhibitionism” is a salute to some of the most influential, thematically important and provocative shows in the institution’s history, 33 out of more than 200. It’s a hit parade, from “Paul Poiret, King of Fashion” (1976), “Fashion and Surrealism” (1987) and

“The Corset” (2000) to “Eco Fashion” (2010), “A Queer History of Fashion” (2013) and “Black Fashion Designers” (2016). The selection has historical range and “a range of curatorial MOs, modi operandi,” Steele said.

The fashion treasures are on display in the dimly lit rooms of the Special Exhibitions Gallery, where viewers are in for an illuminating flashback. “As you go through, you can see how different directors and different curators come up with different approaches,” said Steele. “They really weren’t all about showing a bunch of pretty dresses. They all were doing research. A good museum is like a good university. It really does do in-depth research and advances knowledge about the field.”

The exhibits have spawned a cottage industry of books, brochures, lectures, symposia and websites. They have an afterlife. There is a Facebook page for 2013’s seminal show on queer fashion, with regular postings “so it can be a continual resource for people wanting to study LGBTQ influence on fashion and influence on culture in general,” Steele said.

From the outset, the focus of most of the museum’s directors and curators has been on building the collection, not mounting shows. “I wanted people to realize we weren’t a kunsthalle [a place for temporary displays],” she said. “We don’t just bring in exhibitions from outside. We create them ourselves.”

You don’t have to be a fashion junkie to appreciate the extremely inventive concepts and creations showcased here, some with mise-en-scène props and design elements from the original exhibits, or photos of them, to take you back.

A sampling from curator Colleen Hill’s popular “Fairy Tale Fashion” (2016), which looked at the role of clothing in fairy tales, features a mannequin in an Alexander McQueen evening gown with Rapunzel’s long golden locks — fashioned from gold bugle beads — cascading down the front of the garment. A towering silk curtain with digitally printed blonde tresses

frames the figure.

Steele organized “Gothic: Dark Glamour” in 2008, one of more than 25 shows she has curated at FIT since 1997. She recalled: “It was when I first became aware that mise-en-scène was important, and we had not just the vampire idea of coming out of the coffin, but we also had a ruined castle and a laboratory. Fashion experiments would be taking place.”

She did not say whether Frankenstein’s monstrous experiment was a part of the elaborate staging, but a goth mannequin in a Thierry Mugler little black vampire dress walks out of a coffin here, so he would have fit right in.

Young curators have orchestrated some of the most exciting shows. “Global Fashion Capitals” (2015), organized by Arielle Elia and Elizabeth Way, spotlighted more than a dozen emerging fashion cities, such as São Paulo, Lagos, Seoul and Shanghai. Don’t miss one of the show’s signature pieces by Nigerian designer Lisa Fowlawiyi, the Queen of Print — a fringed cotton dress, inspired by Ankara (African print) textiles.

As Steele said about another very imaginative presentation, “The Body: Fashion and Physique” (2017), curated by Emma McClendon: “The cool thing about working with some of my younger colleagues is that they would ask [questions like], ‘Can we be a bit more open to different kinds of body types?’ That’s something a young female curator would be more prone to think about.”

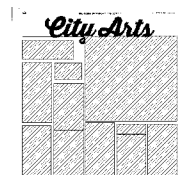
Mixing historical and cutting-edge designs, “Exhibitionism” demonstrates that this fashion capital, though half a century old, has evolved and stayed nimble. “I would say a museum of fashion is like a shark. It has to keep moving or it dies,” said Steele.

## IF YOU GO

**WHAT:** “Exhibitionism: 50 Years of The Museum at FIT”

**WHERE:** The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, Seventh Ave. at West 27th St.

**WHEN:** Through April 20, 2019





**Valerie Steele, chief curator of the  
Museum at FIT.** Photo: Zach Hilty/BFA



From the exhibit "Fairy Tale Fashion" (2016): An Alexander McQueen evening gown from 2007 with Rapunzel's golden locks fashioned from gold bugle beads. The Museum at FIT. Photo: Val Castronovo



From the exhibit "Global Fashion Capitals" (2015), left to right: Lisa Folawiyo, striped cotton dress with glass bead fringe, spring 2015, Nigeria. The Museum at FIT, Gift of Lisa Folawiyo. Big Park, denim and satin screen-printed dress, spring 2015, South Korea. The Museum at FIT, Gift of Big Park. Uma Wang, red and black wool dress, fall 2014, China. The Museum at FIT, Gift of Shanghai Uma Wang, Fashion Co. Ltd. Photo: © The Museum at FIT