

News Release

Designing Women: Fashion Creators and Their Interiors **November 30–May 14, 2023**



*Illustration by Bil Donovan. Inspired by Eileen Gray
and Paul Ruaud for Juliette Mathieu-Lévy
(Suzanne Talbot).*

The Museum at FIT (MFIT) presents ***Designing Women: Fashion Creators and Their Interiors***, the first exhibition that illuminates the profound connections between the worlds of modern high fashion and interior decoration. Drawn solely from MFIT's permanent collection, more than 60 garments and accessories by 40 female designers—including Coco Chanel, Elsa Schiaparelli, Ann Lowe, Mary Quant, Carolina Herrera, and Anna Sui—will be accompanied by small photographs of interiors, as well as a selection of large-scale drawings created exclusively for the exhibition by artist and FIT adjunct associate professor of Illustration Bil Donovan. The interiors range from luxe couture salons and apartments designed by the leading architects and interior decorators of their time to modest ateliers and homes decorated by designers themselves.

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Anna Sui at home, photograph by Miguel Flores-Vianna. Courtesy of Elle Décor.

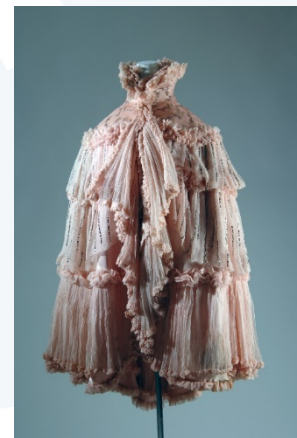


Kaftan ensemble by Anna Sui, autumn 2012. Gift of Anna Sui.

“Fashion designers have avidly incorporated interior decoration into their personal and professional lives,” said Patricia Mears, MFIT deputy director and curator of the exhibition. “Although there have been many articles and books documenting this phenomenon, ***Designing Women: Fashion Creators and Their Interiors*** is the first exhibition to explore the connection between these intertwined disciplines.” Together, the featured objects and images provide insights into the magical interiors made for the most innovative and important fashion creators of the modern era.



Cinq Heures chez Paquin (Five Hours at Paquin) by Henri Gervex, 1906.



Evening Cape by Jeanne Paquin, pink silk chiffon, Paris 1897. Museum purchase.

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Examples such as Coco Chanel’s sumptuous Paris pied-à-terre and Anna Sui’s whimsical New York apartment validate the belief that few disciplines exemplify the gracious art of living better than fashion and interior decoration. The creation of interiors that promote social progress—from workers’ rights to urban renewal—have been likewise advanced by female fashion creators such as Madeleine Vionnet to Tracy Reese. It is no surprise that interiors commissioned and created by female fashion designers continue to have profound influence, widespread appeal, and enduring relevance.



Rose Room of the Lucile Couture House in New York City, circa 1916. Courtesy of Special Collections and College Archives, Gladys Marcus Library, FIT.

The exhibition begins with objects dating to the 18th century, while the main focus is on the highly innovative period between 1890 and 1970. French rococo style was very influential during the late 19th century, when an increasing number of women founded important couture houses in Paris, London, and New York. At the same time, the field of interior decoration became a viable profession, thanks primarily to a small group of pioneering women on both sides of the Atlantic. Rather than espouse masculine modernism, these “great lady decorators,” as they were called, embraced a contemporary revival of the 18th-century decorative arts, textiles, and fashions.

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Tea gown and slip, attributed to Lucile, New York, circa 1918. Gift of Elizabeth Roberts.



Peignoir and slip, attributed to Lucile, New York, circa 1918. Gift of Elizabeth Roberts.

Among the fashion designers featured in the exhibition are pioneering Edwardian couturiers, who spearheaded the trend of feminine, intimately decorated couture houses, such as Jeanne Paquin, the Callot Sisters, and Lady Duff-Gordon, better known as Lucile. The latter was a close friend of Elsie de Wolfe, who is widely acknowledged to be the first modern interior decorator. The interwar years were a golden age for both fields. Some of fashion's most important creators such as Jeanne Lanvin, Madeleine Vionnet, Elsa Schiaparelli, and Juliette Mathieu-Lévy, owner of the millinery house Suzanne Talbot, were patrons of the era's greatest architects, craftspersons, and interior decorators including Jean-Michel Frank, Armand-Albert Rateau, Eileen Gray, and Jean Dunand.

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Le salon de verre, designed by Paul Ruaud, furniture by Eileen Gray, for Madame Mathieu-Lévy, (milliner J. Suzanne Talbot), Paris, ca. 1930.



Hat from J. Suzanne Talbot, Paris, circa 1908. Museum purchase.

After World War II, the collaboration between fashion designers and leading interior decorators continued, particularly in New York City. Two Park Avenue apartments—one for Hattie Carnegie by the exclusive French firm Jansen and the other by American’s legendary decorator Billy Baldwin for Mollie Parnis—exemplify this phenomenon. Later, in London during the swinging 1960s, Mary Quant commissioned Terence Conran to design her boutique called Bazaar.



Birdcage in the Schiaparelli perfume boutique, Paris, ca. 1937, by Jean Michel Frank.



Evening coat printed with butterflies by Elsa Schiaparelli, Paris, summer 1938. Gift of Mr. Rodman A. Heeren.

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The exhibition also includes the work of fashion designers who did their own decorating. Examples include: the colorful, art-infused, mid-century modern, high-rise unit of American sportswear designer Bonnie Cashin; the Dublin salon of Sybil Connolly, sheathed in hundreds of yards of the same finely pleated Irish linen used to make her couture garments; and Anna Sui's lush, vibrant, maximalist apartment.

Also featured are a few fashion designers who left the field to become decorators themselves, such as Barbara Hulanicki and Carolyne Roehm. Perhaps the most famous of all was Pauline Fairfax Potter, later known as the Baroness de Rothschild. While her French home, Château Mouton, was a masterpiece of modern interior decoration, so too was the modest New York City apartment she inhabited years earlier while working as the chief designer for the house of Hattie Carnegie.



*Illustration by Bil Donovan.
Inspired by Valentina Schlee.*

An exciting component of the exhibition will be the inclusion of original artwork by internationally celebrated illustrator Bil Donovan. Vibrant, colorful, as well as elegantly reductive, Donovan's illustrations have graced the editorial pages of countless publications and fashion brand advertisements around the world. His work is so impactful that Donovan was appointed Dior Beauty's first artist-in-residence in 2009, and he continues to serve as an ambassador for the brand.

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About The Museum at FIT (MFIT)

The Museum at FIT, which in March 2022 received its second accreditation by the American Alliance of Museums, is the only museum in New York City dedicated solely to the art of fashion. Best known for its innovative and award-winning exhibitions, the museum has a collection of more than 50,000 garments and accessories dating from the 18th century to the present. Like other fashion museums, such as the Musée de la Mode, the Mode Museum, and the Museo de la Moda, The Museum at FIT collects, conserves, documents, exhibits, and interprets fashion. The museum's mission is to advance knowledge of fashion through exhibitions, publications, and public programs. Visit fitnyc.edu/museum.

The museum is part of the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), a State University of New York (SUNY) college of art, design, business, and technology that has been at the crossroads of commerce and creativity for 75 years. With programs that blend hands-on practice, a strong grounding in theory, and a broad-based liberal arts foundation, FIT offers career education in nearly 50 areas, and grants associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees. FIT provides students with a complete college experience at an affordable cost, a vibrant campus life in New York City, and industry-relevant preparation for rewarding careers. Visit fitnyc.edu.

The Couture Council is a philanthropic membership group that helps support the exhibitions and programs of The Museum at FIT. The Couture Council Award for Artistry of Fashion is given to a selected designer at a benefit luncheon held every September. For information on the Couture Council, call (212) 217-4532 or email couturecouncil@fitnyc.edu.

The museum is open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays from noon to 8 pm, and Saturdays and Sundays from 10 am to 5 pm. Admission is free. It is mandatory that all visitors, regardless of their vaccination status, wear a face mask while in the museum. All visitors are requested to review the latest safety guidelines and protocols. [Find details at fitnyc.edu/museum/visit](https://fitnyc.edu/museum/visit).

For more information and the latest MFIT updates, visit the museum's website at fitnyc.edu/museum. You can also [register for the newsletter online](#) and follow the museum on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), and [Facebook](#).