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Fashioning Wonder: A Cabinet of Curiosities
February 19–April 20, 2025
Curated by Colleen Hill

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Fashioning Wonder: A Cabinet of Curiosities has been made possible thanks to the generosity of the Couture Council of The Museum at FIT.

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Cover: Necklace by Yves Saint Laurent (Robert Goossens), 1985, gift of Yves Saint Laurent. Dress by Jean Paul Gaultier, spring 1999, museum purchase. "Clock" bag by Lederer, circa 1955, museum purchase. "Hand" bag by Marcia Lloyd, 1986, museum purchase. "Butterfly" sandals by Sophia Webster, 2019, gift of Sophia Webster.

Interior: Mirror-embellished dress by CD Greene, 1996, gift of CD Greene. Metallic "skeleton" dress by Arzu Kaprol, spring 2013, gift of Arzu Kaprol. Butterfly-printed dress by Mary Katrantzou, spring 2019, museum purchase. Unless otherwise credited, all images are © The Museum at FIT.

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		<i>A Cabinet of Curiosities</i>							
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Fashioning Wonder: A Cabinet of Curiosities is a contemporary adaptation of a centuries-old phenomenon. Known in German as the Wunderkammer (“chamber of wonder”), these cabinets predate modern museums, showcasing collections owned by European royals, aristocrats, and scholars from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. A cabinet of curiosities could be a single, freestanding piece of furniture, an entire room, or a series of rooms. The word “cabinet” also described the collections themselves.

The expansion of global travel and trade, a greater interest in scientific learning, and the desire to acquire art and antiquities were among the historical conditions that fueled many collectors. The appearance of the cabinets inspired awe, and these sites of study also represented a microcosm of the world’s knowledge. The objects acquired fell into two general categories: *naturalia* (natural materials) and *artificialia* (human-made artifacts). With an array of items such as anatomical specimens, ancient coins, religious relics, and shells and coral, these collections also featured fashion—especially shoes, headdresses, and jewelry.

Viewers experienced fashion as a marker of history and a representation of the ceremonies and customs of cultures from around the world. Collectors throughout



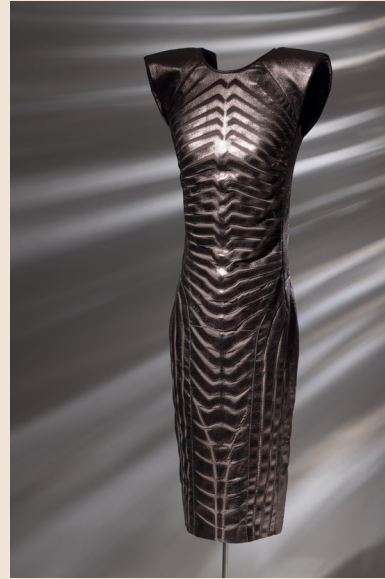
Europe shared knowledge about their acquisitions through publications—indicating how prevalent fashion was within cabinets of curiosities. Their catalogues reveal that the beauty and artisanship of garments were frequently admired. Yet these historic cabinets were problematic. Despite the esteem given to global fashion, collecting practices played a role in othering non-Europeans. Although some enthusiasts procured objects for study during their own travels, many purchased items from explorers who were “discovering”—and colonizing—other parts of the world.

Fashioning Wonder considers the Wunderkammer’s complex legacy, but it also offers an inventive new interpretation of the subject. Nearly 200 garments and accessories are organized into 10 key themes, each of which is inspired by the breadth of items—fashion and otherwise—collected within the cabinets. The objects are further chosen to pique curiosity through their rarity, beauty, or originality.

Collections of animals, vegetables, and minerals were prominent within many cabinets of curiosities, where they were often studied and artfully displayed. Fashion’s own fascination with the natural world is highlighted by a display of fashion SPECIMENS, as well as an AVIARY represented by a large, central “bird cage” containing a variety of feathered objects. Some historical cabinets featured menageries of live animals—collections of unusual birds were especially prestigious. Luxury fashion exploited feathers for centuries, a practice diminished by today’s ethical and environmental concerns.

Human anatomical specimens populated cabinets of curiosities, which were occasionally housed in a specialized space called an ANATOMICAL THEATRE. Innately intrigued by the human form, fashion designers both cover and reference the body in styles that take inspiration from bones, organs, and musculature.

The theme of ARTISANSHIP celebrates the techniques, materials, and tools of makers and creators. In addition to life-size garments superbly crafted in a variety of ways, this section includes miniature fashion objects to be admired for their intricate artisanship. Cabinets featured not only items made with extraordinary skill, but also the tools used to shape them. These were frequently marvelous creations in their own right.



text, cabinet visitors were emboldened to examine objects and make their own conjectures. Through a selection of historic, rare, and/or obsolete fashion accessories, *WHAT IS IT?* encourages visitors to guess how these items were made or worn before reading about them. *THE SENSES* includes recordings of the sounds made by several objects in the exhibition—usually silenced in a museum context. In *Fashioning Wonder*, visitors may touch a replica garment and open drawers filled with themed accessories.

Curiosity is broadly linked to concepts such as exploration, observation, interest, and learning, making it a deeply personal experience. How do elements such as unfamiliarity, scale, artistry, or display techniques affect one’s experience of viewing fashion in a museum? Through their own examinations of the many objects on view, I hope that visitors leave feeling inspired and—most importantly—curious.

Works of fine art, especially paintings, inspired the KUNSTKAMMER (“chamber of art”). This section showcases canonical artworks that fashion designers transformed into clothing. Similarly, collectors integrated VANITAS paintings—seventeenth-century artworks that symbolize the transience of human life and its conceits—into their repositories. A tableau of accessories, arranged to resemble one of these artworks, is a reminder that fashion within museums often memorializes vanities and desires from the past.

Optical marvels such as telescopes, camera obscuras, prisms, and mirrors form another category within the cabinets. REFLECTIONS AND REFRACTIONS spotlights garments embellished with reflective materials or designs inspired by Op art or kaleidoscopes. Objects of illusion offered humorously clever ways to fool cabinet visitors. The art of trompe l’oeil (“deceives the eye”) can be traced back to ancient Greece, and its techniques remain wondrous. ILLUSIONS highlights that this effect in fashion, popularized throughout the twentieth century, is artfully achieved through a variety of techniques.

Collectors took pleasure in experiencing and sharing the unfamiliar. Whereas contemporary museum-goers usually acquire information through written

Colleen Hill, curator

