

The Museum at FIT presents  
***Fashioning Wonder: A Cabinet of Curiosities***  
February 19–April 20, 2025

The Museum at FIT (MFIT) presents [\*Fashioning Wonder: A Cabinet of Curiosities\*](#), an inventive exhibition that provides the first in-depth exploration of the fascinating connections between cabinets of curiosities and fashion. Also known as *wunderkammern* in German, cabinets of curiosities can be traced back to the early 16th century. They were precursors to the modern museum, and many included examples of clothing. The exhibition features nearly 200 garments and accessories, almost exclusively selected from MFIT’s permanent collection, which are inspired by the breadth of objects collected within the cabinets. The objects on view, many of which are shown for the first time, are meant to pique curiosity through their rarity, beauty, or originality.



*Mary Katrantzou, printed, embroidered, and beaded dress with net overlay, spring 2019.  
Museum purchase.*

An introductory gallery examines the history of cabinets of curiosities, explaining their significance to the Age of Exploration (15th to 17th centuries), their ties to colonialism, and the need for contemporary museums to be more inclusive and informed about the objects they acquire. It also highlights the interconnections between curiosity, creativity, and collecting. A dress by Mary Katrantzou dates to her 10th anniversary collection in 2019, in which she expressed the urge “to amass like objects of a particular kind, to record, to study and identify, to protect and cherish.” Its intricate patterning includes butterflies and seashells, both of which are regularly featured in the cabinets.

Within the main gallery, a playful exhibition design encourages exploration of the show’s 10 themes, divided into sections, through custom-made sets, each of which offers a contemporary, fashion-focused take on cabinets of curiosities. The popularity of materials of the animal, vegetable, and mineral varieties inspired a section on ***Specimens***. It illustrates fashion’s longstanding interest in the natural world, with some objects displayed in unexpected ways. On view are a variety of earrings from makers including Kai-Yin Lo, Ted Muehling, and Tiffany’s, displayed in small glass jars to evoke the appearance of scientific specimens. A fall 2013 gown by Tom Ford, intricately beaded in a zebra pattern, is complete with a horsehair “mane” that runs down the center back of the floor-length garment.



*“Specimen jars” featuring earrings from labels including Kai-Yin Lo, Ted Muehling, and Tiffany’s.*



*Tom Ford, sequined and beaded zebra-print dress with horsehair “mane,” fall 2013. Gift of the Estate of Joy Venturini Bianchi.*

An **Aviary** is represented by a large, central “bird cage,” in which a variety of feathered objects are housed. Some cabinets featured menageries of live animals, and collections of unusual birds were especially prestigious. Feathers have been associated with luxury fashion for centuries, though ethical and environmental concerns have diminished the use of feathers in recent years. On view for the first time ever is a table that was densely and vividly adorned with feathers by milliner-turned-photographer Bill Cunningham.



*Adolfo, feathered headdress, 1962–1964. Donated in memory of Isabel Eberstadt by her family. Bill Cunningham, feathered table, 1960s. Gift of Frederick Eberstadt.*

Human anatomical specimens were also included in cabinets of curiosities, and they were sometimes housed in a specialized space referred to as an **Anatomical Theatre**. Fashion designers have been equally intrigued by the human form, simultaneously covering it and referencing it in designs that take inspiration from bones, organs, and musculature. Among the objects featured is a body-skimming 2013 dress by Arzu Kaprol, made from metallic leather with a cut-out skeletal design.



*Arzu Kaprol, “skeleton” dress in rose metallic leather, spring 2013. Gift of Arzu Kaprol.*

The techniques, tools, and materials used to create artifacts were often celebrated in the cabinets, and the exhibition’s section on **Artisanship** reflects this idea. In addition to garments superbly crafted in a variety of techniques, this section includes miniature fashion objects that can be admired for their intricate handcraft. Cabinets featured items not only made with extraordinary skill, but also the tools used to create them—frequently objects of beauty in their own right. This idea also extends to fashion, as demonstrated by items such as a late-19th-century dress form and a sculptural, mid-20th-century hat block.



*A group of miniature objects. From left: Late 1930s felt hat adorned with tiny hats by Hattie Carnegie, gift of William F. Sweeney. Circa 1890 red wool dress (dressmaker's sample), museum purchase. Circa 1910–1915 black rubber boots (salesperson's sample), gift of Mike Dykeman.*



*Fashion tools: Brass sleeve-drafting tool from 1893 (hanging), museum purchase. Early 1950s cedar hat block (on pedestal), gift of Rose Simon. Metal wire dress form, 1881, gift of Mrs. Herbert Singer.*

The ***Kunstkammer*** (“Chamber of Art”) section of the exhibition is inspired by works of fine art, especially paintings, that were commonly collected. It showcases canonical artworks that have been transformed into clothing, including a 2018 Comme des Garçons dress featuring the 1591 painting *Vertumnus* by Giuseppe Arcimboldo—a composite portrait of Emperor Rudolf II that became part of his substantial assemblage of curiosities.



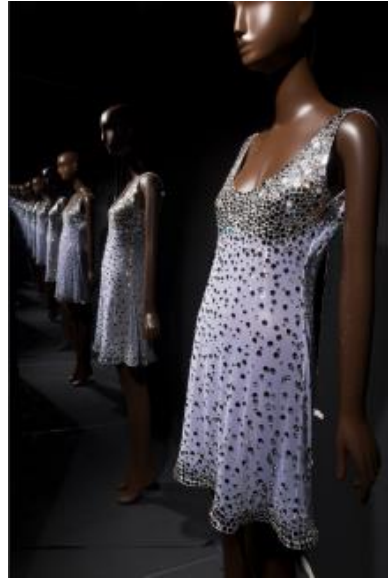
*Comme des Garçons, polyester, cotton, and nylon dress printed with Arcimboldo's painting *Vertumnus*, spring 2018. Gift of Nordstrom.*

Similarly, **Vanitas** paintings—17th-century artworks that featured groups of symbolic objects representing the transience of human life and its conceits—were often incorporated into collections of curiosities. The exhibition includes its own version of a vanitas tableau, created using fashion accessories. These will include a pair of Sophia Webster’s elegant butterfly shoes and a skull-shaped leather bag by AMBUSH x Masaya Kushino, representing the fragility of life and mortality.



*Sophia Webster, Chiara sandals with multicolor embroidery and hand-painted heels, 2019. Gift of Sophia Webster.*

Optical marvels such as telescopes, camera obscuras, prisms, and mirrors formed another collecting category within the cabinets. **Reflections and Refractions** includes objects that are embellished with reflective materials or feature optical or kaleidoscopic designs. Such eye-catching techniques—exemplified by a 1996 dress by CD Greene, designed for Tina Turner and adorned with rhinestones and small mirrors—are heightened by the use of mirrors in the exhibition design.



*CD Greene, white stretch-nylon dress with crystal rhinestones and mirror beads, 1996. Gift of CD Greene.*

Objects of illusion offered humorous or clever ways to fool cabinet visitors. The art of *trompe l'oeil* (meaning “deceives the eye”) can be traced as far back as ancient Greece. Its use in fashion, popularized over the course of the 20th century, can be achieved through print, construction, or embellishment. ***Illusions*** features a 1955 dress by Pucci, made from the label’s impressively convincing “Visone” (“Mink”) printed silk, complete with “tails” edging the skirt hem.



*Pucci, Visone (Mink) trompe l'oeil printed crepe de chine dress, 1954–1955. Gift of Joan Kaufman.*

The final sections of the exhibition are designed for audience interaction, which was an important aspect of visitor experience within early cabinets of curiosities. ***What Is It?*** takes its cue from the rare and unusual objects found in early collections. Visitors are encouraged to test their knowledge of fashion history by observing a selection of curious or obsolete fashion accessories, with the goal of guessing how they were made, used, or worn before learning about them.

***The Senses*** includes a touchable replica of a Molyneux dress from circa 1948 (made by Katherine Shark, a graduate student in FIT's MA Fashion and Textile Studies program), shown alongside the original object. The dress is fashioned with eight functional pockets around the skirt—a nod to the small, private “collections” of objects we sometimes carry on our person. The sounds made by several objects—usually silenced in the context of a museum exhibition—are recorded for visitors to experience. This includes a red silk umbrella from the late 1950s, which features a wooden, cello-shaped handle that doubles as a music box. When wound, it plays “The Blue Danube” waltz—a detail intended to add a bit of wonder to everyday life.

*Fashioning Wonder: A Cabinet of Curiosities* is curated by Dr. Colleen Hill, senior curator of Costume, MFIT. A corresponding symposium, *Wondrous Objects*, will be held on March 28, 2025.

#### **About The Museum at FIT (MFIT)**

The Museum at FIT, which in 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](http://fitnyc.edu/museum).

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](mailto: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. For more information and the latest updates, visit the museum's website at [fitnyc.edu/museum](http://fitnyc.edu/museum). To subscribe to the museum's newsletter, [register here](#). Follow MFIT on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), and [Facebook](#).

#### About FIT

A part of the State University of New York (SUNY), FIT has been a leader in career education in art, design, business, and technology throughout its history. Providing more than 8,000 students with



an uncommon blend of hands-on, practical experience, theory, and a firm grounding in the liberal arts, the college offers a wide range of affordable programs that foster innovation and collaboration. Its distinctive curriculum is geared to today's rapidly growing creative economy, including fields such as computer animation, toy design, production management, film and media, and cosmetics and fragrance marketing. Internationally renowned, FIT draws on its New York City location to provide a vibrant, creative community in which to learn. The college offers nearly 50 majors and grants AAS, BFA, BS, MA, MFA, and MPS degrees, preparing students for professional success and leadership in the new creative economy. Among notable alumni in fashion are Calvin Klein, Michael Kors, Norma Kamali, Reem Acra, Brian Atwood, Stephen Burrows, Dennis Basso, Francisco Costa, Nanette Lepore, Bibhu Mohapatra, Ralph Rucci, John Bartlett, Peter Do, Daniel Roseberry, and Michelle Smith. Other prominent graduates include Leslie Blodgett, creator of bareMinerals; international restaurant designer Tony Chi; and Nina Garcia, editor-in-chief of *Elle*. [fitnyc.edu](http://fitnyc.edu)