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The Louvre Makes a Major Fashion Statement

BY TINA ISAAC-GOIZE
January 23, 2025



"The medieval period speaks to my heart. It's an era of courage, when heroism is a mode of expression," Jean-Charles de Castelbajon, fall-winter 2010-2011: medieval camouflage tapestry ensemble with Bambi motif, antler headpiece in faux fur. Photo: Musée du Louvre / Nicolas Bousser



With the men's collections in full swing and Couture right around the corner, the Louvre Museum today will unveil "Louvre Couture," the first major exhibition to place masterworks of modern fashion—and their inspiration—within the broader context of French history and decorative arts.

Keeping company with tapestries, armor, jewels, enamel, goldsmithing, bronzes, cabinetry, porcelains and other ornaments that embody the glory of French craftsmanship are looks by 45 houses and designers, among them Balenciaga by both Cristobal and Demna, Hubert de Givenchy, Christian Dior by John Galliano and Maria Grazia Chiuri, Schiaparelli by Daniel Roseberry, Nicolas Ghesquière for Louis Vuitton, and pieces from final collections —by Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel and by Gianni Versace—as well as leading indies like Marine Serre, Erdem, Undercover, Thom Browne and Iris van Herpen.

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In all, about 100 pieces of couture, ready-to-wear, and accessories dating from 1949 to the present day are installed throughout the Descriptive Cabinet department on the first floor of

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pieces may be spinning throughout the Louvre's Courtyard as part of the first show in the Richelieu wing. "Louvre Couture" will be fitted in grand style on March 4 with the first annual Grand Diner du Louvre, an event sponsored by Visa Infinite. At press time, organizers announced that 30 tables already had been auctioned off, meeting the fundraising goal of 1 million euros.

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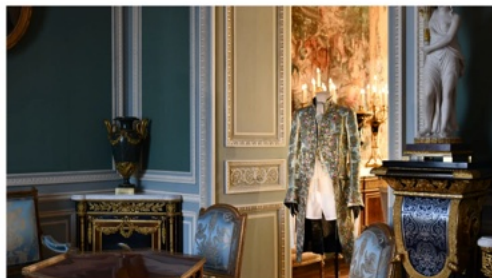
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Star fashion curator Olivier Gabet, the new director of the decorative arts department, spoke with *Vogue* about the making of the exhibition and what the world's most famous museum brings to fashion—and vice versa.



This conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity.



From the Louis Vuitton spring 2018 collection by Nicolas Ghesquière, a sporty, urban riff on 18th century French style, one of several pieces by the designer included in this show. Photo: Musée du Louvre / Nicolas Bousser



At left, a metallic knit and organza couture look by Rabih Kayrouz, fall 2019. At right, a bejeweled blue velvet ensemble by Karl Lagerfeld for the "Paris-Byzance" métiers d'art collection, 2010. Photo: Musée du Louvre / Nicolas Bousser

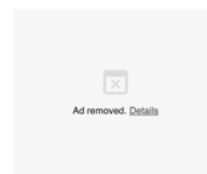
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Why did you want to bring fashion into the Louvre?

When I arrived, in 2022, [Louvre president-director] Laurence des Cars and I spoke a lot about all the programming we do around contemporary creation. We have choreographers, theater people, writers, painters, residencies, and I said we can't have all these creatives and not make fashion a part of it. Fashion has to be here: it's a major means of artistic expression today. It also makes sense because we have longstanding ties with fashion, whether through shows staged here by houses like Louis Vuitton and Dior or acquisitions and renovations that have been supported by the private sector, notably LVMH and Kering. That said, the Louvre exists a bit above the fray. We don't need more visitors: we have almost 9 million a year. But fashion can change how people look at us. Even if we are talking about haute couture and extravagant prices, fashion is part of today's popular culture, of visual culture. Lots of people feel in phase with fashion, and this is a way of inviting them in and letting them discover that they're in phase with the museum, too.

How did you define your approach to "Louvre Couture"?

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It was very precise. The Louvre doesn't have fashion collections and never will, those collections belong to other institutions like the MAD (Museum of Decorative Arts) next door and the Galliera. But we do have 32,000 art objects, among them 300 works left to the Louvre by Madame Carven, pieces that belonged to Jacques Doucet and a beautiful diamond box that belonged to Yves Saint Laurent.

When you look at that, and the birth of haute couture, and how collecting allowed all these designers to consolidate their social status, there are deep cultural, societal, sociological reasons for us to do this. So our question was: how did designers look at the works in the Louvre, draw inspiration from them, reinterpret them? When you take a step back, fashion is everywhere you look—in Antiquity, in Babylon, in Athens, in Venetian painting and French sculpture, absolutely everywhere. At the Louvre, fashion isn't 'held'; it's worn.

Could you highlight a few examples for those who aren't in Paris right now?

The idea was really to follow the chronological order of the collections by blocks, from Byzantine to the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the 17th and 18th centuries, the Empire, the Second Empire, etc. That way, we could show that, in his final couture collection, Karl Lagerfeld was inspired by an 18th century blue and white lacquered commode. Sometimes, the interpretations are freer, as with Versace, but you can see that designers are interested in moments in the history of objects. More broadly, it's interesting to observe how the decorative arts influence them personally: we all know the photos of the interior decor in Lagerfeld's, Dior's and Saint Laurent's homes; with young talents like Blazy or Pieter Mulier, design and photography is always very present.

What was the reaction among houses and designers?

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I think the Louvre can feel a little intimidating for everyone, even very famous designers who don't shy away from anything. I think it's been a pleasure for all involved. But more than that, these designers have an extraordinary capacity for work, it's crazy. For a house, putting on an individual exhibition is high-pressure no matter the size. Here, 45 houses and designers come together as part of a collective history but given that the installation is spread out over 9,000 square meters, there's space for everyone to have their own dialogue. We paid attention to details like symbolic numbers—Chanel has look number five (for its famous perfume), Dior has 30 (after its Avenue Montaigne headquarters). It's very 'feel-good.' There's this relationship to history. They're always being asked to be ever more creative, to change things all the time, whereas some painters did the same thing their whole life and they passed into posterity. I think the Louvre puts things a little more into perspective, which is a positive for our friends in fashion and everyone else.

What were some of the hard choices?

We could have done this with ten times the number of pieces, and we had to refuse hundreds of them. There are designers and houses I admire that aren't here because there wasn't that specific parallel to our collections. Courrèges, Lanvin, Anthony Vaccarello's Saint Laurent, Nina Ricci, Pierre Cardin. I love Christian Lacroix, but how do you choose one dress to explain something? He's done many exhibitions, and to me, in a way, he is all this, in fact; it's thanks to people like Lacroix that such shows are possible today. But I wanted the choices to be more surprising. With people like Alexander McQueen, Jonathan Anderson, Galliano, Lagerfeld, and Balenciaga, it's like a boulevard because it's about a specific tie, a certain culture.

And what do you think are the biggest surprises?

Actually, I think it's freedom. People tend to think of museums as impressive and rigid, a place where you have to act a certain way, but it's really a place of freedom. You don't have to like the Mona Lisa, you can come with curiosity and an open mind and find so many different things. It might be something by Jonathan Anderson, a shoe by Christian Louboutin, a dress by Olivier Rousteing for Balmain inspired by Marie-Antoinette—and I can promise you that when you put it next to an object that belonged to her, it works. It might not be what you'd expect, but I also think that museum-goers are a lot more sophisticated than they get credit for.

"Louvre Couture" will run through July 21, 2025.



From left to right: Wool crepe suit with handmade brass bust, from the "Interno" haute couture collection by Schiaparelli, spring 2023. "Cathedral" dress in copper-plated 3D-printed polyamide (Selective Laser Sintering), Iris van Herpen, spring 2012. Minidress in stretch silk knit with mesh overlay in horn and lambskin, Hermes spring 2021. Blue cotton top with copper wings by Jonathan Anderson for Loewe, fall 2023. Photo: Musée du Louvre / Nicolas Bousser

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From Balenciaga's 50th anniversary couture collection by Demna, a black pantsuit in heavy technical tweed with lacquered dome hat, fall 2021. Photo: Musée du Louvre / Nicolas Bousser



From left to right: Chain metal minidress by Paco Rabanne, fall 1967 haute couture collection. From the 52nd haute couture collection by Balenciaga, an armor dress with elements in galvanized resin, fall 2023. Jacket in sculpted, hammered metal by Jonathan Anderson and the artist Elie Hirsch for Loewe, fall 2023. Silver mirror dress by Gareth Pugh, spring 2011. Photo: Musée du Louvre / Nicolas Bousser

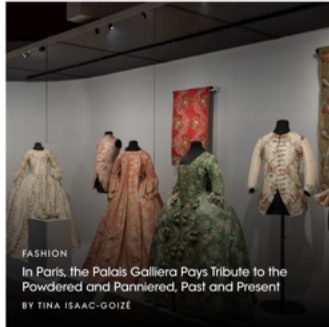




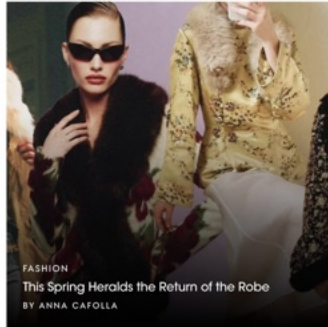
Evening dress in pleated tulle embroidered with mosaic flowers evoking floor motifs in Baroque and Renaissance palazzos, Fendi fall 2019 haute couture collection. Photo: Musée du Louvre / Nicolas Bousser

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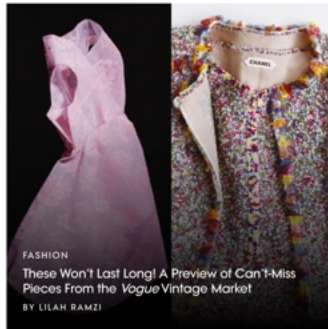
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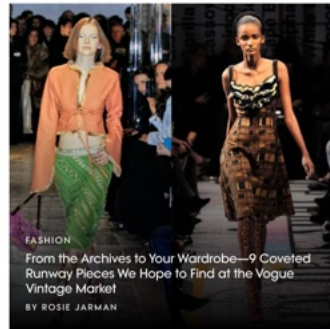
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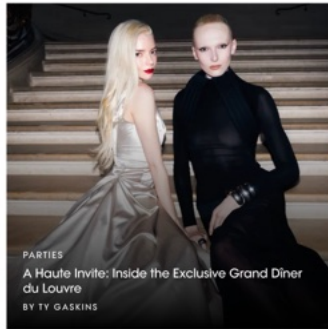
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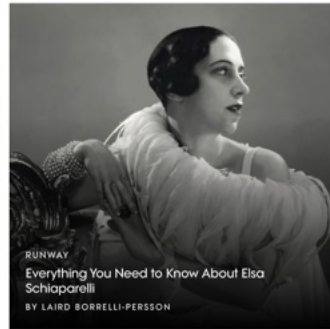
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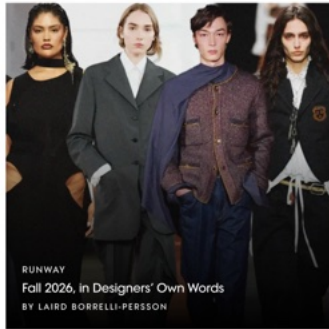
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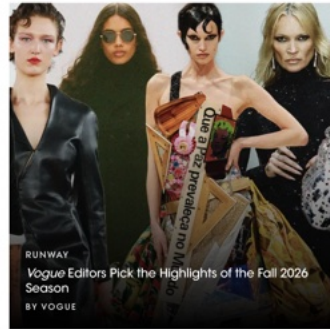
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