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Review: “Fashioning San Francisco: A Century of Style”



BY LIBERTY IMHOFF · JULY 22, 2024



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When we think of San Francisco, many of us think of radical protests, radical music, and radical acceptance of different cultures.

But, the de Young Museum argues, San Francisco also has a radically good fashion history.

In *Fashioning San Francisco: A Century of Style*, the Herzog & de Meuron-designed institution plays host to high fashion and haute couture loans from local sources paired with 100 pieces from the museum's collection. The fashions featured date from the twentieth and twenty-first century and are broken down into distinct sections, with the exhibit encompassing designers from Europe and Asia as well as the United States.

Some of these names will be easily recognizable to the casual fashion observer – Chanel, Valentino, Rei Kawakubo, and Alexander McQueen garments make appearances – but designers whose careers began more recently such as Kei Ninomiya, Christopher John Rogers, and Rodarte's Mulleavy sisters also show up.

Fashioning San Francisco begins with ensembles demonstrating the San Francisco retail scene's return to form in the years following a disastrous earthquake and fire in 1906.



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Later, the museum takes note of the transformation of the little black dress from a staple of those in mourning to an everyday staple during World War I. One of the garments featured in this section, which can be seen in the lower left corner of the above photo, happened to be the first dress designed by the Algerian-born designer Yves Saint Laurent during his work for French powerhouse Christian Dior's Fall/Winter 1955 Haute Couture collection.

Additionally, *Fashioning San Francisco* has a section titled "Global Aesthetic Influences" which admits that the museum's collection reflects the practice of cultural appropriation due to San Francisco's high level of ethnic diversity. To be fair, however, this statement could likely be made by every museum in Western culture – but the de Young Museum is one of the only museums honest enough to make the point so plainly and directly.

The de Young Museum partnered with Snapchat to create an augmented reality experience for museum-goers – Augmented Reality Mirrors – to virtually try on three garments from the exhibit. I did not partake, but this is a compelling feature that could potentially take hold in other fashion exhibits in the future by creating an added layer of interactivity for attendees.

An interesting point gathered from the exhibit is that philanthropy – and the ensuing galas and other formal parties has been important in San Francisco for a long time, dating back to the city’s growth in the nineteenth century and the lack of government infrastructure to assist residents during that time.

This left an opening for department stores like I. Magnin & Company and City of Paris to provide extravagant fashions for society doyennes for those galas, balls, and other high-profile events such as opening nights to the San Francisco Opera and San Francisco Ballet.

To speak particularly on the fashion sense of San Francisco, you would never have expected the level of studied extravagance that the museum displayed of San Franciscan style, given the laid-back and casual demeanor of the everyday city resident and the accompanying low-key fashion choices. The high society members whose ensembles are featured in this exhibition carried a sophisticated flair, to be sure, but there is no particular common thread in this exhibit that denotes a San Franciscan means of dressing.



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Where this exhibit excels is its ability to paint a sartorial timeline of the lives of San Francisco’s societal figures and use that timeline as a peek into the city’s past as a whole. By featuring the garments of prominent philanthropists such as Ethel Sperry Crocker, Dodie Rosekrans, and Denise Hale while also displaying their willingness to take risks on wearing young and exciting fashion talent in the public sphere, museum visitors get a complete visual picture of who these financially generous women were and what they stood for in being arts patrons.

“Fashioning San Francisco: A Century of Style” is open to the public for viewing through August 11, 2024, at the de Young Museum in San Francisco, CA.