



Eleanor Lambert: Empress of Seventh Avenue has been organized by graduate students in the Fashion Institute of Technology's MA program in Fashion and Textile Studies: History, Theory, Museum Practice, with the support of Shonagh Marshall and Elizabeth Way.

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#EleanorLambert

The Museum at FIT

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Cover photo: Eleanor Lambert by Peter Fink for *The Denver Post*, August 14, 1961. School of Graduate Studies Collection.
Inside: Bill Blass, coat, printed linen, c. 1970, gift of Eleanor Lambert © The Museum at FIT

The Museum at FIT

Eleanor Lambert

Empress of Seventh Avenue



Presented by the School of Graduate Studies

Eleanor Lambert

Empress of
Seventh Avenue



Eleanor Lambert: Empress of Seventh Avenue is the first exhibition to explore one of the most influential members of the New York fashion industry. Often working behind the scenes in service of her illustrious clientele, Eleanor Lambert was the “original” fashion publicist. Born in Crawfordsville, Indiana, in 1903, Lambert went on to study art and



sculpture at the John Herron Art Institute in Indianapolis and the Art Institute of Chicago. She came to New York City in 1925 and worked as a publicist for artists such as Jackson Pollock, Salvador Dalí, and Cecil Beaton before transitioning into the growing fashion industry during the early 1930s. When Lambert began her career in fashion, Paris was the world’s undisputed fashion capital, and New York’s thriving garment industry mostly copied Parisian designs. However, by the early twentieth century, American industry leaders began to push for recognition of American design talent. The need for this recognition was underscored by Paris’s isolation during World War II. Eleanor Lambert therefore saw a window of opportunity to help put the American fashion industry on the map.

Organizations

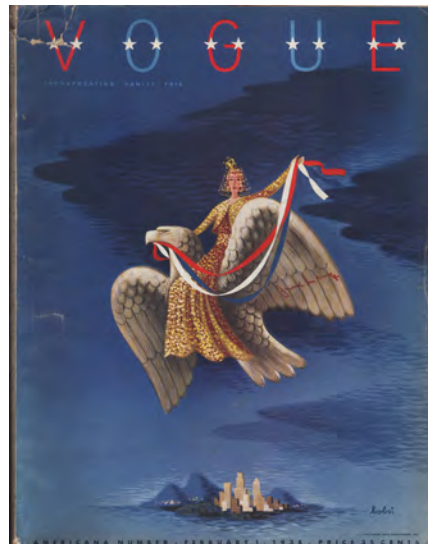
Eleanor Lambert created numerous integral organizations to promote the New York fashion industry and American designers. She was the press director for the New York Dress Institute beginning

in the 1940s, helped found the Coty American Fashion Critics’ Awards (1942), and began Press Week (1943) and the Council of Fashion Designers of America (1962). These initiatives celebrated American designers and promoted them to the American public.

Fashion Meets Politics

Lambert also harnessed the power of political influence to promote American designers. In 1963 she testified before the U.S. Senate petitioning for fashion’s recognition as an art form, thereby allowing the Council of Fashion Designers of America to receive financial support from the newly formed National Council for the Arts. Lambert quoted an essay written by Harriet Beecher Stowe to explain the importance of the American fashion industry, stating, “When the American girl adopts unnatural fashion from foreign circles, she does not represent either her character, her education, or her good points.”

In 1960, when controversy surrounded Jackie Kennedy amid allegations of her buying French fashion, New York garment worker union leaders urged Lambert to intervene. She rebutted Kennedy’s denial, telling the future first lady, “But you are buying French clothes. *Women’s Wear Daily* will catch you, so don’t lie.” In response, Kennedy hired American designer Oleg Cassini as her “secretary of style.” Although Cassini copied French designs, he brought Kennedy’s fashion under an American name.



Working with U.S. presidents, Lambert also produced fashion shows such as the “March of Dimes Fashion Show” (1944) and the White House “Discover America Fashion Show” (1968) to simultaneously support public programs and promote American designers.

Creative Society

Lambert collaborated with artists, dancers, socialites, actresses, and writers to bring glamour and prestige to the American fashion industry. For example, she brought the International Best-Dressed List to America in 1940, taking it over from the designer Mainbocher, who originally created it in Paris to flatter couture clients. Drawing from her past art world experience, she commissioned Salvador Dalí to design a campaign for the International Silk Association in 1949. Author Truman Capote recruited Eleanor Lambert to help plan the “Party of the Century,” his infamous Black and White Ball in 1966. She created the guest list, tracked publicity, and organized the party.

Black Fashion Support

During a time when diversity was little supported in the fashion world, Eleanor Lambert was an early advocate for black fashion professionals. She hired black models for the Coty Awards, New York Press Week, the

1) Detail of Bill Blass Coat, c. 1970, Gift of Eleanor Lambert © The Museum at FIT 2) Press release for Lilly Daché, 1966, Courtesy FIT Special Collections 3) Traina-Norell Evening Gown, c. 1947, Gift of Beatrice Renfield © The Museum at FIT 4) Adolfo Mask Worn at The Black & White Ball, 1966, Gift of Penelope Tree © The Museum at FIT 5) *Vogue*, February 1938, Graduate Studies Collection 6) Stephen Burrows Jacket, Fall 1970, Gift of Stephen Burrows © The Museum at FIT 7) Mainbocher Dress, 1943, Gift of Edith D’Errecalde-Hadamard © The Museum at FIT

“March of Dimes Fashion Show,” the 1959 Moscow Exhibition, and the 1973 “Battle of Versailles” fashion show, giving them unprecedented opportunities and exposure. Lambert selected designer Stephen Burrows to represent American fashion at the Versailles show, promoted designer Jon Haggins through her “She” column, which was published in sixty newspapers around the world, and assisted *Ebony* fashion editor Audrey Smaltz. Smaltz explained that “...in the 1970s some fashion designers were not that open to lending out garments to a black publication. ... I could call on Eleanor and she made sure that her clients gave us garments from their current collections to photograph.”



Eleanor Lambert’s Vision of Seventh Avenue

Lambert’s eye for talent was impeccable, helping to shape the American fashion industry. Many of her clients received Coty Awards and other accolades for their work. Lambert’s commitment to her clients meant that she defended them when they received backlash for their radical actions or



designs. She supported Rudi Gernreich in 1963 when his avant-garde suit design, featuring two different lapels, prompted the established designer Norman Norell to claim that the Coty Award jury was more interested in praising flashy and rebellious collections than appreciating high fashion design. This incident illustrated the modernizing fashion industry and how Eleanor Lambert skillfully kept up with these changes throughout her career. Although she died on October 7, 2003, Lambert’s legacy lives on through the designers she propelled to stardom and the essential role she played in the creation of New York as a global fashion capital. ☆

#EleanorLambert