

FASHION CITIES

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Abstract

The history of Western fashion is closely related to the history of urban life. As cultural geographer [David Gilbert](#) has claimed, this complex relationship underpins contemporary understandings of global fashion as a system orchestrated around a shifting network of world cities, particularly Paris, New York, London, Milan, and Tokyo but also incorporating (at various times) Moscow, Vienna, Berlin, São Paulo, Kuwait City, Cape Town, Barcelona, Antwerp, Delhi, Melbourne, Sydney, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Mumbai, and others. This hierarchy of locations, he has suggested, “has to be understood through ... a long-term history, which places fashion at the intersection of key cultural and economic processes that shaped the urban order.” These included the urban consumer revolution of the eighteenth century, the economic and symbolic workings of European imperialism, the growing influence of a U.S. engagement with European fashion (specifically via the medium of film), and the emergence of a distinctively modern fashion promotional industry (advertising and magazines, fashion weeks, and runway presentations) focused on a few key urban centers.

The Early History of Fashion Cities

The history of Western fashion is closely related to the history of urban life. As cultural geographer [David Gilbert](#) has claimed, this complex relationship underpins contemporary understandings of global fashion as a system orchestrated around a shifting network of world cities, particularly Paris, New York, London, Milan, and Tokyo but also incorporating (at various times) Moscow, Vienna, Berlin, São Paulo, Kuwait City, Cape Town, Barcelona, Antwerp, Delhi, Melbourne, Sydney, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Mumbai, and others. This hierarchy of locations, he has suggested, “has to be understood through ... a long-term history, which places fashion at the intersection of key cultural and economic processes that shaped the urban order.” These included the urban consumer revolution of the eighteenth century, the economic and symbolic workings of European imperialism, the growing influence of a U.S. engagement with European fashion (specifically via the medium of film), and the emergence of a distinctively modern fashion promotional industry (advertising and magazines, fashion weeks, and runway presentations) focused on a few key urban centers.

The first modern centers of fashion production, distribution, and display prospered because of the concurrent existence of clusters of highly skilled clothing producers; local and international markets for the trading and dissemination of raw materials, finished goods, and printed representations of them; and magnificent court cultures where the promotion of luxury was a social and ethical necessity. All three factors were often interdependent, echoing fashion's generic character as an amalgamation of the forces of production, distribution, and consumption. But the emphasis and effect differed from city to city, leading to local distinctions and wider competition. Thus, the rising dominance of Burgundian, Venetian, and Spanish sartorial styles in formations of early modern European taste reflected those moments during which their respective courts (and their host cities) enjoyed unchallenged political, economic, and military influence. In fourteenth-, fifteenth-, and sixteenth-century Venice, Florence, Madrid, Paris, Bruges, and London, fine textiles and clothes were also as significant an indicator of civic power as the streets, squares, guildhalls, and palaces that signified heightened metropolitan status in architectural terms. Furthermore, such sites offered spaces where crowds might congregate, classes of people intermingle, and individuals compete for attention through the modishness of their attire. To be fashionable was to be urban and vice versa.

By the late seventeenth century, the dual systems of mercantile trade and courtly display had produced a convergence whereby Paris emerged as the prime center of urban fashionability and the first of fashion's world cities. The nearby court of the "Sun King" Louis XIV utilized the power of fashion propaganda for dynastic and nationalistic prominence in unprecedented ways. Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Louis's most powerful statesman, is anecdotally said to have remarked that fashion is to France what the gold mines of Peru are to Spain. Royal sponsorship of French textile, ceramics, metal, and furniture manufacturers as producers of substitutes for Spanish and Italian luxury imports, in addition to the spectacular consolidation of the king's household at Versailles as a carefully managed symbol of absolutism, strengthened the idea of French fashion as a vehicle for control and promotion. Ambitious courtiers and subjects were kept in check by a complex system of sartorial regulations, and foreign competitors were awed into submission by the staging of ostentatious examples of fashionable consumption, both personal and ceremonial.

The labor that lay behind this emphasis on the creation of fashionable personae, lifestyles, and happenings was located in Paris and underpinned the transformation of its economy and international profile. Unsurprisingly, the thousands of weavers, embroiderers, tailors, dressmakers, and milliners employed in the service of the court at Versailles were also able to establish themselves as an alternative source of fashion knowledge, materials, and techniques to a local clientele. The demimonde of wealthy courtesans and actresses at home in the city, the rising Parisian bourgeoisie, and increasing numbers of overseas and provincial visitors formed a new audience for their goods and a new conduit for trends that operated independently of those that trickled down from the monarchy. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Parisian tastes, freed from the restrictions of official practice, were also attracting the attention of a younger aristocratic generation. After 1715 Louis XV's circle chose to embrace the chic urbanity of metropolitan modes over fossilized court ceremonial; in this context, the Paris-based purveyor of fashion gained a new prominence. As historical sociologist [Norbert Elias](#) has observed, the "civilising and cultural physiognomy" of court society "was taken over by professional-bourgeois society, partly as a heritage."

The complicated guild regulations that governed the production of Parisian fashion in the eighteenth century (preceding the equally severe edicts of the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture* in the twentieth century) threw up discrete categories of producers, most notably the *maitresses couturieres* (responsible for the cutting-out and construction of the basic garment) and the *marchandes de modes* (who supplied trimmings and had more influence over fashion directions). The latter demarcation described the professional identity of Rose Bertin of the rue Saint-Honoré, dressmaker to Marie Antoinette; her reputation as a domineering dictator of ancien-régime style arguably formed the prototype from which later constructions of the Parisian fashion designer developed. Certainly, as for several of her successors, from Charles Worth in the 1870s to Coco Chanel in the 1930s and Yves Saint Laurent in the 1970s, her expertise lay in a masterful juxtaposing of existing elements sourced from the city's rich supply of exquisitely crafted products, the ability to flatter and anticipate the tastes of her elite clients, and a driving self-promotional force.

Toilette de ville by A. Foa, from *Le Moniteur de la Mode: Journal du Grande Monde*, 1893. In the nineteenth century, Paris came to epitomize luxury consumption, and the title of this print indicates that the fashionable woman in the picture is wearing an outfit made to be worn in the city. Picture Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Such a characterization underlines the continuing importance of the couturier's personality to enduring ideas of Paris as a premier fashion city, but the gradual development of the physical city in which Bertin worked also contributed to the creation of a powerful myth of Parisian prestige, endorsed in countless guidebooks and subsequent representations of what the sociological and cultural critic Walter Benjamin would come to call the "capital of the nineteenth-century" (Gilbert 2006, 21). During the following years, Paris itself would become a global object of desire and a symbol for luxury consumption. Bertin's world had been located in a rarefied domain of small gilded showrooms and prestigious made-to-measure workrooms that over the decades expanded to incorporate the rue Richelieu and the rue de la Paix. In the 1850s the neighboring Palais Royal housed a less refined but no less opulent collection of ready-made fashion goods for visiting tourists and wealthy locals hungry for the latest "look." In contrast, the rue Saint-Denis, with its new and elegant department stores, was associated with the respectable but stylish purchases of the middle classes, and its pavements were equally crowded. Despite their different atmospheres, what these districts held in common was their inhabitants' blind belief in the global supremacy of Parisian fashion and a scattering of tenants whose trading names had become synonymous with that same phenomenon.

Yet in the late nineteenth century, the seemingly undisputed domination of Paris as a first fashion city was coming under threat from other versions in Europe and beyond. London, for example, by this time enjoying economic and political world prominence, could boast an established reputation as the home of gentleman's tailoring: the "man's city" whose Savile Row-inspired elegance stood in opposition to the French capital's association with glamorous femininity. In Berlin, Barcelona, Brussels, and Vienna, cafe society and the promotion of artistic bohemianism offered alternative interpretations of fashionable urbanity, premised on aesthetic avant-gardism and social experimentation. And in the United States, the fashion retailing and manufacturing innovations of Chicago and New York showed the potential for a more democratic understanding of fashion as a commercial endeavor, synonymous with the United States' youthful metropolitan centers and their expanding populations.

Fashion Cities in the Age of Empire

To some extent, all of these established and emergent cities of fashion were linked through the ties of international diplomacy, trade, and labor and reflected a broader colonial context. Their rise coincided with the circulation of widely recognized symbolic codes for the luxurious, the "primitive," and the "exotic," which placed fashion capitals at the nodal points of an imperialist geography of consumerist supply and demand, where the fashionable goods in production, on show, or in use conformed to respected hierarchies of taste. Such values could be seen at play in the imaginative uses made of Orientalist displays in European and U.S. department stores or the manner in which the perfect craft and visual flair of elite metropolitan fashions were celebrated as "art" in the new magazines. These distinctions were naturalized as part of the fabric of Western "civilization," demonstrating the comparative merits of the "sophisticated" beauty of urban fashion in the developed world and the "savage" simplicity of clothing in subordinated nonurban societies. The immigrant communities whose presence also contributed to the establishment of modern fashion cities, together with those who resided in the colonies of European empires, either provided the labor necessary for the production and distribution of city-specific fashions or had their original cultures coopted as sources of inspiration for the latest lucrative trends. Local and seasonal patterns of migration and exchange between cities and their rural hinterlands also ensured that fashion capitals in the industrial age maintained their reputation as magnetic centers, attracting labor and wealth and generating creativity.

By the fin de siècle, fashion had thus established itself as one of the currencies by which cities distinguished themselves from and competed against each other. The production and consumption of particular genres and styles of fashionable goods accompanied the promotion

of state architecture, the cult of the international exhibition, the imposition of grand street plans, and the rise of international tourism as a mechanism for engendering a higher profile in the consumer's imagination and greater prosperity. In the 1920s and 1930s, the influence of U.S. engagement with European fashion (and vice versa) via the instruments of a new mass culture had also become a defining factor in the forging of a more popular understanding of the concept of the fashion city. In this way Hollywood film directors and Fifth Avenue magazine editors branded an enduring image of Paris as the eternally elegant city of fashionably dressed eroticism on global consumer consciousness, while New York attained a screen identity as the dynamic and futuristic domain of slick and snappy acquisitiveness that it has subsequently found hard to shed. In this dreamlike vision of fashion's complementary centers, London featured either as a bastion of tradition and conservatism or as a gothic nightmare of fog-shrouded alleyways and hansom cabs. What is fascinating is the manner in which such stereotyping still endures in the language and imagery of contemporary fashion industry rhetoric: where the extravagance of a Dior couture collection still evokes the sensual overload of a Proustian courtesan's boudoir; where the successful television and film franchise *Sex and the City* with its obvious commodity-fetishism is taken as an unproblematic representation of Manhattan mores; and where the provocative sexuality of designers like Vivienne Westwood or the late Alexander McQueen shows nonironic comparisons with Victorian melodrama and the world of Jack the Ripper.

Two young women outside a boutique on the King's Road in Chelsea, London, 1969. In the 1960s the capital was known as "Swinging London" because of the trendy streetwear being created by young designers such as Mary Quant. Getty Images.

Fashion Cities and Late Modernity

Whereas the prewar development of the world-fashion-city idea was focused on establishing infrastructural foundations and representational tropes as part of the broader promotion of metropolitan ideals, in the postwar era, the identity of the fashion city has been more closely bound up with the evolution of modern fashion itself. Since the 1960s, a "more differentiated ordering of fashion's major centres" (Gilbert 2006, 25) has echoed the relative fortunes of national fashion-based industries and caused the mantle "fashion city" to be deployed more self-consciously as a form of protectionism, as a promotional tool, or as a mechanism for rebranding and regeneration. As Gilbert has remarked, "the Parisian collections were joined by others, and the biannual journeys of international buyers turned into a moving road show of events. The first shows in Florence were organized in 1951, and 1958 saw the first London fashion weeks. Other cities formed organizations to protect and promote local design traditions, such as the Council of Fashion Designers of America founded in New York in 1963. However what was taking place was not that other cities were threatening to usurp Paris's established position, but that the whole geometry of fashion's urban ordering was changing."

The key changes Gilbert alluded to were the rise of ready-to-wear and mass-market lines and the expansion of branding and licensing, both of which actually bolstered the reputations of cities like Paris and London because these initiatives depended for their success on the continuing vibrancy of the fashion-city myth. Thus, the "Swinging London" phenomenon of the mid-1960s, with its fresh celebration of a democratic and ephemeral street fashion pioneered by "trendy" young designers such as Mary Quant in the King's Road and Carnaby Street, underpinned the shift toward the more rapid succession of new looks that characterized the ready-to-wear system. Similarly, the promotion of couture house perfume ranges and direct licensing of ready-to-wear fashions bearing the names of designers like Yves Saint Laurent capitalized on the mythic status of Paris as the home of elite luxury and inspirational design. Milan, which rose to prominence as the premier Italian city of fashion in the 1970s, also benefited from these shifts in manufacturing, design, and consumer sensibilities, drawing on local traditions of craftsmanship in northern Italy and the developing "flexible specialization" and "vertical integration" of Milan's industrial infrastructure to forge a particularly Italian version of prêt-à-porter. This approach, symbolized by the glossy work of Gianni Versace and Giorgio Armani and made concrete in the extravagantly dressed boutiques of the via della Spiga, appealed directly to the materialist tenor of late-twentieth-century European and North American

society and set the foundations for the subsequent global triumph of the concept of “fast fashion.”

The “Italian miracle” of the 1970s and 1980s also epitomized what has been termed the rise of a “cultural economy” of cities in which the production and promotion of fashion played a key role. Increasingly, the symbolic and economic attributes of fashionability and concepts of “lifestyle” were used by planners and city boosters to encourage productivity and regeneration in particular places. Cultural economist [Allen Scott](#), writing on the potential of Los Angeles as a world fashion city in 2002, produced a checklist of the necessary characteristics for fashion-city status in the twenty-first century that included a flexible manufacturing base, the presence of skilled specialists and subcontractors, training and research institutes, a media and publicity infrastructure, local design traditions, and strong relationships with other cultural industries in the region. These factors have, of course, been present in the workings of the international fashion industry since Colbert’s promotion of the luxury industries of Paris in the seventeenth century. In the twenty-first century, the heightened experience of fashion consumption is a further motor in the growth of the fashion-city concept. As [Gilbert](#) has suggested, in a globalized world of “ever more similar shopping spaces, the traditions and symbolic significance of certain districts and streets become increasingly valuable.” It is no surprise then that “fashion consumption—or perhaps more precisely the experience and consumption of places traditionally associated with elite fashion—has ... made a significant contribution to the [recent] massive growth in urban tourism. Such sites of fashion work as tourist ‘honey-pots’ alongside galleries or historic landmarks.” Some of the later additions to the list of the world’s fashion cities, including Hong Kong, Tokyo, Sydney, Kuwait City, Moscow, Rio de Janeiro, and Shanghai, would certainly seem to enjoy a dual status as homes to particular internationally renowned local styles (street style in Tokyo or surf wear in Sydney) and as celebrated locations for intensive shopping.

In the future, the nature of the fashion city looks set to change again as the system of fast fashion with its reliance on far-flung producers disrupts the traditional relationship between time, place, and fashion creativity. Similarly, the World Wide Web and the rise of Internet fashion portals such as the Worth Global Style Network have made the seasonal display of collections in a few key fashion weeks less relevant; journalists and retailers can identify emerging trends instantaneously online. What seems less likely, though, is the demise of the idea of the fashion city as a crucial component of the concept and structural organization of fashion more generally. Contemporary sartorial commodities by necessity operate in the “realm of values.” The design and media creatives in the most successful and long-standing fashion cities have always understood this, seeking to project their particular sense of life and culture onto the rest of the world’s markets in a responsive and fluid manner. The differentiated and often-stereotypical fashion imagery of Paris, Milan, New York, and London is not entirely fixed in its geographical specificity, even though its validity and meaning partly lie in a real industrial history and cultural heritage. The flexible nature of fashion-city values endows the modern fashion order with the extraordinary capacity to create and challenge social realities and identities.

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