

FIT Museum Exhibit
Ballerina: Fashion's Modern Muse

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Throughout history, gender oppression against women has been an ongoing issue that seems to not be fully resolved. The strength of a women has been overlooked and underestimated. Women are expected to be feminine, dainty, soft and pure but the admiring characteristics women carry such as strength and courage are frequently disregarded. THE FIT museum exhibit, *Ballerina: Fashions's Modern Muse*, is a great depiction of the strength a women carries, mentally and physically. The collection consists of works of art that are representing that can be perceived as something a women who is soft and feminine, but also strong and muscular, would wear.

Ballerinas are looked at as feminine and dainty. Many people do not realize the strength that comes along with being a ballerina. The theme of the exhibit can be understood very contradictory and represents strong women. There is a juxtaposition of femininity and masculinity. Ballerinas can be strong and muscular but also soft and feminine. There is a tightness of how they are perceived to be but looseness of the inner and physical strength and persistence. Vera Maxwell's gray and black wool knit top and pants set from 1959 found at the Museum of FIT is a representation of how women have evolved throughout history in many different aspects. Traditionally, ballerinas have worn tutus and tights, as the traditional ballerina costume. These traditional costumes are typically made of pale colors and tones such as beige, pink, peach. Contradictory to this, Maxwell's design is a pant jumpsuit which is not too often seen in a traditional ballerina recital. The jumpsuit is also made of a dark tone fabric of gray and consists of no color. (see figure 2) This design is in a way is revolutionary. It changes not only the whole costume idea but even opens it up to a completely different color scheme that was not seen as typical or feminine.

In the United States, women throughout the country began the fight to make it socially acceptable for women to wear trousers in the 1850's during the Women's Rights Movement. (Bruculieri, 2019) This ongoing fight extended into the 19th century, where even though it became slightly more acceptable and not completely unheard of, it was still frowned upon in many cultures for women to wear trousers. (Bruculieri, 2019) For many who have come from cultures where wearing pants is not a norm, it is liberating to be able to dress in pants. Although in today's society and in American culture it has become acceptable to dress in trousers, whether it is in a professional setting or not, in many places of the world and cultures it is still very forbidden.

Wearing trousers became socially acceptable in the United States as time passed and as well known female leaders began to publicly wear them. Political leaders such as Jackie Kennedy, Pat Nixon, Nancy Reagan and Hilary Clinton have publicly worn trousers making it a very controversial topic. (Anthony, 2015) These powerful and strong women opened the doors to a new era of acceptance in women dressing how they would prefer to. (see figure 1) This loosens culture and breaks old traditions, similar to Vera Maxwell's jumpsuit as a ballerina costume. This piece was designed in 1959, during a time where wearing pants was taboo and certainly not seen of at a ballerina recital because it is not feminine but instead masculine. However the Women's Right Movement's focus on making pants socially acceptable definitely opened the door for ballerinas to have the option of wearing pants.

The Ballerina exhibition at The Museum at FIT portrays contradiction where femininity is tied in with masculinity. The pieces represent how the idea of what a woman should be has

changed over time. A ballerina costume transforming to a pant jumpsuit designed by Vera Maxwell, rather than a traditional tutu gown represents how the idea of female oppression, has progressed throughout the years, in terms of dress. It represents how a dainty and soft touched ballerina has characteristics that are in fact more masculine, such as muscular and strong.

Images



Figure 1:

Three powerful female leaders and former First Ladies, Hilary Clinton, Barbara Bush and Rosalynn Carter wearing pants at a political event.

Dharapak, C. (n.d.). Former First Ladies Hillary Clinton, Barbara Bush and Rosalynn Carter all wearing pants at the George W. Bush Presidential Library dedication. [Photograph].



Figure 2:

Gray and black wool knit top and pants set designed in 1959 by Vera Maxwell. This is part of the Ballerina collection but gives a more modern and masculine twist to a ballerina costume.

F. (n.d.). Vera Maxwell, gray and black wool knit top and pants set, circa 1959. The Museum at FIT, Gift of Vera Maxwell. © [Photograph]. Ballerina, FIT Museum, New York.

References

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