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Food & Fashion
September 13–November 26, 2023
Curated by Melissa Marra-Alvarez and Elizabeth Way

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Cover: Moschino, chocolate bar gown, fall 2014.
Interior flap: Comme des Garçons, dress, spring 2018. Gift of Nordstrom.
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Food & Fashion



September 13–November 26, 2023

In 2008, the food scholar Fabio Parasecoli wrote, “The obsession with food that in the past few decades has taken large sections of many Western cultures by storm apparently will not subside any time soon.” Food and fashion may seem like an improbable pairing, but, fifteen years later, the intersection of food and fashion continues to be a growing area of interest, dominating popular culture. Jeremy Scott’s fall 2014 collection for Moschino, for example, merged the brand’s logo with the “Golden Arches,” creating a viral fashion moment that commented on fast food and fast fashion consumption. It inspired intergenerational nostalgia that has made food-themed fashion so successful with customers. In spring 2023, the popularity of Rachel Antonoff’s “pasta puffer” led *The New York Times* to report that food patterns are “like the new florals.”

The connection between the two is hardly new. Food has appeared on textiles and clothing—woven pomegranates, embroidered ears of wheat, and fruit-trimmed hats—from antiquity through the nineteenth

century. During the twentieth century, food and fashion made a compelling pair through food-themed magazine editorials, designer cookbooks, and food-inspired couture. More recently, restaurants run by luxury houses, co-branded collaborations, and stylized pizzas and lattes emblazoned with fashion logos have filled Instagram feeds, charting new paths for this union. The intersection of food and fashion is clearly an appetizing way to explore culture and society.

Food and clothing are basic necessities; they also express our beliefs and values. Throughout history and across cultures, both have served as markers of distinction in terms of class and taste. Cultural geographers David Bell and Gill Valentine explain that taste works “to construct our cultural identity: we may be what we eat, but what we eat also produces who we are.” Fashion theorist Elizabeth Wilson adds that “fashion is in many ways an extreme of cultural activity. It is concerned with the basic human need, clothing, but goes far beyond a simple biological necessity.”

Louis XIV built up the elite food and fashion industries of France as twin forms of soft power to establish his country as the ultimate source of luxury, and these ideas still resonate through heritage brands such as Louis Vuitton and Moët Hennessy under LVMH. During the late-nineteenth century, wearing haute couture and dining in the new elite restaurants of New York, London, and Paris helped the newly rich establish their positions in society. Concurrently, followers of the Aesthetic Movement rejected industrialization by wearing medieval-inspired clothes, dyed with natural materials, and many embraced vegetarian lifestyles.

Perhaps the most powerful connection between food and fashion is in its expression of group and personal identity. Fashion designers often use food motifs to celebrate their cultures. Han Feng’s spring 1998 silk jersey ensemble is printed with the labels of Chinese tea boxes. From 130 BCE, silk and tea were two of the most significant commodities to travel the Silk Road, defining luxury in

the west. Dolce & Gabbana frequently use Italian foods—pasta, gelato, rustic vegetables—to celebrate food and fashion as part of *la dolce vita*. Bianca Saunders’s spring 2023 collection depicts Jamaican hard foods, such as yams and plantains. Cooking transforms hard foods into soft, comforting staples—a metaphor for the tailored and draped elements of her designs.

Food and fashion have also helped negotiate gender identities. Victorian idealizations of middle class and elite women as “dainty” were expressed as a perceived preference for sugary foods. These ideas are carried on in Jean Dessès’s 1950s couture dress of frothy chiffon tiers conflating the wearer with a sumptuous cake. Junya Watanabe’s spring 2001 dress juxtaposes a fanciful dessert print with tangled masses of pearls, suggesting a more complex relationship between women and stereotypes of femininity.

The relationship between food and fashion can also be examined through a socio-political lens. One reason for food and fashion’s uneasy association is the fashion industry’s decades-long preference for

thinness and its fetishization of food. Designers like Becca McCharen-Tran of Chromat reject the idea that fashionable bodies do not eat. Her fall 2014 fashion show featured models of diverse body sizes eating Flamin’ Hot Cheetos on the runway.

As two of the world’s largest and oldest industries, food and fashion are ripe with social ills, from environmental damage to labor abuses, but are also vehicles for protest and activism. Nineteen-seventies punks rejected meat and animal products in an indictment of capitalist industrial systems but are better known for their radical style that did the same. Vegan and environmental ethics guide Stella McCartney’s label. She is a leader in sustainable fashion, championing innovative food-waste biomaterials, such as mushroom and apple skin leather alternatives.

Tied to our future in critical ways, food and fashion continue to illuminate significant aspects of culture and society through their intersection.

Melissa Marra-Alvarez and Elizabeth Way, co-curators



Junya Watanabe for Comme des Garçons, dessert-printed dress, spring 2001.



Moschino, “Over 20 Billion Served” ensemble, fall 2014. Gift of Moschino



Rachel Antonoff, pasta look, holiday 22/23. Image: Amy Lombard. Model: Melany Rivero



Han Feng, silk jersey ensemble printed with tea box labels, spring 1998. Gift of Han Feng.



Dolce & Gabbana, dress, spring 2017.



Bergdorf Goodman, cream and pink pillbox hat, circa 1965. Gift of Mrs. Ephraim London, Mrs. Rowland Mindlin & Mrs. Walter Evtan In Memory of Mrs. M. Lincoln Schuster; Nancy Haggerty, cream faille shoes with “wedding cake” embellishments, circa 1932. Gift of Rodman A. Heeren; Balenciaga, toque hat with pink roses, circa 1953.