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# Three Centuries of Craft: What the Palais Galliera Exhibition Tells Us About Textile Design Technology Today

## The purpose of design technology isn't to substitute craft knowledge, but to give it a larger canvas

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Vue in situ de l'exposition « Tisser, broder, sublimer. Les savoir-faire de la mode » © Nicolas Borel

If every generation of makers has believed that their newest technology would replace the craft before it, and none of them have been right yet, what does that tell us about where we are today?

It's a question worth sitting with. Because every few years, a new technology arrives in the textile industry accompanied by that same familiar anxiety: that this time, the craft really is about to be replaced. The industrial loom provoked it. CAD software provoked it. And now digital design platforms are provoking it again.

But the historical record doesn't support the fear. And **the current exhibition at the Palais Galliera,** Paris's museum of fashion, makes that argument with three hundred years of evidence.

Spanning the full arc from 18th-century Rococo silks and hand-worked lace to the laser-cut precision of Balenciaga, the exhibition assembles an extraordinary visual archive of how fashion has been made, and by whom. What it reveals, quietly but unmistakably, is that craftsmanship hasn't disappeared once across all of that time. It's simply acquired new instruments at each turn, and in doing so, expanded what skilled makers are able to achieve.

For textile designers, print specialists, embroiderers, weavers, and the many other professionals whose expertise underlies every finished garment, this exhibition isn't a retrospective. It's a mirror.

ys, and expose themselves to unnecessary security risks. This isn't just inefficient; it's a critical failure to adapt. The future of software licensing is not about locking down devices; it's about empowering users. It's time for a fundamental shift towards flexible. secure. and user-centric cloud solutions.

## A Museum About More Than Fashion

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**The Palais Galliera holds a collection of over 250,000 garments,** accessories, and related objects, the majority of which have spent most of their existence in storage, visible only through temporary exhibitions. The new permanent display changes that, offering visitors an extended and continuous reading of fashion history from the early 18th century to the present day.

To describe this as a fashion museum is, in one sense, accurate. But it undersells what the collection actually documents. The Palais Galliera is, at its foundation, a record of textile innovation. Every silhouette shift, every new construction technique, every change in surface decoration reflects not merely a change in aesthetic taste but a change in what makers knew how to do, and what materials and tools they had at their disposal.

The 18th-century pieces, rooted in the Rococo tradition and the social world of the French aristocracy, are built from woven silks of extraordinary complexity. Their embroidered surfaces, applied laces, and decorative featherwork represent the full breadth of technical specialisation that luxury textile production demanded. But these weren't objects produced by a single hand. They were the result of tightly organised collaboration between weavers, embroiderers, lace makers, floral workers, and tailors, each contributing a specific and highly developed skill.

Casaquin, circa 1740-1750
CC0 Paris Musées / Palais Galliera, musée de la Mode de Paris

Summer dress, circa 1832
CC0 Paris Musées / Palais Galliera, musée de la Mode de Paris

Moving through the 19th century, the exhibition traces the engineering ambitions of crinoline construction, the emergence of early haute couture as a formalised discipline, and the increasing refinement of garment structure as a design consideration in its own right. **Charles Frederick Worth, often credited with establishing the modern couture house,** understood that a garment's quality depended as much on the expertise of the artisans producing it as on the vision directing them.

The early 20th century introduces further complexity: evolving silhouettes responding to social change, wartime restrictions reshaping what was possible, and a gradual modernisation of the relationship between the body and what covered it. By the mid-century, designers including Christian Dior, Cristóbal Balenciaga, Coco Chanel, and Yves Saint

Laurent were each, in their own way, pushing at the boundaries of what textile construction could achieve. The techniques on display, elaborate pleating, intricate hand embroidery, precision beading, and sculptural tailoring, aren't decorative afterthoughts. They're the structural language in which each garment's ideas are expressed.

And the exhibition doesn't stop at couture. The presence of pieces made specifically for this permanent display, including work by younger contemporary designers, signals something important: the arc of this history isn't closed. It continues to be written, and the people writing it are using tools that would've been unimaginable to the artisans who produced **the Flying Dress (Robe Volante) of the 1730s,** that early and elegant rejection of the corset in favour of flowing, liberated movement.

## The Unsung Specialists Behind Every Masterpiece

There's a tendency, in fashion history, to organise the story around the names that appear on labels. Worth, Dior, Balenciaga, Chanel. These are important figures, and the Palais Galliera gives them their due. But the exhibition does something rarer and more valuable: it also pays attention to the hands through which their visions became physical objects.

The embroiderers. The lace makers. The weavers. The print designers and textile artists who spent entire careers developing the surface treatments, repeat structures, and decorative vocabularies that couture houses relied upon. These are the people whose expertise made the work possible, and whose names almost never appeared in the press coverage of the collections they helped produce.

François Kollar, France at work Couture and fashion. Flowers and feathers. View of the Judith
Barbier workshop
© Mairie de Paris/bibliothèque Forney

The Palais Galliera's attention to craft process makes clear that these specialists weren't subordinate to the designers whose names they served. They were collaborators in the fullest sense: people whose technical knowledge shaped what was creatively possible in the first place. A designer who didn't understand what a particular lace maker could achieve wouldn't have thought to design for it. The relationship ran in both directions.

And that's still true today. The textile designer who understands weave structure, repeat mechanics, and colorway behaviour isn't simply executing someone else's vision. They're contributing knowledge that actively changes the design itself. The embroidery specialist who can accurately visualise a decorative treatment before committing to production is providing a creative service, not merely a technical one.

The Palais Galliera reminds us that fashion history is, in significant part, a history of these specialists. It's worth sitting with that recognition, because the industry doesn't always reflect it back to them with equal clarity.

## What Three Centuries of Fashion Reveal About Creativity

Viewed across its full span, the Palais Galliera collection presents a consistent pattern. The aesthetic vocabulary changes, the silhouettes change, and the cultural references shift considerably. But the underlying design challenges remain recognisably similar across every era.

Every generation of textile makers has had to solve the problem of colour: how to select, calibrate, and translate it accurately from one stage of production to the next. They've had to develop repeat structures for patterned textiles, balancing the integrity of the motif against the technical requirements of continuous fabric production. They've had to manage the relationship between decorative ambition and material constraint, between what a design calls for and what a given technique or fibre can realistically deliver.

These aren't problems that technology has eliminated. They're problems that better tools have made more tractable.

Consider the parallels. In the 1750s, a weaver developing a brocade pattern worked by hand-drawing the repeat, testing colour relationships physically on the loom, and producing samples to demonstrate how the finished textile would behave. In 2026, a textile designer developing a digital jacquard follows the same logical sequence: the repeat is constructed, colour relationships are tested, and the design is visualised against its production requirements before sampling begins. The cognitive work is identical. The medium in which it's performed has changed.

The same holds for embroidery. The 18th-century embroiderer sampled physically, working a small section of a motif to establish how it would read at scale and where adjustments were needed before the full work began. Today, digital embroidery visualisation allows a designer to preview that same information before a single stitch is placed. The question being answered hasn't changed. The method of answering it has become faster and considerably less expensive.

This isn't a claim that digital tools replicate handcraft. They don't, and the distinction matters. But what they do is perform the evaluative and iterative work that has always preceded production, and perform it at a different pace and scale than physical methods allow.

The workflow evolved. The design thinking didn't.

## Why Digital Design Is Part of the Same Story

The transition from physical to digital methods in textile design is sometimes framed as a break: a point at which the industry departed from its craft traditions and entered something categorically different. The Palais Galliera exhibition makes a quietly persuasive argument against that framing.

What the collection documents isn't a series of departures but a series of continuations. Each technical development, from the industrial loom to the synthetic dye to the mechanised embroidery frame, extended the range of what skilled makers could produce without dissolving the underlying expertise those makers carried. The knowledge of colour, pattern, construction, and material behaviour accumulated and passed forward. The tools changed around it.

Digital design occupies exactly this position in the sequence. The textile designer working in a digital environment isn't practising something fundamentally different from what the specialist at a Jacquard loom was practising. They're applying the same disciplinary knowledge, the understanding of how pattern repeats function, how colour relationships shift across different grounds and scales, how decorative motifs need to be engineered to survive the transition from screen to fabric to finished garment, through a different medium.

What digital tools have genuinely changed is the economics of iteration. Physical sampling has always been the most expensive and time-consuming stage of textile development. The cost of producing a physical sample doesn't just represent material and labour; it represents a compression of the design process, the point at which options narrow and decisions become harder to reverse. A designer who can evaluate more options before that point, testing colour variants, adjusting repeat mechanics, and visualising embellishment treatments without committing to physical production, is a designer with a materially different creative range.

Digital colour management allows palette relationships to be developed and communicated with a precision that reduces the gap between designer intent and production outcome. Digital repeat tools allow complex pattern structures to be built and adjusted without the physical constraints that limited earlier methods. Virtual sampling reduces the number of physical samples required to reach a production-ready design, with corresponding reductions in material waste and development time.

And none of this replaces the knowledge that makes these tools useful. A digital repeat tool operated by someone who doesn't understand repeat mechanics won't produce a better result than the same ignorance applied to a hand-drawn repeat. The value of the digital environment lies entirely in the expertise that navigates it.

Vue in situ de l'exposition « Tisser, broder, sublimer. Les savoir-faire de la mode » © Nicolas Borel

## Preserving Craft by Expanding Possibility

**This is the argument that the Palais Galliera makes implicitly, and that**

## NedGraphics has built its practice around explicitly: that the purpose of design technology isn't a substitute for craft knowledge, but to give it a larger canvas.

**NedGraphics develops software specifically for the specialists** whose work the Palais Galliera's exhibition celebrates: the textile designers, print creators, weave developers, and embellishment specialists who form the technical and creative foundation of the industry. The tools are designed around how these professionals actually work, which means they're designed around the design logic that's persisted across three centuries, not a simplified or generalised version of it.

Digital textile printing allows a print designer to take a historical motif, a Rococo floral or a geometric derived from a brocade structure, and develop it for contemporary production with the precision and repeatability that commercial application demands, while retaining the integrity of the original design intent. **Weave development tools allow a jacquard designer to construct complex structures digitally,** visualise how yarn behaviour will affect the finished surface, and plan the technical specifications that carry the design from screen to loom without the expensive sequence of physical tests that once made this process prohibitively slow.

**Embellishment visualisation allows a designer to develop decorative treatments,** whether beading arrangements, embroidery placements, or sequin distributions, and evaluate them against the garment they'll occupy before any physical work begins. It's not a replacement for the embroiderer's knowledge. It's a tool that allows that knowledge to be applied to more options, faster, with better information about the likely outcome.

The practical results are measurable: fewer physical samples, shorter development cycles, and more accurate colour communication across supply chains. These aren't abstract benefits. They represent real reductions in waste, real improvements in the accuracy with which design intent reaches production, and a design process that spends more of its time on refinement and less on repetition.

The craft endures. The infrastructure around it has been rebuilt to support it more effectively.

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# The Next Chapter Is Already Being Written

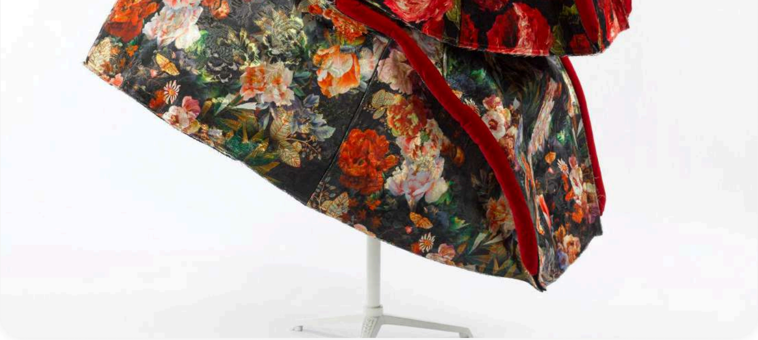
The Palais Galliera exhibition isn't a nostalgic gesture toward a lost golden age of craftsmanship. It's an argument about continuity. The collection demonstrates, across three hundred years of evidence, that fashion has always evolved through the sustained partnership of creative knowledge and technical capability. Every tool that's entered the industry, **from the silk-weaving innovations of 18th-century in Lyon** to the laser-cutting technologies visible in Balenciaga's more recent work, has expanded what skilled makers are able to achieve. And none has made their knowledge redundant.

For designers working today, that's a more useful frame than the anxiety that tends to accompany each new wave of technological development. The question isn't whether digital tools will change the practice of textile design. They already have, and they'll continue to. The question is how the accumulated expertise of the discipline navigates that change, and what it carries forward in the process.

The answer that the Palais Galliera suggests, and that the history of the industry consistently supports, is that the knowledge carries itself. The people who genuinely understand colour, pattern, construction, and material behaviour have always found ways to apply that understanding through whatever medium the moment provides. The techniques endure because the people behind them continue to adapt.

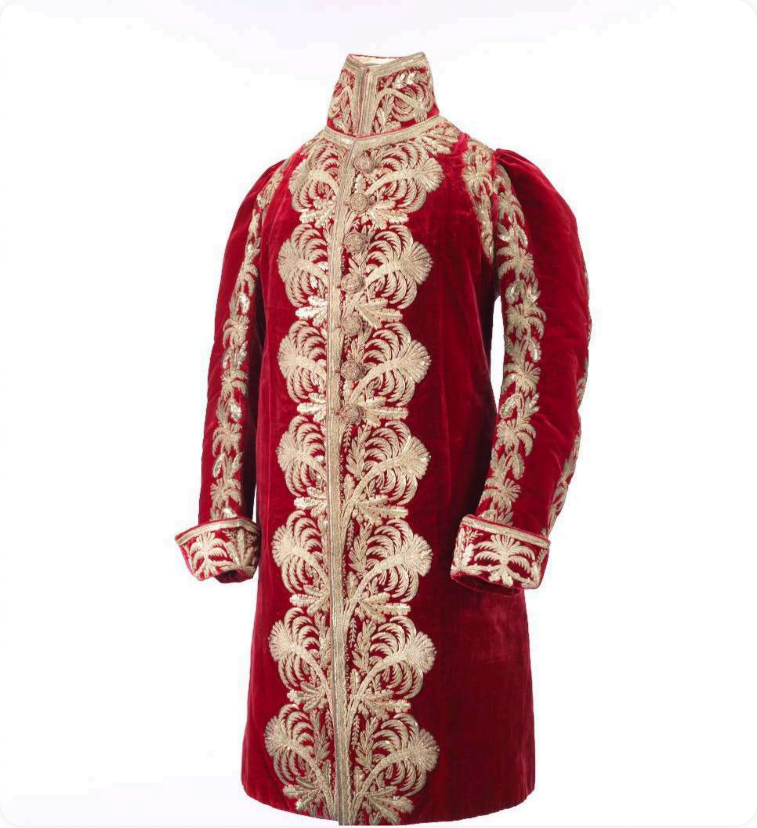
Today's digital textile designers aren't departing from the tradition that the Palais Galliera documents. They're writing its next chapter, with the same design intelligence that's always animated the work, and with tools that give that intelligence more room to move.

Tradition and technology have never been opposites. They've always been the same story, told in the language of each successive generation.

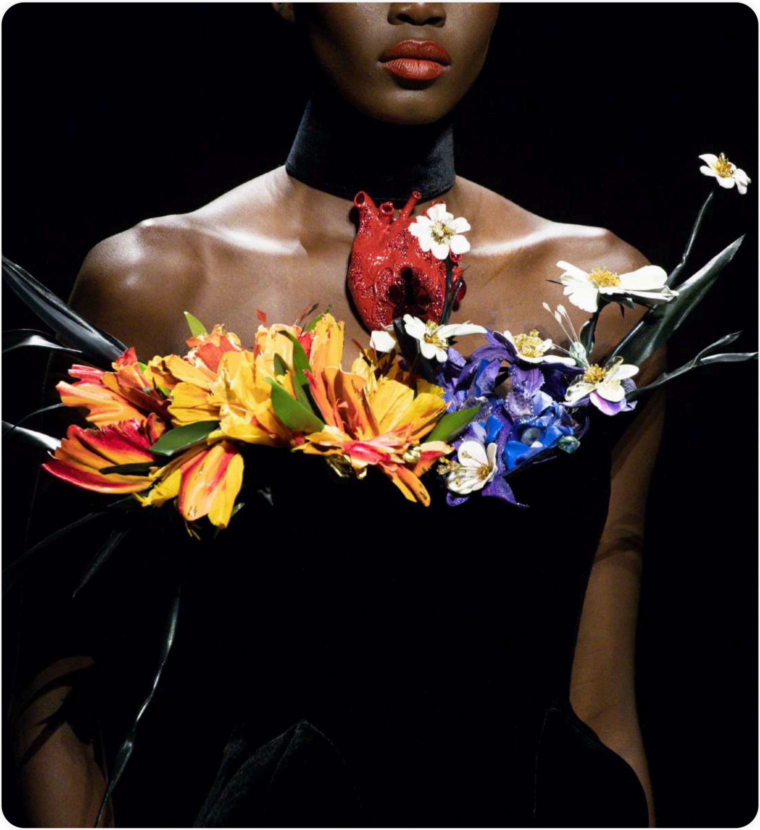


Dress Comme des Garçons by Rei Kawakubo, Ready-to-wear, Fall/Winter 2016-2017
CC0 Paris Musées / Palais Galliera, musée de la Mode de Paris

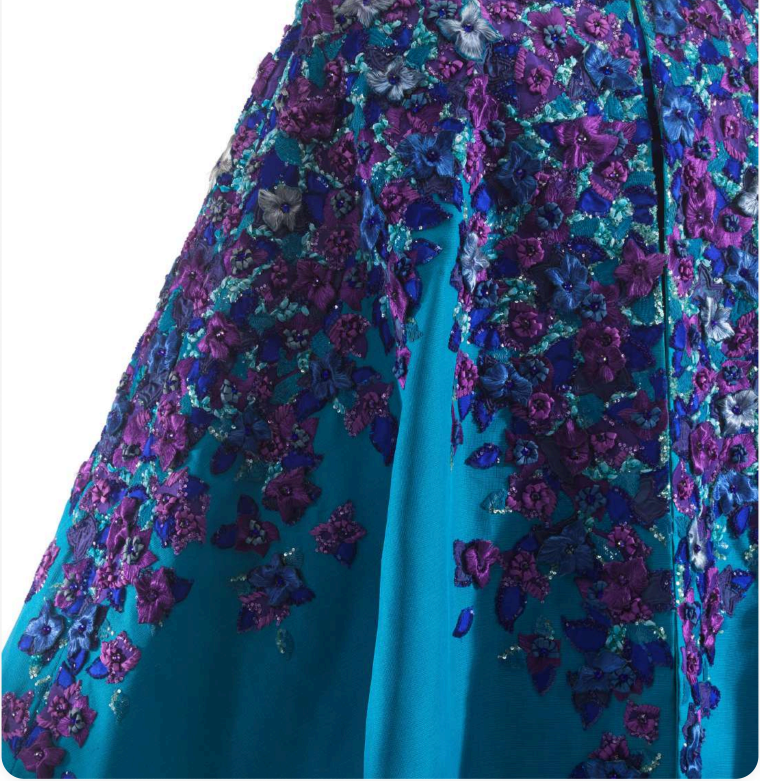
Blouse, skirt, and thigh-high boots ensemble Balenciaga by Demna Gvasalia (detail), Ready-to-wear, Fall/Winter 2016-2017
CC0 Paris Musées / Palais Galliera, musée de la Mode de Paris



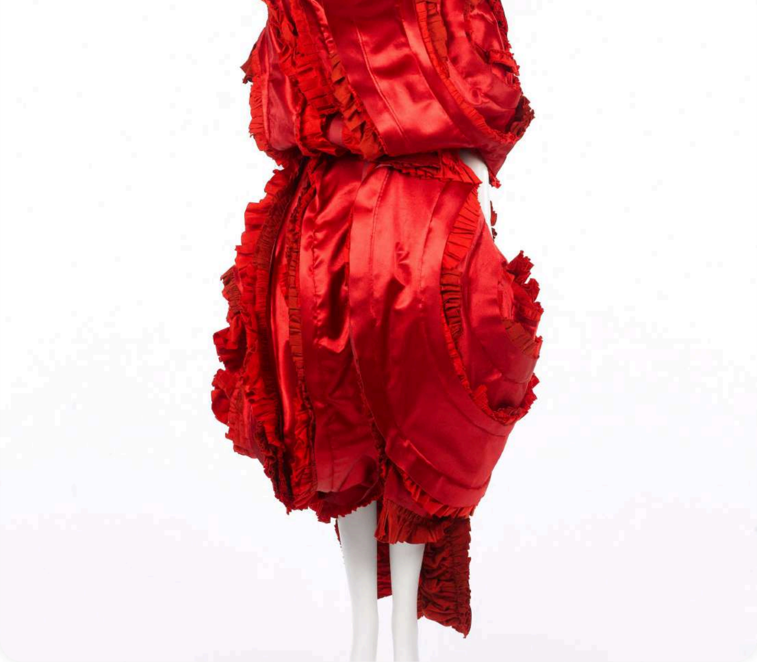
Coat of a Grand Marshal of the Palace, circa 1813-1815
CC0 Paris Musées / Palais Galliera, musée de la Mode de Paris



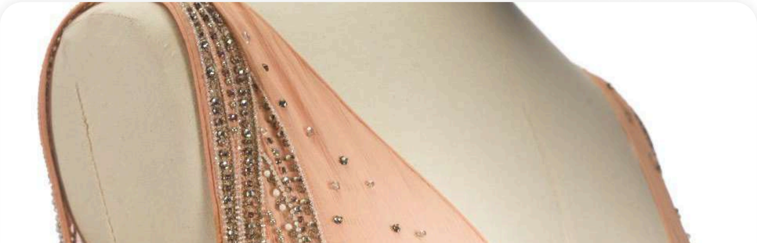
Schiaparelli bustier by Daniel Roseberry, Baqué Molinié (embroidery), Haute couture, Fall/Winter 2022-2023
© Courtesy of Schiaparelli

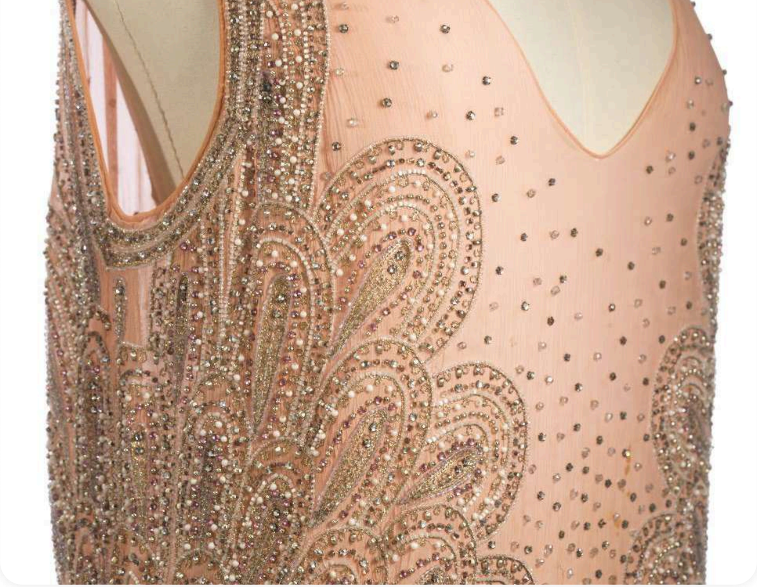


Cape and dress ensemble Yves Saint Laurent, Abraham & Co (fabric), Lesage (embroiderer), Haute Couture, Spring/Summer 1989
CC0 Paris Musées / Palais Galliera, musée de la Mode de Paris

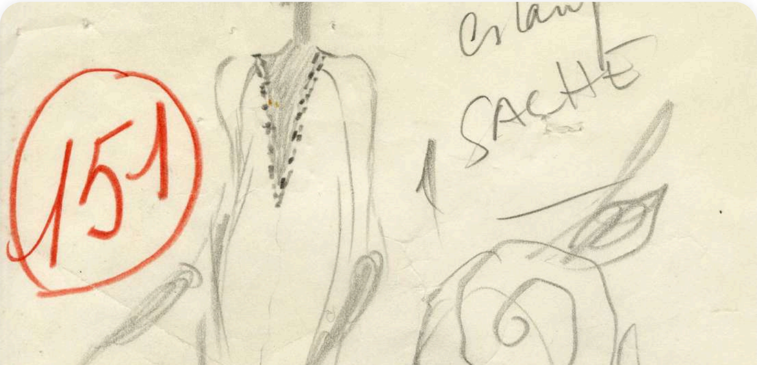


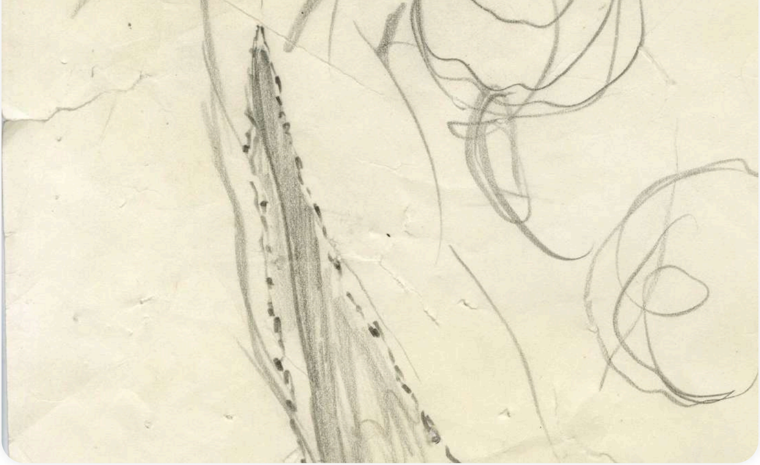
Ensemble Comme des Garçons by Rei Kawakubo, Ready-to-wear, Spring/Summer 2015
CC0 Paris Musées / Palais Galliera, musée de la Mode de Paris





Evening dress Lucien Lelong, circa 1928
CC0 Paris Musées / Palais Galliera, musée de la Mode de Paris





Summer dress, circa 1832
CC0 Paris Musées / Palais Galliera, musée de la Mode de Paris

Evening ensemble Balenciaga, Haute couture, Spring/Summer 1947
CC0 Paris Musées / Palais Galliera, musée de la Mode de Paris

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