

Golden Glamour: The Edith Stuyvesant Vanderbilt Gerry Collection,

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These garments dating from 1922 to the late 1930s share two traits: they were worn by Edith Stuyvesant Dresser Vanderbilt Gerry (1873–1958) and they incorporate gold in the form of lamé, metallic pigments, and actual metal threads. During the period represented here, lamés and pale gold fabrics added glamour and festive brightness to eveningwear, and Edith, with her striking good looks and height of nearly six feet, was the perfect model. These examples from the RISD Museum permanent collection beautifully reflect her drama, humor, and elegance.

Raised in Gilded Age opulence at her maternal grandparents' Newport estate, Edith moved by 1892 to Paris, where she was exposed to a cosmopolitan lifestyle that suited her creative spirit and love of drama. In 1898, she married America's most eligible bachelor, George Vanderbilt, and the pair lived in the grandest home in America: Biltmore, in North Carolina. As mistress of the house, Edith was outfitted by the leading French fashion houses, and she delighted in tableaux vivants (living pictures), a popular form of entertainment adopted from her time in Paris. Vanderbilt unexpectedly died in 1914, leaving Edith as the head of the estate. She returned to Rhode Island in 1925, when she married Senator Peter G. Gerry. After her death in 1958, her grandsons offered her clothing from her home at 62 Prospect Street (now RISD's Woods-Gerry House) to the RISD Museum.

Symbolizing light and richness, golden fabrics historically were worn by the most elite, whether royalty or clergy. In the early modern period, shimmering golden fabrics were made of actual metal threads wound around a silk, linen, or wool thread. The weaving of metal thread required considerable skill and time, and the wearing of golden cloth signified extreme wealth; even in the form of fabric, the gold retained its value.

Luminous textiles became accessible to a wider audience in the early 20th century. Thanks to developments in textile science, precious metal threads were replaced by alloys and man-made alternatives; subsequently, cloth of pure gold became scarce. The garments on view, extraordinary examples from première fashion houses of the early 20th century, were created using traditional techniques and these new technologies.

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CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Attributed to Elsa Schiaparelli, designer
Italian, 1890 - 1973
Gloves and stole, 1933-1937
Looped metallic yarn
Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Edith Stuyvesant Vanderbilt Gerry 59.031.1

Evocative of chain-mail armor, these gloves suggest high drama and power. Elsa Schiaparelli began her career with knitwear items such as sweaters and beach attire, and her designs matured as she became influenced by the Surrealist and Dadaist movements and collaborated with Salvador Dalí and Jean Cocteau. The contrast here between the supple nature and light weight of the gold-colored yarn and the impression of heavy armor attests to the designer's interest in Surrealism, where the irrational juxtaposition of images from dream and reality was seminal.



Bergdorf Goodman, design label and retailer
American, est. 1899
Robe, ca. 1929
Printed gold silk lamé
Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Edith Stuyvesant Vanderbilt Gerry 59.031.2

At home, Edith exuded the same elegance she exhibited at public appearances. With this floral print robe, reminiscent of a Japanese kimono, Edith embraced the glamour of a silver-screen siren. The trailing hem and gold and copper floral on a metallic green background all enhance the robe's sumptuous quality.

Beginning in 1914, Bergdorf Goodman began to introduce ready-to-wear, making the New York retailer a hot spot for leading American and French fashions. Edith, who could no longer afford to travel to Europe for all her garments, began to incorporate American-made fashions into her wardrobe.



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Paul Poiret, designer

French, 1879-1944

Paul Poiret, design house

Dress with attached wrap, ca. 1925

Silk satin weave with painted velvet decoration

Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Edith Stuyvesant Vanderbilt Gerry 59.031.3

In this deftly modern ensemble, red, ocher, and metallic gold pigments sit on top of the lustrous velvet pile of the silk velvet wrap, creating a contrast in texture with the smoothness of the emerald-green satin underdress. Nymphs dance amongst grasses in the wrap's hand-painted design, signed by French artist Renee Vautler.

Designer Paul Poiret, hailed with freeing women from corsets, perhaps references his legacy with the imagery of women dancing in the nude and the freedom of the dress's front-opening wrap design, held in place with an enamel buckle. The design presages the wrap dress made famous by designer Diane von Furstenberg in 1974.

Molyneux, design house

1919 - 1950

Edward H. Molyneux, designer

British, 1891-1974

Evening coat, ca. 1932

Silk, metallic yarn; plain weave, quilted

Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Edith Stuyvesant Vanderbilt Gerry 59.031.4

Edith's garments came from the toniest fashion houses of Paris, but glowing metallic fashions were also becoming increasingly popular in America. The strong shoulders and full drape of this evening coat evoke the fast-talking Hollywood heroines of the 1930s. English author Graham Greene described one such woman, actress Carole Lombard, as having "a figure to be swathed in silver lamé."

The reflective nature of metallic fabrics translated beautifully to film, offering actresses an otherworldly glow. For Edith, who possessed a great love of the theater and fantasy, this quality must also have held great appeal, placing her in the "spotlight" wherever she went.



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House of Worth, design house

French, 1858-1952

Attributed to Jean-Philippe Worth, designer

French, 1856 - 1926

Cape, 1922

Gold and silver silk with jet and rhinestone embellishment

Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Edith Stuyvesant Vanderbilt Gerry 59.031.5

Edith was one of many elite clients who traveled to Paris to purchase their wardrobes. The House of Worth, known for its use of lavish materials, was a good match for Edith's sumptuous taste. The lamé used here, made of both silver and gold threads, shines like liquid metal. From 1895, the House of Worth was led by Jean-Philippe Worth, whose work expounded upon his father's aesthetic. The firm flourished during Jean-Philippe's tenure and into the 1920s.

The RISD Museum collection includes some of the few remaining items from Edith's wardrobe, and they must have been especially cherished. Biltmore documentation shows Edith often donated her own clothing, and that of her daughter, Cornelia, to the staff.

Attributed to Callot Soeurs

French, 1895 - 1937

Dress, 1923

Pleated silk, leno weave with red and gold metallic brocade, and black velvet trim

Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Edith Stuyvesant Vanderbilt Gerry 59.031.6

This toffee-colored afternoon dress, tightly pleated at the neckline, features billowing sleeves and a deep hem of red and gold brocade. The chiffon overdress floats away from the figure, with the cuffs and center front closure bound with the same brocade as the hem. A romantic black velvet ribbon completes the ensemble, attributed to the Callot Soeurs.

Established as a lingerie and lace business, Callot Soeurs evolved into a leading dressmaking house in the early 20th century. Known for working rare and unusual materials, Callot was among the first designers to use lamé. The narrow silhouette of this dress plays off the ornamented surface and delicate fabrics, illustrating what fashion curator Harold Koda described as the house's "disciplined modernism."



RISD MUSEUM

Mariano Fortuny y Madrazo, designer

Spanish, 1871-1949

Tunic and dress, 1926

Silk, metal thread, glass beads; hand-block printed

Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Edith Stuyvesant Vanderbilt Gerry 59.031.7

Venetian-based Spanish designer Mariano Fortuny hid red silk threads along the reverse of this lamé underdress, achieving a burnished gold tint that suggests a cloth from antiquity. Fortuny intentionally “aged” many of his textiles, in keeping with his aesthetic and his reverence for historical motifs. Small Venetian glass beads along the hem of the gauze overdress are not only eye catching, but their weight holds the fabric taut, highlighting the hand-printed design.

Fortuny’s loose-fitting sleeveless silhouette follows that of the *aba*, a traditional garment in the Middle East. In the 1920s and ’30s, Fortuny’s gowns were especially popular among avant-garde women seeking freedom of movement and a hint of exoticism.



Paul Poiret, designer

French, 1879-1944

Paul Poiret, design house

Coat, 1922

Silk velvet, fur, metallic silk embroidery, and faux pearls

Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Edith Stuyvesant Vanderbilt Gerry 59.031.9

The enormous popularity of the Ballet Russes in the 1910s and ’20s greatly influenced Parisian art and design, and in particular the fashions of Paul Poiret. The lush fur hem and couched metallic embroidery on this coat suggest a Russian style by way of the costuming of the Ballet Russes, which was itself influenced by Byzantine and folk traditions.



While most of Western Europe was searching for a modern design vocabulary in the early 20th century, Russia carried on many Byzantine styles, in particular the lavish use of freshwater pearls. Close examination of the torso and sleeves reveals scroll-like patterns, with pearls used as borders.