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*Dress, Dreams, and Desire: Fashion and Psychoanalysis*  
September 10, 2025 - January 4, 2026  
Curated by Valerie Steele

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Cover: Issey Miyake, bustier, 1983.

Interior: Jeremy Scott for Moschino, evening gown, Fall 2014.

Rick Owens, ensemble, Spring 2009. Gift of Rick Owens.

Elsa Schiaparelli, evening jacket, Spring 1939. Francesca Galloway, London. Image © Francesca Galloway (Photograph Katrina Lawson Johnston).

Jean Paul Gaultier, dress, Fall 1984.

Ashlyn, ensemble, Fall 2025. Courtesy of Ashlyn.

John Galliano for Christian Dior, hat, Fall 2000.

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# DRESS DREAMS & DESIRE

## FASHION & PSYCHOANALYSIS



SEPTEMBER 10, 2025-  
JANUARY 4, 2026



We all speak Freud, whether we know it or not, wrote historian Peter Gay. Certainly, fashion people speak Freud: Marc Jacobs designed a “Freudian slip” dress. John Galliano created a couture collection for Christian Dior titled “Freud or Fetish.” Prada presented a fashion film in which Helena Bonham Carter plays the patient who takes off her fur coat, lies down on the couch, and begins to talk about her daddy. Her voice fades, and the psychoanalyst, played by Ben Kingsley, stands up, walks over to the fur coat, and begins stroking it. As he surreptitiously slips the coat onto his body and gazes at his reflection in the mirror, we suddenly hear her ask: *What does it all mean?*

Psychoanalysis is famously concerned with the search for hidden meanings. Yet the key word here is search, since meaning is not self-evident or unchanging. *Dress, Dreams, and Desire* is the first exhibition to explore the cultural history of fashion and psychoanalysis. It is also the first to interpret fashion through the lens of key psychoanalytic ideas about the body, sexuality, and the unconscious. By placing Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and other psychoanalysts in their historical context, the exhibition illuminates a shifting landscape of ideas. For all its false starts and dead ends, psychoanalysis provides important clues about the power and allure of fashion, as well as the ambivalence and hostility that fashion also attracts.

Fashion is often dismissed as “superficial,” and it is, literally, superficial, since it exists primarily on the surface of the body. But fashion is meaningful and important, precisely *because* of its intimate connection with the fleshly human body, which plays a significant role in the individual’s evolving sense of self. Rejecting body-mind dualism, Freud emphasized the development of the self as an *embodied subjectivity*. This has been confirmed by neuroscience, as has his emphasis on the influence of emotions on thought. Perhaps we might best characterize fashion as a deep surface, a changeable, renewable second skin, where unconscious emotions and fantasies take symbolic form.

*Dress, Dreams, and Desire: Fashion and Psychoanalysis* features almost 100 items of dress by designers including Azzedine Alaïa, Willy Chavarria, John Galliano for Christian Dior, Jean Paul Gaultier, Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons, Alexander McQueen, Thierry Mugler, Rick Owens, Olivier Rousteing of Balmain, Sonia Rykiel, Elsa Schiaparelli, Jun Takahashi of Undercover, Gianni and Donatella Versace, Viktor & Rolf, Grace Wales Bonner, and Vivienne Westwood.

The introductory gallery is organized chronologically, beginning with Freud’s attitude toward his own clothes, as well as his ideas about sexuality



and the unconscious. By the 1920s and 1930s, psychoanalysis had become popularly associated with sexual and personal freedom for modern women and sexual minorities. Surrealist artists were also attracted to psychoanalysis. By the 1950s, however, most psychoanalysts were virulently homophobic and misogynistic. Edmund Bergler described gay male fashion designers as “women’s bitterest enemies.” Yet changes in society and developments within the profession opened possibilities for a more liberated psychoanalysis.

In the main gallery, the exhibition moves away from chronology to explore how psychoanalytic concepts may be used to interpret fashion. The dream theories of Freud and Carl Jung, for example, may throw light on the unconscious significance of different styles. Freud initially interpreted most dreams in terms of sexual symbolism, pleasure, and wish fulfillment—visualized here as Moschino’s chocolate bar dress. By contrast, Jung interpreted dream imagery in terms of eternal archetypes, so a dress from Rick Owens’ “Priestesses of Longing” collection might be interpreted as an esoteric feminine archetype.

Elsa Schiaparelli’s famous mirrored jacket has sometimes been interpreted in terms of Lacan’s mirror stage, which is associated with the development of the individual’s body image. The child’s first mirror is the mother’s gaze, and because her mother often told her that she was ugly, Schiaparelli internalized this message, and sometimes failed even to recognize herself in the mirror. Yet she also seems to have used fashion to try to repair her negative body image. Didier Anzieu’s concept of the skin ego suggests that clothing often functions as a psychic second skin that provides both physical and psychological protection. Designers have sometimes described their clothes as “holding” or “hugging” the wearer, or acting as “armor” that protects you from unwelcome eyes.

The exhibition also explores desire and sexual difference, with sections on the concept of the “phallic woman” (think of Jean Paul Gaultier’s cone-bra dress), the object of desire, and new ideas about the body and the self. Traditionally, psychoanalysts have insisted that “the body is bedrock.” Even today, many analysts insist that transgender people need to accept “reality.” Yet in her book *Transgender Psychoanalysis*, the Lacanian analyst Dr. Patricia Gherovici argues that neither the body nor the self is a given, fixed entity. Rather, each of us becomes who we are through a complex process of self-fashioning.

Valerie Steele

