

The F Word - Talking Fashion with Valerie Steele

Natasha Lardera (October 29, 2013)



Grazia D'Annunzio and Eugenia Paulicelli, creators and hosts of the AddRESSing Style series at Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimo', engaged Valerie Steele, Director and Chief Curator of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, in a multifaceted conversation about the role of fashion in contemporary society and culture.

The F word, yes that is a euphemistic way of referring to the word...well, you know which word. We don't really need to be specific right now, but we can say that the expression is often used when we don't want to use that curse word, especially in front of children or when we want to be polite.

The F word was also the title of a conversation about Fashion (PUN INTENDED) with Valerie Steele, Director and Chief Curator of the [Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology](#) [2] held at Casa



Italiana Zerilli Marimo' that was part of a series of meetings of the series AdDRESSing Style. Creators and hosts of the series were Grazia d'Annunzio, US Special Projects Editor, Vogue Italia, and Professor Eugenia Paulicelli, Professor of Italian and Comparative Literature, co-Director of The Concentration in Fashion Studies at the Graduate Center, CUNY.

"Years ago Fashion was indeed the F word," Valerie Steele, who has been nicknamed the Freud (another F) of fashion said, "People did not want to be associated with it. When I was in school and I was writing my dissertation a colleague asked me what I was writing it about, and I replied fashion. He answered with a question... German or Italian? He had misunderstood me. I was not writing about fascism and when I tried to explain that to him and he walked away. Fashion was a frivolous topic."

Yet the three fashionable ladies were everything but frivolous as they carried on one of the most interesting conversations held at Casa Italiana so far, a conversation that ranged from trends of all eras, including corsets and goth inspired pieces, to fashion designers like Valentino, Dior or Gaultier, fashion icons, like Daphne Guinness and Oscar Wilde, the collection at FIT and the different shows held there.

The classic definition of fashion is "a popular style or practice, especially in clothing, footwear, accessories, makeup, body piercing, or furniture. Fashion refers to a distinctive and often habitual trend in the style in which a person dresses or to prevailing styles in behavior." But Valerie Steele has her own definition, "fashion is the expression of someone's personal identity."

And through her work at FIT Valerie Steele and her team of curators are busy showcasing the different styles and identities of the past two centuries. "We have a permanent collection of 50.000 pieces, including garments and accessories. Our strength is mostly on the 20th and 21st century. Clothes are not like oil paintings so they cannot be on permanent display, they need to rest in the dark...and we continue to switch them around."

Currently on view, there is A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk, to explore in depth the significant contributions to fashion made by LGBTQ (lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-queer) individuals over the past 300 years. "We hope that this exhibition will transform our understanding of fashion history," Steele, who co-curated the show with Fred Dennis, senior curator of costume, has declared "For many years, gays and lesbians were hidden from history. By acknowledging the historic influence of gay designers, and by emphasizing the important role that fashion and style have played within the LGBTQ community, we see how central gay culture has been to the creation of modern fashion."

The conversation also touched topics such as Italian fashion (which is not as hot as it used to be, Steele highlighted), French couture, Japanese styles (apparently Tokyo is shopping Heaven or Hell, depending on how much you spend!!!), fetishism, shoe obsessions (the shoe has replaced the bag as THE accessory par excellence)... a fascinating voyage through the multiple facets of fashion... not a frivolous topic at all.

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