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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Hidden Hands Behind Fashion - Weaving, Embroidering, Embel

Palais Galliera, 11.09.2026 [ENA]

At the Palais Galliera, Weaving, Embroidering, Embellishing: The Crafts and Trades of Fashion offers a necessary and deeply rewarding correction to the usual history of fashion. Rather than focusing only on the famous couturier, the iconic silhouette, or the glamorous public image of the fashion house, the exhibition turns its attention to the extraordinary artisans whose expertise makes fashion possible.

Weavers, printers, lacemakers, embroiderers, feather workers, floral makers, textile designers, and specialist embellishers emerge here not as anonymous suppliers to luxury, but as creative figures in their own right. The exhibition's central theme is the flower, a motif that has shaped textile art, dress, and ornament for centuries. It is a deceptively simple curatorial choice, but an exceptionally rich one.

Flowers allow the exhibition to move across periods, materials, and techniques while maintaining a visual coherence. They appear as woven brocade, printed cotton, lace, beadwork, sequins, feathers, appliqué, artificial blooms, sculptural ornament, and digital surface design. The floral motif becomes a lens through which visitors can see the technical and artistic transformations that have continually renewed fashion.

The historical range is impressive. An eighteenth-century waistcoat in elaborate brocade sits in dialogue with later couture creations and contemporary fashion, including a Balenciaga ensemble employing laser printing. The comparison is not merely chronological. It reveals how fashion repeatedly returns to floral imagery while reinventing the means by which it is produced. A flower can be rendered through the density of silk threads, the transparency of Chantilly lace, the shimmer of embroidery, or the precision of digital technology.

The exhibition's pleasure lies in making these variations visible and in allowing visitors to understand that the same decorative idea can carry radically different meanings depending on technique, material, and historical context. One of the exhibition's most compelling achievements is its attention to craftsmanship as a form of knowledge. More than 350 objects—garments, accessories, photographs, graphic works, samples, tools, and documents—demonstrate that fashion is not simply a succession of seasonal images. It is an archive of specialised skills, accumulated over generations and continuously adapted to new aesthetic demands. The presence of fabric samples and viewing tables equipped with magnifying glasses is especially valuable.

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It encourages close looking, slowing the visitor down and making it possible to study the individual stitches, threads, beads, layers, and tiny structural decisions that can disappear when a dress is seen only from a runway distance. This act of looking closely changes the status of the garment. A couture gown or embroidered accessory is no longer a finished object carrying only the name of its designer. It becomes a record of time, manual labour, invention, collaboration, and material intelligence. The exhibition makes clear that embellishment is not an optional addition to fashion. It can determine a garment's rhythm, volume, light, movement, and emotional character.

Embroidery can create weight or weightlessness; lace can produce opacity or reveal the body; a fabric flower can suggest romance, mourning, theatricality, femininity, fragility, or defiance. The exhibition is also a tribute to the Parisian ecosystem of specialist workshops. Historic maisons such as Lesage and Hurel appear alongside contemporary ateliers including Baqué Molinié and Aurélia Leblanc. This juxtaposition is important. It shows that the great traditions of French craftsmanship are not preserved merely through repetition. They survive because artisans continue to innovate, experiment, and translate inherited techniques for contemporary designers and audiences.

Paris's status as a fashion capital rests not only on major brands and fashion-week visibility, but on this complex network of highly skilled makers, many of whose names remain unknown to the public. Gabrielle Chanel's camellia provides one of the exhibition's most recognisable examples of how a flower can become a fashion signature. Yet the display wisely resists reducing the subject to famous motifs alone. The floral theme is continually expanded: it can be naturalistic or abstract, delicate or excessive, handcrafted or technologically produced. Flowers become material experiments, surfaces of memory, and emblems of changing ideas about the body and beauty.

Curated under the direction of Émilie Hammen with Marie-Laure Gutton, Samy Jelil, and the Palais Galliera conservation team, the exhibition combines scholarly depth with visual seduction. It succeeds because it gives decorative arts their full intellectual status. The show reminds visitors that fashion is one of the most sophisticated applied arts precisely because it brings art into movement, into the social world, and onto the body.

Weaving, Embroidering, Embellishing is ultimately an exhibition about attention: attention to materials, to gestures, to history, and to the often invisible people whose mastery gives fashion its most enduring brilliance. At Palais Galliera, flowers do not simply decorate garments. They reveal the immense, living intelligence of fashion's crafts. In celebrating these often unseen makers, the exhibition ultimately affirms that the future of fashion will depend as much on preserving and renewing craft knowledge as on the visions of the designers whose names appear on the label.

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