

Textilmuseum St.Gallen

Fashion Photography from the Belle Époque to the Present Day

3 July 2026 – 28 February 2027

Fashion is made not only from fabrics, but above all from images. Fashion photographs bring clothing to life, convey notions of style and shape our understanding of beauty and femininity. At the same time, they document the close relationship between fashion houses, photographers, the media and the textile industry.

The exhibition "Mise en Scène. Fashion Photography from the Belle Époque to the Present Day" is the first to focus on the significant photographic collections held by the Textile Museum of St.Gallen and other public and private holdings in Switzerland. Through a selection of works by renowned photographers, it traces the development of fashion photography from its beginnings around 1900 to the present day, connecting the international history of photography with the textile industry of eastern Switzerland.

At the heart of the exhibition are photographs by Nathan Lazarnick, Atelier d'Ora Benda, Tom Kublin, Helmut Newton, Peter Knapp, Jeanloup Sieff, Anton Corbijn, Iwan Baan and others. Complemented by textiles, garments and archival materials, they tell the story of more than 120 years of fashion, cultural and economic history.

Photography as a Work of Art and a Historical Source

At first glance, an exhibition on fashion photography at a textile museum might seem surprising. Yet photography is among the most important – and least researched – areas of the institution's collection. The Textile Museum of St.Gallen alone holds around 20,000 photographic objects, ranging from glass plate negatives and paper prints to slides and digital image archives. These are supplemented by significant holdings from corporate archives, as well as private and public collections.

The photographs offer a unique perspective on the history of the eastern Swiss textile industry. They show how embroideries, laces and fabrics from Switzerland found their way into international fashion, document the relationships between textile producers, couturiers, photographers and the media, and reveal how Swiss companies positioned themselves in global markets.

At the same time, the images are far more than mere historical documents. The exhibition brings together works by photographers whose names remain associated with the history of fashion photography to this day: from Nathan Lazarnick and Atelier d'Ora Benda, Tom Kublin, Peter Knapp, Helmut Newton, Rudy Faccin von Steidl, Jean-Philippe Decros and Jeanloup Sieff, to Steven Klein, Anton Corbijn

and Iwan Baan. Their photographs were taken in New York, Paris, Vienna, Milan and St.Gallen, and reflect the artistic developments of their respective eras.

A central criteria for selection was photographic quality and aesthetic merit. The images are not presented as illustrations of a textile or corporate history, but as independent photographic works in their own right. At the same time, they are contextualised through garments, fabric samples, pattern books, fashion magazines and company archives. This makes it possible to trace their origins, their circulation, and the ideas of elegance, modernity and femininity they conveyed.

This tension is particularly evident in the works commissioned by textile companies in eastern Switzerland. Photographers brought their own distinctive creative voice, yet worked simultaneously for competing fashion houses, magazines or fabric manufacturers. The series of images created by Helmut Newton for Forster Willi and Jakob Schlaepfer exemplify how photographic expression and commercial interests could produce different outcome.

A Journey Through 120 Years of Women's Fashion

"Mise en Scène" is a journey through the history of fashion in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The photographs document not only the evolution of photographic styles, but also the transformation of clothing itself.

At the beginning of the tour, visitors encounter the elaborately decorated gowns of the Belle Époque. Richly embroidered dresses, such as those worn around 1900 in the salons of New York and Paris, bear witness to the international success of the eastern Swiss embroidery industry. In the photographs of Nathan Lazard, fashion imagery and social portraiture are still largely intertwined.

The racetrack photographs of the 1920s speak of the social momentum that followed the First World War. Skirts grow shorter, silhouettes more streamlined, and freedom of movement becomes increasingly important. Fashion accompanies the emancipation of women and, thanks to photography and its growing presence in the media, becomes ever more visible in the public sphere.

These years see the emergence of a new body consciousness. The photographs taken by the Viennese Atelier d'Ora Benda in the 1930s for the lingerie brand Hanro depict sporty swimwear and modern lingerie. The female body comes more prominently to the fore and becomes a central subject of photographic staging.

After the Second World War, Christian Dior's "New Look" dominates fashion. Photographs by Tom Kublin document the return to elegance, luxury and a distinctly feminine silhouette. Haute couture experiences its final heyday before prêt-à-porter fundamentally transforms the world of fashion.

The works of Peter Knapp, Rudy Faccin von Steidl and Jean-Philippe Decros guide the viewer through the decades of youth culture, flower power and the supermodels of the 1980s and 1990s. Finally, Steven Klein, Anton Corbijn and Iwan Baan represent contemporary

positions that understand fashion as part of a broader visual culture, progressively dissolving the boundaries between photography, film, architecture and art.

The Woman in the Picture

The theme of the female representation runs through the exhibition like a common thread. Few media have shaped conceptions of beauty, elegance and femininity in the twentieth century as lastingly as fashion photography.

The exhibition traces this development over more than a century. The early photographs show women as figures of social representation, whose status is expressed through clothing and posture. The 1920s and 1930s give rise to a new ideal: athletic, active and self-determined. After the Second World War, more traditional notions of femininity return to the foreground, before the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s paved the way for a structural expansion of women's scope for action: in education, the workplace, and also in shaping their private lives.

With photographers such as Helmut Newton and Jeanloup Sieff, the depiction of the female body takes on a new intensity. Their works move between self-staging, eroticism, artistic expression and commercial visual language. Viewed from today's perspective, they raise questions that have lost none of their relevance in this age of mass circulation of photographs via social media: Who determines how women are portrayed? Who looks at whom? And how do photographic images influence our understanding of beauty and body norms?

As early as 1992, Alexander Liberman, long-serving editor and art director of Condé Nast Publications, articulated a thought that accompanies the exhibition: "A fashion photograph is not a photograph of a dress; it is a photograph of a woman."

"Mise en Scène" takes up this quote: the exhibition understands fashion photography not merely as a documentation of changing trends, but also as a testimony to the social ideas, projections and expectations that have become inscribed in the images.

A Contrasting Perspective: Barbara Davatz and the People of the Textile Industry

The Textile Museum has deliberately chosen to juxtapose the glamorous and highly staged fashion photographs with a second photographic perspective. Running alongside "Mise en Scène", the museum's lounge is hosting the series 'Portrait of a Swiss Company' by the Eastern Swiss photographer Barbara Davatz.

In 1972, Davatz photographed the employees of the Herisau-based textile company Walser AG. The images were not taken on runways, in photography studios or for fashion magazines, but in close proximity to the everyday working lives of those portrayed. Spinners, factory workers, textile printers, administrative staff and apprentices look directly into the camera. Many of them came from Italy, Spain or other European countries and belonged to a generation of

migrant workers without whom the economic success of the Swiss textile industry would have been unthinkable.

Whilst fashion photography creates idealised worlds and gives visible form to societal desires, Barbara Davatz turns her gaze towards the people behind the scenes of an influential industry. Her photographs show individuality rather than staging, personality rather than perfection, and serve as a reminder that behind every fabric, every garment and every advertising campaign there are people who develop, manufacture and distribute the products on display.

The juxtaposition of the two exhibitions makes clear that fashion has many faces. Photography as a medium is therefore always in the hands of the artist or the client. It often tells the story of beauty, creativity and consumption – but sometimes also the story of labour, migration and social change.

An Exhibition About Images and the Society That Produces Them

"Mise en Scène" invites visitors to look afresh at the images that continue to shape our understanding of fashion, beauty and femininity. The exhibition shows that fashion photography is far more than the staging of clothing. It documents social values, cultural ideals and economic interests, and reveals how closely these are intertwined.

The questions that fashion photography has been asking for more than a hundred years have lost none of their relevance: How do we want to be seen? Which images shape our sense of self? And what shapes our view on beauty, identity and gender roles?

"Mise en Scène" is also the last major special exhibition at the Textilmuseum St.Gallen before the museum undergoes extensive renovation. From March 2027, the institution will close for several years before reopening in a new form. The exhibition thus marks not only a highlight in the museum's exhibition programme, but also a distinctive moment in its history.

Duration	3 July 2026 – 28 February 2027
Venue	Textilmuseum St.Gallen, Vadianstrasse 2, 9000 St.Gallen, Schweiz
Curation	Silvia Gross, Textilmuseum St.Gallen
Scenography and Exhibition Design	Meierkolb, André Meier

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