

Exhibition: *Fashioning Chinese Women: Empire to Modernity*

Dates: June 14–October 12, 2026

Location: BCAM, Level 2



(Image captions on page 4)

(Los Angeles, CA—May 13, 2026) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents *Fashioning Chinese Women: Empire to Modernity*. The exhibition charts the evolution of Chinese women's dress, from loose-fitting embroidered robes of the late Qing Dynasty to the iconic sleek silhouettes of 1930s qipao to the global style of 1950s cheongsam. Bringing together over 70 rare looks from LACMA's permanent collection, *Fashioning Chinese Women* illuminates a seldom-seen story of how Chinese and Chinese American women used dress to negotiate their changing identities amid profound societal and cultural transformations.

In early 2020, Berkeley-based artist and designer Chere Lai Mah approached LACMA seeking a permanent home for her expansive collection of 19th- and 20th-century Chinese women's clothing. Over the course of more than 45 years, Lai Mah meticulously researched and preserved the wardrobes of her mother and mother-in-law and, in the process, became a de facto archivist to family, friends, and the broader Chinese American community. Drawing from this network, her collection grew to include items made in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Singapore, Taiwan, Bangkok, Tokyo, San Francisco, New York City, and beyond. Joined by other recent LACMA acquisitions, these garments have transformed the museum's holdings of Chinese fashion and formed the basis of the exhibition.

Fashioning Chinese Women features original, 3D-printed mannequins, with faces, hairstyles, and finish customized by fashion designer Jason Wu. These specialized mounts underscore the bespoke tailoring practices that have long characterized Chinese women's fashion. Further complementing the artwork is the exhibition design concept by Los Angeles architecture firm Chu-Gooding, inspired by the traditional siheyuan, the Chinese courtyard house. The exhibition is guest curated by Michaela Hansen, with support from LACMA curators of Costume and Textiles, Clarissa Esguerra and Nicole LaBouff.

"Until now, curatorial examinations of Chinese women's fashion have largely been framed in terms of its influence on Western design," said Hansen. "This exhibition marks the first 21st-century study by an American museum to celebrate the creativity, resilience, and sartorial heritage of generations of Chinese women whose lives—and wardrobes—spanned the globe."

"The story of Chere Lai Mah and her remarkable collection reveals extraordinary intersections of tradition and innovation across time," said Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director. "We are grateful for her generous gift, without which we would not be able to tell these stories of Chinese women's fashion. What is most exciting about this exhibition is how it brings together the artistry and histories of these garments for a new generation of local and global audiences, thanks to our collaboration with Jason Wu and Chu-Gooding."

Exhibition Highlights

Fashioning Chinese Women is organized thematically and presented in three sections.

The entryway and first gallery introduce late Qing dynasty textile craftsmanship. **A Manchu woman's one-piece embroidered robe** is presented alongside **two-piece ensembles favored by Han women**, featuring embellished jackets paired with finely pleated skirts. Despite differences in silhouette, both traditions emphasize a loose fit, prioritizing textile design over accentuating the body.

Ensembles from the turn of the 20th century reveal how global trade and political upheaval began to reshape fashion. In treaty port cities such as Shanghai, courtesans popularized **narrower cuts** and the use of **imported technologies and materials, such as jacquard ribbons**, signaling a shift away from ethnic distinctions toward a shared, modern style. By the 1910s, the social transformations surrounding the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912 accelerated the simplification of women's dress, making clothing a visible expression of new roles and freedoms. **Streamlined designs like aoku, fitted jacket and pants**, allowed for greater mobility, and by the 1920s, cinema, print media, and department stores helped define the "new woman" as educated, modern, and increasingly active in public life.

The show's central gallery examines the **emergence of the one-piece qipao in the early 1920s** as a defining innovation in modern Chinese dress, and its rise to sartorial dominance by the mid-1920s. While retaining distinctive Chinese features such as a standing collar and right-side closure, the garment also expressed a cosmopolitan identity shaped by global influences. One such example on view traveled from China to San Francisco's Chinatown by 1930. The long, body-skimming silhouette of the 1930s—achieved through **lightweight and sheer silks and rayons, such as a floral printed qipao** on view—came to embody new ideals of femininity associated with health, vitality, and modern life. In the mid-20th century, the garment—known internationally as the cheongsam—achieved global prominence. Its popularity declined in mainland China after the 1949 rise of communism, but it flourished in overseas communities. In 1950s Hong Kong, tailors trained in Shanghai refined the cheongsam using Western dressmaking techniques. As embodied by **three examples on display from the personal wardrobe of Aileen Chiang Pei**, stepmother of architect I. M. Pei, the elegant, form-fitting style became an enduring symbol of cultural identity and modern fashion worn worldwide.

The final two galleries explore how new textile technologies transformed Chinese fashion from the late Qing through the mid-20th century. As China became increasingly connected to the wider world—particularly through treaty ports established under the unequal treaties of the mid-19th century—foreign innovations were adapted within long-established textile traditions and refined through local craftsmanship and aesthetic values. As women's roles evolved and clothing became a means of personal expression, textiles played a central role in shaping modern identities, a shift evident even in **bridal wear that blends diverse cultural influences**. New materials and processes expanded both the appearance and availability of fashionable dress. Synthetic dyes produced brighter, more durable colors, and mechanized weaving introduced complex patterns inspired by international design trends, such as **Art Deco-style rose-patterned machine lace**. A group of **three devoré (burnout) velvet qipao from the 1930s** illustrates how human-made fibers like rayon increased the accessibility of luxury fabrics. By the 1960s, Chinese fashion reflected a dynamic synthesis of global innovation and local tradition, maintaining a distinct visual language while engaging an increasingly international world.

Publication

The exhibition's accompanying publication brings together a vivid range of archival images including book illustrations, textile prints, magazine covers, and calendar posters. With a preface by Jason Wu, it features essays by curators and art historians that offer original research and nuanced analyses of modern Chinese fashion design. Mei Mei Rado investigates fashion's interplay with rapid historical and cultural changes in China, while Michaela Hansen analyzes how industrial and technological advances reshaped Chinese textile designs used in fashion.

The exhibition was organized by The Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Presented by East West Bank.



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About LACMA: Located on the Pacific Rim, LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection of 155,000 objects that illuminate 6,000 years of artistic expression across the globe. Committed to showcasing a multitude of art histories, LACMA exhibits and interprets works of art from new and unexpected points of view that are informed by the region's rich cultural heritage and diverse population. LACMA's spirit of experimentation is reflected in its work with artists, technologists, and thought leaders as well as in its regional, national, and global partnerships to share collections and programs, create pioneering initiatives, and engage new audiences.

Location: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA, 90036. lacma.org

Image captions: [Left] Han-Style Jacket (Ao), probably Hong Kong, c. 1905, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Costume Council Acquisition Fund, Pants (Ku) (detail), China, c. 1905, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Costume Council Acquisition Fund, mannequin head © Jason Wu, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA; [center left] Dress (Qipao), China, 1928–29, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Costume Council Acquisition Fund, mannequin head © Jason Wu, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA; [center right] Dress (Qipao), China, late 1930s, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Chere Lai Mah, mannequin head © Jason Wu, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA; [right] Woman's Dress (Cheongsam), Hong Kong, early to mid-1960s, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Mei Mei Rado, mannequin head © Jason Wu, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

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