

ON *the* BALL

BALLS HAVE BEEN SETTING THE SCENE, BOTH SOCIAL AND SARTORIAL, FOR CENTURIES – AND THEY'RE NOW ENJOYING A RENAISSANCE

Words TESS DE VIVIE DE RÉGIE



Kirsten Dunst and Jason Schwartzman in Sophia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (2006).

In November, Apple Martin made her ‘society debut’ in the most contemporary manner: by going viral. Granted, she’d already nearly broken the internet two years ago when she made her fashion week debut, not on the runway (yet), but in the front row at Chanel’s Spring 2023 haute couture show. This time, she was attending Le Bal des Débutantes in Paris flanked by her famous parents, actress Gwyneth Paltrow and Coldplay’s Chris Martin. On the arm of a blue blood, Count Leo-Ferdinand Henckel von Donnersmarck, she made quite the entrance in a baby blue, micropleated and ruffled custom haute couture gown by Alessandro Michele for Valentino (which reportedly required 750 hours of work). Clips of the pair’s entrance, where she appears to roll her eyes at her date, went off on TikTok – as did other footage of her photobombing another deb’s photo op and when she danced with dad.

Images of the evening offer a glimpse into the ultra-exclusive ball that originated in 1958 at the Orangery of the Palace of Versailles, ended in 1973 and was subsequently revived in its current form in 1994 by Taittinger hotel group publicist Ophélie Renouard, as a fundraiser for charities such as paediatric cardiology research centre ARCFA and World Central Kitchen. The by-invitation-only affair brings together around 20 young women, usually the daughters of crowned heads and A-listers parents for a couture-clad party at a glamorous Parisian hotel, such as Hôtel de Crillon and the Shangri-La. Previous deb’s include Margaret Qualley, Lady Kitty Spencer and Lauren Bush, as well as Australian heiress Francesca Packer Barham, the granddaughter of Kerry Packer, who attended in 2013.

Lily Collins – then best known as the daughter of musician Phil Collins – attended in 2007 in a princessy, feathered and beaded gown by Chanel. Seventeen years later, as the titular star of Netflix’s blockbuster *Emily in Paris* series, Collins sported a striking monochromatic striped catsuit by Harris Reed to a masquerade ball in Season 4, a nod to Truman Capote’s famed 1966 Black and White Ball at New York’s Plaza Hotel that assembled a starry lineup – notably Gloria Steinem, Lauren Bacall, Frank Sinatra, Mia Farrow and a full complement of Capote’s ‘Swans’ – for a legendary night nicknamed the ‘party of the century’.

Now another ball is set to make headlines. On July 6, Paris’ Musée des Arts Décoratifs (MAD) will hold its inaugural ‘Grand Ball’ in honour of the centenary of 1925’s International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts (the exhibition ran in the French capital from April to October 1925 and coined the term “art deco”, pulled from the event’s full French title of ‘exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes’).

The *Bal d’Été* – or ‘summer ball’ – will raise funds for the museum and represent “a celebration of fashion and French *art de vivre*” following the “tradition of the great Parisian balls”, while the gala’s artistic direction will be overseen by Sofia Coppola, the filmmaker behind *Marie Antoinette* and *Lost in Translation*. The MAD press office indicated that it was “too early” to provide precise details, but much of the international fashion set will likely be in attendance, with the celebration marking the beginning of Haute Couture Week, which kicks off the following day.

Pending the publicity generated, the MAD ball could potentially emerge as a European rival to the megastar annual Costume Institute Benefit at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, otherwise known as the Met Gala. Created by legendary New York fashion publicist Eleanor Lambert as a charity event in 1948 to raise money for the institute (and co-chaired since 1995, excluding 1996 and 1998, by US *Vogue* editor-in-chief Anna Wintour) the fundraiser serves as an opener to the institute’s annual

spring exhibition at The Met, and its dress code always nods to the exhibition’s theme (2025’s is ‘Superfine: Tailoring Black Style’, inspired by Monica L. Miller’s 2009 book *Slaves to Fashion*). Guests’ extravagant, often eyebrow-raising interpretations of the theme receive feverish social media and press attention, which Launchmetrics calculated generated a record-breaking US\$1.4 billion in what it calls Media Impact Value in 2024 – while inclusion on the 450-strong guest list is considered rock-solid evidence of one’s cultural relevancy.

“If we think of the ball as a gathering for celebrating a particular event, these have been happening since [the beginning of] humanity,” reflects Isabella Coraça, fashion communication lecturer at Central Saint Martins in London. “Balls in France have a long history, beginning in the reign of Louis XIV, when hundreds of nobles and their families lived in Versailles,” notes James H. Johnson, professor of history at Boston University and author of *Paris Concealed*:

INCLUSION ON THE 450-STRONG GUEST LIST [FOR THE MET GALA] IS CONSIDERED ROCK- SOLID EVIDENCE OF ONE’S CULTURAL RELEVANCY

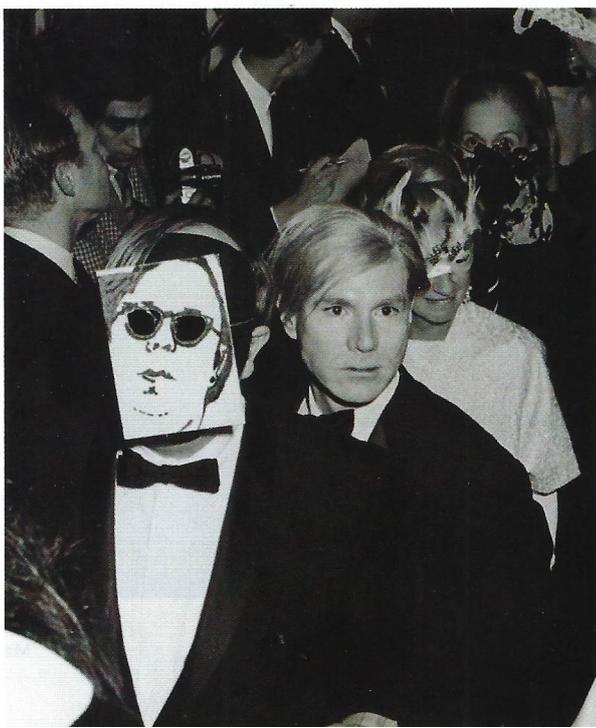


Photography: courtesy of Ad Pics Photography/Alamy.



CLOCKWISE, FROM MAIN

PHOTO Zendaya attends the 2024 Met Gala, celebrating 'Sleeping Beauties: Reawakening Fashion', at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Lee Radziwill, sister of Jacqueline Kennedy, adjusts her mask after arriving at Truman Capote's legendary Black and White Ball, held at New York's Plaza Hotel, on November 28, 1966; a 19th-century French poster for the Theatre de l'Opera; Andy Warhol at the Black and White Ball.



Masks in the City of Light. And one's mask was no mere adornment. "When a high-ranking aristocrat felt slighted or dishonoured, he or she would remove the mask to upbraid the offender. Everyone knew that if the ball grew too unruly, the king or queen had the authority to tell all attendees to unmask themselves."

The Devonshire House Ball in 1897 marked a significant milestone, according to Coraça: the emergence of the designer. Orchestrated by the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire at their Piccadilly townhouse, the costume ball was in honour of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Many of the costumes were designed by Paris-based British couturier Charles Frederick Worth, such as the gold gauze, tinsel- and sequin-embellished gown worn by the Duchess herself in her guise as Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra. Worth, whose clients included Empress Eugénie and Melbourne-born soprano Nellie Melba, is regarded as the founding father of Paris' haute couture industry, having moved to the city in 1845 where he founded the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture in 1868. The ball, notes Coraça, served as a "marketing tool" for the designer, a trend that would intensify from the late 19th century onwards.

Across the Channel in 1911, couturier Paul Poiret – an alumnus of Worth's atelier – threw The Thousand and Second Night ball in honour of his newly launched perfume line, *Parfums de Rosine*. The theme was a somewhat dubious interpretation of 'Persian dress': Poiret became a sultan, his wife, Denise, his concubine, with the bejewelled and befeathered guests draped in harem pants and turbans, many of which were of Poiret's own design. The extensive press coverage that the soirée enjoyed proved a genius promotional coup for his brand.

At the Materials Ball in 1929, hosted by Marie-Laure de Noailles, a French artist, viscountess and patroness of surrealists Salvador Dalí, Man Ray and poet Jean Cocteau, guests were asked to eschew typical clothing fabrics for their costumes in favour of unlikelier materials, like glass, straw and feathers.

Then came *Le Bal Oriental*, thrown by flamboyant French Mexican art collector Count Carlos de Beistegui in 1951: a glittering costume ball that dazzled after the bleakness of World War II. Held at his Venetian palazzo, guests included Christian Dior, Aga Khan III and Dalí. Deborah Mitford, Duchess of Devonshire remembered in her memoir, *Wait for Me!*, that "the extravaganza . . . was the talk of London, Paris and New York for months".

In 1989, event producer Susanne Bartsch helmed the first of a series of fundraising Love Balls in New York City (the second and third editions came in 1991 and 2019) after losing numerous friends and fashion-industry colleagues to HIV/AIDS. The ball comprised a 'voguing' competition between drag artists – Michelle Visage and RuPaul performed – celebrating the dance subculture developed by Black, Latino and LGBTQ+ communities that later attained mainstream fame via Madonna's 1990 song 'Vogue'.

Throughout the centuries, society balls have continuously shapeshifted. Johnson sees today's iterations as "an occasion of display for others much more than one's own self-transformation"; more an opportunity to peacock one's wealth and taste than an exercise in transgression.

The power of donning a costume remains potent. "[On the Met Gala red carpet], the guests are themselves, but they're playing a part – that of the celebrity," reflects Coraça. "For me, what balls really are about is creating a character."

So, to what might we attribute the ball's enduring appeal? "The element of spectacle," posits Coraça. Balls supply a welcome dose of joyous escapism both for guests and those watching on from afar. Over now to MAD to see just what it manages to deliver come July. **HB**