



ITEMS: Is Fashion Modern ?

MoMA

ITEMS: Is Fashion Modern ?

Paola Antonelli
and Michelle Millar Fisher

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

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Front cover: Ben Westwood, *Carry On Kilts* (detail), promotional image for Worlds End Boutique, London, 2016. See p. 153

Back cover: Kabelo Kungwane, a member of the South African design collective Sartists, 2015. Photograph by Keagan Kingsley Carlin. See p. 93

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Hyundai Card

Hyundai Card is proud to sponsor *Items: Is Fashion Modern?* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. This trailblazing exhibition provides a first-of-its-kind opportunity to understand fashion within the wider field of design.

As MoMA's first exhibition on fashion in many decades, *Items* examines fashion in the context of society, culture, and technology rather than through the typical lens of mass consumption. The exhibition challenges existing ideas about fashion's role in contemporary culture and reconsiders fashion as a catalyst for social change. By tracing the history of each item's design and offering visions of its future, *Items* both reflects on today and helps us speculate about tomorrow.

Hyundai Card is committed to creating and promoting the kind of forward-thinking vision that is exemplified in *Items*. As Korea's foremost issuer of credit cards, Hyundai Card seeks to identify changes in culture, society, and technology and to utilize them to enrich lives. Whether we're hosting tomorrow's cultural pioneers at our stages and art spaces, building libraries devoted to design, travel, music, and cooking for our members, or designing credit cards and digital services that are as beautiful as they are functional, Hyundai Card's most inventive endeavors all draw from the creative well that the arts provide.

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We believe that we are all citizens of the world and members of communities.

We believe that geographical coordinates are figments of the imagination.

We believe that inspiration comes from the monumental and the mundane.

We believe that good design can and has changed the world.

Which is why we are proud to be major supporters of *Items: Is Fashion Modern?* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

We are WGSN, and with you we create tomorrow.

WGSN is the world's leading trend authority for creative thinkers. Our global trend forecasters and data scientists obsessively decode the future to provide the authoritative view on tomorrow.

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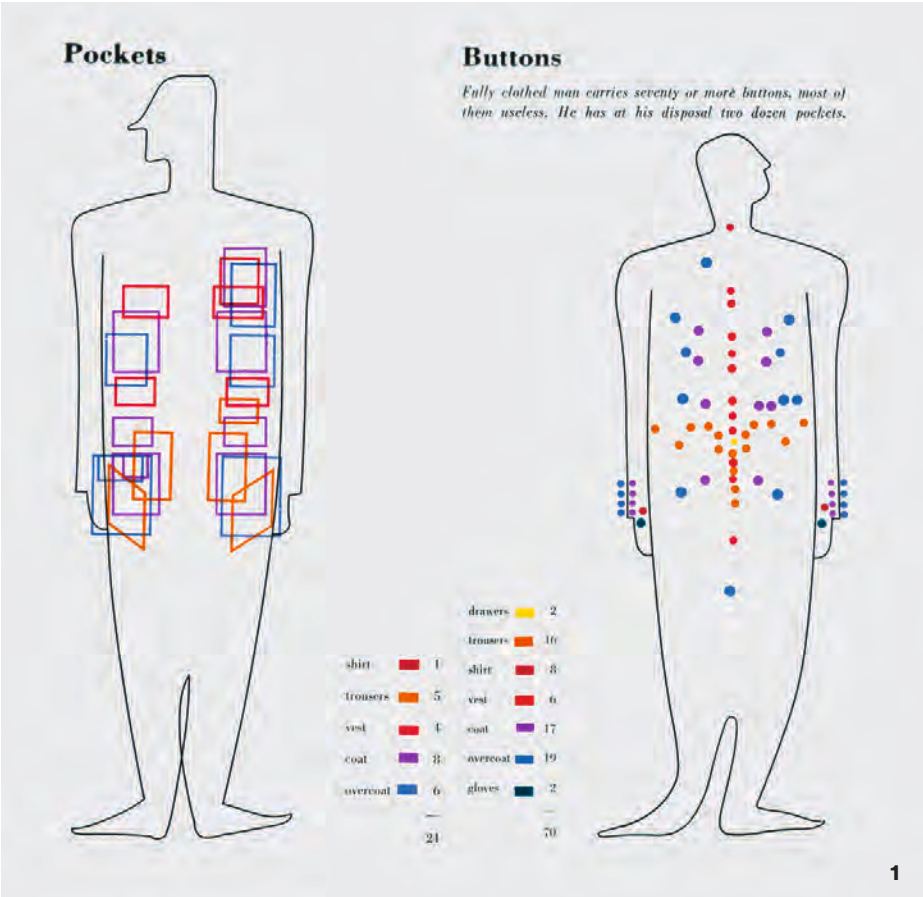
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FOREWORD As exhibitions at The Museum of Modern Art have demonstrated time and again, design shapes us all and a rigorous and considered design history must be expansive. Yet historically the Museum has not engaged with one particular area of design: fashion. *Items: Is Fashion Modern?* persuasively argues that a robust and complete design canon must include the kind of design that we wear. Six or seven years ago, Paola Antonelli and I began a conversation about the place of fashion within the institution's larger commitment to design, and now she has brought to life the brave, experimental, and soundly researched *Items*. The goal of the exhibition and catalogue is to help bring into focus our relationship to a ubiquitous, aspirational, and complex design field. The title of the exhibition simultaneously gestures to the quotidian nature of fashion—we all purchase, sport, and treasure items of clothing—and serves up a question that is open-ended and deliberately difficult to answer.

When the guest curator Bernard Rudofsky organized the first exhibition of fashion at the Museum, *Are Clothes Modern?*, in 1944, he unabashedly promised “an entirely new and fresh approach to the subject of clothes,” and his well-received project remains a flash point in the history of exhibiting fashion. More than seven decades later, *Items*, MoMA's second fashion exhibition, recalibrates Rudofsky's inquiry to consider the whole ecosystem of fashion through a selection of the garments and accessories—from precious jewels to mass-produced staples—that have had a strong influence on the world in the past century. Humble masterpieces like clogs and chinos are displayed alongside high-fashion ensembles from Comme des Garçons and Pierre Cardin; other pieces were crafted specifically for this presentation. The 111 items in this volume, arranged alphabetically, represent the most ubiquitous or iconic form of their respective typologies. In the exhibition, these stereotypes are complemented by painstakingly gathered materials that contextualize each item and trace its history back to its archetype. In twenty-eight cases, the item has been reimaged by a contemporary designer in response to the social, political, technological, and cultural landscape of the twenty-first century.

Items brings together more than 350 works from storied museums, private collections, and backs of closets. The result is an incisive and engaging reflection on the past, present, and future of a field that touches us all in myriad ways. On a daily basis, clothing constitutes the first interface between us and the world; it is at once a deeply embodied form of design, intimately bound to psychology and identity, and part of a set of systems that exploit labor and greedily strip the environment. *Items* suggests that we dismiss this field of design at our peril. I am grateful to Paola Antonelli, Senior Curator, and Michelle Millar Fisher, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Architecture and Design, for conceiving the exhibition with perserverance and skill, and to the many colleagues who have collaborated with them during their sartorial odyssey. On behalf of the staff and trustees of the Museum, I would also like to thank Hyundai Card and WGSN for their generous support of this milestone exhibition.

— Glenn D. Lowry
Director, The Museum of The Modern Art



Items: Is Fashion Modern? is the first exhibition on fashion at The Museum of Modern Art since 1944. Although the Museum was established in 1929 for the express purpose of “encouraging and developing the study of modern arts and the application of such arts to manufacture and practical life,”¹ and indeed has included architecture and design since its founding, the only fashion item in the collection when I began my career at MoMA in 1994 was an early-twentieth-century Delphos dress by Mariano Fortuny, acquired in 1987.² Ever since, the Museum’s acquisitions of clothing and accessories have been sporadic: a few garments here and there, injected into wider conversations on technology (digital production, for instance) or functional typologies (such as the sports hijab or parkas for the homeless). Today the design collection includes four dresses, one coat, one shirt, and four head coverings.³ Incremental progress has been made, but there is still a long way to go. Our collection must encompass fashion if it is to complete the circle that connects all forms of design—from architecture to textiles, from manufactured objects to digital artifacts—in the fertile dialogue at the root of the diverse and open-ended contemporary incarnation of the modern.

Fashion is unquestionably a form of design. As with other types of design, its pitch is struck in the mediation between form and function, means and goals, automation and craftsmanship, standardization and customization, universality and self-expression, and pragmatism and vision. In other words, fashion partakes in all the existential dilemmas of design, and since its involvement in our lives is so intimate and intrinsic, it is an especially agile mediator between the universal and the personal, capable of magnifying our rawest emotions. Like other physical and digital forms of design, it moves on a spectrum ranging from postindustrial seriality (from ready-to-wear to fast fashion) to precious, hand-crafted uniqueness (haute couture). Like all design, it exists in the service of others. In most cases, it is conceived by an individual to dress others—sometimes many, many others—so that they can function in the world, in different arenas, and not only cover but also express themselves. Moreover, like all design, fashion has consequences—social, political, cultural, and environmental. And the influence works both ways: military research, for example, has long pioneered new, wearable materials and technologies that have been incorporated into the clothing of private citizens. Culture wars and political protests continue to be waged through garments. Today fashion is produced *en masse* and distributed on a global scale. An increase in customers with disposable income and the advent of e-commerce have drastically altered buying behaviors, eliciting demand for up-to-the-minute choices and the expectation of both affordable pricing and on-demand luxury. Fast fashion, in particular, is an arena for social, political, economic, and environmental conflict. The death of more than 1,100 workers in 2013



Left:
1— “Pockets” and “Buttons,” from the 1947 book Bernard Rudofsky produced in conjunction with his exhibition *Are Clothes Modern?* (MoMA, 1944). The caption reads, “Fully clothed man carries seventy or more buttons, most of them useless. He has at his disposal two dozen pockets.”

2— Brandon Wen and Laura Zwanziger’s half-scale plus-size dress form Tolula, designed at Cornell University’s 3-D body-scan lab in 2013. Photograph by the designers. Like the other new designs illustrated in this essay, this prototype was presented in the *Items* exhibition (corresponding in this case to *Comme des Garçons’s Body Meets*

Dress—Dress Meets Body)
3— *Are Clothes Modern?* exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, 1944. View of the entrance. Unknown photographer
4— Jumpsuit prototype designed by Richard Malone for *Items: Is Fashion Modern?*, 2017. Photograph by the designer

in relationship to different urgent and timely issues—such as sustainability, gender, and memory—within an arresting installation design.¹³ Although monographic shows exist also in design, MoMA curators have traditionally privileged thematic exhibitions, in which objects become portals to a deeper understanding of the world in all its political, technological, sociological, cultural, economic, philosophical—in other words, in all its systemic—complexity, without sacrificing aesthetic consideration. Clothes are especially profound and charged examples of design that allow us to explore these knotty realms.

Items was born around 2011, initially emerging as a list of “garments that changed the world,” and it encompassed clothes and accessories that have had a profound impact during the time range covered by MoMA’s collection. It was originally an exploration of potential acquisitions that seemed necessary to tell a more accurate history of modern design. This volume and the related exhibition explore a small slice of such canonical and noncanonical garments from all over the world through the nexus of their complex and dynamic production, allowing readers and audiences to understand the larger implications of—and their own participation in—the systems that govern and produce this design field. The list is hardly exhaustive, either in terms of cultural and geographic reach or in number (arbitrarily, 111 objects, a ceiling that purposely provokes others into highlighting omissions and proposing additions). The *Items* curatorial team has chosen to celebrate our center of gravity, New York, by using the city as an observatory, albeit one equipped with a particularly powerful and inquisitive telescope. New York’s diversity and density, and its inhabitants’ penchant for intense conversations—for instance, about contamination or appropriation—have taught us that while you cannot write somebody else’s story or compile somebody else’s list, it does not take much to trigger a vivacious and productive response. Our list of 111 items is, thus, like any abbreviated compilation, particular, filled with this team’s soul and personalities, and also inductive, crafted to distill a common experience and inspire a reaction. The goal of the exhibition is to stimulate curiosity and focus attention so that everyone who passes through it might look at fashion in a different way, with more awareness, agency, and respect. Throughout the gestation of this project, the public—from third graders to seasoned scholars—felt inspired to suggest, comment on, approve, decry, or amend both the choice of items and the way each was represented.

In the exhibition and in this catalogue, garments created for the benefit of many (such as the white T-shirt or the dashiki) coexist with rarefied fashion episodes for the delight of a few (Martin Margiela’s Tabi footwear series, for instance, or Yves Saint Laurent’s Le Smoking). What they have in common is their influence on the world, whether direct and immediate, as evidenced by millions of purchases, or mediated and metabolized at first by institutional and financial elites. Thanks to the cross-pollination made possible by physical and cultural migrations, rampant appropriation, and the disseminating power of media both old and new, nowhere do high and low engage in so productive a conversation as in fashion.

In the Museum galleries, we examine these items in three tiers: archetype, stereotype, and prototype. Presented first in the incarnation that made it significant in the last one hundred (or so) years—the stereotype—each item is then accompanied by contextual material that traces its origins back to historical archetypes. Our method for defining a design’s stereotype was necessarily subjective but drew on the collective consciousness: when you close your eyes and think of a sari, or a pair of chinos, or a pearl necklace, what do you see? *That* is the item’s stereotype. In our constructive stereotyping, we

were helped by a diverse, international advisory committee (see p. 282) and by the impressive roster of speakers who participated in a two-day colloquium at the Museum in May 2016¹⁴; our efforts were further buttressed by research, interviews, and extensive travels—to India and Bangladesh, Nigeria and South Africa, and many other places in Asia, Europe, and the US. Finally, for about a third of the pieces, when advancements in technology, social dynamics, visual culture, or political awareness warranted it, we complemented the item with a newly commissioned design—a prototype to jump-start a new life cycle for the garment with pioneering materials, more sustainable approaches, or novel design techniques. (The preparatory drawings for some of these commissions illustrate this essay.)

The exhibition is laid out so as to provide both deliberate and serendipitous adjacencies. From an area devoted to mutating ideas of the body and silhouette, spanning issues of size, image, and gender—this space presents, among many other items, the little black dress, the Wonderbra, the sari, and Rudi Gernreich’s Unisex Project—the exhibition segues into a zone devoted to new technologies and visions of the future, bringing experiments such as Issey Miyake’s A-POC (A Piece of Cloth) and Pierre Cardin’s Cosmocorps collection into conversation with Gore-Tex, sunscreen, and the Moon Boot. The fascinating relationship between emancipation, modesty, introversion, and rebellion—concepts that paradoxically share many common traits, in fashion and beyond—is introduced by the hoodie and the turtleneck, and this portion of the show includes items as diverse as leather pants, the cheongsam, the slip dress, the bikini, the hijab, and kente cloth, all connected by a thread of alternately muted or roaring subversion. Next comes a section devoted to items whose foremost function is to deliver a message, sometimes explicit (a graphic T-shirt, a tattoo, a particular use of a bandanna) and other times implicit (a Birkin bag or a diamond engagement ring). Sports—often a source not only of technological but also of stylistic innovation and the basis of contemporary casual wear and street wear—inspired a section charting the myriad ways in which fashion and athleticism have met over the past century, whether in the form of sports jerseys and other street-wear staples like the polo shirt and the Converse All-Star, or revered high-fashion collaborations such as Yamamoto’s Y-3. A section dedicated to everyday uniforms features humble masterpieces such as the Breton shirt and Levi’s 501s, professional attire such as the pencil skirt and loafers, and the ubiquitous, multipurpose Dutch wax textiles—indispensable staples that are all but invisible, so entrenched are they in our habits and behaviors. The exhibition concludes with a study of power—hard and soft—embodied by, among other garments and accessories, a selection of men’s suits, Donna Karan’s Seven Easy Pieces, the stiletto heel, and the pearl necklace. In order to make our inquiry’s shift to a global scale clearer, we commissioned information designer Giorgia Lupi to create a mural that places the 111 items within larger systems—for instance, the United Nations’ sustainability protocol, adapted for the future of fashion.

Each of the items in the exhibition engages many intersectional themes and could therefore be positioned usefully in any number of constellations. This catalogue, however, takes a different tack, presenting the material alphabetically, for ease of reference. A short essay on each of the 111 items in the exhibition appears in the order suggested by the first letter of its name, though we have in some cases decided to take certain license—for example, opening the sequence with 501s, omitting their maker’s well-known name in order for them to lead the pack as harbingers of modernity, fashion, and design’s interdependency. We have relied on primary sources from the past century, including

material-culture references such as *Vogue*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, and the *New York Times*, to describe particular cultural moments, and have, of course, drawn heavily on available scholarship, archival materials, and interviews. Novel visual interpretations of the items in the show were solicited from five photographers: Omar Victor Diop, Bobby Doherty, Catherine Losing (in collaboration with stylist Anna Lomax), Monika Mogi, and Kristin-Lee Moolman (with longtime collaborator Ibrahim Kamara), and those stellar images are among the many hundreds included here.

In this project, high fashion lives comfortably alongside the white T-shirt and jeans and other familiar items whose histories we are not so well-acquainted with (perhaps the true definition of a “humble masterpiece”).¹⁵ Equally, in a protomodern approach that emphasizes the interrelationship and continuity between all forms of culture, fashion items of all sorts can exist alongside the architectural models, chairs, posters, and video games that constitute this Museum’s design history. Making these connections has always been part of MoMA’s mission—at least in the Department of Architecture and Design, where we get to place highly diverse objects side by side in considered juxtapositions that allow our audiences to bring their own experiences to bear, too. It is plain that what we wear informs our everyday experience of self and society. The foundational clothing designs included here allow us to talk rightfully about fashion as a salient area of design—one that should not and cannot be ignored. I believe that the writers, curators, students, and members of the general public who recognize and embrace this show’s approach can help locate a new center of gravity for the field of fashion and generate their own provocative questions for further exhibitions, books, public discussions, and personal reflections—at least some of which, I trust, will happen at MoMA. No modern design history is complete without fashion.

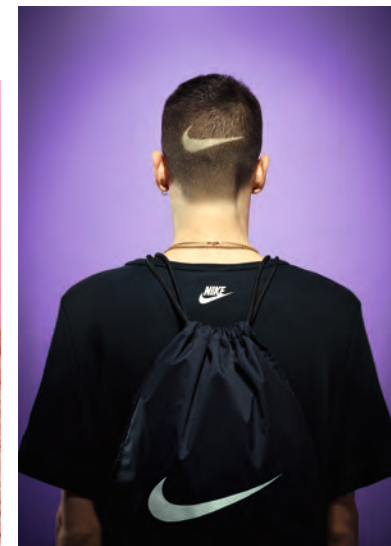
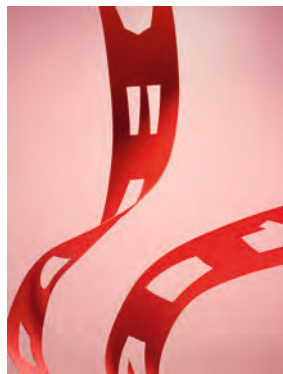
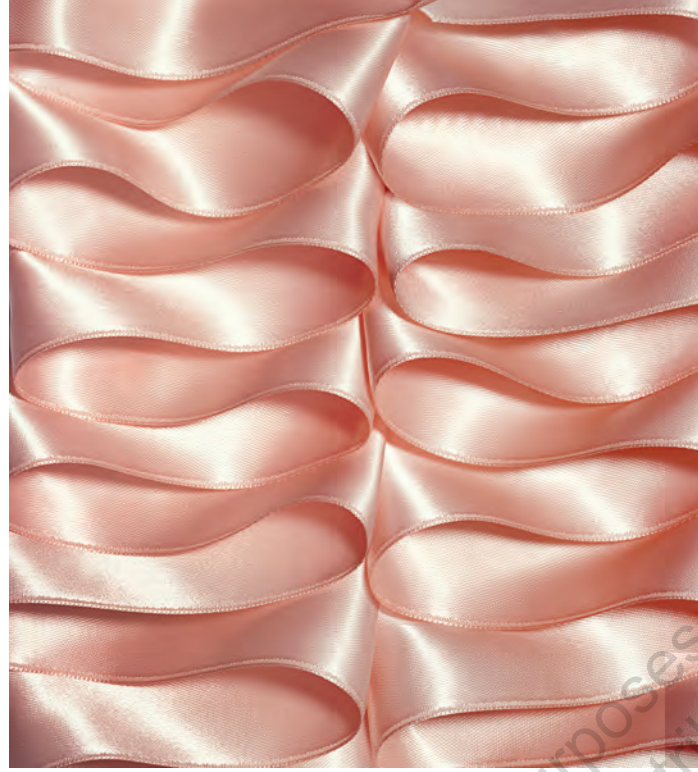


Right:
9, 10— Breton sweater
prototype designed by
Unmade for *Items: Is Fashion
Modern?*, 2017. Photograph
by Luke Bennett
11— Still from a video
produced in conjunction
with the little black dress
prototype designed by Pia
Interlandi for *Items: Is
Fashion Modern?*, 2017

12— Development sketches
for the harem pants
prototype designed by
Miguel Mesa Posada for
Items: Is Fashion Modern?,
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