

Invisible Men: An Anthology from the Westminster Menswear Archive

Ambika P3, University of Westminster, London. 25 Oct. – 24 Nov. 2019

A brief description or biography of the institution or individuals presenting the project

Prof Andrew Groves, director of the Westminster Menswear Archive (WMA), and Dr Danielle Sprecher, curator of the Westminster Menswear Archive, co-curated the Invisible Men exhibition.

The WMA was founded in 2016 as a teaching collection at the University of Westminster in London. It was established to house significant examples of menswear and related artefacts to encourage and develop the technical and functional study of menswear design; to advance general knowledge of menswear as a design discipline; and to serve as a resource tool to inform contemporary menswear design.

The WMA began without a core collection; as a result, we were able to develop a collection development policy that focused on the underrepresented area of men's fashion and men's dress, with an emphasis on garments produced, designed, or worn in the United Kingdom. The WMA is underpinned by a distinct non-hierarchical approach to the collection and taxonomy of cloth-based objects, challenging the orthodoxy of traditional approaches to dress history, proposing a parity of objects instead, by interspersing workwear, uniforms, and designer garments.

The *Invisible Men* exhibition builds on growing interest and development in the study of masculinities and men's fashion, as evidenced by the International Encyclopaedia of Men and Masculinities (Flood, 2007), The Men's Fashion Reader (Karaminas and McNeil, 2009), and the 2014 launch of the journal Critical Studies in Men's Fashion. Over the course of three years, the team researched, sourced, and added over 1700 artefacts to the collection that would serve as the foundation for the *Invisible Men* exhibition.

Invisible Men - Project Overview

Aims

The project aimed to redress the gendered imbalance within collections of dress and their presentation. By rejecting a conventional hierarchy of design and challenging the orthodoxy of traditional dress collections and exhibitions, the project would generate new knowledge within the discipline of fashion history and propose novel methods of research and curatorial practise.

The project drew on recent research on the history of dress collection and exhibition in museums. Exhibiting Fashion: Before and After 1971 (Clark and Haye, 2013) delves into the seminal V&A exhibition Fashion: An Anthology by Cecil Beaton (1971) and its significance in establishing the national collection of Textiles and Fashion, setting precedents for collection policies, and reinforcing existing gender and class hierarchies within the field. The project drew on Horsley's 2014 article 'An Incomplete Inventory of Fashion Exhibitions Since 1971' and Petrov's research for the chapter 'Gender Considerations in Fashion History Exhibitions' (2014). Additionally, it builds on the work of Wilcox, the Victoria and Albert Museum's senior curator of fashion, and her investigation into the establishment of the V&A's national collection of textiles and fashion (2018). This research uncovered a significant knowledge gap in the field of menswear collection, study, and curation. Historically, object-based research in the field of dress has concentrated on womenswear as a means of comprehending the fashioned body, with far less research on menswear (Breward 1999; Mida and Kim 2015).

Menswear remains largely marginalised or excluded from the history of dress, despite the exponential growth of fashion exhibitions over the last 50 years. Horsley labelled this absence of menswear in exhibitions the 'Absent Shadow' (Horsley 2017). Menswear exhibitions have tended to focus on the fashionable figure of the dandy, with an emphasis on the unusual and visually spectacular, such as the Artist Rebel Dandy exhibition at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum (Irvine and Brewer 2013). Additionally, menswear has been significantly

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underrepresented in museums of decorative arts and dedicated fashion collections, both as material culture and as a design process (Taylor 2002).

Menswear has historically been underrepresented or completely excluded from many exhibitions. For example, despite McQueen's training in men's tailoring on Savile Row, no menswear was included in Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty (2011) while Christian Dior (2017), focused solely on womenswear despite the label introducing a men's line in the 1970s and their ground-breaking menswear under designers Hedi Slimane and Kim Jones. A notable exception was the Los Angeles County Museum's Reigning Men: Fashionable Menswear 1715-2015 (2015).

Objectives

The objectives for the Invisible Men exhibition were to:

- Present a substantial new dress collection to the public, allowing for an understanding of a previously under-researched aspect of fashion history to be understood
- Engage new or previously overlooked audiences due to the gendered nature of fashion exhibitions and the tendency to focus exclusively on menswear as the story of the dandy.
- Create a significant contribution to the knowledge and understanding of the production, consumption and design of British menswear and its historical context.
- Develop and present new understandings of the role of garment archives in the design processes of contemporary designers.
- Increase awareness of menswear as a design discipline distinct from womenswear in its design production and manufacturing techniques.
- Develop new perspectives on womenswear by presenting menswear objects that are related by creator, period, or style.

Outputs

Invisible Men was the largest exhibition dedicated to menswear in the United Kingdom, showcasing over 170 garments, many of which had never been on public display before, to explore the last 120 years of British menswear. The exhibition drew exclusively from the Westminster Menswear Archive. The exhibition included items from:

A-COLD-WALL*, adidas, Aitor Throup, Alexander McQueen, Austin Reed, Belstaff, Blades, BodyMap, British Army, Burberry, Burton, C.P. Company, Calvin Klein, Carol Christian Poell, Christian Dior, Comme Des Garçons, Craig Green, Dege & Skinner, Gieves, GMP, GPO, H&M, Harrods, Helmut Lang, HMP, Irvine Sellars, Issey Miyake, Jean-Paul Gaultier, Jeremy Scott, John Stephen, Junior Gaultier, Junya Watanabe, Left Hand, Levi's, Lewis Leathers, Liam Hodges, Mackintosh, Martin Margiela, Massimo Osti, Meadham Kirchhoff, Metropolitan Police, Michiko Koshino, Mr Fish, Nigel Cabourn, Palace, Paul Smith, Peter Saville, Prada, Sibling, RAF, Stella McCartney, Stone Island, Umbro, Undercover, USMC, USN, Vexed Generation, Vivienne Westwood, Vollebak, Zegna Sport.

Coinciding with the exhibition, we hosted several events for academics and wider audiences:

- A one-day conference with eight invited speakers drawn from leading menswear scholars in academia and industry practitioners saw 120 delegates explore the core issues raised by the exhibition.
- At the same time, a series of weekly In Conversation events featured a variety of prominent menswear designers being interviewed by journalists in front of an audience of 140 guests.

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- A series of special events saw delegates from several organisations including the British Fashion Council, Première Vision Paris, and The National Saturday Club, being given private curators tours.
- Supplementing the main exhibition at Ambika P3, a secondary satellite exhibition featuring additional objects from the archive was also shown for two weeks at 18 Montrose in Kings Cross.

Additionally, we published a physical catalogue and established a dedicated website and social media accounts for the exhibition, which allowed us to conduct additional research into the virtual spaces where menswear is discussed, collected, and championed.

A summary of how Invisible Men meets the award criteria

– Quality of research, scholarship, and interpretation

Unlike the traditional collections of dress held within museums, the specific user-led collection development of the WMA is unique and led to the creation of a new approach to its taxonomy. We have proposed a parity of objects, rejecting a hierarchy of design. By combining workwear, uniforms, and designer garments, we challenge the orthodoxy of dress collections and exhibitions. This approach enables us to develop new knowledge on existing historical menswear objects and to generate an understanding of their transformative role in the creation of new design-led outcomes. The widespread but little understood fashion industry practice of creating symbiotic correlations between 'designer' objects, their military counterparts, and industrial artefacts can then be critically assessed.

This period of research allowed us to develop the thesis that underpinned the exhibition Invisible Men (2019) which explored the design language of menswear and its focus on the reiteration of archetypal functional garments. It enabled us to examine the interconnectivity and complexity of the relationships between specific industrial, technical, or military cloth-based objects and their functionalities.

The research aimed to explore the thesis that central to the design, production, and consumption of menswear in the United Kingdom is the reinforcement of a gendered hegemony of masculinities. Through the endless reiteration of archetypal garments and their functions, men's dress codes and roles are prescribed and reinforced, thereby successfully enabling menswear to evade analysis and remain invisible.

– Unique contributions to the field of fashion and dress history research

From early conversations about the project, we realised that despite the absence of menswear within fashion exhibitions over the last 50 years, this fact had mostly gone unnoticed. The few menswear shows that had previously been staged had mostly presented menswear as the story of the dandy. While this is a visually compelling narrative, it does not focus on the fundamental design language of menswear with its focus on uniformity, replication, and adaptation as a means of enforcing its hegemonic power. To address this absence, and to fully confront the complexities presented within menswear, we decided that we would show a total of 186 objects displayed on 156 mannequins, therefore making Invisible Men the biggest exhibition of menswear to have been staged in the United Kingdom.

Invisible Men addressed the historical omission of menswear both in collections of dress and within fashion exhibitions, and how this absence denies opportunities to understand male dress and masculinities. The Invisible Men exhibition fully explored the multiplicity of relationships and dialogues between these object categorisations, and in doing so changed historic exhibition narratives of fashion and dress that present menswear as being dominated by the figure of the dandy.

– Innovative, creative, and engaging approaches to objects, media and/or design elements

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The title *Invisible Men* acknowledged the absence of menswear within dress collections and fashion exhibitions. It also referenced a distinctive method of design intrinsic to menswear and an inherent approach to male dress that is preoccupied with both unwritten rules and minor, almost unnoticeable, detail. The exhibition design consciously reflected this through its regimental presentation, and the use of headless mannequins positioned all at the same height, echoing the hegemonic power of uniformed men that deliberately make the individual invisible.

Building on the taxonomy developed for the WMA the exhibition was divided into 12 thematic sections highlighting different aspects of menswear. Designer garments were displayed next to industrial and functional menswear. Central to the curation of the show was its location, sited three floors below ground in a vast 14,000 square ft industrial space, a former concrete engineering construction hall. The rawness and redundancy of this space, previously a site of male-dominated heavy industry, illuminated the fetishistic appreciation of the working man in all his heroic iterations (Bell 2020).

– **Awareness of the project's target audience**

Invisible Men was intentionally designed to actively engage audiences that fashion exhibitions and collections of dress had previously disregarded. Our research indicated that the absence of prior exhibitions devoted to menswear meant that curators and institutions lacked a track record of successful exhibitions to support and justify the staging of exhibitions dedicated to menswear. In effect, creating a self-fulfilling feedback loop preventing the commissioning of exhibitions devoted to menswear. Our objective therefore was to demonstrate unequivocally that there is a sizable untapped audience for menswear exhibitions, and that they are a very engaged audience. By doing so, we would establish the evidence necessary for others to stage exhibitions in the future. Over the course of the exhibition's 18-day run, 5692 people attended.

– **Overall excellence, encompassing the ability to serve as a model for advancing research in fashion and dress history**

The success of the exhibition demonstrated our hypothesis that there is a significant public interest in menswear as a distinct design discipline. With no precedent for such a large-scale exhibition of menswear in the United Kingdom, the success of *Invisible Men* lessens the perceived risk that has previously stopped menswear exhibitions being staged. As a result of *Invisible Men* several forthcoming exhibitions requested to borrow objects from the WMA collection including the V&A, in 2022 for *Fashioning Masculinities* curated by Claire Wilcox, the Manchester Art Gallery for *Dandy Style* in 2022, and the V&A Dundee for *Tartan* in 2023.

A summary of the project's target audience. If project evaluation has been carried out, please include a brief statement regarding audience feedback or other means of audience engagement

Target Audience Summary

Given the objective of demonstrating there was a substantial audience for menswear exhibitions we wished to attract as many people as possible to physically attend the exhibition. Additionally, we sought to engage a younger, male audience that would not typically attend fashion exhibitions due to the objects on display bearing no personal relevance to their own engagement with fashion and menswear. It was critical that we engaged with appropriate menswear media and social media via our Instagram accounts, where we have developed a highly engaged and articulate following. We actively seek their input and draw on their expertise, highlighting their significance as subject experts.

Audience Engagement

Over a period of 18 days, *Invisible Men* attracted 5692 visitors.

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Our press and media coverage achieved an estimated 1.12 million coverage views. The exhibition gained significant international press and media coverage including Artforum, CNN, The Financial Times, i-D Magazine, Dazed, Evening Standard, LOVE Magazine, Le Monde, Paper Journal, SHOWstudio, The Guardian, The Independent, Vogue, V Man, Another Magazine, 1 Granary, The Guardian.

Audience profile

(Figures taken from visitor survey 322 responses)

Age

54% 19-25

Sex

54% female

43% male

Ethnicity

19% Asian or Asian British

5% Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African

5% Mixed or multiple ethnic groups

70% White