Beyond Rebellion: Fashioning the Biker Jacket has been organized by the graduate students in the Fashion Institute of Technology’s MA program in Fashion and Textile Studies: History, Theory, Museum Practice, with support from Sarah Byrd and Colleen Hill.

We would like to thank the many people who helped make this exhibition possible:

Dr. Joyce F. Brown, President, Fashion Institute of Technology

From the School of Graduate Studies: Dean Dr. Mary E. Davis, Instructor Sarah Byrd, Associate Chair Denyse Montegut, Associate Professor Lourdes Font; Umita Allsop, Marilyn Barton, Tracy Daniels, Carole DeSantis, and Marjorie Phillips

From The Museum at FIT: Director and Chief Curator Dr. Valerie Steele, Deputy Director Patricia Mears, Associate Curator Colleen Hill, and Publications Coordinator Julian Clark; Acting Senior Curator Fred Dennis; Senior Conservator Ann Coppinger, Nicole Bloomfield and Marjorie Jonas of the Conservation Department; Museum Photographer Eileen Costa; Sonia Dingilian and Jill Hemingway of the Museum Registrar’s Office; Exhibition Manager Michael Gotta, Boris Chesakov and Gabrielle Lauricella of the Exhibitions Department; Lynn Sallaberry and Thomas Synamon of the Costume Department; Curator of Education Tanya Melendez and Associate Curator of Education Melissa Marra; Media Manager Tamisen Young

From the Pre college Program: Michele Nagel

From Communications and External Relations: Cheri Fein, Carol Leven, and Smiljana Peros

From the Gladys Marcus Library’s Special Collections at FIT: Karen Trivette Cannell and April Calahan

Special Thanks to: Graphic Designer Matthias Kern, Ian Densford, Adeline Franco-Paddack, and Gabrielle Litterio

The exhibition will be on view from March 4 through April 5, 2014.

The Museum at FIT is open Tuesday–Friday, noon–8 pm; Saturday, 10 am–5 pm. For more information, visit fitnyc.edu/museum or call 212.217.4558.
The Perfecto is widely regarded as the original black leather biker jacket. It was created in 1928 by the Schott Brothers of New York City, at the request of a Harley-Davidson motorcycle distributor. The Perfecto’s design derives from the black leather jackets of German World War I aviators, but each design element was customized for motorcycle riders: the button fasteners of early military jackets were replaced with more secure, yet accessible, chrome snaps and zippers; the waist was cropped to facilitate freedom of movement while riding; and a buckled belt and asymmetrical, zipper front were added to protect the wearer from the wind.

Perfecto cemented the rebellious “bad boy” look in the form of the Wild One, white t-shirt, and cuffed jeans. Yves Saint Laurent became the first high-fashion designer to appropriate the edgy appeal and style of the biker jacket. As part of his 1960 haute couture collection for Christian Dior, Saint Laurent created a jacket inspired by the street style of beatniks and hip young students of the Left Bank in Paris. His version, however, was made of black crocodile skin and trimmed with mink. Fashion writer Eugenia Shepard remarked 15 years later that Saint Laurent had “turned black leather motorcycle jackets into high fashion, where they have been ever since.”

The exhibition, Beyond Rebellion: Fashioning the Biker Jacket, begins with the original Perfecto and proceeds from there to examine significant events in the jacket’s history. It shows that fashion designers have been fascinated by the biker jacket’s mystique for more than 80 years, inspired by not only its design elements, but also its “outsider” cultural associations. The exhibition includes a variety of high-end, ready-to-wear garments that revise and reinvent the traditional biker jacket.

During the 1970s and 1980s, as some fashion designers grew increasingly attracted to black leather for its associations with fetishism and sexuality, they began to take cues from leather subcultures. Claire Montana often did so in his ready-to-wear collections. In 1973, he designed a leather vest that resembles a biker jacket with cut-off sleeves, a style worn by leather enthusiasts, which they appropriated from motorcycle club members to produce a hyper-masculine image. Punks of the 1970s often added spikes, metal studs, pins, and fetish imagery to their biker jackets, while musicians in punk bands, such as the Sex Pistols, frequently wore similar jackets. Jean Paul Gaultier brought punk style to high fashion: a dynamic version of the jacket from his 1987 collection combines spikes with fringe, leather trapunto stitching, and faux fur. Meanwhile, a variety of rock musicians used the jacket to convey a “badass” persona. The biker jacket worn by Michael Jackson on the cover of his 1987 Bad album is sleek and sexy, while heavy metal rockers, like the members of Judas Priest, often wore studded jackets that referenced the S&M scene.

Designers continue to draw on the biker jacket as a source of inspiration. Some of them have pushed the boundaries of its construction and symbolism, going far beyond the classic Perfecto silhouette. A 2005 ensemble from the Biker + Ballerina collection by Rei Kawakubo for Comme des Garçons, mixes a pink gingham and tulle skirt with a saddle-stitched, black leather biker jacket, juxtaposing the jacket’s tough and aggressive associations with the skirt’s softness and femininity. Rick Owens is another designer known to integrate biker jackets into his avant-garde collections. In 2008, he created a dress that explores the contours of the body while referencing utilitarian elements, such as exposed zippers and leather.

Ever since the 1928 Perfecto, the biker jacket has adapted to a variety of trends, while its elements have been incorporated into numerous ready-to-wear clothing styles. Today, it is once again at the forefront of fashion. Its thoughtfully engineered design continues to encourage reinterpretation and reconfiguration by fashion designers. The biker jacket’s resilient features and tenacious symbolism have established it as a fashion classic, making it a dynamic presence on the runway as well as the street.