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Museum information line: (212) 217-4558

Power Mode: The Force of Fashion

December 10, 2019–May 9, 2020

Curated by Emma McClendon

exhibitions.fitnyc.edu/powermode

#PowerMode

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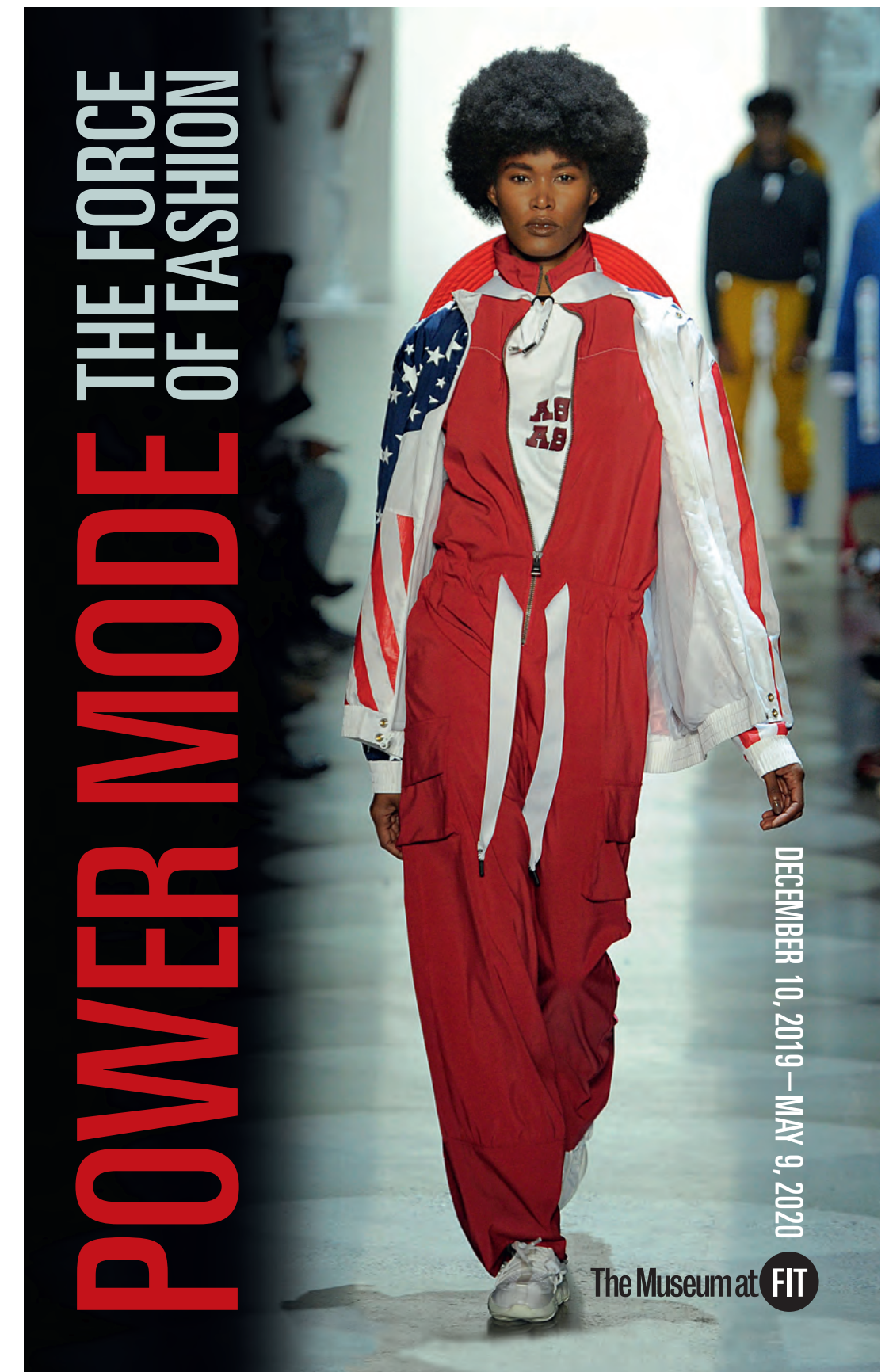
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Cover: Reebok by Pyer Moss Collection 1. Photo: Pyer Moss shot by Maria Valentino.
Inner flap: Christian Dior by Maria Grazie Chiuri, spring 2017. Photo: firstVIEW.com.



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Today, we see a multitude of sartorial power symbols, from “power suits” to “power heels.” But what makes a garment “powerful”? According to sociologist and political theorist Steven Lukes: “We speak and write about power, in innumerable situations, and we usually know, or think we know, perfectly well what we mean ... And yet, among those who have reflected on the matter, there is no agreement about how to define it, how to conceive it, how to study it, and, if it can be measured, how to measure it.”

Diana Slip, circa 1930, museum purchase.



If we think of power in terms of kinetic force (for example, electrical power or a person’s physical power over another), clearly an inanimate item of clothing does not have actual power. The force of fashion is symbolic. It is social. It lies in the sphere of interpersonal relations and cultural dynamics. There is no single, universally accepted definition of power. Power means different things to different people at different times. As such, its connection to fashion is multifaceted, and a multifaceted approach is necessary for considering the role fashion plays in power dynamics both historically and today.

The exhibition is organized into five thematic sections, each devoted to a particular type of sartorial “power.” In each section, men’s and women’s clothing are considered side by side, and pieces from as early as the eighteenth century are juxtaposed with looks from contemporary collections.

The first section considers military uniforms and their transformation into fashion items. Modern military uniforms combine tailoring with an elaborate code of patches, braiding, stripes, colors, and metalwork that makes the soldier a walking extension of the state’s power. In fashion, a company logo replaces the state’s seal, but uniform-inspired silhouettes, colors, textiles, buttons, etc., become visual shorthand for the power, strength, and authority of the military. It is the power of association.

The second looks at status dressing from ermine capes and luxurious brocade fabrics to contemporary “It” bags

Shoes, 1740–1745, museum purchase. ►



Burberry by Christopher Bailey, fall 2010, gift of Burberry.

and logo-covered products. Wealth and class are key to understanding the role status dressing plays in modern society as are issues of taste. In 1899, Thorstein Veblen laid out his theory of “conspicuous consumption” to highlight the performance in owning and displaying status goods. While status dressing was once reserved

for monarchs and aristocrats, today Peter McNeil and Giorgio Reillo observe that “consumers think that luxury is something that everyone should aspire to.” This is the paradox of contemporary status dressing—accessible luxury.

From status dressing, the exhibition moves to consider the history of the suit. The sharply tailored suit is perhaps the most conventional example of “power dressing.” Indeed, the term power dressing was often used to describe the big-shouldered suits worn by upwardly mobile business men and women during the 1980s. However, the history of the suit is more nuanced. Anne Hollander points out, “Heads of state wear suits ... and men accused of rape and murder wear them in court to help their chances of acquittal.” In court rooms and office spaces, the suit isn’t just a symbol of authority. It is also a sign of blending in—submitting to established norms and dress codes.

The next section considers the role of resistance dressing. Blue jeans, printed T-shirts, and black leather jackets have become some of the most common symbols of resistance in clothing. They signal a certain type of power that is subversive of established authority. It is the power of protest and rebellion. There is a tension between resistance clothing and “fashion,” with the later often being dismissed as surface-level commodification. But the relationship is not so simple—fashion can also be a vehicle for protest as seen in the recent work of Kerby Jean-Raymond for his label Pyer Moss.

Finally, the fifth section analyzes objects associated with sex and sexuality. There are many fashion objects that

Thom Browne, 2018, gift of Thom Browne. ►

are culturally coded as “sexy.” Corsets, leather, lingerie, and high-heeled boots are but a few examples. The power dynamics of these garments are inherently complex. How a garment is interpreted can fluctuate between dominance and subjugation. As fashion critic Holly Brubach once said of Versace’s famous 1992 bondage collection, it “riles women who think this is exploitative and appeals to women who think of his dominatrix look as a great Amazonian statement. It could go either way.”

Power Mode is a curatorial experiment. It aims to combine theory with history and object analysis in order to better understand the complex nature of power in fashion as well as the ways fashion can be key to a broader understanding of power dynamics in culture.

