



***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.

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



Seventh Avenue at 27th Street  
New York City

The Museum at FIT is open Tuesday-Friday, noon-8 pm; Saturday, 10 am-5 pm.  
For more information, visit [fitnyc.edu/museum](http://fitnyc.edu/museum) or call 212.217.4558.

# BEYOND REBELLION:

# FASHIONING THE BIKER JACKET

MARCH 4–APRIL 5, 2014

Presented by the School of Graduate Studies and

FIT

# BEYOND REBELLION: FASHIONING THE BIKER JACKET

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. The well-engineered construction of the *Perfecto* established it as the archetypal biker jacket, destined to become an inspiration to motorcyclists and fashion designers alike.

This 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.

In 1935, one of the earliest unruly motorcycle clubs, the Outlaws, was established along Route 66 in McCook, Illinois. Club members accepted the *Perfecto* (and sometimes its imitators) as a part of their standard riding attire. After World War II, the Hells Angels and other motorcycle clubs cultivated a lawless image in order to break away from the conformity of post-war America. The biker jacket became a recognizable symbol of the "outlaw biker" by 1947, when a club known as the Boozefighters clashed with police in the town of Hollister, California. The riots that took place there inspired the 1953 film *The Wild One*, starring Marlon Brando. Brando's *Perfecto*, white t-shirt, and cuffed jeans cemented the rebellious "bad boy" look in the public consciousness.

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 Sheppard remarked 15 years later that Saint Laurent had "turned black leather motorcycle jackets into high fashion, where they have been ever since."

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

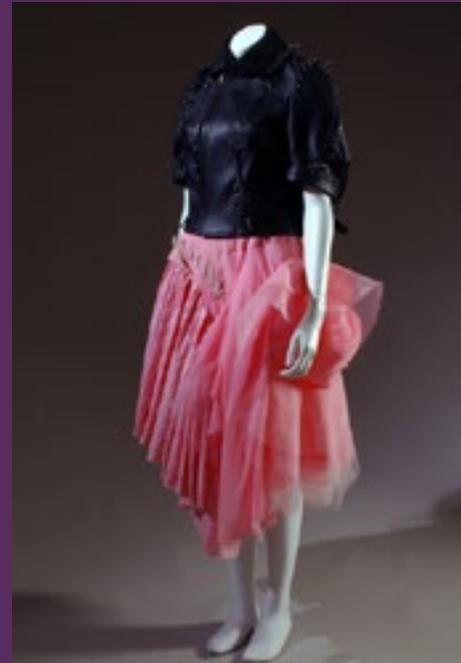
subcultures. Claude Montana often did so in his ready-to-wear collections. In 1973, he designed a leather vest that resembles a biker jacket with cut-off sleeves, a style worn by leather enthusiasts, which they appropriated from motorcycle club members to produce a hyper-masculine image. Punks of the 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 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.



All photographs MFIT.

From left: Schott, *Perfecto* jacket, black leather, circa 1980, USA; Jean Paul Gaultier, jacket, black leather, faux fur, suede, and grey wool, 1987, France; Comme des Garçons (Rei Kawakubo), jacket and skirt, black leather, pink gingham and tulle, spring 2005, Japan; Rick Owens, suit, off-black denim, wool felt, leather, grey ribbed knit, fall 2008, France.

Inside flap: Detail, Comme des Garçons (Rei Kawakubo), jacket and skirt, black leather, pink gingham and tulle, spring 2005, Japan.

Cover: Schott, *Perfecto* jacket, black leather, circa 1980, USA.