



BEYOND REBELLION: FASHIONING THE BIKER JACKET

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This exhibition traces the journey of the black leather motorcycle jacket from functional outerwear to subversive statement of “cool,” culminating with its current status as an iconic wardrobe staple. It examines the biker jacket as a high-fashion garment and features clothing from leading designer labels including Jean Paul Gaultier, Rick Owens, and Yves Saint Laurent. The objects are organized in the exhibition according to three themes: the history of the biker jacket, the biker jacket as a statement for countercultural groups, and the avant-garde reinterpretations of the garment.

A UTILITARIAN GARMENT

Widely regarded as the original black leather jacket, the *Perfecto* was created for motorcyclists in 1928 by Irving Schott at the request of a Harley-Davidson manufacturer. Named for Schott’s favorite cigar, the *Perfecto* was inspired by the black leather coats of German World War I aviators, but it was customized for motorcycle riders. Design features of the *Perfecto*, such as a cropped waist and an asymmetrical zipper, facilitated easy riding and protected wearers from the wind. The well-engineered construction of the *Perfecto* made the biker jacket a desirable garment among riders, and motorcycle club members soon adopted the biker jacket as standard riding attire.

What additional features of the biker jacket do you think would protect motorcycle riders from the elements of the open road?

Do you still see motorcycle riders wearing leather jackets today?





A SYMBOL OF DEFIANCE

By 1947, the biker jacket was the symbol of the “outlaw biker,” as many motorcycle clubs sought to rebel against conformity. Soon, the image of the biker jacket represented rebellion and was adopted by other countercultural groups, such as punks. The biker jacket was suddenly a symbol of “cool.”

Many fashion designers have been inspired by these countercultural groups and their appropriation of the biker jackets. An example of this is a jacket by Jean Paul Gaultier that incorporates a metal spike on each elbow. The stitching details on the shoulders recall armor, and exaggerate the size of the upper body.

How is wearing the biker jacket an act of defiance or rebellion?

Would you agree that the biker jacket is “cool?”



AVANT-GARDE FASHION

Yves Saint Laurent was the first fashion designer to appropriate the edgy appeal of the biker jacket for a couture collection in 1960. Designers have continued to seek inspiration from the biker jacket and have gone far beyond the classic *Perfecto* by infusing its physical and symbolic features into avant-garde fashions. An ensemble from Comme des Garçon’s *Biker + Ballerina* collection juxtaposes a sculptural, masculine, black leather jacket with a delicate pink gingham and tulle skirt. Although the *Biker + Ballerina* ensemble and the *Perfecto* serve different functions and appeal to different consumers, the allure and mystique of the jacket remains.

What elements of this avant-garde biker jacket resemble the Perfecto? Are the avant-garde features of this jacket functional or are they purely elements of fashion?

GLOSSARY

Avant-Garde: new and unusual or experimental ideas
Cool: attractive or impressive; fashionable
(All definitions from Merriam Webster Dictionary)