

May Public Tour: **The Art of Fashion**

Explore the visual language of fashion as expressed in the art of many cultures. Discuss how time and place affect how we look. We may even bring up the current “beard invasion!”

Ideas for Crafting Your Public Tour

A fascinating tour can be based solely on the art of fashion from different times and places. Also consider how visitors may enjoy thinking about fashion from a broader perspective. Below are a variety of connections that might be of interest. **As always, your tour is your own to create.**

Fashion Chronicles the Events of the Time

Use the art of fashion to explore changes in society, economics, politics and technology. Need ideas? Read [The Dress that Ignited the Slave Trade by Caroline London](#). Pick your favorite global trade partners in world history and explore art that shows human desire for the exotic and rare. Use Dyani White Hawk’s **Untitled** 2016.74 (G261) to trace the circular route of Native American quillwork, the acceptance of European beads, and the renewed interest in quillwork today. Consider the kimono-clad husband in **The Asparagus Vendor** by Pieter de Hooch 82.46 (G309) which reflects the Dutch East India Trading Company’s access to Japanese culture.

Who’s in charge?

Who decides the way we should look? In modern times there are many influencers: the selfie, fashion blogs, social media, movies, magazines, the choices of the rich-and-famous. Check out this short article: [The Birth of Fashion Magazines](#).

Artists routinely changed or “improved” the way people looked to make their work more appealing to the buyer. For example:

- Consider Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun’s portrait of **Maria Theresia Bucquoi** 78.7 (G306), a woman of 47. Vigée-Le Brun specialized in large eyes and a youthful appearance. She provided clothing props (shawls, the latest “Turkish cap”) that made her subjects up-to-date fashion-wise.
- John Singleton Copley portrayed his subject in the manner of an English aristocratic lady of fashion in **Portrait of Sarah Allen, née Sargent** 41.3 (G322).
- Throughout history people have tried to “look good” by changing their body according to societal norms. Explore Lonnie Holley’s **Permanent Wave: Hair was my Glory & Chain** (G373). There’s a good essay on Holley in this [NY Times article](#).
- Pick a portrait and uncover the truth about underwear. Wikipedia has articles on the “corset” (used by women, as well as men) and the “corset controversy.”

Establishing Identity

- Fashion can proclaim one’s identity to the world. The Lakota **Headdress** 2015.6 (G261) celebrates the wearer’s power, leadership, and generosity. Many Mia objects, like **Portrait of a Burgomaster** 35.7.106 (G311), shout out with symbols of status and wealth. Compare it to the understatement and simplicity of **Portrait of Harriet Brown** 98.141 (G304).
- Fashion can also be about self-expression: one’s personality, religious beliefs, and accomplishments. Find self-expression in the embroidery of the Moroccan scarves of the **Beni Hilal** (G236) or the woven Mayan **Huipils/blouses** (G260). Wander into the **Wanda Gág**

exhibition (G315 and 316) to see her Peasant Blouse that she chose to express her Bohemian/Czech heritage.

- When thinking about identity, try a compare/contrast with the **Somali Beard Comb** 2010.4 (G254) and **Bust of Emperor Hadrian as a Young Man** 2010.10 (G340). How do visitors understand the popularity of facial hair today? Need a little background? Read a short article: [The real reason why beards go in and out of fashion](#)
Also see a GQ article on the “beard invasion”: <https://www.gq.com/story/beard-package-facial-hair-shaving-trimming>
- People with different backgrounds have a more complex path with identity. **Mixed Blood Guy** 2011.49 (G261) may give pause for reflection.
- Visitors may want to discuss the idea of **appropriation** (the action of taking something for one's own use, typically without the owner's permission). Why do people wear the fashion of another culture? When does it cross the line?
- Throughout time people have made permanent changes to the body in the quest for beauty, identity, and to honor an accomplishment. A few popular alterations of our time and place include: ear/body piercing, tattooing/inking, hair and breast implantation, and cosmetic surgery. At Mia, scarification is seen in our **Shrine Head** 95.84 (G250) and the **Algerian** 76.3 (G357). The **Nuer Shield** 2016.28.2 (G250) has patterns similar to scarification—and will remind some of a character in the movie [Black Panther](#). Head binding can be seen in the silhouette of a Mayan man on **Plate** 97.92.4 (G260).

How inappropriate!

The rules about acceptable fashion may not be written but are generally well-known.

- Today the **Vacationers on the Beach at Trouville** 15.30 (G355) seem overdressed to us, but they must have felt they looked pretty good.
- Visitors may enjoy thinking about the challenges posed by **Mrs. T. in Cream Silk** 60.33 (G302) for her well-meaning family.
- Discuss the custom of dresses for boys in **Portrait of a Young Boy** 98.239 (G304) and the association of boys with pink in **Portrait of a Boy** 2017.50 (G309).
- For the right audience consider Caillebotte's **Nude on a Couch** 67.67 (G355). He thumbed his nose at upper class values by including the woman's street clothes and shoes in the painting. This marked the nude as an ordinary woman. Beyond the sexual innuendo, this painting trespassed rules of class and values of what great art should be. She's a nude who is not a mythological goddess!

A final thought from a New Yorker article: [The Power of Personal Style in “Phantom Thread”](#) By [Brandon Taylor](#):

Fashion is all about control—of the viewer's eye, of a client's body, of oneself— so good style becomes the highest form of self-mastery, the ability to control what of oneself the world is allowed to access. Woodcock's great hubris has everything to do with controlling the bodies of the women he dresses—they can barely breathe, can barely move, they are there to be propped and looked at—but it also has to do with wanting to control how the world reaches him.