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20th Century Dress and Culture

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### **Museum Exhibition: Object Analysis Paper**

Whilst viewing the “Power Mode” exhibition at the museum at FIT I was intrigued by many of the various garments on display. One garment in particular that stood out to me was the classic “biker” jacket. The jacket was displayed on a mannequin with a white T-shirt on the inside to accentuate the contrast between the two colors. The jacket’s color was all black with silver metal accents along the lapel and two pocket compartments on each side of the abdomen. The Jacket also features various metal zippers on it including one to close the jacket and two along the bottom of each sleeve as well as a diagonal zipper on the upper right side of the jacket. This Jacket also features the two classic shoulder straps. This garment was originally designed by Irving Scott in 1928 and was dubbed as the *Perfecto*, it stood out with its asymmetrical, cross-body design, durable black leather, and exposed metal hardware. After World War II, motorcycle gangs started wearing this jacket as a uniform usually patched with gang logos and it eventually became a symbol. Later the actor Marlon Brando would also make this look famous in the movie *Wild One* which helped make the Jacket a symbol of rebellion. The Jacket took influence from Bomber jackets that were worn by fighter pilots during World War II and later Schott would transform this silhouette into a famous look and ultimately a timeless classic. The jacket during the time gave off a hyper-masculine and “bad boy” aesthetic worn by gang members and rebellious teenagers throughout the early 1900s. This design adds to the history of American fashion. The inclusion of the belt at the bottom of the jacket adds to the functionality of the piece as it was used to help provide stability to those who wore it when driving a motorcycle making it both functional as well as fashionable.

When it comes to discussing the history of the motorcycle jacket it must begin in 1913 with the founding of Schott NYC, an apparel company that was founded by Russian immigrants Irving and Jack Schott. They were known for making raincoats out of a basement factory in the Lower East Side and selling finished products door to door. Fifteen years later Irving would make a coat intended for warmth, protection, and comfort during motorcycle riding. In 1928 Schott Perfecto was introduced as the first leather motorcycle jacket. Leather Jackets had been around prior to the introduction of the motorcycle jacket as seen on pilots during World Wars. Schott had contributed their own designs to the US military in WWII when they were commissioned by the air force to create an exponentially warm jacket for bombing crews and continued to produce garments for the military for the next 60 years. Simultaneously Schott was still producing their motorcycle jackets to its limited clientele of motorcyclists that changed dramatically in 1953 with the premiere of *The Wild One* starring Marlon Brando as the leader of a motorcycle gang. During this time the young men of America took notice often idolizing and imitating the cool, edgy style of Brando and the gang. The Jacket's popularity continued to gain popularity throughout the 1950s, 60s, and 70s and became synonymous with various rock artists of the time such as Blondie, Joan Jet, Sex Pistols, the Ramones and many others. As time continued to pass it was becoming more clear that this leather jacket trend was certainly here to stay as various other high-end fashion houses would implement this garment into their looks and produce their own versions of the biker jacket. While the perfecto was successfully representing the mod from the 1950s, the original roots of the leather bomber jacket made its comeback, becoming a wishlist item for our wardrobes during the 1980s the leather jacket came back into fashionable uniformity. This led to a demand for leather goods by Schott so he designed the NYC bomber with borg collar design in the 1980s and had made its movie debut worn by Tom Cruise in 1986 in the movie *Top Gun*. I believe that it's safe to say that during the period in which this garment was produced the country was in a period of extreme nationalism and everyone was very prideful about being an American during this somber wartime. Schott being able to put out this jacket at this particular time gave the people who wore it a sense of grit and toughness which truly embodied the reflection of the mood of the time.

Inside the Museum at FIT the garment was displayed all the way at the very end of the exhibit on two different mannequins. On the first mannequin was the classic men's motorcycle jacket only showing the torso of the body to really accentuate the jacket and all of its detail. Next to it was a women's version of the jacket made by the fashion house, Yves Saint Laurent in 1966. This version of the garment was inspired by the naval "peacoat" worn by sailors during that time period but still kept the leather jacket aesthetic. The jacket was elongated and ended just below the knee and was tapered at the bottom. Underneath each mannequin display was a brief description of both garments and their history giving insight on the origins of the two jackets. The inclusion of this garment to the exhibition conveys the idea that this piece is not only a staple garment within the history of American fashion but a classic garment that has a significant impact on fashion worldwide. This affects our interpretation of Paris fashion by shifting the view of Paris being the fashion capital of the world. American fashion has clearly evolved and established its own identity as one of the fashion powerhouses of the world. Since then many other fashion houses have made their own variations of the motorcycle jacket letting its impact become known around the world. In my opinion, the exhibition "Power Mode" at the Museum at FIT was very helpful in my learning of the evolution of 20th-century fashion because it gave me the ability to physically see the garments in full effect in a comfortable and peaceful environment. I was able to see the detail in each garment and read about the history of the clothing directly at the bottom of each display. These descriptions were very informative and clearly painted a picture of the time period in which the garments were cultivated.

## Works Cited

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