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Westminster Menswear Archive

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The Westminster Menswear Archive (WMA) was established in 2016 as a specialised teaching and research collection focused on menswear. Addressing the historical underrepresentation of menswear in fashion archives, the WMA has rapidly grown into a vital resource for both academic and industry research. This article explores the archive's origins, collection strategy, and its pivotal role in supporting design education, research, and industry engagement. Through key acquisitions, including garments from designers like Alexander McQueen and Massimo Osti, the WMA highlights menswear's diverse evolution, from military uniforms to high fashion. The archive has also contributed to significant exhibitions, including *Invisible Men* (2019) and *Umbro 100: Sportswear x Fashion* (2024). This paper outlines the challenges the WMA faces, such as managing rapid collection growth and expanding digital access, while underscoring its critical role in shaping the future of menswear studies.

Keywords: Westminster Menswear Archive; menswear fashion history; designer menswear collection; fashion research archives; menswear exhibitions and design

Origins and Evolution of the Westminster Menswear Archive

The Westminster Menswear Archive (WMA) was founded in 2016 at the University of Westminster, London, UK as a specialised teaching collection dedicated to menswear. This collection, funded initially by the Quintin Hogg Trust (QHT), a charity whose purpose is to support the advancement of the education of students at the University of Westminster, addresses the relative scarcity of menswear in existing fashion collections and museums. The primary goal of the WMA is to provide a comprehensive selection of men's garments for object-based research, benefiting design students and fashion professionals alike. Through its public exhibitions and engagement initiatives, the WMA also aims to promote the understanding of menswear as a distinct and significant design discipline.

Before the creation of the WMA, the use of garment research for teaching of fashion design at the University of Westminster primarily relied on staff members providing their own garments for student study. This informal practice continued until June 2007, when a fire at the university's Harrow campus severely damaged the fashion design studios. As a result, the BA (Hons) Fashion Design course was forced to relocate to temporary facilities, which extended to four and a half years. The prolonged displacement prompted a comprehensive reassessment of the programme's resources, spaces, and pedagogical methods. This reflection led to the decision to establish a permanent teaching collection of garments, and a dedicated space to house this collection. In January 2012, the course moved into its new studios which included a garment archive room (Hawkins/Brown 2011). During this period a handful of garments were acquired —mainly military surplus but also some womenswear—through donations from lecturers, students, personal contacts, and anonymous donors. The collection did not have a clear identity and was referred to by various names such as 'fashion resource archive' (University of Westminster 2012), 'Westminster Fashion Archive' (Caballero and McKay 2015), and 'menswear garment archive' (Andrew Groves pers. comm. January 8, 2016).

Several factors during this formative period contributed to the collection's shift to a sole focus on menswear including the increased attention on this area of fashion by the industry and academics. In 2012 the family of Italian menswear designer Massimo Osti released a book documenting his career, and his methodology for creating new designs using his garment archive of over 30,000 technical, military, and functional garments (Facchinato 2012). Later that year, the Italian menswear brand, Stone Island published *Archivo*, a 600-page book detailing hundreds of garments from its archive (Griffiths and Foxton 2012). Within the UK June 2012 saw the British Fashion Council launch London Collections: Men, a twice-yearly event that showcased both established menswear designers and emerging

talent. Opened by HRH The Prince of Wales, brands such as Hardy Amies, Timothy Everest, and Margaret Howell showed alongside emerging designers including Martine Rose, JW Anderson, and Aitor Throup. By 2015, the event had grown to include seventy-seven designers presenting their collections. Scholarly and curatorial attention on menswear was also growing with works such as McNeil and Karaminas (2009) and exhibitions *Artist Rebel Dandy: Men of Fashion* (Brewer and Irvin 2013) and *Reigning Men: Fashion in Menswear 1715-2015* (Takeda 2016). At the University of Westminster, Robert Leach was developing *The Fashion Resource Book: Men* (2014), which explored how garment research could inspire new design outcomes.

In October 2014, Andrew Groves, course director of the BA (Hons) Fashion Design programme at the University of Westminster, was approached by White Line Projects, a curatorial and creative studio. They were working with the Massimo Osti family on an idea to create a small museum in London dedicated to Osti's work and make his archive an educational resource for design students. These discussions acted as a catalyst for Groves, who considered expanding the University of Westminster teaching collection with garments created by BA Fashion Design alumni (Andrew Groves, pers. comm. January 24, 2015). However, by February 2015, the scope of the proposal included archetypal garments, inspired by the approach Osti had taken with his own archive. These ideas were formalised by White Line Projects in August 2015 in a revised plan to collect objects connected to the university's history, such as graduate collections or significant works by alumni; archetypal garments and key pieces from contemporary designers; historical garments (or reproductions) for students to handle free from the constraints of conservation,; and envisioned the future digitisation of garment patterns to further expand access (Caballero and McKay 2015).

Running in parallel, and influenced by the new attention on men's fashion, was the decision by the University of Westminster to initiate a new postgraduate fashion design course with an exclusive focus on menswear (Mellery-Pratt 2016). The establishment of the two-year MA Menswear programme, alongside the final White Line Projects plan strengthened the final application to the QHT who in February 2016 awarded £350,385 over three years to the newly named Westminster Menswear Archive. During 2016 new studios for the MA were designed and built including a dedicated space for the WMA. The QHT funding facilitated the kitting out of the archive space, garment acquisitions and, in May 2017, the appointment of Dr. Danielle Sprecher as the archive's curator.



Figure 1: The Massimo Osti Archive in Bologna, established in 2012 following Osti's death in 2005, houses over 5,000 garments, accessories, and fabric samples that document his innovative career in fashion design. © Photograph courtesy of Massimo Osti Archive.

Collection Growth and Acquisition Strategy

The original collection policy of the WMA intended to ‘create a collection of garments to encourage and develop the study of menswear design from a technical and functional standpoint; to advance the general knowledge of menswear as a design discipline, and to be used as a resource tool to inform contemporary menswear design.’ This broad scope is situated within the western tradition of fashion design with collecting focused on men’s garments and accessories primarily from the UK, US and Europe post-1900. The WMA experienced rapid growth in its first year, expanding from 50 to around 800 garments by 2016. This swift expansion was made possible by sourcing garments from global resale platforms like eBay, Grailed, Depop, Vinted, StockX, and Etsy. Using these platforms allowed the archive to quickly build its core collection and has had a significant impact on its development, a process that may have taken much longer two decades ago. While this acquisition method allowed for rapid expansion, it resulted in a lack of provenance for most garments. However, since 2017 as the collection has become more well known, increasing numbers of the archive’s acquisitions have come through donations, many of which include personal narratives about the objects' histories, enhancing the contextual richness of the collection.

The WMA is managed by the University Records and Archives service. All items in the collection are catalogued systematically through the university's Access to Memory (AtoM) system. By 2024, the AtoM catalogue included over 2,640 records, covering both physical and digital objects. In 2022, the archive team grew with the appointment of a part-time Assistant Curator (0.6 FTE), providing additional support to the director and curator in managing the expanding collection.



Figure 2: In 2016, the WMA relocated to its current 111m² space, positioned next to the newly established MA Menswear course. This photograph shows the area prior to the installation of the collection. © Photograph by Andrew Groves

The development of the WMA collection has led to a diversity of garment type and the non-hierarchical approach means that items as varied as a supermarket-produced Lidl trainer and a Louis Vuitton leather jacket are situated side by side. This inclusivity reflects the archive's broader mission to represent all facets of menswear, from high fashion to everyday apparel. The collection now has strengths in the following: designer menswear and British designers; work wear and utilitarian garments; military uniform; sports, casual and leisure wear; personal wardrobe collections; tailoring including designer, bespoke, uniform and ready-to-wear; and pieces by graduates of the University of Westminster. Each year, the WMA acquires at least one full outfit from a graduate of the BA Fashion Design and MA Menswear courses. This section of the archive includes designs from notable alumni such as Robyn Lynch, Priya Ahluwalia, Robert Newman, and Liam Hodges. Within its holdings of

designer menswear are significant collections of the work of Alexander McQueen and Massimo Osti. There are over 60 garments from McQueen's menswear covering the period from 1996-2010. The archive holds over 160 examples of Osti's output for several of his brands, including Stone Island, C.P. Company, Boneville, Left Hand, and Massimo Osti Production. The impact of Black British designers on menswear can be seen in examples of work by Charlie Allen, Joe Casely-Hayford, Nicholas Daley, Martine Rose and Soul II Soul.

The section of utilitarian and industrial clothing showcases an extensive collection of workwear and personal protective equipment (PPE) featuring technical fabrics. This includes specialised protective garments, such as immersion suits, rainwear, and apparel designed to protect against fire, tasers, and electric shock and civil uniforms from fire services, police forces, rail and the post office.. The military collection within the WMA has uniforms spanning from the 1870s to the present day. It includes camouflage, combat, and dress uniforms from Army, Air Force, and Naval services, primarily from the UK, the US, and various European countries. This collection provides an overview of the modern-day evolution of military attire, from historical garments to modern-day innovations.

The archive also holds a good collection of tailored menswear with examples from the 1780s to the present. Notable pieces include two tailcoats from the 1830s-1840s, military dress uniforms, and suits from the 1960s 'Peacock Revolution.' The collection features deconstructed jackets by Carol Christian Poell and Comme des Garçons, bespoke Savile Row suits, and made-to-measure garments from Leeds tailors. It also includes subcultural tailoring, such as those worn by Mods and Teddy Boys, alongside tailoring pattern blocks from Creations Fischer in Paris, used for Christian Dior Monsieur, Givenchy, and Yves Saint Laurent.

Educational Impact: A Tool for Fashion Research and Design

The use of the archive by students and staff has significantly transformed design practice. It enables both groups to explore and critically analyse the work of other designers, focusing on aesthetic, material, and construction choices. This shift has decentralised the tutor's role, moving fashion pedagogy away from solely critiquing students' work and instead encouraging them to position their designs within the wider context of professional design practices. The archive's non-hierarchical collection supports this by showing that diverse design approaches are valid and celebrated. Shifting design pedagogy away from subjective ideas of aesthetic taste, emphasis is on the designer's intent and how it fits with audiences or markets.



Figure 3: A student and the curator examine an 18th-century frock coat alongside a modern interpretation—a 1999 frock coat designed by Alexander McQueen. © Photograph by David Freeman.

The archive plays a crucial role in supporting specific design projects on the undergraduate and postgraduate fashion courses at the University of Westminster. Students can access the WMA via drop-in sessions or by appointment with over 370 visits in the 2023-24 academic year. The curator has developed specific collections of garments to complement modules on specific themes such as sustainability, print, tailoring, or material studies, offering students a curated range of research objects for in-depth analysis. The WMA also facilitates collaborations with industry partners for student projects. For example, in 2024, the MA Menswear tailoring module was delivered in partnership with Alexander McQueen. The project began with an in-depth research phase, where students examined examples of McQueen's tailoring housed in the archive, focusing on his use of Savile Row cutting techniques in his collections from 1996 to 2000. This research directly influenced their own design development, and the final tailored outcomes were reviewed by the McQueen design team, offering students valuable professional feedback and deepening their learning experience.

Beyond supporting the University of Westminster, the archive also offers access to students, academics and professionals from other institutions both within the UK and internationally. Students can make individual research appointments and group visits are also available. Academic research utilising the collection has included face coverings, pre-1920 workwear and tailoring, and pattern cutting analysis.

Industry Engagement and Partnerships

A key element of the original proposal for the WMA was that it would be open for use by the fashion industry to enable research and inform teaching practices, along with the potential to generate income. In the past five years designers from a wide range of companies including recent graduates establishing their labels to large international brands have made use of the

archive's services. These brands have used the archive in a similar way to how they access other specialist garment archives, such as the Vintage Showroom in London or Modateca Deanna in Italy. Designers will visit these archives each season, researching and hiring garments to support their design processes. This activity not only provides income for the WMA but also offers valuable insights into how designers engage with research garments. Initially, it was assumed that these garments were directly referenced. However, due to the separation of design and manufacturing—often in different countries—the hired garments are frequently the only physical clothing in design studios. As such, they become central to communication among designers, functioning as a shared language that facilitates design development.

Embedding this industry research activity within academia has helped bridge the gap between academic study and professional practice, yielding additional benefits. It has allowed students to observe industry research processes, fostering a clearer understanding that garment research is not only valid but central to the design process. Additionally, this interaction has sometimes led to internships and employment opportunities for students, as they engage directly with design teams. For the archive's curatorial team, this collaboration has also shaped the WMA's acquisition strategy. By working closely with design teams, the staff gain valuable feedback on which garments to add to the collection, helping to identify gaps and expand the range of items available. Companies and designers also donate to the WMA with notable collections including over 60 pieces from Calvin Klein in 2017 and over 20 from Massimo Osti Studio in 2024.



Figure 4: A selection of garments from the Westminster Menswear Archive, rented by a menswear brand in 2022 for research and development purposes. © Photograph by Andrew Groves

Exhibitions and Public Engagement: Showcasing Menswear's Evolution

The WMA has staged three major exhibitions since it was established in 2016. In 2019 it staged *Invisible Men, An Anthology from the Westminster Menswear Archive* at the University of Westminster, Ambika P3, London. To date, this is the largest exhibition of menswear to have been staged in the UK. In March 2021, the WMA presented an online exhibition *Undercover – From Necessity to Luxury: The Evolution of Face Coverings During COVID-19*. Most recently in April 2024 the exhibition *Umbro 100: Sportswear x Fashion* was shown in the university's Ambika P3 space.



Figure 5: A view of the *Invisible Men* exhibition (2019), held at Ambika P3, London. © Photograph by David Freeman.

Each exhibition was part of a strategic acquisition plan designed at broadening the WMA collection. The *Invisible Men* (2019) exhibition was held to celebrate the achievements of the WMA after the QHT three-year funding period and to demonstrate the excitement and interest that menswear can generate. The research and feedback from *Invisible Men* resulted in the writing and publication of *Inside the Westminster Menswear Archive* (2024) by Groves and Sprecher, featuring over 140 garments from the WMA. The book supports object-based research and highlights the design methodology central to the collection. The book concludes with a reference history of the designers and brands featured, focusing on their menswear.

The online only exhibition *Undercover* (2021) emerged from a rapid response collecting project in 2020 designed to document the face coverings produced by the menswear industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. This resulted in the acquisition of over

100 masks, including medical devices, police and postal service uniforms, and fashion face coverings from designers like Louis Vuitton, Burberry, and Paul Smith.

Umbro 100 (2024) was the culmination of a five-year collecting project initiated to mark the centenary of the Manchester-based sportswear company. This project led to the accession of over 150 Umbro garments into the collection, spanning from the 1930s to the present. The exhibition investigated the relationship between sportswear and fashion, and its evolution over the last century with a focus on Umbro's use of collaborations as a means of positioning itself within the fashion industry. Notable partnerships include Kim Jones, Aitor Throup, Palace, Off White and Aries. The exhibition attracted 2,752 visitors over three weeks and included a comprehensive 200-page full-colour catalogue (Groves and Sprecher 2024).



Figure 6: A section of the *Umbro 100: Sportswear x Fashion* exhibition (2024), displayed at Ambika P3 Gallery, London. © Photograph by Andrew Groves

The WMA has loaned garments to a range of national and international exhibitions, allowing menswear to be featured in displays that might otherwise have excluded it due to budget constraints or a lack of suitable items in other collections. Notable exhibitions featuring WMA loans include *Style in Revolt* (2021) in Beijing; *C.P. Company Cinquanta* (2021) in Milan; *Dandy Style* (2022) at Manchester Art Gallery; *Tartan* (2023) at the V&A Dundee; *Workwear* (2023) at Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam; and *Fashion City: How Jewish Londoners Shaped Global Style* (2023) at the Museum of London.

Future Directions: Addressing Challenges and Expanding Access

The Westminster Menswear Archive (WMA) has successfully addressed a significant gap in the representation of menswear in UK dress and teaching collections and this is evident through the increasing offers of donations. However, this has led to increased pressure on resources and the need to expand its physical space, as the collection grows by 10% annually. To address these challenges and ensure continued access for students and researchers, current efforts are centred on developing digital access to the collection. The WMA was awarded a grant from Research England through the Higher Education Museums, Galleries and Collections Fund to support the development of digital engagement. The primary focus is to enhance the WMA's digital infrastructure, making the collection more accessible to the wider research community beyond the University of Westminster.

In the coming years, the WMA faces the dual challenge of managing its physical expansion while continuing to develop its digital offerings to meet the needs of a growing global research community. By embracing new technologies and further refining its collection policies, the WMA is poised to play an increasingly significant role in both academic research and the wider preservation of menswear design heritage.

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