# Metropolitan Museum unpacks rich legacy of Black dandyism in new exhibit



The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Costume Institute is set to showcase an evocative spring exhibit titled “Superfine: Tailoring Black Style,” which highlights the rich heritage of Black sartorial elegance, focusing especially on menswear from the 18th century to the present day. The exhibit, inspired by Monica Miller’s book "Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity," centres on the concept of dandyism—a style historically linked to aristocratic leisure but profoundly reinterpreted within Black culture as a symbol of resistance and self-expression. The exhibit will open with the Met Gala on Monday, an event known as fashion's most glamorous night.

Historically, dandyism described the refined and elaborate dressing of figures like Regency England’s Beau Brummell. However, Monica Miller, who is the guest curator of the Met exhibit, explains an important and often overlooked facet: in the 18th century, young Black servants in England were adorned in expensive materials such as gold, brass, or silver collars with padlocks and fine livery that signified ownership, designed to portray the enslaved individuals almost as luxury items. Jonathan Square, an assistant professor at Parsons School of Design and adviser on the exhib it, elaborates that such attire was a forced spectacle of wealth for the owners. Miller also writes about how slaves in America, who often arrived with little to no belongings, treasured personal adornments such as beads and precious objects, using clothing as a means of self-distinction and symbolic escape from bondage.

Following emancipation, the restoration of autonomy allowed Black Americans to express themselves more freely through fashion, setting the stage for the Harlem Renaissance. This cultural surge from the 1920s to 1930s in New York's Harlem neighbourhood became a pivotal era of Black creative expression, influencing literature, music, and style. Brandice Daniel, founder of Harlem's Fashion Row, refers to the Harlem Renaissance as "the birthplace of this visual identity that spoke to what we now call Black excellence." This period encouraged bold fashion choices—women wore furs and beaded dresses, while men sported tailored fabrics, fedora hats, two-toned shoes, and dramatic silhouettes. Tara Donaldson, co-author of "Black In Fashion: 100 Years Of Style, Influence, and Culture," reflects on the enduring impact of Harlem Renaissance style, noting how family photographs often show grandfathers proudly decked out in suits, embodying both the garments and the poise that accompanied them.

The influence of prominent intellectuals of the era is also noted, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, who often donned a three-piece suit, frock coat, and top hat. Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, highlights Du Bois's efforts at the 1900 Paris Exposition to challenge racial stereotypes through a photographic exhibit showcasing the achievements of Black Americans, underscoring “self-fashioning as a way of reclaiming a sense of self-respect.”

One of the most notable styles linked to Black dandyism is the zoot suit, characterised by high-waisted, loose-fitting trousers and oversized jackets with bold shoulders and lapels. The suit’s extravagant use of fabric during a time of wartime rationing made it a declaration of defiance and identity. Jonathan Square illustrates the zoot suit’s role as “meant to be a provocation,” and also “a form of protection.” The style gained popularity beyond Harlem, embraced by Mexican American and Filipino American men in Los Angeles. This cultural tension culminated in the 1943 Zoot Suit Riots, when servicemen and police attacked men wearing these suits. Today, the zoot suit’s legacy continues in gender-fluid fashion, as seen in the designs of Willy Chavarria.

The evolution of Black dandyism also transcends gender boundaries. After World War I, women began challenging traditional fashion norms by adopting styles typically associated with masculinity. Entertainers like blues singer Gladys Bentley became known for their tailored tuxedos and top hats during the Harlem Renaissance. Contemporary figures like singer and actor Janelle Monáe, who is part of this year’s Met Gala host committee, continue this tradition with her theatrical and tailored ensembles that incorporate oversized hats and ornate bow ties—hallmarks of the dandy style.

This year’s Met Gala theme “Tailored for You” aims to celebrate the sophistication and individuality that Black dandies have historically brought to fashion. Designer Ev Bravado, co-founder of Who Decides War, remarked, “Black people, Black men are finally getting their flowers for being true style icons. It is amazing to see the ancestral work being put on display.”

The exhibit promises to deepen appreciation for the complex interplay between fashion, identity, and resistance in Black culture, from enslaved servants to contemporary icons, preserving a legacy of style that speaks to freedom and self-assertion. The Independent is reporting.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.metmuseum.org/press-releases/superfine-2025-exhibitions> - This press release from The Metropolitan Museum of Art announces the 'Superfine: Tailoring Black Style' exhibition, detailing its focus on Black dandyism and its cultural significance.
2. <https://www.metmuseum.org/it/exhibitions/superfine-tailoring-black-style> - The exhibition page provides an overview of the 'Superfine: Tailoring Black Style' exhibit, highlighting its exploration of Black dandyism from the 18th century to the present.
3. <https://www.metmuseum.org/press-releases/superfine-2025-exhibitions> - This press release from The Metropolitan Museum of Art announces the 'Superfine: Tailoring Black Style' exhibition, detailing its focus on Black dandyism and its cultural significance.
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