

The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (MFIT) presents *Beyond Utility*,
in collaboration with the Fashion and Textile Studies MA program

An Exploration of Fashion's Fascination with Function, 1850s to Present



Yvonne Schichtel, *Trench Dress*, 2021.

New York, NY—What is it about utilitarian clothing that invites continual reinvention? *Beyond Utility*, a new exhibition presented by the **School of Graduate Studies at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT)** in collaboration with **The Museum at FIT (MFIT)**, examines the ongoing transformation of garments born of necessity within and beyond the fashion system. Conceived and organized by graduate students in FIT's Fashion and Textile Studies (FTS): History, Theory, Museum Practice MA program, the exhibition features never-before-displayed objects from the MFIT Study Collection and the FTS Graduate Study Collection, pairing utility archetypes with reinterpretations by designers including Issey Miyake, Bonnie Cashin, Junya Watanabe, Burberry, and Moschino.

Beyond Utility, on view in the Goodman Center lobby from **February 25 to March 22, 2026**, asserts that the fundamental principle of utilitarian clothing design is practicality, often prioritizing protection of the body, freedom of mobility, and material durability. Yet these garments rarely stay fixed in their original function. Over time and across cultures, they acquire layered meanings, perpetually renegotiating their place in the fashion system.

On one end of the spectrum, high fashion designers have transformed utilitarian garments with luxurious fabrics and abstracted silhouettes, highlighting form over function and obscuring their intended purpose. On the other end, these same garments have been co-opted and adapted by members of resistance and counterculture movements, to confront social norms and communicate defiance.

Featuring never-before-displayed objects from the MFIT Study Collection, dating from 1850 to the present, the exhibition brings together archetypal utilitarian garments and their fashion reinterpretations within the same space. Chronology is not the focus; instead, the dialogue demonstrates how clothing born of necessity continues to shape ideas of style—from factories and battlefields to runways and city streets.

Organized into three sections—Workwear, Military, and Craft—the exhibition invites visitors to draw new connections between familiar fashions such as trench coats, denim, and patchwork, and to engage in an active dialogue about materials, aesthetics, and cultural meaning.

The first section, “Workwear: Beyond the Factory,” highlights a tactile language of design grounded in durability: the reinforced stitching, metal hardware, and heavy textiles that once protected bodies engaged in physical labor. Through the examination of overalls, carpenter jeans, aprons, and more, visitors consider how a shift towards leisure, status, or artistic expression softens or mutes the garments’ original protective intent.

“Military: Beyond the Front” investigates fashions developed for discipline, defense, and coordination. Originally meant to obscure individuality, signal authority, or conceal and conform, garments such as trench coats and sailor uniforms, and concealment tactics such as camouflage and khaki, have been reinterpreted to express personal power, political resistance, and cultural identity.

“Craft: Beyond the Home” centers on handworked techniques such as knitting, quilting, crochet, patchwork, and visible mending. The expressive adaptation or surface imitation of these structural methods alludes to their utilitarian roots while simultaneously negating the intentional labor behind them. Visitors are invited to consider the tactile qualities and sensory experience of handcraft in a world where fashion is dominated by mass production and inauthenticity.

By tracing how utilitarian garments shift from items of necessity to objects of fascination, ***Beyond Utility*** encourages audiences to reevaluate the seemingly ordinary objects in their own wardrobes—recognizing the heritage they carry, the identities they communicate, and the power they hold. ***Beyond Utility*** will be on view in the Goodman Center lobby from **February 25 to March 22, 2026**. Admission is free.

Beyond Utility and MFIT public programming are made possible in part by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature.

Public Programming

Join us for **From Function to Fashion: The Enduring Legacy of Utilitarian Design**, part of our spring [2026 Fashion Culture programming](#). This panel, moderated by Hilary Davidson, chair of the Fashion and Textile Studies graduate program, features fashion scholars Sonya Abrego and Charles W. McFarlane. They will discuss the history of utilitarian garments, a category that is often overlooked in traditional fashion exhibitions. Each panelist brings specific expertise in one of the exhibition's three main themes—**military**, **craft**, and **workwear**—and will examine the lasting impact and continual reinvention of functional design elements. The panel will be **Wednesday, March 11, 5:30 pm**, at the **Katie Murphy Amphitheatre, FIT**.

About The Museum at FIT (MFIT)

The Museum at FIT, which in 2022 received its second accreditation by the American Alliance of Museums, is the only museum in New York City dedicated solely to the art of fashion. Best known for its innovative and award-winning exhibitions, the museum has a collection of more than 50,000 garments and accessories dating from the 18th century to the present. Like other fashion museums, such as the Musée de la Mode, the Mode Museum, and the Museo de la Moda, The Museum at FIT collects, conserves, documents, exhibits, and interprets fashion. The museum's mission is to advance knowledge of fashion through exhibitions, publications, and public programs.

The museum is open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays from noon to 8 pm, and Saturdays and Sundays from 10 am to 5 pm. Admission is free. For more information and the latest updates, visit the museum's website at fitnyc.edu/museum. Subscribe to the [museum's newsletter](#). Follow MFIT on [social media](#).

About FIT's Fashion and Textile Studies: History, Theory, Museum Practice MA program

The two-year Master of Arts degree program in Fashion and Textile Studies: History, Theory, Museum Practice is an interdisciplinary program that offers comprehensive training in fashion and textile history and conservation theory and practice. The program prepares students to enter the museum field as a curator, conservator, collections manager, or educator; to teach fashion and textile history; and to work in fashion and textile archives, auction houses, or vintage dealerships. In courses that examine the role of textiles, dress, and fashion in different societies and cultures, students are encouraged to take an innovative approach to the study of costume and textile history. Over two semesters in their second year, each cohort plans and executes an exhibition that is mounted at **The Museum at FIT (MFIT)**. Follow FTS on [social media](#).

Past exhibitions have included:

- [*Temptation, Joy and Scandal: Fragrance and Fashion: 1900-1950*](#)
- [*Sole Desire: The Shoes of Christian Louboutin*](#)
- [*The Women of Harper's Bazaar: 1936-1958*](#)
- [*Lauren Bacall: The Look*](#)
- [*The Roaring Twenties and the Swinging Sixties*](#)
- [*Elizabeth Hawes: Along Her Own Lines*](#)
- [*Untying the Bow*](#)
- [*All That Glitters*](#)

About FIT

A part of the State University of New York (SUNY), FIT has been a leader in career education in art, design, business, and technology throughout its history. Providing more than 9,000 students with an uncommon blend of hands-on, practical experience, theory, and a firm grounding in the liberal arts, the college offers a wide range of affordable programs that foster innovation and collaboration. Its distinctive curriculum is geared to today's rapidly growing creative economy, including fields such as computer animation, toy design, production management, film and media, and cosmetics and fragrance marketing. Internationally renowned, FIT draws on its New York City location to provide a vibrant, creative community in which to learn. The college offers nearly 50 majors and grants AAS, BFA, BS, MA, MFA, and MPS degrees, preparing students for professional success and leadership in the new creative economy. Among notable alumni in fashion are Calvin Klein, Michael Kors, Norma Kamali, Reem Acra, Brian Atwood, Stephen Burrows, Dennis Basso, Francisco Costa, Nanette Lepore, Bibhu Mohapatra, Ralph Rucci, John Bartlett, Peter Do, Daniel Roseberry, and Michelle Smith. Other prominent graduates include Leslie Blodgett, creator of bareMinerals; international restaurant designer Tony Chi; and Nina García, editor-in-chief of *Elle*. Visit fitnyc.edu.

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