

## ICOM UK – Bursary Report

Research visit to New York to visit *Superfine: Tailoring Black Style* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology

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As the curator of a specialist menswear teaching collection, I am very grateful to funding from ICOM UK for giving me the opportunity to travel to New York to see *Superfine: Tailoring Black Style* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and to visit the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT). Based on Monica L. Miller's book *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*, *Superfine* is the first menswear exhibition at The Met in over twenty years and is a landmark show in its focus on Black male identity and tailoring across the Atlantic diaspora. The Museum at FIT houses a permanent collection of over 50,000 garments and the 1,500-piece Study Collection.

The research trip was undertaken with my colleague Professor Andrew Groves over 23-26 July 2025, slightly later than originally planned. This resulted in a few changes to our original schedule and who was available for us to meet but also gave us other opportunities, though it did mean we were there at a very hot time of year!



*Superfine: Tailoring Black Style*, Metropolitan Museum of Art

We were given a personal two-hour tour of the *Superfine* exhibition by research assistant Kai Marcel. This gave us an incredible insight into the curatorial processes, layers of interpretation and thinking behind the exhibition from the mannequin design (by artist Tanda Francis) and exhibition staging (by artist Torkwase Dyson), to object selection, loans and acquisitions. Notable examples included the display of two zoot suits from the 1940s. We returned for a second two-hour visit on our final day in New York, and were rewarded with the chance to observe visitor interaction and the time to appreciate the nuances of the exhibition. The exhibition demonstrates meticulous attention to detail in the way that it creates a complex picture of the history of Black male style and how this process is both private and public. We were particularly struck by the large number of Black British fashion and menswear designers included in the exhibition, demonstrating how important their work has been to the invigoration of menswear design internationally.



Menswear rail, Study Collection, the Museum at FIT

Our other key visit was to the Museum at FIT. Unfortunately, for the first time in their history they had closed both of their exhibition galleries because of building works. This also meant that the permanent collection was inaccessible. However, we were welcomed by senior curator Dr Colleen Hill and assistant curator Raissa Bretaña who showed us the study collection and teaching spaces and spoke to us about their collecting and curatorial practices. The study collection is integrated into both undergraduate and postgraduate teaching across FIT and well utilized by both teaching

staff and students. It has been organised thematically in response to learning needs. Recently they focussed on increasing the number and range of menswear garments due to requests from students and teaching staff and now have about 50 pieces on a themed rail. We were particularly interested in their collecting and exhibiting of work by Black fashion designers and global fashion which has been part of their collecting from at least the 1990s. This is often focussed around their exhibition programme which has included 2016's *Black Fashion Designers* and 2024's *Africa's Fashion Diaspora*, curated by Elizabeth Wray, which centred cross-diasporic design and included acquisitions prioritising underrepresented voices. Both of these exhibitions included menswear designers.



Calvin Klein display, PVH Archive

The delay in our visit meant we were able to organise an appointment to see a private company archive with collections and industry design research processes that relate to the work of the Westminster Menswear Archive. The PVH archive contains hundreds of thousands of garments and paper-based objects from their brands Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger. The company archivists gave us an in-depth tour of their two collections

and discussed how they work with their in-house design teams to provide a research resource and understanding of the history of the brands.

This research trip has been invaluable. Menswear is underrepresented in narratives of fashion and many Black designers work in that space. The *Superfine* exhibition is especially significant for its groundbreaking contribution to the curation and collection of this doubly marginalised area – menswear, Black style and Black designers. This has a direct benefit to the Westminster Menswear Archive's current collection development review and the shaping of our curatorial priorities. Other benefits include international benchmarking with museum, education and commercial fashion collections and developing international relationships.