

WORCESTER ART MUSEUM

Worcester Art Museum Examines Design Evolution of Baseball Jerseys, And Their Significant Influence on Streetwear and High Fashion

***Opening June 2021, Exhibition Positions the Sport's Most Iconic Symbol
As Underexplored Work of Art and Design***

Worcester, MA—February 24, 2021—Over the course of 170 years, the baseball jersey has become an iconic emblem of American culture, extending well beyond a sports uniform to inspire fashion trends and serve as a means of everyday, individual self-expression. While the ubiquity of the American baseball shirt is undeniable, there has been little scholarly research on its importance to material and popular culture through time. In June 2021, the Worcester Art Museum (WAM) will open *The Iconic Jersey: Baseball x Fashion*, the first museum exhibition to focus specifically on the design evolution of baseball jerseys and their impact on wider national culture. The show will feature 37 garments, including historic and contemporary jerseys as well as runway looks—from Jesse Tannehill's 1908 Boston Red Sox Uniform Shirt to MIZIZI's Black Lives Matter jersey—along with two, one-of-a-kind jersey chairs and other ephemera that capture the phenomenon of the baseball shirt, both on and off the field. The exhibition, which will remain on view through September 12, 2021, is accompanied by a scholarly catalogue that further examines the subject.

The Iconic Jersey coincides with and celebrates the construction of a new baseball stadium, Polar Park, in Worcester's Canal District—just a short distance from the Museum—and the arrival of the Boston Red Sox's Triple-A affiliate to the city—the Worcester Red Sox or "Woo Sox". The team is expected to play their first game in their home stadium in spring 2021. Worcester has a long and storied history with baseball, and the upcoming exhibition offers a singular opportunity to explore the sport's most recognizable symbol as a work of art and design in its own right—and in doing so further collapse perceived boundaries between fine art and everyday objects.

"The long history of the baseball jersey taps into a profound set of human desires, to belong, and to be proud in proclaiming that affiliation whether as a player or a fan," said Matthias Waschek, the Jean and Myles McDonough Director of the Worcester Art Museum. "But the jersey has not been a static item. Over the years it has changed and evolved, has sought to pick up on fashion trends or to reject them, and both designers and fans have, in turn, brought their own influences to bear. Now, for the first time, we can explore this history in a systematic way."

The exhibition, which is organized by Erin R. Corrales-Diaz, Ph.D., WAM's curator of American art, takes a broad view of the baseball jersey, illuminating equally its relationships to aesthetics and athletics and to collective and individual expression. To orient the viewer within these different themes, *The Iconic Jersey* is divided into three major sections, including "The Modern Jersey," which traces the evolution of aesthetic choices such as fabrics, typography, colors, and patterns; "Experimental Design," which examines sartorial decisions that deviate from the traditional jersey shape; and "Off the Field," which explores the jersey as the ultimate articulation of fandom and its emergence in both luxury design and streetwear.

“*The Iconic Jersey* takes the ‘formal’ language and concepts that we typically apply to individual works of art and, by applying it to baseball jerseys, makes it possible to bring forward new ideas and ways of looking at an article of clothing many people take for granted,” said Corrales-Diaz. “All of these jerseys, whether made for players or for fans, reveal an extensive design process in which a designer considers fabrics, fit, shape, colors, markings, and logos. When we choose to put one on, we do more than just affiliate ourselves with our chosen team. We are also embracing design, a set of aesthetic choices that help to define who we are and how we look at the world.”

More information regarding the ideas and histories explored within the three exhibition sections follows below.

The Modern Jersey

The New York Knickerbockers adopted the first baseball uniform in 1849. Seeking to professionalize and add credibility to the sport, other teams soon followed in developing uniform and dress parameters for their ball teams—most often inspired by volunteer fire and militia companies. Far from our modern conception of baseball style, this first uniform is described as featuring blue woven pantaloons, a white flannel shirt, and straw hat. This section of the exhibition traces the aesthetic evolution of the jersey from these early styles to the more casual and collarless look we understand today. The exhibition pays attention to both major changes in fit and fabric brought on by technological advances to the small shifts in graphic elements, logos, and colors, highlighting the importance of these developments to capturing team identity.

Among the highlights in this section are early design pamphlets and guides for sporting manufacturers, including never before exhibited items from the R. J. Liebe Athletic Lettering Company, who began creating their elaborate, circular chain stitched lettering in 1923, and who continue to provide lettering and other materials for major manufacturers’ uniforms. Also included are a wide range of jerseys, that span from such early examples as a 1908 Boston Red Sox Uniform Shirt worn by Jesse Tannehill and a 1909 Chicago Cubs Uniform shirt worn by Johnny Kling through to contemporary jersey designs that look to the future of innovation.

Experimental Design

While the classic button-down jersey is recognized as the quintessential look of baseball, there have been many moments of inspiration and innovation within jersey design across its 170-year history. This includes fanciful and unorthodox ideas such as satin jerseys, sleeveless shirts, and the incorporation of rainbow colors to designate player positions that were quickly discarded by teams and fans alike. In this portion of the exhibition, audiences will be treated to an array of these unusual style decisions, with a particular focus on uniforms from between the 1970s and 1990s—particularly fertile decades for daring uniform design choices.

One iconic design from this period is the Houston Astros’ “rainbow” pullover, created not by fashion designers or even manufacturers, but by New York ad agency McCann Erickson, which was hired to rebrand the team and refresh its visibility, with a jersey of different colored stripes.

Another highlight is an initiative introduced by the Seattle Mariners, titled “Turn Ahead the Clock,” which explored the jersey of 2027. The “Turn Ahead the Clock” jerseys were baggy and sleeveless and featured enlarged logos and new “techy” colors of metallic silver and maroon. The initiative proved popular and was later adopted as a League wide event, although the jerseys themselves were not used beyond promotional opportunities. Another, the 1950s uniform of Isabel “Lefty” Álvarez, a Cuban ballplayer who came to the United States and played for the Kalamazoo Lassies, shows how gender-specific design actually hindered performance by female players on the ball field.

Off the Field

When fans began donning replicas of baseball jerseys in the 1970s, they transformed the shirt from athletic uniform to a symbol of both communal and personal expression. As replica jerseys grew in popularity among everyday fans, they were further adopted by celebrities and musicians, who gave the shirts heightened creative and cultural significance. This led to interest in jersey design from fashion houses such as Gucci, Dolce & Gabbana, and Moschino, among others.

This section of the exhibition explores the life of the baseball jersey in popular and fashion culture. It pays particular attention to the important role that Hip Hop artists of the 1990s such as Ice Cube, Notorious B.I.G., and Outkast played in bringing the jersey to streetwear styles, opening the door to the jersey’s incorporation in mainstream fashion, as well as to significant collaborations between designers, artists, and activists within wider political and social movements. This includes Runaway x G Yamazawa, a 2017 collaboration on a jersey to honor the Japanese American ballplayers at the WWII incarceration camp Heart Mountain Relocation Center, and the creation of a Black Lives Matter jersey by MIZIZI, a streetwear brand representing the African diaspora that has been worn by protesters across the globe.

The exhibition is accompanied by a scholarly catalog by curator Erin Corrales-Diaz, Ph.D. This groundbreaking volume traces the design and aesthetics of the iconic baseball jersey both on and off the baseball field. Published by D Giles Ltd in association with the Worcester Art Museum, the catalog is available from the Museum Shop for \$34.95 and can be ordered by emailing shopsales@worcesterart.org.

The Iconic Jersey: Baseball x Fashion is made possible through the generous support from the Fletcher Foundation. Additional support is provided by the Arthur M. and Martha R. Pappas Foundation, Bill and Joan Alford Foundation, Lunder Foundation-Peter and Paula Lunder family, Murray Family Charitable Foundation, Larry and Stacey Lucchino, Cynthia L. Strauss and Harry A. Sherr, and an anonymous donor. This project is also funded in part by the Don and Mary Melville Contemporary Art Fund, Ruth and John Adam, Jr. Exhibition Fund, Hall and Kate Peterson Fund, Heald Curatorial Fund, and Michie Family Curatorial Fund. Corporate support is provided by Samuel Adams, Country Bank, Gilbane Building Company, and Gatorade. Media partner is The Boston Globe.

Related Programming

As part of its monthly Master Series Third Thursday* program, the Museum will present a talk by Todd Raddom, author of *Winning Ugly: A Visual History of the Most Bizarre Baseball Uniforms Ever Worn (May 2018)*, on **Thursday, June 17 at 6pm**. The talk, "Baseball by Design: Looking at the Rich Visual History of our National Pastime," will explore graphic design for professional sports, the aesthetics of baseball, and the dynamics of brand loyalty between consumers and professional sports franchises. Registration information for the event can be found on the Museum's website, worcesterart.org.

The Museum will also present a screening of *The Other Boys of Summer*, a documentary about racism, segregation, and civil rights in America, told through the lives of the Negro League baseball players, **on Thursday, July 15 at 6pm**. Directed by Emmy-nominated Lauren Meyer and narrated by the late Cicely Tyson, the screening will be followed by a Q&A with the Meyer. Registration information will be available on the Museum's website, worcesterart.org.

*Master Series Third Thursday programs are hosted by the WAM Members' Council and sponsored by AbbVie. Additional support is provided by the Michie Family Curatorial Fund, the Amelia and Robert H. Haley Memorial Lecture Fund, the Bernard and Louise Palitz Fund, and the Spear Fund for Public Programs.

About the Worcester Art Museum

The Worcester Art Museum creates transformative programs and exhibitions, drawing on its exceptional collection of art. Dating from 3,000 BCE to the present, these works provide the foundation for a focus on audience engagement, connecting visitors of all ages and abilities with inspiring art and demonstrating its enduring relevance to daily life. Creative initiatives—including pioneering collaborative programs with local schools, fresh approaches to exhibition design and in-gallery teaching, and a long history of studio class instruction—offer opportunities for diverse audiences to experience art and learn both from and with artists.

Since its founding in 1896, the Worcester Art Museum has assembled a collection of 38,000 objects: from the ancient Near East and Asia, to European and American paintings and sculptures, and continuing with works by contemporary artists from around the world. WAM has a history of making large scale acquisitions, such as its Medieval Chapter House, the Worcester Hunt Mosaic, its 15th-century Spanish ceiling, and the Flemish *Last Judgment* tapestry. In 2013, the Museum acquired the John Woodman Higgins Armory Collection, comprising two thousand arms and armor objects. It continues to commission and present new works, such as 2019's exhibition [With Child: Otto Dix/Carmen Winant](#), which objectively explored pregnancy and birth in works by the German artist Otto Dix (1891-1969), and contemporary American visual artist Carmen Winant (b. 1983).

The Worcester Art Museum, located at 55 Salisbury Street in Worcester, MA, is open Wednesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Admission is \$18 for adults, \$14 for seniors 65+ and for college students with ID. Admission is free for Museum Members and children ages

0-17. On the first Sunday of each month, admission is free for everyone. Museum parking is free. **Admission is by timed ticket only, which must be purchased in advance at worcesterart.org.**

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