

Forever sewn in history

ASU Professor Mitchell Jackson on Black fashion and its impact

By Megan Neely, ASU News

February 12, 2025

The historical significance of Black influence on fashion spans centuries. From the prints and styles of Africa to various American political climates, Black fashion has sealed its impact on the world. Many can recall, for example, the iconic streetwear designs of Dapper Dan or the eye-catching red carpet looks of Zendaya.

Mitchell Jackson has had an eye for trends since his childhood; one of his first recollections of this was when he dressed up in a cowboy hat and boots, taking note of the aesthetic even then. Later, the meaning behind his clothing picks blossomed even more as his career in writing took shape.

“For me to look at the cowboy hat and boots and say that I like it and that I want to recreate that image, someone had to make that first, someone had to merchandise that, someone had to put that in a film or in a magazine,” Jackson said. “All of those things become related to the cultural, social, political and financial things that were happening at the time certain styles were popular.”

Today, [Jackson](#) is the John O. Whiteman Dean’s Distinguished Professor in Arizona State University’s [Department of English](#). In 2021, he was awarded the National Magazine Award and Pulitzer Prize in Feature Writing for his [Runner’s World article](#) on the killing of Ahmaud Arbery. Last year, his [NBA fashion coffee table book](#) was named [Booktique’s 2024 best lifestyle book](#).

He’s looking forward to seeing history on display at the Met Gala (this year's theme will be "Superfine: Tailoring Black Style") and the opportunity to showcase the meaning behind Black fashion.

Fashion at the intersection of war, civil rights and cultural conformity

A point in American history that caught Jackson’s eye was the 1940s. Fashion wasn’t the focal point amid a world war and the budding Civil Rights Movement, but some aspects of those events created an interesting scene and kick-started new looks.

“I was interested in how the war was shaping what people wore. There were mandates (during the war) on how much leather you can have in your shoe, how many suits you could own,” Jackson

said. “If you have these limitations around how much denim you can wear, how much rubber you can wear, how much wool you can and can't have, now you have to be creative inside of those lines.

“Whoever was ‘fly’ in 1945 was really fly because you had less to work with and you had more rules about what you can do along with the expectations surrounding politics and culture.”

He referenced this phenomenon in his book’s overview of the beginning of the NBA. While mandates on what was available due to the war led to a creative output of NBA players’ looks, there were still rising factors that encouraged a stretch of conformity, and not necessarily by choice.

As Jackson wrote in “Fly,” the expectation “of being beacons expected to help their people achieve long-denied civil rights” had an impact on how athletes dressed and conducted themselves.

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“Before the Civil Rights Movement, Black people were trying to be taken seriously; they're trying to get their basic human rights,” he said. “To achieve that, they have to lobby white people in power. When we look at politicians, they all have the same blue suit and red tie or black suit and blue tie, they all have the same pin. It's because they don't want us to see that.”

When thinking about the history of Black culture, even back to the diaspora in Africa, there's a delineation in how people look. African garb was traditionally colorful and stood out — its presence is significant and eye-catching.

But Jackson noted that the bright garments were unlike anything the Western world had known, or was willing to accept, and that lack of acceptance carried on even generations later and forced that political and social conformity.

“If you want the people in power to give you voting rights, let you drink from the same fountain and let you go to their schools when there is a conformity in appearance, you also have to look like they wanted you to look,” Jackson said. “If you look at Black people previous to the Civil Rights Movement, they're dressing like politicians because they have to, because the people in power are saying they're not taking you seriously if you don't.

“It was a definitive time when political, cultural and financial pressure was shaping what fashion is or what you can wear.”

Stitching the past to the present

In late 2024, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art announced the 2025 theme for the world-renowned Met Gala: "[Superfine: Tailoring Black Style](#)." Pulling from Monica L. Miller's 2009 book "[Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity](#)," the exhibit will showcase garments, artwork and photographs exploring the style of Black men from the 18th century to the present day.

This year's co-hosts include musicians Pharrell Williams and A\$AP Rocky, actor Colman Domingo and race car driver Lewis Hamilton alongside the event's honorary chair, NBA star LeBron James.

Black dandyism primarily originated during the 18th century at the height of the Atlantic slave trade. With the use of signature styles and clothing associated with dandy, Black men and women used it as a way to break down identity barriers. From there, it became a way of expressing political and social opportunity.

The Met Gala is known for their broad and often otherworldly themes highlighting niche stories told through fabric. This is the first theme surrounding menswear since 2003's "[Bravehearts: Men in Skirts](#)." Jackson hopes that when audiences look at the designs, they investigate where and how these pieces originated.

"I would like for people to be open to the history of how all of these looks came to be.

"Whether that look is from 18th-century France or from 16th-century Ghana, I would want them to understand the background," Jackson said.

"The Met Gala is a visual medium, so whatever statement you want to make needs to be tacit in what you wear. I think this is the moment for really explicit politics, if you really want to take a stand on something."

The official dress code, "Tailored for You," references the exhibition's focus on menswear, and was announced Feb. 4 alongside details on this year's host committee, which includes the likes of Simone Biles, Usher and Sha'Carri Richardson. The Met Gala will take place on Monday, May 5.

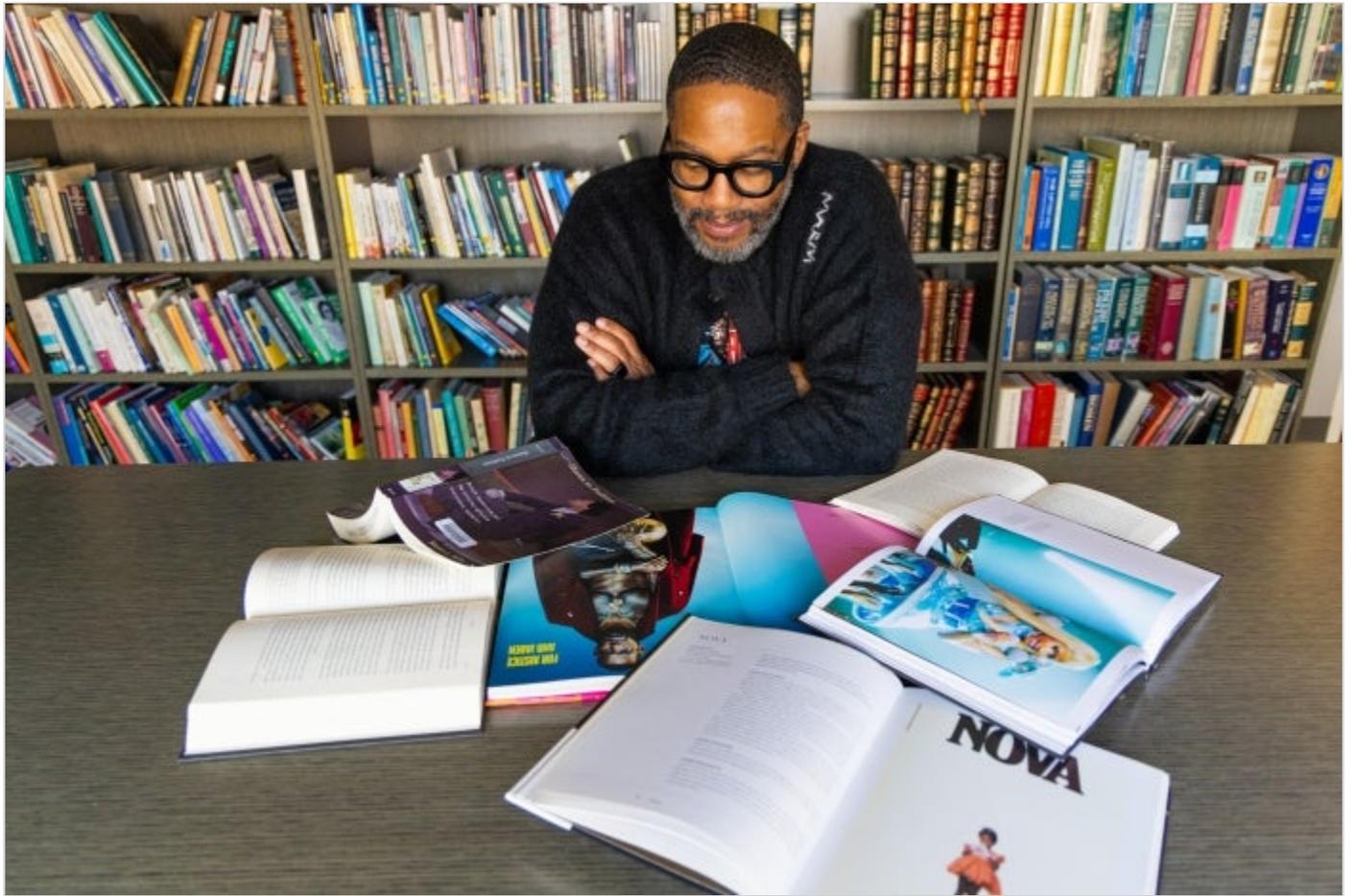
This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



ASU Professor Mitchell Jackson is the author of "Fly: The Big Book of Basketball Fashion." Photo courtesy of Meghan Finnerty

Text image(s)



Mitchell Jackson. Photo courtesy of Meghan Finnerty