

Fig. 1. Protestors marching at the Stonewall Riots in New York City in 1969. Diana Davies; *New York Public Library*, <https://www.history.com/news/stonewall-riots-timeline>.



MILITARY INFLUENCE ON FASHION: THE BOMBER JACKET

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The 1970s was a decade shaped by war, concepts of the military, and the image of the idealized soldier. In North America, cultural norms were changing and adapting in the wake of the Vietnam War. Most relevantly, ideas of masculinity and the idealized male figure were no longer embodied by the soldier (Ireland). With the decade beginning in the shadow of the Stonewall Riots, LGBT activism was at the forefront of society (see fig. 1). As a result, many political and social victories were achieved through the fight for equality (Pruitt).



Fig. 2. Reversible Black MA-1 Bomber Jacket by 1017 ALYX 9SM on SSENSE.com, https://www.ssense.com/en-us/men/product/alyx/reversible-black-ma-1-bomber-jacket/3823961?clickref=110117rgQryS&utm_source=PH_1011115080&utm_medium=affiliate&utm_content=0&utm_t

THE EMERGENCE OF THE BOMBER JACKET

In a time of social, cultural, and political change, the military influence in fashion was manifesting itself in new ways. It was a shift of sole focus from practicality by placing significance on aesthetics. The bomber jacket is a garment that symbolizes this shift perfectly.

The bomber jacket was born out of necessity to keep airmen warm in the times of the propeller planes. They would wear leather jackets lined with fleece in a design dubbed "A-2" (Cruz). With the advancement in aircraft design, also came the need for innovation in the flight jacket design. Less space in the cockpit of a jet meant a more streamlined design, hence the new "B-15" design, which boasted a lightweight yet warm feel. Cruz explains that this design is often referred to as "the godfather of the modern bomber". In 1949, the final upgrade was made to create the MA-1 (see fig. 2), again updated in parallel with the technological advancements of the aircraft.

The first move to aesthetic value was in the late 1960s, through the use of the bomber jacket by the British skinheads, a subcultural movement that expressed blatant white supremacist and neo-Nazi ideologies. They used the jacket as a "sartorial expression of the changing social conditions" (Cruz) (see fig. 3). This symbol was ironically adopted by the LGBT community as a method to subvert the oppressive ideals of the skinheads. In North America, the LGBT community also adopted the bomber jacket, but as a method of fetishizing hyper-masculinity in order to oppose the rejection of LGBT members in the military.



Fig. 3. Bomber jackets being worn by the British Skinheads in the 1960s from Josephine Cruz.; "A Brief History of the Bomber Jacket: From the cockpit to the runway", <https://hypebeast.com/2016/11/bomber-jacket-streetwear-facts>



Fig. 4. Front view of Harvey Sobel's bomber jacket taken at the Fashion Research Collection at Ryerson University. 2019, Authors own photo.

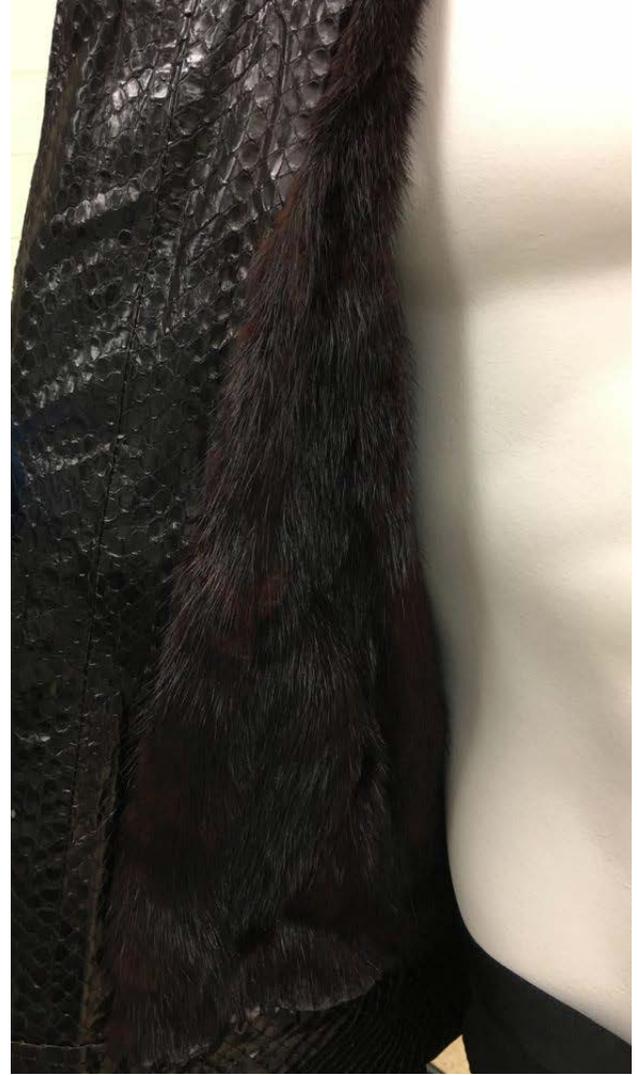


Fig. 5. Inside mink fur lining of Harvey Sobel's bomber jacket. 2019, Authors own photo.

A TRIP TO THE 1970s VIA THE FASHION RESEARCH COLLECTION

Upon a trip to the Fashion Research Collection, I was immediately drawn to one of the only pieces of menswear on display, a 1970s bomber jacket (see fig. 4). It was not your traditional military-style bomber jacket, simply because of the addition of a lapelled collar and the choice of materials. The jacket is made of black, glossy, synthetic snakeskin, with a brown mink fur lining. We can deduce the synthetic nature of the snakeskin because real snakeskin scales are able to be lifted, and the jacket did not exhibit this quality. Therefore, the scales were embossed on to the material. The weight, texture, and imperfect colouring of the mink fur lining suggest the lining is real (see fig. 5). There aren't many hardware applications to the jacket, apart from the exposed silver zipper. It is relatively simple in its design allowing the materials to be the focus of the garment.

Without any labels, the observation analysis of this garment was rather limited. However, upon further research, I was able to locate the original owner and donor of the garment, Harvey Sobel. He had donated various garments to the Fashion Research Collective at Ryerson as he was a prominent member of the Toronto LGBT community and a world-renowned interior designer. After his death in 2014, The Hamilton Spectator published an article praising Sobel for his exquisite taste and zest for life, "this man who owned an Indian silk shirt with 1,000 carats of topaz buttons and frequented Michelin-starred restaurants and five-diamond hotels" (Nolan) lived life to the fullest. Knowing this, the extravagance of Sobel's bomber jacket is not as shocking as one would think.

FOCUSING THE RESEARCH

Harvey symbolized the cultural shifts of the 1970s and his garment represented the themes of sexual liberation, anti-war sentiments, and challenges to the hegemonic masculinity. It forces an inquiry into the military influence in fashion. Specifically, how did the military influence ideas of masculinity in LGBT men's fashion in North America in the 1970s?

In simply observing the garment, one can certainly say the choice of materials was purposefully different from the original bomber jackets. Sobel was undeniably conspicuous, in his decor aesthetics, lifestyle, and fashion choices. How does Sobel's bomber jacket exemplify the act of conspicuous consumption (Trigg 101)?

Finally, the bomber jacket is just one instance and a very literal example of military influence in fashion. There are a variety of different manifestations of the military in fashion throughout history and in the present-day. In keeping with the idea of aesthetics over functionality, a video timeline will portray these influences as we transition through the decades. In exploring these channels, Sobel's bomber jacket will be theoretically dissected from its material to its deeper meaning.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A MAN?

Masculinity is constructed. It is solidified through social and cultural practices, such as fashion and dressing, that are performed to establish identity (Barry and Martin "Dapper dudes" 6). In the LGBT community specifically, "gay refers not just to something you are, but also something you do" (Halperin 13). Butler explains this idea of gender as a performance through establishing masculinity and femininity as inherently unstable categories that, through repetition, one can produce a perception of gender by which they identify (527). One of these performance categories is the choice of one's clothing (Barry and Martin "Gender rebels" 228).

In the 1970s, gay men wanted to associate masculinity with homosexuality. They did this by forming the "clone" subculture; a movement to disrupt the idea that the societal notion that gay men were feminine. This subculture adopted the stereotypical heterosexual male image by wearing plaid shirts, denim, and bomber jackets (Barry and Martin 228). Some gay men who were part of The Gay Liberation Front of the 1970s actively blurred the societal lines between masculinity and femininity by combining female and male fashion and dressing practices in a single outfit.



Fig. 6. Blackglama Advertisement of Maria Callas wearing a mink fur coat in the 1970s by Richard Avedon. <https://www.ebay.com/itm/BLACKGLAMA-MARIA-CALLAS-Vintage-1970-advertising-poster-MINK-FUR-COAT-22x28-NM-/202253012888>.

This idea of merging masculinity and femininity can also be seen in Sobel's bomber jacket. The bomber jacket silhouette stems from an inherently male figure of the soldier. By combining this with essentially female materials, animal print and fur. It combines ideas of sexuality and the untamed woman with ideas of war and military prestige. If we unpack the use of mink fur, we can see Sobel's was intending to make a statement of luxury and status, while blurring the lines between male and female fashion signifiers (see fig. 6). "Because a fur coat represents probably the most expensive and luxurious fashion commitment a person can make... the buying process is as much psychological as it is financial" (Eitorre). Sobel was making a statement about gender, sexuality, status, and the economic climate with one fashion choice.

VEBLEN'S THEORY OF CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

In choosing these materials to create an apparently custom bomber jacket was the ultimate symbol of conspicuous consumption. Veblen believed that to establish one's identity and status in society, there must be a display of wealth. This display of wealth could be done by participating in leisurely activities or lavish spending on commodities or services (Trigg 101). Veblen also outlined that "to have property is to have status and honour", which Sobel did.

Everything about Sobel was conspicuous, his lifestyle, his design aesthetic, and his fashion. These visual displays through fashion were not only used to establish his identity in the LGBT community but also his status within the greater society. Although the home was historically related to femininity and defined as a woman's space, the accumulation of wealth through objects has remained "constant in the definition of bourgeois domesticity" (Potvin 15). Sobel used interior design, of his own home and the homes of many others, as a method of placing his identity in society. This idea is expressed by Potvin, as he notes, "queers make sense of a space by making it uniquely our own as a vital means to allow for our embodied selves to take place, whether in, out or on the threshold of the proverbial closet" (287). Sobel embodied the dissolving of these archaic lines between gender and pursued a career and life encapsulated by design, art, and the home. Just as the LGBT community subverted the meaning and images surrounding the bomber jacket used by the skinheads, Sobel furthered this redefinition through his fashion.

His bomber jacket, seen in figures 4 and 5, is purposeful in its appearance as he made aesthetic value the primary focus. He could have used another cheaper material to make the jacket functional for the cold weather, but he chose mink fur. An essentially luxurious, feminine object. This value of aesthetics over functionality was also, ironically, seen within the military. The visual appeal of uniforms was commonly used to entice potential soldiers. They were attracted to the "most flamboyant uniforms" (Peoples 18). There are many parallels between the practices of attraction and the aesthetic value placed on fashion items between the military and the aforementioned LGBT community. While the decorated, heroic soldier was the image of ideal masculinity in the military, gay men took that image and turned it on its head by adding feminine fashion items or hyperbolizing the hegemonic masculinity. Ultimately reimagining and fetishizing masculinity.

THE MILITARY INFLUENCE ON FASHION

Despite the establishment of hegemonic masculinity in military uniform and dressing practices, various subcultures adopted these fashion items and redefined military fashion. Peoples addresses the deep influence of the military on fashion as “ripple effects of [the] military education” (18). Throughout history and in the present-day, from high-end luxury to fast fashion, the military influences have established long-standing trends within the fashion industry. These trends span societal communities, gender, sexuality, and many more social and cultural distinctions. Since this influence has turned the functionality of military uniforms to purely focusing on its aesthetic value, there is no better way to examine these influences than through a visual medium. To understand the movement of military fashion through history, I have created a video that will showcase images and video clips from magazines, fashion shows, advertisements and photographers (see fig. 7). Through this visual timeline, we can see how the military influence in fashion has manifested and survived to present-day.

Fig. 7. “Military Influence on Fashion: A Visual Timeline”, YouTube, Sara Abraham, 20 November 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSOViqytaX8>

THE MILITARY INFLUENCE ON FASHION: A VISUAL TIMELINE



Alexander McQueen A/W 2011

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