

Press release

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Accessories – Objects of desire

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Accessories are more than fashionable adornment. The new exhibition at the National Museum Zurich features over 200 objects spanning four centuries, illustrating how accessories reflect status, identity and societal change. It includes hats, scarves, fans, bags, shoes and many other everyday items, taking visitors on a journey into cultural history, from head to toe.

What do a hat, a pair of gloves, or an elegant scarf say about their wearer? Accessories have always been more than just decorative add-ons. Rather, they are objects that carry their own message and meaning. The exhibition at the National Museum Zurich features elaborately decorated hats, luxurious scarves, elegant walking canes, extravagant bags, delicate fans and sensual shoes from the Swiss National Museum's extensive collection. They span the period from the 17th century to the present day and provide an insight into social change, status, identity and cultural expression.

Various exhibits, such as the velvet beret belonging to a councillor from Bern in the early 18th century, children's christening bonnets and a magnificent decorative headdress from the canton of Schaffhausen, show how headgear was a sign of social status, regional identity, and social exclusion. Modern-day examples, such as the pink 'pussy hat' illustrate how headwear can still make a political statement today.

Accessories that are held in the hands extend the body and lend emphasis to gestures. In the past, members of the leisure class had their hands free for bags, fans, parasols and walking canes. Many of these objects served functions that have now been forgotten. For example, the exhibition features an elaborately decorated cane from Zurich with a silver rocaille knob, which would have been used by wealthy gentlemen when strolling around the city as a sign of wealth, status and refinement.

The exhibited bags and other items worn on the body range from a baroque alms purse to a briefcase and modern-day handbag. A particularly impressive exhibit is

the bag by Swiss designer Kévin Germanier, made from upcycled wool oddments and shower curtain rings – an example of sustainability in fashion.

The exhibition also shows how social change is reflected in fashion accessories, from strict dress codes and the artistic opulence of accessories for regional traditional costumes, to present-day items that play with gender norms. For example, a pink-coloured men's house cap from the 18th century considers why the colour is nowadays seen as feminine, while the unisex sneakers with pink tulle worn by Nemo at the Eurovision Song Contest in 2024 deconstruct social norms.

Finally, short films from the course 'Major Trends & Identity' at the Zurich University of the Arts look at the diversity and relevance of accessories in contemporary society and ask how they shape the modern body image.

The exhibition takes a deep dive into the role of accessories in everyday life, culture and politics. It encourages visitors to think about clothing as a cultural practice and clearly shows that accessories are much more than fashionable adornment – they are a window into cultural history, telling stories from head to toe.

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