

# **A Change of perspective: the female gaze in menswear**

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## **Introduction**

After finishing my latest collection, I received feedback encouraging me to push myself beyond my comfort zone. This inspired me to reflect on recurring challenges from my previous collections and projects. One consistent comment from my tutors was a suggestion to explore menswear. This feedback initially startled me, leaving me questioning whether my designs were only considered interesting or valuable when worn by men. I felt a strong resistance to designing for men, unwilling to contribute to a world that already seems to revolve around them. Yet, I was equally perplexed by my own reluctance.

For this thesis, my aim is to confront these feelings and explore a feminist approach to designing menswear, seeking not only to understand but to dismantle my negative perceptions. Through this process, I hope to reframe my attitude and find new possibilities within (menswear) design.

During my research, I have investigated the issue of gender representation in the fashion industry and the role of the designer in relation to this. The fashion industry prides itself on innovation and inclusivity, yet a closer look at its leadership and design perspectives reveals a persistent lack of diversity. The rise of the female gaze in fashion has brought essential discussions to the forefront, challenging long standing norms and highlighting the need for broader representation in fashion design.

To understand this development this thesis explores how fashion has historically been shaped by gendered perspectives: from the early dominance of male womenswear designers and the evolution of inflexible menswear as a uniform to the transformative role of female designers in redefining menswear. By analyzing groundbreaking work of female designers like Vivienne Westwood, Martine Rose and Miuccia Prada my aim is to uncover how the female gaze is reshaping clothing.

How do roles shift when female designers view men as male designers view women? What new concepts, emotions, sexualities, fantasies, and political statements arise from the female gaze in fashion design?

# 1. Shaped by gender: The history of clothing and identity

## 1.1. The suit: A symbol of power, sexuality, and the evolution of masculine style

Throughout the history of fashion, male clothing has always been clearly more progressive compared to women's dress. Menswear has reached a modernized state at approximately 1820. Since then, the appearance of the men's suit has changed relatively little. The modern suit was such a perfect visualization of modern male pride that it had yet to be replaced, and it gradually became the standard costume of the social elite around the world.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of restraint for men's clothes served to accentuate both the physical and spiritual essence of the male form. This approach draws inspiration from classicism, contributing to an overall aesthetic that is both refined and compelling. The before rough jacket transformed to a perfectly balanced garment without any creases tracing the male body. This resulted in what was perceived as the body of a Greek athlete being clothed. Just like the ancient naked statues, men gradually began to resemble each other and also wanted to look more like each other.<sup>2</sup>

The forms of the modern male dress always articulated the body, emphasizing the torso, neck, head, hair, legs, feet and arms and sometimes the genitals, while the forms of female dress did the opposite. The real structure of the female body was visually disguised rather than emphasized by fashion. Therefore, it can be said that for the most time the men's suit was even more daring and sexy than women's dress.<sup>3</sup>

Fashion is more than something people wear, it underlines the individual body, psyche and of course sexuality. So, another important aspect of the omnipresent success of the suit is its sex appeal. Ever since fashion has existed, the forms interpreting the clothed male or female body have been generated by sexual fantasy and then toned down to fit other dimensions of life. Sexuality is the basis of every form in fashion, but it must be said that here sexuality does not mean seduction.<sup>4</sup>

Since sexuality is always the driving force behind fashion, erotic confusion will always appear in it. Sexuality is especially emphasized when someone is wearing clothes originally created for the other sex. Women started wearing suits earlier than men started to wear women's clothes. When women did so, they did not look more masculine, they underlined their femininity by wearing men's clothes.<sup>5</sup>

The acceptance of women wearing men's clothing increased significantly in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. What used to be part of the feminine erotic tradition then became an integral part of society. Trousers, suits and short hair were seen as distinctly feminine, and women who wore these items of clothing were no longer associated with masculinity. Women could not imitate

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Hollander, *Anzug und Eros: Eine Geschichte der modernen Kleidung*, (Berlin – Verlag 1995), 91.

<sup>2</sup> Hollander, *Anzug und Eros: Eine Geschichte der modernen Kleidung*, 145.

<sup>3</sup> Hollander, *Anzug und Eros: Eine Geschichte der modernen Kleidung*, 81.

<sup>4</sup> Hollander, *Anzug und Eros: Eine Geschichte der modernen Kleidung*, 55-62.

<sup>5</sup> Hollander, *Anzug und Eros: Eine Geschichte der modernen Kleidung*, 70.

men in order to be taken seriously anymore, because male clothing was also already feminine. As a result, male clothing - even when worn by men - no longer had such a uniquely masculine meaning, and so they could confidently adopt new set pieces that used to be called feminine. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women took over the entire male clothing repertoire, adapting it to their needs and gave it new meanings.

In the postmodern world, male sexual potency is no longer tied to certain notions of masculinity as they had become entrenched in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These preconceptions often dismissed any imaginative expression in clothing, categorizing it as feminine.<sup>6</sup>

The adoption of menswear by women has been demonstrated to influence men's perception of their own wardrobe. It is therefore important to consider womenswear in the context of menswear, and vice versa, when discussing this topic.

The appeal of the modern suit, however it is interpreted in our time, still lies in the combination of comfort and strictness as the unshakably well-fitting shell suggesting undefeatable physical and sexual self-assurance, radiating a superior degree of inner balance. But because the suit reached its modern state from earlier on and while women were given the freedom to explore and borrow from men's clothing, menswear itself also seems to carry the paradox of feeling uninspired or predictable. This is because all the liberties taken with the original tailoring scheme have not yet succeeded in eliminating the form, but only in proving its dynamic and seemingly infinite possibilities.<sup>7</sup>

After centuries of stagnation in menswear, there is now a noticeable shift, with male models, as well as a growing number of - primarily young - men on the streets, embracing the suit, as well as pushing other pieces of clothing, jewelry, and accessories traditionally associated with women's fashion—such as crop tops, pearl necklaces, extremely short shorts, and even skirts. This development is indicative of a broader cultural openness to sexualities beyond heterosexuality. While such fashion choices may suggest a challenge to traditional gender norms, it is important to note that wearing clothing typically associated with the opposite gender today does not necessarily imply a person's sexual orientation.

## **1.2. The evolution and impact of gendered clothing**

Prior to women creating womenswear, only men were tailors and women were only allowed to act as assistants for example in embroidery or similar handicrafts. But it must be mentioned that the costumer and therefore also female costumer decided on the “design” of the garments. From the late 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, a shift occurred where women took responsibility for women's clothing and men for men's clothing. Although this change was driven by women, it ultimately did not benefit them: it eventually worked to their disadvantage as the whole field of fashion was increasingly divided into respectable tailoring for men and frivolous 'fashion' for women. Since then fashion has been the counterpart of men's tailoring, it became something created and consumed by women, something that consequently worked to the “disadvantage of men” and therefore of society.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hollander, Anzug und Eros: Eine Geschichte der modernen Kleidung, 282-83.

<sup>7</sup> Hollander, Anzug und Eros: Eine Geschichte der modernen Kleidung, 306.

<sup>8</sup> Hollander, Anzug und Eros: Eine Geschichte der modernen Kleidung, 110.

Women began to create even more imaginative images of their own physical selves, while men continued to rely on established tailoring traditions of creating an acceptable body and concentrating on literature, art, science and politics. Men's phantasies about women were now created by women themselves and was implemented in the very other feminine fashion. For the first time, a distinct difference arose in how clothing was designed and created for each sex, a division that deeply shaped the character and reputation of fashion for the next two centuries and continues to resonate today.<sup>9</sup>

But no matter the similarities or differences in men's or women's clothing, the arrangement of one is always made with regard to the other. Male and female clothing together reflect how society has envisioned and still envisions the relationship between the sexes, whether through fashion or behavior. Understanding women's fashion is impossible without considering what men wear, and vice versa.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to recognize that the dualistic concept of clothing, menswear consisting of pants, jackets, and shirts, and womenswear characterized by dresses, skirts, and decorative romantic details, remains deeply rooted in contemporary society. These distinctions are so ingrained in our daily visual experience that when these norms are broken on the runway fashion becomes particularly compelling. While the majority of male models continues to showcase new interpreted suits, the shifting trends in fashion signal a gradual transformation, challenging established norms and suggesting a wider reconsideration of gendered clothing. The shift to less gendered clothes is also noticeable when looking on the runway for mens- and womenswear fashion weeks, where models of all genders walk together. In my opinion, fashion becomes and has become most interesting when elements of menswear and womenswear come together, no matter who wears the outfits.

## **2. Power and perspective: The gaze in fashion**

### **2.1. The dominating gaze in fashion**

The fashion industry has a cognitive diversity problem, which includes more than external appearances. For the past couple of years, including in 2024, most head designers at major fashion houses within LVMH and Kering share similar backgrounds, education, and experiences, all of which contribute to designing fashion from a predominantly white male perspective. Considering the fact that more women graduate from fashion schools than men, most leading designers in the industry are still men. This imbalance persists even though the fashion industry broadly claims to be inclusive and open to all.<sup>11</sup>

Fashion both portrays individuals and is shaped by them. The emergence of the female gaze in fashion has introduced important conversations around diversity, inclusion, equity, and power. It has highlighted how these elements are reflected in and influenced by the way people are

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<sup>9</sup> Hollander, *Anzug und Eros: Eine Geschichte der modernen Kleidung*, 125-26.

<sup>10</sup> Hollander, *Anzug und Eros: Eine Geschichte der modernen Kleidung*, 16-17.

<sup>11</sup> Vanessa Friedman, "Fashion's Groupthink Problem: Why is the industry going backward when it comes to diversity and designers?" *The New York Times Company*, 12.10.2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/11/style/designers-kering-diversity.html>.

represented in the industry. To create good and diverse fashion it is crucial to design from not only a female point of view, but to include people of various backgrounds, genders, ethnicities and sexualities in general.

The concept of the "female gaze" refers to the way women and girls perceive others and the world around them, offering a counterpoint to the traditionally dominant male gaze. The term "female gaze" was originally used by the feminist film critic Laura Mulvey in the 1970s to criticize the superficial representation of women in movies which were portrayed by the predominantly male filmmakers. The term then made its way into academic and radical feminist circles, and it was only in the 2010s that it finally found its way into general usage.<sup>12</sup>

The male gaze does not inherently have to be negative; it can be neutral or even positive depending on the context. The issue arises when a single perspective, such as the male gaze, is overwhelmingly represented in media and culture, portraying others one-sided and leaving individuals who cannot relate to it feeling marginalized or excluded. The problem is not the existence of any one gaze, but rather the lack of diverse perspectives.

For centuries male fashion designers who create clothes for women have been culturally ingrained and are often the norm. The first fashion designer was Charles Frederick Worth. Ever since he emerged as the first male womenswear designer, more fashion designers began to rise and dresses were able to point out that women were not only completely different creatures from men, but essentially creations of men. All this contributed to the new idea that a fashion designer should be a "man inventing women" and someone who captures the male imagination.<sup>13</sup>

As the prominence of designers grew, menswear remained largely excluded from the realm of fashion. For an extended period, men perceived fashion as being disconnected from their identity, associating noticeable or unconventional dress with a lack of authority or influence. Nonetheless, it can be stated that there is an inherent modernity in male attire that has consistently led to its high desirability, perhaps even more so than that of female fashion.<sup>14</sup>

Contemporary fashion discourse shows an increasing focus on menswear as a significant aspect of fashion and an increase in popularity and engagement with conventional menswear can be seen in both menswear and womenswear fashion.

## **2.2. Female gaze in menswear**

In what ways might the roles be reversed, when female designers look at men in the same way that male designers look at women? What innovative concepts, sentiments, sexualities, fantasies, and political messages emerge from the female gaze in the context of fashion design?

Remarkably, it has taken centuries of fashion for this breakthrough to finally occur and to answer these questions, I will analyze some pioneering female menswear designers and reflect

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<sup>12</sup> Charlotte Jansen, "To Watch And Be Watched: What Does The Female Gaze Mean In The Fashion Industry Today?", *Elle*, 10.08.2023, <https://www.elle.com/uk/fashion/a44689262/female-gaze-fashion/>.

<sup>13</sup> Hollander, *Anzug und Eros: Eine Geschichte der modernen Kleidung*. 194-95.

<sup>14</sup> Hollander, *Anzug und Eros: Eine Geschichte der modernen Kleidung*, 23.

on their take on designing menswear and how these women portray men from a female perspective.

### 2.2.1 Vivienne Westwood

The first designer I want to reflect on in relation to the questions discussed above is Vivienne Westwood. Her work was profoundly influenced by English tailoring, blending bold nonconformity with a respect for tradition, resulting in a rebellious approach to both womenswear and maybe unexpectedly also menswear.

Westwood's ability to break taboos and challenge traditional gender and class codes is not typically associated with the Deconstructivist movement in fashion. However, her early work aligns with the same narratives explored by designers like Raf Simons and Martin Margiela. Her designs and counter-cultural fashion as a whole have disrupted societal norms, bringing taboo elements such as sado-masochism, explicit nudity, and working class influences to the forefront of clothing and design.<sup>15</sup>



*Fig. 1 Vivienne Westwood, fall 1981 ready-to-wear*

For Westwood's and her partner Malcom McLaren's first catwalk collection "Pirate", in 1981 Westwood started to research on historical menswear at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. She reflected on her creative process, explaining that while designing she discovered that the shape of the trousers in the past had been entirely different from today's. Once she realized this, she found her style: "rebellious, rakish look of ill-fitting clothes". Fascinated by historical notions of sexual attractiveness, she recognized the need to reconstruct past garments to fully understand their appeal. Through her research, she had learned that the priorities of that time and the concept of sexuality were entirely different from those of today.<sup>16</sup>

Building on this foundation, the "Pirate" show presented a groundbreaking aesthetic that blurred traditional gender lines. Featuring both female and male models styled with the same makeup, proportions, and garments, the collection highlighted a New Romantic aesthetic that embraced gender fluidity. This collection introduced a softer dimension to Westwood's work,

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<sup>15</sup> Claire Wilcox, *Vivienne Westwood*. (London : V&A-Publ. 2004), 14.

<sup>16</sup> Wilcox, *Vivienne Westwood*, 15-16.

contrasting with the more aggressive style of her earlier Punk designs but still maintaining rebellious and questioning societal perceptions of gender.<sup>17</sup>

In spring 1987 Westwood went on to create one of her most significant and impactful collections, establishing the direction and defining the essence of her work for the next decade. With the winter collection “Harris Tweed” she reinvented traditional tailoring, British fabrics and styles. A few years later, she pushed the idea of genderfluid tailoring even further and developed the concept of the “trouserless man,” drawing inspiration from early 19th-century menswear, characterized by cutaway jackets and tight breeches, as well as the era's fascination with classical proportions and the nudity of ancient statuary. Westwood even wore this eye-catching ensemble herself and explained:

I wanted my outfit to look like a girl dressed like a man with no trousers on.<sup>18</sup>

While looking at Westwood’s last collections prior to her passing, she and her husband Andreas Kronthaler carried on the same narratives that had been important to Westwood’s work since the beginning. One such narrative was the portrayal of a unisex look, with men and women modelling for Westwood’s menswear lines, playing with the concepts of tailoring and gendered clothing.

Another distinctive feature of the label is its showcasing of skin on men, portraying them in a sexually provocative way, similar to how women have been sexualized on the runway for such a long time, that we are all used by it.

While researching Vivienne Westwood's contributions to menswear design, it became evident that she was a pioneering figure in challenging traditional gendered notions of clothing. Westwood's design ethos and her political perspective continue to influence fashion today, and her significant legacy will undoubtedly continue to surprise and inspire us in many ways.

### 2.2.2. Martine Rose

Continuing with the next designer, Martine Rose describes herself primarily as a menswear designer. She founded her eponymous label 2007 in London and is deeply inspired by her Jamaican – British heritage. For her there is an ongoing tension between attraction to and resistance against the established norms of menswear. Rose’s examination of masculinity, the



*Fig. 2 Vivienne Westwood, (1987), Ensemble of Harris Tweed 'Savile' jacket and lycra tights with a green mirrored fig leaf*

<sup>17</sup> Laird Borrelli-Persson, “Why the Swagger of Vivienne Westwood’s 1981 Pirate Collection Resonates 40 Years On”, 17.05.2021, <https://www.vogue.com/article/the-pirate-look-in-fashion-1981-2021>.

<sup>18</sup> Wilcox, Vivienne Westwood, 22.

sexual undertones in her collections, and her sensitivity to character and mood are central to defining her work.<sup>19</sup>

Rose says while growing up she was always fascinated by the men surrounding her. When designing clothes for men, she reflects on whether one would want to be around the type of man she designs for, or even whether one would be attracted to him. According to her sex appeal is an implicit yet ever-present element in fashion. Rose designs clothes while imagining men from a female perspective, the female gaze.<sup>20</sup>

From a psychoanalytic perspective, this can be seen as sexuality being both shaped by culture and also shaping it in return. Ultimately, this concept proves to be complementary across the fields of feminism, psychoanalysis, and fashion.<sup>21</sup>

In Rose's point of view, designing menswear provides greater creative freedom and excitement in challenging established boundaries compared to designing womenswear. In menswear there are more rules to be broken and therefore there is more room for innovation. With this point of view Rose's dismantles the idea that in menswear there are less possibilities than in womenswear, ultimately making it less interesting.<sup>22</sup>

Interestingly, female costumers also wear her (menswear) designs, and Rose comments on this by saying:

I don't know if it's because I'm a woman designing menswear that women have felt somehow attached to it, I don't know if it's got a particular female gaze that women can connect to, but women have always bought my clothes, so it's great.<sup>23</sup>

In this case designing menswear from a female perspective allows for a broader appeal, showing that it is not just men who are drawn to "men's clothes." This approach opens the door to a wider audience that does not see the necessity to identify as a man to wear menswear.



Fig. 3 Martine Rose (2024), Spring 2025 Menswear

<sup>19</sup> Martine Rose, "about", 2023 <https://martine-rose.com/en-cu/pages/about>.

<sup>20</sup> Sarah Mower, "5 Female Designers Creating Boundary-Breaking Fashion For Boys", Vogue, 08.06. 2020, <https://www.vogue.co.uk/fashion/article/british-female-menswear-designers>.

<sup>21</sup> Caroline Evans und Minna Thornton, "Fashion, Representation, Femininity", Volume 38, Issue 1 (1991), 48-66. <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1991.19>

<sup>22</sup> Lauren Cochran, "Martine Rose Is Your Favourite Designer's Favourite Designer", Elle, 02.01.2024, <https://www.elle.com/uk/fashion/a46349628/martine-rose-interview/>.

<sup>23</sup> Cochran, "Martine Rose".

Rose also portrays this unisex approach within the model cast of her collections. For her Spring 2025 menswear collection approximately a quarter of the models were women, while male models wore finely tailored pencil skirts and net socks. What is striking is how the male and female models blend seamlessly together. There is little to distinguish them, creating a sense that gender distinctions have almost faded entirely.

Martine Rose's approach to menswear challenges traditional notions of gendered fashion, proving that clothing is not bound by rigid definitions of masculinity or femininity. Her designs, worn by both men and women, blur the lines between gendered dress codes and highlight the fluidity of personal expression. By pushing the boundaries of what menswear can be, Rose not only expands the creative possibilities within fashion but also reflects a broader cultural shift towards inclusivity and individuality. In doing so, she redefines contemporary menswear, proving that its evolution is far from over.

### 2.2.3. Miuccia Prada

Another important figure in the field of menswear design is Miuccia Prada. For decades the release of Prada's menswear collection has been eagerly awaited by the fashion world and is more relevant than ever today. Prada's latest menswear collections, may appear to be very classical at first glance, featuring a range of suits, shirts and coats in dark colors. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that Prada showcases unusual silhouettes on its male models, uniquely contouring the male body, almost in a feminine way. The attention to detail in the looks is so thorough that even the typical men's wardrobe is presented in a whole new light.

For the Spring 2025 Menswear collection, Miuccia Prada and Raf Simons drew inspiration from hand-me-downs, incorporating both female and masculine elements that can be passed down through generations of families, including mothers and grandmothers, as well as fathers and grandfathers.<sup>24</sup>



Fig. 4 Prada (2024) Spring 2025 Menswear

This interplay between menswear and womenswear has been a defining characteristic of Prada's approach since its early menswear collections. For her first menswear runway show in June 1997 the looks were influenced by Prada's womenswear line. Featuring the introduction of nylon and the muted colors that would later become synonymous with Prada, the show redefined menswear with a fresh silhouette. While the menswear and womenswear

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<sup>24</sup>Luke Leitch, "Prada Spring 2025 Menswear", 16.06.2024, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2025-menswear/prada>.

presentations were distinctly separate, they shared a cohesive color palette, a minimalist aesthetic, and an unmistakably unified atmosphere.<sup>25</sup>

Miuccia Prada acknowledges a certain monotony in menswear today in contrast to how men dressed in the past. For her there is a distinct difference in designing for men versus women. She explains that, when designing for men, she asks herself what she would want to wear as a man, trying not to be too exaggerated or unwearable. With doing so she wants to slowly integrate new, but still realistic looks for men. She believes that men are still not free to dress and embellish themselves, with many continuing to wear conventional menswear.<sup>26</sup>

Prada explains:

You can't expect fashion to revolutionize things; revolution happens in society. The miniskirt came [to be] because of the women's liberation. New comes from the change in society and fashion reflects it. Fashion is attentive to changes; maybe now the real revolution is the closeness between men's and women's wear.<sup>27</sup>

Prada's style is distinguished by its timeless elegance. Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that her female perspective on fashion offers a significant source of inspiration for her menswear collection, underscoring her unique perspective on menswear fashion.

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<sup>25</sup> Dazed Fashion, "A look back at the first prada men's show", 18.01.2025, [https://www.instagram.com/p/DFAG3xXtrpU/?img\\_index=9&igsh=MXBnZTNyODbtMm5ybw==](https://www.instagram.com/p/DFAG3xXtrpU/?img_index=9&igsh=MXBnZTNyODbtMm5ybw==)

<sup>26</sup> Zargani, "Miuccia Prada Talks Men's Wear".

<sup>27</sup> Zargani, "Miuccia Prada Talks Men's Wear".

## **Conclusion**

I have always felt the need to separate menswear and womenswear and was under the impression that one could not enrich the other. I did not fully consider the potential benefit of my perspective as a female designer in creating designs for men that would portray them in a feminist light nor the possibility of menswear to enrich my womenswear designs.

After examining other female menswear designers, I believe that designing for men as a woman can help to create a strong design language, without losing, but even strengthening a feminist approach to fashion. The female gaze in menswear questions conventional men's style and reinterprets the typical men's wardrobe, allowing men to show their feminine sides and explore new dimensions of their identity, power and sexuality.

Having explored the female gaze in menswear, I feel more confident and motivated to approach menswear with a fresh perspective, which allows me to go beyond traditional gendered clothing norms and also use menswear as a source of inspiration for my womenswear designs, or perhaps not to even separate the two.

## List of illustrations

Figure 1: Vivienne Westwood, fall 1981 ready-to-wear, Photo: David Corio / Redferns.  
Available at: <https://www.vogue.com/article/the-pirate-look-in-fashion-1981-2021>

Figure 2: Ensemble of mustard-coloured single-breasted Harris Tweed 'Savile' jacket with black velvet collar, lycra tights with a green mirrored fig leaf, white shirt and unfastened tie, from Vivienne Westwood, (1987) V&A photography by Richard Davis, V&A Photographic Studio. Place of publication: Wilcox, Claire. *Vivienne Westwood*. London: V&A-Publ., 2004.

Figure 3: Martine Rose (2024), Spring 2025 Menswear, Photo: Isidore Montag. Available at: <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2025-menswear/martine-rose/slideshow/collection#31> (Accessed 14.02.2025).

Figure 4: Prada (2024), Spring 2025 Menswear, Look 47, Photo: Umberto Fratini.  
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