

Sneakers Unboxed: Street to Studio

Teachers Notes

The exhibition is split into several different sections; You will begin in an introductory room with an overview of the Sneaker industry, accompanied by facts and figures. The next section, style, makes up the majority of the exhibition and focuses on everything from sports celebrity endorsements, music scene links, high fashion contributions and youth scenes. The next section of the exhibition, Performance, looks at material and technology advances in sneakers. The final subsection of the gallery, Sustainability and Circular Design, highlights the modern social and environmental conscience of the Sneaker Industry.

Please use these notes to prepare you for your visit to the Design Museum and help you get an overview of the exhibition ready to prime your students about the content they are about to see. The text below is the text as it is found in the exhibition, accompanied by a few objects from each section.

Introduction

Sports shoe, style statement and cult object – the sneaker is both an everyday item and a rare collectible. Few objects are as universal or as diverse, which is one reason why the sneaker industry is the most innovative and fast-paced in the footwear sector.

Thousands of new sneaker models in endless colourways are released every year, giving the impression that sneaker design and production is an incredibly rapid process. However, it can take several years to develop a sneaker model from start to finish – from concept, experimentation and testing through to production and launch.

Sport once drove sneaker design, with new sneaker models released at significant events such as the Olympics or the FIFA World Cup. But over the last forty years youth culture has increasingly influenced the shape and speed of the industry.

From the power of sneakers to reinforce a sense of belonging and style, to their ability to improve athletic performance, this exhibition highlights the design stories and people behind some of the most culturally and technologically significant sneakers ever made.

StockX

In its 5-year history, StockX has facilitated the trading of millions of sneakers. The data gathered and analysed from these transactions builds a picture of the growth and changing trends of the secondary sneaker market.



Style

Sneaker culture has become ubiquitous thanks largely to the influence of young people from diverse inner-city neighbourhoods. They have been instrumental in elevating sneakers from pure sportswear to sought-after icons of style.

In the 1970s, sneakers were popularised by a number of youth cultures in different parts of the world. Brands, unaware of this demand, only distributed sneakers specifically to be used for sports. Since supply to non-athletes was limited, without realising it brands were fuelling a thirst for exclusivity.

Sneaker brands soon attempted to appeal to young people by introducing endorsements from musicians and sports stars. But it was only when the desire for uniqueness was recognised more widely in the 1990s that a distinct shift in sneaker culture emerged, leading to some of the earliest limited editions and collaborations between sports brands and fashion designers.

Aided by high-profile partnerships and the growing dominance of the internet, sneakers have seen an unprecedented growth in popularity over the last decade. Now, more than ever, they are a platform for experimental design.



adidas Jabbar, 1980s

First released 1977

The first brand to replace canvas sneakers with leather was Adidas in 1964, with their Supergrip model. This developed into the Superstar in 1969. Kareem Abdul Jabbar wore the Superstar, on both NBA and streetball courts, and in 1976 he was officially endorsed by Adidas. The Jabbar features both a portrait of the player and his signature on the tongue.

Nike Air Huarache Trainer, 2015

First released in 1991

Released in the mid 2000s, the Triple Black version of Tinker Hatfield's Huarache Trainer was one of many UK-only SMUs released by British retailer JD Sports. The colourway became synonymous with the matching tracksuit and sneakers style associated with UK grime.





A-COLD-WALL*

For his collaboration with Nike, Samuel Ross, founder of A Cold Wall, explored the idea of how aged garments and footwear could convey a life lived. The Zoom Vomero +5 has been stripped of its protective polyurethane coating, resulting in an accelerated ageing process, with each sneaker being hand-dyed and therefore unique. Similarly, the classic Converse Chuck Taylor All Star has been redesigned as a hard-wearing utility shoe in order to extend its lifespan. The brand examined the relationship between material and emotion for its Spring/Summer 2020 collection, focusing on clay, lead, glass and water. The Strand-180 was designed as part of this collection.

Nike x A-COLD-WALL* Zoom Vomero +5 'Solarised', 2019

Converse x A-COLD-WALL* Chuck Taylor All Star Lugged, 2020

A-COLD-WALL* polyester blazer coat, nylon trousers, nylon and wool zip top, Spring/Summer 2020

A-COLD-WALL* Strand-180 Lo, 2020

CRAIG GREEN

London-based menswear designer Craig Green is known for progressive designs, which he has extended into his sneaker collaborations with Adidas Originals. Exploring themes of functionality and innovation, the aesthetic of the sneakers and garments are both vintage and futuristic, and are matched in colour palette and contrast panelling.

CRAIG GREEN utility shirt, jacket, trouser, hat, cape and neck tie, all cotton, Spring/Summer 2021

adidas Originals x CRAIG GREEN Scuba Phormar-III prototype 'Tactile Orange', 2020

Versace

Taken from Versace's Autumn/Winter 2018 RTW collection, the Chain Reaction sneaker and the look it has been styled with are unified in their use of mixed and clashing primary-colour pop prints, the essence of the Versace brand. The sneaker, designed by Salehe Bembury, embodies the strongest element of the fashion house's identity, with its thick chain-shaped outsole.

Versace printed bodies and skirt, all viscose, leather belt, Autumn/Winter 2018

Versace Chain Reaction, 2018

Performance

Most sports shoes that we now think of as innovative or ground-breaking arose from a need to meet a core set of interconnected design concerns. Factors such as traction, fit, stability, cushioning and energy return can help to improve athletic performance. These concerns are continually revisited by designers, as brands engage with new technologies and emerging research in sports science, in a quest to make their shoes technically the best.

The most urgent issue facing designers and consumers today is sustainability. Innovation in materials, experimental manufacturing techniques and increased transparency in supply chains are some of the ways in which brands are tackling the environmental impact and human cost of sneaker production. Designers and customisers are also developing more sustainable methods by extending the lifespan of sneakers through upcycling, remaking and refurbishing.



Vibram FiveFingers first production shoe, 2004

General release 2006

Since its founding in 1937, Vibram has specialised in the production of rubber outsoles known for their superior traction. The company partners with thousands of shoemakers, licensing its technologies. The FiveFingers is created with individual toe pockets for flexibility, to replicate the barefoot experience and act as a second skin, following the contours of the foot.

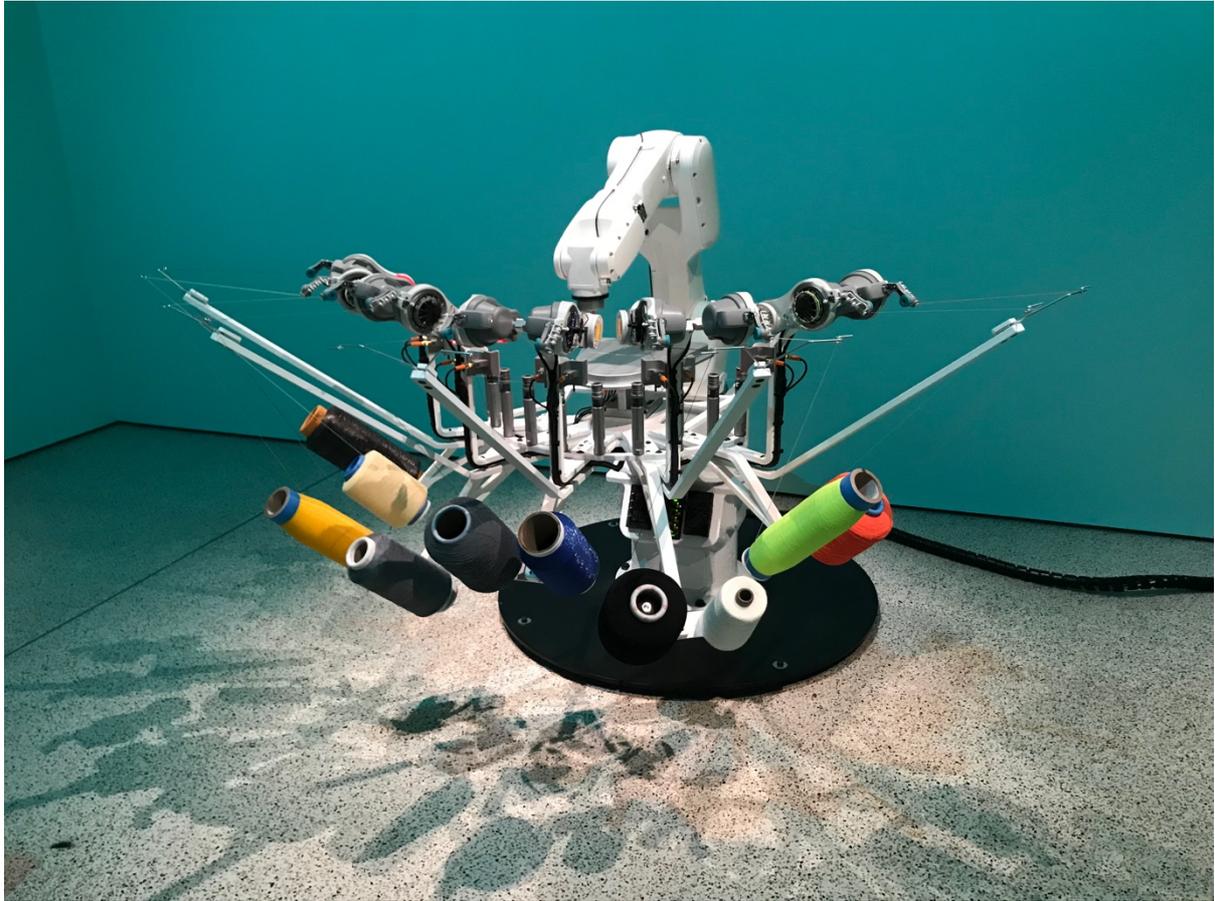
Sustainability and circular design

Sneaker production is exceptionally carbon-intensive. A typical pair of running shoes generates approximately 13.6kg of CO₂ emissions. Most sneakers consist of problematic materials, including synthetic rubber and plastic, which are created using energy-intensive processes and bound together using glues that are harmful to the environment. The scale of sneaker production is growing, with millions of pairs ending in landfill and taking decades to degrade. There is a multitude of promising projects underway to address these issues, including innovation in materials and manufacturing, a concerted effort to repair and recycle, and a greater understanding of circular design.

adidas x Parley Project, 2015

In 2015, Alexander Taylor was approached by the newly formed partnership between Adidas and non-profit organisation Parley for the Oceans to generate a design that reused illegal deep-sea gill nets removed by the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society and waste plastic collected around the Maldives. This concept shoe was made in just six days, with support from green chemist John Warner and material innovator Bionic Yarn. The initiative is ongoing.





adidas FUTURECRAFT.STRUNG, 2020

This knitting robot is the product of Adidas Future, the multidisciplinary research and development team at Adidas. Design and technology studio Kram/Weisshaar designed, engineered and built the software and hardware tools that enable the creation of Strung uppers. They are made by a robot using multi-directional weaving and knitting techniques, allowing specific areas of the upper to be stiffer, more breathable or flexible depending on the athlete's needs. The size of the robot means that design and manufacturing teams can collaborate and refine without having to travel across the globe, ultimately cutting carbon emissions and waste.

KRAMWEISSHAAR FOR adidas

EXHIBITION GUIDANCE

Objects in the exhibition are on open display rather than in cases. Care should be taken when moving around the exhibition and most objects should not be touched. Any objects that can be touched will be clearly signed. Please ask staff if you are unsure. We would be grateful if you could brief your students accordingly.

Depending on your group and your itinerary for the visit, we would recommend that you set aside approximately 60 minutes to explore this exhibition.

Please adhere to social distancing guidelines whilst in the Design Museum and exhibition.