

# The Hoodie

by Silvia Bombardini



*Untitled (Hood 1), 2016; Untitled (Hood 13), 2017 – John Edmonds*

Paola Antonelli, the Senior Curator of the Department of Architecture & Design at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in Manhattan, describes the hoodie in a TED Talk videoclip as a *Humble Masterpiece*. Like the paper clip or the tea bag, it is an object of design whose mundanity belies its brilliance. But the hoodie is not only humble because we now take it for granted – it is humble by birth, it always was. Among the hoodie's oldest ancestors we find the cowl attached to the robes that medieval monks in Europe wore, as well as the hooded cape – a *cappa* – donned by shepherds in the open fields. In its contemporary iteration too, the hooded cotton sweatshirt that the Knickerbocker Knitting Company, now known as Champion, introduced to keep athletes warm and dry, was soon to be adopted by the working classes in the cold warehouses and building sites of 1930s New York. But humble beginnings were on their way to become a statement themselves, and the hoodie was to rise up the fashion ranks from plain utility to the streetwear staple it's become today, in the wake of the rags-to-riches stories of those who most famously wore it. Think for instance of Rocky Balboa, the

**amateur boxer played by Sylvester Stallone in the 1976 eponymous *Rocky*. A training scene in which he runs up the stone steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art in a grey hoodie and sweatpants is largely credited to have contributed to the garment's mythology and diffusion, among the movie's legions of fans and in popular culture as a whole.**

But they weren't all fictional stories. With the birth of hip-hop culture, still humble when it began in the early 1970s in the post-industrial South Bronx, rappers in hoodies were soon to rise to international success. And even as they achieved it, and wealth and status symbols with it, few have been those who ever fully left the hooded sweatshirt behind: they'd drape it in jewels perhaps, but the hoodie usually got to stay. For dressing the rich and famous whose richness and fame had not compromised their values and loyalty to the hood – as in neighbourhood, but also as style – the hoodie from humble became the symbol of a power perhaps exceeding the power of suits: the power to forgo a dress code imposed from above and lay down new laws. It is important to never again mistake a tech company's CEO's hoodie as humble, nor even as humblebrag. What his hoodie – for usually a he it is – tells us about, is of a willingness to break all rules, to even align oneself eventually with the ones above them. As Antonelli observes, today *“if you're wearing a two-piece suits you might be the bodyguard. The real powerful person is wearing a hoodie”*. Indeed, it's not unusual now to come across in the media with the image of a celebrity in a hoodie, hands lifted to cover their faces, surrounded by suited escorts to keep the paparazzi at bay.



Mark Zuckerberg wears a hoodie as business attire

This points to another argument for the brilliance of the hoodie as a design object, a feature apparently but not truly at odds with its newfound connotations as a symbol of power. Perhaps as fundamental for us digital citizens

as for the labourers of yore was shelter from adverse weather, the hoodie as we know it offers the wearer a sample of something that in today's society is ever more scarce, and ever more sought after: a modicum of anonymity. Precious on some level to us all, in the 17th century women reportedly wore hooded garments to preserve their own when meeting their lovers in secret. It's not surprising then, that the gift of partial privacy the hoodie or its precursors have always allowed for is appreciated today all the more by those who live their lives in the public eye whether they want it or not. Nor, at the polar opposite of celebrities, that it's appreciated no less by those who make a living, or a point, from not being seen. The all-too-natural appreciation of hooded sweatshirts on part of petty criminals seeking not to be recognised, has led to the hoodie's poor reputation among shopkeepers and the middle classes, to the extent that a shopping mall in England made news in 2005 for banning entrance to anyone who wore it. Unlike a paper clip or tea bag, which we might use and set aside, largely without being judged for it, the wearing of iconic clothing always tends to inspire on part of casual observers assumptions about the character of the one who wears them. When the wearers themselves are iconic – i.e., celebrities – this effect is naturally neutralised. But when they aren't, almost by osmosis, through their skin strangers absorb the traits that we've come to associate with the archetypal garments they wear. Unlike iconic objects of design that we don't put on, that is, iconic clothing can depersonalise us. To the point that some, such as hoodies and suits, become metonyms: like we might call *a suit* not just the outfit but the person who wears it, often in a derogatory sense which highlights their stiffness, severity, conformity to norms or ignorance of manual labour, so *a hoodie*, other than a hooded sweatshirt, according to the Collins English Dictionary now also means "*a young person wearing a hoodie, thought by some people to be badly behaved or possibly criminal*".

When the young person who wears it is not white, these prejudices can fatally intertwine with the ongoing issue, especially in the United States, of racial profiling: when Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by a neighbourhood watch volunteer in Florida in 2012, the unarmed black teenager's hoodie was deemed responsible for making him look suspicious. Public outrage has since drawn many, in the country and oversea, to don the hoodie in protest of police brutality. Artists have also engaged with these themes, and with the hoodie as either a symbol or a rhetorical figure. John Edmond's *The Hoods* series for instance, in which street-casted people are invited to wear Edmond's own hoodies and photographed from behind so that their features are concealed, compels the viewer to question his or her own bias. Two of these portraits are currently on show, until April 12, at the Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, as part of a major new exhibition titled simply *The Hoodie*. Once more, its simplicity belies its scope: curated by Lou Stoppard, the show undertakes the iconography of the hoodie as a socio-political carrier, its evolution in sports-, work- and streetwear as a signifier of class, wealth, gender and race, and as a tool for privacy, for better or worse, whose desirability, as much as that of any one thing which someone somewhere ever has banned, has risen in direct proportion to its being maligned. Indeed, designer hoodies from brands like Vetements, C.P. Company, Rick Owens and Off-White are featured alongside and against artworks such as Bogomir Doring's installation, also titled *The Hoodie*, for which 8000 images of hoodies from existing journalistic or documentary footage were fed to an AI who would generate new hoodie imagery: the resulting body of work reflects, in Doring's words, the "*grotesque, uncanny, horrific character*" of the hooded sweatshirt's

contemporary mediatic representations. In a welcome twist of self-awareness, usually missing from shows with counterculture as their subject, the museum in its communications refers to the exhibition within its walls as an off-site programme: in recognition that the hoodie's real life happens on-site in neighbourhoods elsewhere, where someone might be stigmatised for wearing these very same clothes just as we walk around its galleries and marvel and the masterpieces on display.