



Who's Wearing the Pants?

25 March 2025 to 1 February 2026

Weltmuseum Wien

Tour of the exhibition

In 2025, Weltmuseum Wien will take a journey through three millennia of global legwear history in its major special exhibition, using this symbolic item of clothing as an opportunity to ask: 'Who's wearing the pants?' Many histories have been sewn into them: of domination and rebellion, of triumph and fear of loss, of provocation and intimate details.

The exhibition extends over five rooms, in which historical artefacts enter into a dialogue with contemporary art. From the Hall of Columns, you enter the exhibition between the legs of a neon-yellow, seven-metre-high pair of trousers. The five rooms are laid out in a figure-eight loop, extending to the right and left from the central entrance hall.

In the **first room**, called *De-Constructions*, there are ten very different pairs of trousers arranged around a contemporary sculpture by Laura Eckert. This represents a deconstructed, naked, upside-down body, interpretable as male, stretching its hips and legs upwards. Visitors are confronted with the question of whether this is a gymnastic nude or a distortion of (gender) facts. At the same time, the sculpture radiates a touching vulnerability that wants to be protected and clothed – but with what?

The ten selected 'options' for covering the naked lower body come from East, South, and Southeast Asia, West Africa, Central and North America, and from climatic regions ranging from the Arctic to the subtropical. They can be seen as textile works of art, or explored as examples of the question taken up quite literally in the title of the exhibition 'Who's wearing the pants?'. Small drawings illustrate how these trousers would look on a fully dressed person in their original context.

The walls feature three additional opportunities to delve deeper into the topic: cloths that can be turned into draped-bound trousers without any stitching at all; patterns that show the fabric consumption and the different construction methods of some of the trousers on display; and a cartoon illustration of the words used for trousers from around the world: where do the words *Hose*, *pants*, and *sirwal* come from – and where have they spread with the worldwide triumph of trousers?

The **second room** takes a look at the historical beginnings of trousers: in addition to a copy of the world's oldest known trousers from Turfan in Western China, reconstructed by the German Archaeological Institute using experimental archaeology, the exhibition also features an original pair of 1,000-year-old harem pants from the region of ancient Nubia (today southern Egypt). These are considered to be the oldest textile trousers in the collections of the KHM-Museumsverband and probably also the oldest trousers preserved in Austria.



Also on display is a dress fibula in the shape of a human figure in trousers from the Museum of the Celts in Hallein, dating from the Celtic La Tène culture (Late Iron Age), as well as three ancient coins made of gold and non-ferrous metals, depicting a trouser-wearing king, or 'barbarians' defeated by the Romans.

This 'ride through the history of trousers' is complemented by an entertaining film and a giant, trouser-shaped timeline that allows visitors to situate the most important objects in the exhibition in time and space.

The **third room** approaches the topic of the exhibition from a cultural and symbolic perspective: the focus here is on gender roles, forms of self-empowerment or emancipation, as well as other hidden meanings or codes that were and are transported by wearing pants. In ancient Greece and Rome, for example, trousers were worn by people who did not belong to their own culture, which, in addition to real eastern and northern neighbours, also included the mythical Amazons. Examples from the Collection of Greek and Roman Antiquities, the Imperial Armoury, and the Kunstkammer of the Kunsthistorisches Museum are juxtaposed with impressive documents from the photo collections of the Weltmuseum Wien and the Theatermuseum.

Through the inclusion of underpants, intimate topics have also found their way into this room, because these, in their various forms, are symbolic of the body parts and functions that they cover and protect, but which are also associated with excretion and sexuality. The oldest men's underpants found to date, which come from late medieval Tyrol, are joined by humorous transgressions of taboos, such as the provocative trousers of a 'Flinserl costume' from Aussee, the sculpture *Trophy for the Longest Pee* by Icelandic artist Guðmundur Thoroddsen, or the picture *Revenge of the Geisha Girl* by Japanese artist Yuko Shimizu.

At this point, the path leads back to the central room, where the exhibits, on closer inspection, reveal new details of their diverse designs and functions, and continues on to the second part of the exhibition.

Past the patterns, whose room-high design drawings, printed on paper banners, invite you to marvel and reflect on fabric consumption and waste, you come to the **fourth room**, which is all about details: trousers from all over the world spread out before the viewer like the delicacies of a market stall, rise into the air like flying fish, and make you want to try on the models provided to find out how cool linen or warm tweed feels, how much time you need to open 14 trouser buttons, or how many different ways trouser pockets can be designed.

A special 'privilege', previously reserved for the emperor's tailor and valet along with a few museum employees, is afforded to visitors in the form of two pairs of trousers from the personal belongings of Franz Joseph I: for the first time, they are not hidden under the loden and uniform jackets that go with them, revealing their workmanship and historical interiors.



This room is not only about the various technical possibilities of tailoring, but also about the sensual encounter with high-quality fabrics that last longer and are better suited for repairs or alterations than many of the cheap products that can be found everywhere today. The aim is to discover fabrics that can be used over and over again, rather than just once.

In the **fifth room**, large-scale moving images show the dystopian dark side of our current throwaway textile culture. At the same time, spaces for creative thinking are also created: What kind of '21st-century trousers' do we want to design for ourselves and the Earth's ecosystem in the future? A large work by British artist Ian Berry, called *The Morning After*, showcases blue denim in all its nuances – a material that continues to this day to be associated with and marketed as a symbol of dreams of freedom, fashion styles, and group identities. The exhibition adds a few little-known designs from the holdings of the Weltmuseum Wien.

With a virtual station for trying on trousers and an angled platform on which the works of contemporary designers shaping the future are presented, the four curators wish to end the exhibition with some key inspirations for further thought and reflection: terms such as 'AI-supported production on demand', 'greenwashing', or 'upcycling' invite you to delve deeper into the topic. The furniture in this room is upholstered in recycled denim, which is intended to provide tangible incentives, while you sit, watch, write, and draw at the creative station, for reducing the mountains of waste.

Innovative exhibition design & extensive supporting programme

The exhibition covers five rooms, each of which is dedicated to a main topic, which in turn is divided into several subtopics. The exhibition design relies on an extraordinary colour scheme to help guide the viewer's eye, thus changing perspectives and drawing attention to details and key objects.

Around half of the trousers on display are three-dimensional and, with no mannequins or clearly visible models, appear to be 'moving' as if they were being worn by invisible bodies. This not only creates a floating, 'weightless' impression of great lifelikeness, but also allows the familiar garment to be experienced from an often unfamiliar perspective as a three-dimensional hollow form. An important design element are waist-high mirrors and semi-transparent mirror films that allow visitors to always keep an eye on their own legs as they walk around the exhibition, thus becoming part of the overall production from the outset with their clothing styles and body perceptions.

Videos, films, and interactive media and hands-on stations, as well as children's texts in the exhibition rooms and an extensive supporting programme with numerous events on the subject of trousers, complete the exhibition.

Curators: Barbara Pönighaus-Matuella, Julia Zeindl, Bettina Zorn, and Hanin Hannouch
Exhibition designer: büro wien. Inszenierte Kommunikation Marketing GmbH

**Opening times, tickets, entrance fees**

www.weltmuseumwien.at/en/information

Additional information regarding your visit

Guided tours, bookings, and reservations for events

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Information, questions, and suggestions

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Exhibition programme and events

All events are listed online in the Weltmuseum Wien [event calendar](#).

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