American Drag

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Accessibility
AMERICAN DRAG

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Front Cover: Karyl Norman, ca. 1930 | TCS 28
Back Cover: Elia Wesner, ca. 1885 | TCS 2
Drag involves altering one’s appearance and performing mannerisms associated with a particular gender, which is typically, but not always, different from the one with which the performer identifies. Cross-dressing and other kinds of gender play have existed throughout human history, and the meanings ascribed to them vary according to the way gender is expressed in a given cultural context. Over the course of the twentieth century, drag performance in the United States developed from something of a novelty act into an independent and impactful performance genre that permeated American culture.

This exhibition traces the evolution of American drag, calling attention to the ways in which it both reflected and inspired changing perceptions of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality. Drag operates as both a form of popular entertainment and a mode of social critique capable of illuminating and at times subverting cultural norms. The parade of performers that follows showcases the range of styles and talents that went into the making of modern drag and highlights the genre’s shifting and expanding appeal for American audiences.
Individuals who confound gender expectations by choice, because of atypical gender markers, or through some combination of the two have long been subjects of fascination around the world. A variety of cultural, social, and biological factors ranging from same-sex institutions to legal prohibitions and medical discourse shape the contexts in which cross-gender performances occur and how they are understood.

**VICTORIAN DRAG**

While some ambitious actresses appeared in traditionally male roles and the cross-dressed comic dame became a staple of American theater, it was in the more ribald world of variety and burlesque that drag flourished during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Even as laws criminalizing cross-dressing were adopted around the country, on stage a lively mix of male and female impersonators pushed the bounds of propriety as they toyed with Victorian conventions of masculinity and femininity.
MODERN DRAG

The first decades of the twentieth century saw the emergence of drag’s first superstar Julian Eltinge, who brought an elegance and newfound respectability to the art of female impersonation. Drag flourished across various lines of popular entertainment in the 1920s, but it was in the underground bars and nightclubs that sprang up following Prohibition that the campy humor and more subversive sexuality associated with modern drag took shape.

THE POSTWAR BOOM

In the wake of the Second World War, economic expansion and social change allowed clubs dedicated to drag performance to proliferate. These establishments often existed in a legal gray area, and their association with the gay community made them suspect in the eyes of many local authorities. Nevertheless, the number of venues around the country that found success offering shows with some version of the byline that “the most interesting women are not women at all” was a testament to the drawing power of drag.
**DRAG ACROSS AMERICA**

By the late 1950s touring companies like the Jewel Box Revue were bringing professional drag performances to communities and clubs beyond the urban centers. One marker of the growth of the genre was the 1963 launch of a trade publication, *Female Mimics*, which profiled leading performers and provided advice about everything from clothes and make up to how to make bookings on the emergent circuit.

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**COUNTERCULTURAL DRAG**

The political and cultural ferment of the 1960s resonated in the world of drag in a variety of ways. In New York, Andy Warhol’s promotion of Mario Montez, Jackie Curtis, and other “superstars” placed drag at the center of avant-garde art in America. On the West Coast, its intersection with the hippie counterculture produced the Cockettes, an anarchic troupe of artists and performers whose embrace of drag reflected an increasingly liberated gay movement.

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*Recollections of a Part-time Lady* by Minette, 1979

2022T-78

*Female Mimics*, 1963

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Stormé DeLarverie performing with the Jewel Box Revue, ca. 1960

MS Thr 2083

*Female Mimics*, 1963

HQ77.F45

Mario Montez, ca. 1969 | MS Thr 2047

Photographer: Thomas Harding

Pristine Condition’s Tri-Sexual

Bicentennial Universal Calendar, 1976

MS Thr 2057

Sylvester and his Hot Band, 1972

MS Thr 2057

Recollections of a Part-time Lady

by Minette, 1979

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*Female Mimics*, 1963

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THE LIBERATION OF DRAG
It was no accident that drag artists like Marsha P. Johnson and Stormé DeLarverie were involved in the Stonewall Riots that marked the emergence of the gay liberation movement. As some of the most visible members of the community, many drag performers have and continue to play prominent roles as advocates for gay, bisexual, and transgender rights.

THE DRAG EXPLOSION
Linda Simpson began publishing the zine *My Comrade* in 1987 to document the “drag explosion” in New York City that took it from the underground into the mainstream. In the decade that followed, what had largely been a queer cultural practice began appearing across music, stage, and screens as drag performers and the broader range of gender expressions they embodied were embraced by American popular culture.