



American Drag

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AMERICAN DRAG

*Good wishes
Sordially
"Karyl Norman"*



Curator: Matthew Wittmann

Designer: Margarita Encomienda

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Barry Bingham Sr. Publication Fund

Front Cover: Karyl Norman, ca. 1930 | TCS 28

Back Cover: Ella Wesner, ca. 1885 | TCS 2

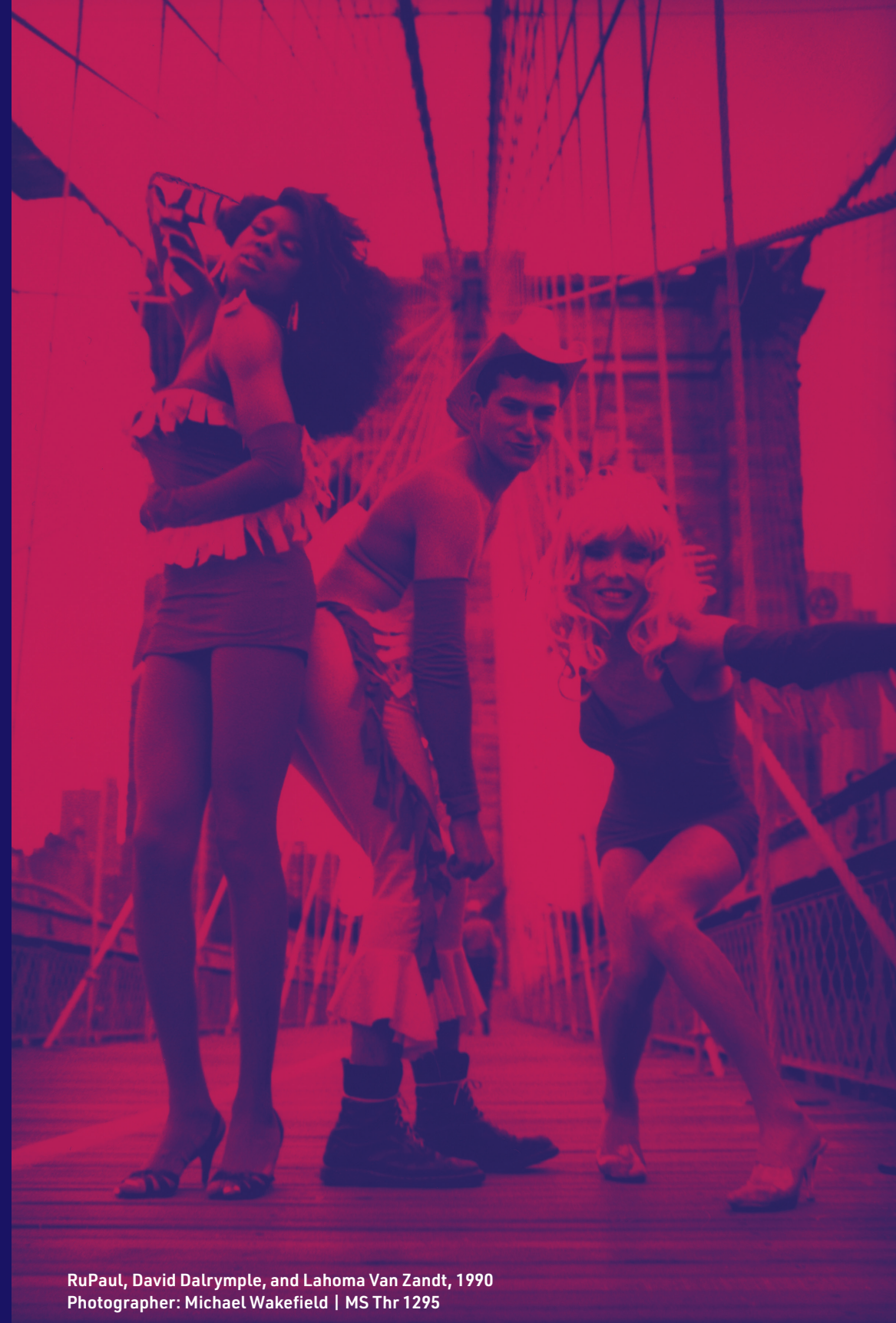
AMERICAN DRAG

HOUGHTON LIBRARY

September 6, 2022 – January 6, 2023

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.



RuPaul, David Dalrymple, and Lahoma Van Zandt, 1990
Photographer: Michael Wakefield | MS Thr 1295

DRAG CONTEXTS

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.



Edward Kynaston (1640-1706)
TCS 44



Takiko Mizunoe, ca. 1935
MS Thr 2205



Hasty Pudding Theatricals score, 1910
MS Thr 759

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.



Annie Hindle, ca. 1880
TCS 2



Francis Leon, ca. 1880
TCS 43



Neil Burgess, 1886
TCS 1



I Wish That I'd Been Born a Boy, 1867
MS Thr 877

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 Clever Mrs. Carfax, 1917
2022T-50



Ubangi Club
ephemera
featuring Gladys
Bentley, 1934
MS Thr 2029



Publicity still by M. Marigold, ca. 1939 | MS Thr 675

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.



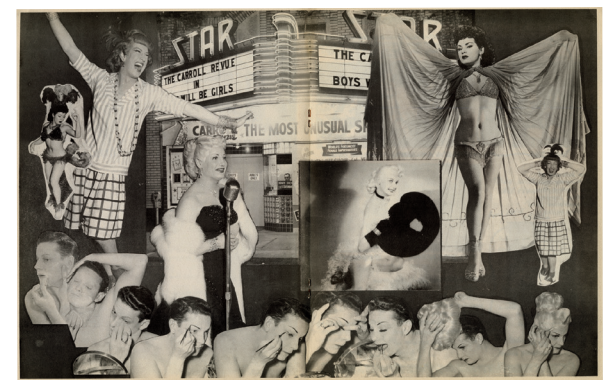
Drag club program, ca. 1945
2022T-68



Bobby Jonson, 1943 | HTC 2



Ty Bennett's *Queen for a Day!* LP, 1961
2022T-88



Carroll Revue program,
1958 | 2022T-60

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.



Recollections of a Part-time Lady
by Minette, 1979
2022T-78



Stormé DeLarverie performing
with the Jewel Box Revue, ca. 1960
MS Thr 2083

Female Mimics, 1963
HQ77.F45

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.

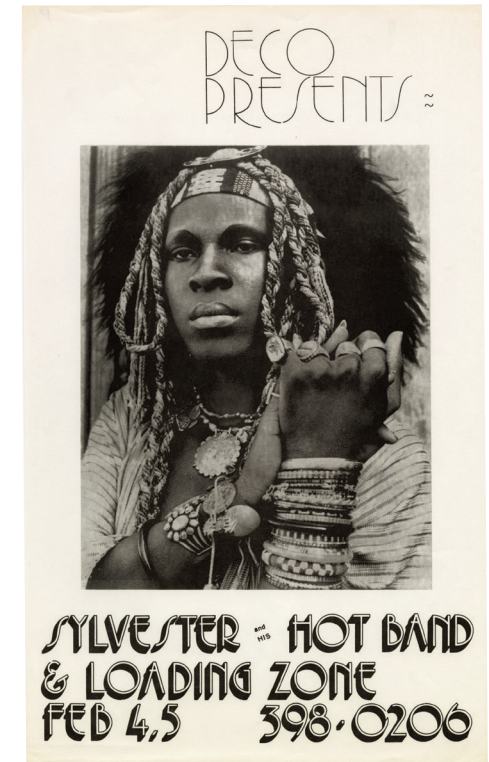


Pristine Condition's *Tri-Sexual*
Bicentennial Universal Calendar, 1976
MS Thr 2057



Mario Montez, ca. 1969 | MS Thr 2047
Photographer: Thomas Harding

Sylvester and his Hot Band, 1972
MS Thr 2057

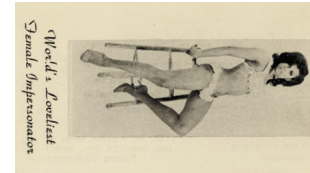


THE LIBERATION OF DRAG

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.



Burma Taylor scrapbook, 1950-1980s
MS Thr 2085



Sir Lady Java promotional materials, ca. 1970
MS Thr 1777



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.



Paris is Burning! film still, 1990
MS Thr 2208



My Comrade, 1987
MS Typ 1295



Joey Arias papers, 1970-2019
MS Thr 1915

