

The Tuxedo Redefined: Formality, Fluidity, and Femininity at the 80WSE Gallery at New York University

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To be quite honest, it's more than a little odd to think about *formality* in a time of quarantine. Seemingly gone are the days of dressing up in black tie for galas, benefits, or even the prom, replaced by the practice of dressing for the Zoom call from the waist up while dressing for the couch from the waist down. We turn longingly to memories of sumptuous fabrics, finely constructed fashions, and the ritual of adorning ourselves in fancy dress. For three and a half weeks in early 2020, long before our lives were shaken by a global pandemic, the shifting dynamics of formal dress were celebrated in *The Tuxedo Redefined: Formality, Fluidity, and Femininity*. Curated and produced entirely by nine graduate students of the NYU Steinhardt Costume Studies program, the exhibition explored how the tuxedo has undergone tremendous shifts both in materiality and social context since its introduction at the end of the nineteenth century.

While the tuxedo was seen as a uniquely male garment throughout much of its history—and is still considered by many today to be so—*The Tuxedo Redefined* looked specifically at how the tux has impacted women's fashion and subverted traditional notions of gender. The exhibition opened with a collection of advertisements highlighting the stark contrast between how tuxedos were marketed to men versus women. Where the tuxedo had served as a formal uniform for men, women adapted the garment to signal a cultural break from the formal traditions of women's dress. The tuxedo, as it was presented in the gallery, represents shifting constructs of power and a questioning of gender norms. These themes were touched upon throughout the entire exhibit. While there were just two garments on display (a tuxedo from The Tailory New York and a prêt-à-porter dress from the Chanel A/W 1987-88 collection), the exhibition had some clear high points.

Hanging alongside a collection of images of tuxedo-clad women, a striking photograph of a dandily dressed Black woman against a

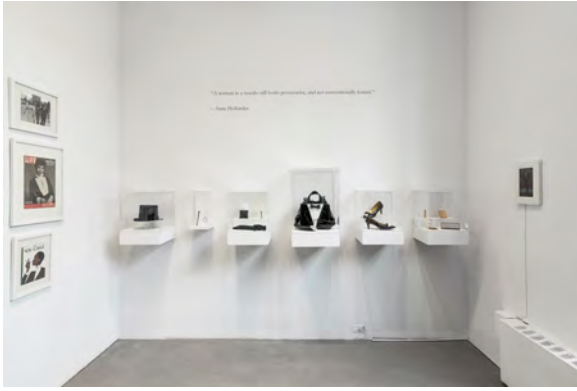


blue background touches upon the *Sapeur* movement. Started in the 1920s by men in the Republic of Congo, the *sapeurs* used extravagant style—oftentimes repurposed from their French oppressors—as a “form of rebellion against colonial rule.” [1] While the practice remained a largely male activity for most of its history, in recent years, Congolese women have established their own *sapeur* group called *les sapeuses*. Within a culture that oftentimes relegates women exclusively to the domestic sphere, the female *sapeuses* reclaim a sense of power and autonomy, as evidenced by this powerful image, the work of photographer Victoire Douniama.

Another exhibited photograph, originally published in 1976 by the *Los Angeles Times*, recounts the experience of a young woman, Sherryl Griffith, who was turned away from her high school graduation because she wore a tuxedo to the ceremony. It’s worth noting that this happened ten years after Yves Saint Laurent debuted his iconic *Le Smoking* look, one of the first tuxedo styles for women to take the fashion industry by storm. Saint Laurent’s *Le Smoking* is often touted as being a significant change in the tide of women’s fashion — radical for adopting a traditionally male style of garment, and notable for paving the way for countless labels and designers to follow suit. However significant these changes, Griffith’s experience exemplifies how high fashion can be more daring than what the average person would wear and can be a signal of widespread cultural changes to come.

The exhibition continued with a collection of accessories presented in plexiglas boxes lining the back wall of the narrow gallery, which included pieces used to accompany tuxedos. For example, a top hat, monocle, and cigarette holder recall how tuxedos were used to subvert traditional notions of femininity when donned by young women in the early twentieth century. But perhaps most notably, the curators have included a number of fashion objects that were inspired by tuxedos rather than replicating them entirely. These objects, including a Thom Browne handbag made to resemble a tuxedo clad torso complete with sleeves, a pair of black patent leather pumps with a white vamp and black bowties, and even an assortment of makeup in shades of classic black and white, showcase how designers have not only designed tuxedos to dress the body, but also as a way to suggest the formality of the tuxedo in the everyday.

The work that most gave me pause, however, was the video that played on a loop by the exit of the gallery. A compilation of twelve film clips dating from 1916 through 1982, the video illustrated the points made throughout the entire exhibition. The impact of the tuxedo, in regard to both feminist theory and popular culture alike, is clearly evidenced when the suits are set in motion by some of the



most iconic figures of Old Hollywood. There are some obvious but important inclusions: Judy Garland in *Summer Stock* (1950, costumes by Walter Plunkett), Leland Palmer in *All That Jazz* (1979, costumes by Albert Wolsky), and Julie Andrews in *Victor/Victoria* (1982, costumes by Patricia Norris). Each of these films highlight the theatricality and showmanship innately associated with the tuxedo as each of the characters wearing a tux in these films did so on the stage. Conversely, Gloria Swanson's tuxedo in the 1916 silent short film *The Danger Girl* serves as comic relief. At a time when women would rarely be seen in public putting on menswear, Swanson's costumes enhance the comedic narrative of the film.

No film compilation of twentieth century women in tuxedos would be complete without the inclusion of Marlene Dietrich. The legendary German-American actress and singer was noted for her so-called gender-bending style. *The Tuxedo Redefined* has included short clips from two of Dietrich's films: 1930's *Morocco* and 1932's *Blonde Venus*, both directed by Josef von Sternberg and costumed by Travis Banton. In *Morocco*, Dietrich is seen in a full tuxedo, engaging in conversation with a table of compatriots before leaning down to kiss a female party-goer right on the lips. Unlike Swanson's character, who had donned a suit to appear male decades earlier, Dietrich's character is explicitly female in her tuxedo. This was perhaps the most astonishing clip on view, as it directly illustrates the assertion made by the curators that tuxedos had been used by women throughout history to not only complicate notions of power, but of gender and sexuality as well.

The Tuxedo Redefined: Formality, Fluidity, and Femininity took on seemingly simple subject matter. However, by focusing exclusively on the style's impact on women's dress, the exhibition highlighted the truly complex nature of fashion itself—that clothing has the ability to encourage dialogues about power, sexuality, gender, propriety, satire, and even cultural and geographical identity. The project seemed almost too large an undertaking given the limited space of the gallery, but the efforts of the curatorial board showed a skillful balance of thought-provoking theory with easy-to-digest examples to illustrate the relationships they explored.

[1] "Sapeur Women – Embodying Tenacity: The Dandy Style of Les Sapeuses," *The Tuxedo Redefined*, accessed May 21, 2020, <https://www.tuxedoredefined.com/sapeurwomen>.

Note:

Image 1: *Femme à l'oeillet* (detail), 1981. René Gruau (Italian, 1909-2004). © Gruau Collection. www.gruaucollection.com

Image 2: *Grace*, 2019. Victoire Douniama (Congolese, born 1997). Courtesy of Victoire Douniama.

Images 3-4: Installation view. Photo © Lucas Quigley, 2020.