

## **These are the digital labels for the exhibition *DIVA* at the Australian Museum of Performing Arts.**

This document holds all written information provided in the physical exhibition, including theme text panels and object labels.

Every effort has been made to provide the content in an order that it could be experienced in the physical exhibition.

The exception are the text panels, which are included here before the object labels for each section. In the exhibition, the text panels are featured in physically appropriate locations.

The digital labels can be navigated through inbuilt hyperlinks, from the list on the **Contents** page to the relevant section, and back again via [return to CONTENTS](#).

There is also additional material that is not included in the physical exhibition. These sections are identified as **online only**.

Physical descriptors are provided throughout the document in **right-aligned purple text**, for example:

**(Online only)**

**(Image)**

**(Hamer Hall foyer)**

# CONTENTS

<b>Welcome .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Prelude: The Australian Diva .....</b>	<b>6</b>
Embracing the Australian Diva .....	7
Disrupting the Diva.....	17
Embodying the Diva .....	27
Defining the Australian Diva.....	30
<b>Act I: Creating the Diva.....</b>	<b>41</b>
The Rise of the Diva .....	42
Goddesses on Stage .....	45
Fame and Wealth .....	55
Victorian Drama Queens .....	58
Actresses for Change .....	59
Power of the Stage .....	63
Dancers and Showgirls.....	72
The Liberating Body .....	73
Silent Goddesses.....	85
The Femme Fatale .....	86
Hollywood Divas .....	93

Power Struggles .....	98
Rebel Icons.....	98
Opera Voices .....	107
The Modern Opera Diva .....	108
Timeline: Redefining the Diva.....	120
<b>Act II: Reclaiming the Diva.....</b>	<b>125</b>
Run the World.....	126
I Want to Break Free .....	141
Backlash Blues .....	153
By Myself .....	168
Express Yourself .....	183
A Star is Born .....	191
<b>Act III: Diva Constellations .....</b>	<b>201</b>
<b>Australian Postlude .....</b>	<b>203</b>

## **Gown worn by Deborah Cheetham Fraillon in performance at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2010**

Deborah Cheetham Fraillon (born 1964) describes herself as ‘a 21st century urban woman who is Yorta Yorta by birth, stolen generation by government policy, soprano by diligence, composer by necessity and lesbian by practice’. She is the founder of Short Black Opera and creator of Australia’s first Indigenous opera *Pecan Summer*. This gown was the first in an ongoing collaboration with Linda Britten. Constructed from 30 metres of red shantung silk, the design was inspired by a flight the diva took over central Australia and the vibrant sand dunes of the desert regions below.

### **Designed by Linda Britten**

On loan from Linda Britten

(Image)

**Deborah Cheetham Fraillon performing at Live and Proud:  
Sydney WorldPride Opening Concert, 2023**

Photograph by Don Arnold/Stringer via Getty Images

(Audio track)

**Acknowledgement of Country performed at the premiere of  
*Dutala – Star Filled Sky*, Hamer Hall, Melbourne, 2020**

Performed by Deborah Cheetham Fraillon AO and the Melbourne  
Symphony Orchestra

**Conducted by Benjamin Northey**

Courtesy of Melbourne Symphony Orchestra

**Running time: approximately 2 minutes**

# Welcome

Welcome to *DIVA* from the V&A London. This exhibition celebrates the power and creativity of iconic performers, exploring and redefining the role of 'diva' and how this has been subverted or embraced over time across opera, stage, popular music, and film.

## Prelude: The Australian Diva

Before you take to the international stage, we invite you to celebrate the Australian diva. From contemporary artists to the ones who paved the way, these performers represent the many talented individuals who have entertained audiences at home and abroad.

Australians on the world stage are embraced for their openness and authenticity. These attributes were exemplified in the late 19th century by our first global superstar, opera singer Dame Nellie Melba. Her uncompromised identity as an Australian showed that homegrown performers can stand proudly in the spotlight, whether as themselves or in famous roles.

That same conviction has seen the rise of many Australian divas, whose powerful stage personas challenge traditional constructs

and introduce new ideas. Making us laugh, cry and reflect long after the final curtain, the Australian diva has been defined over many generations and continues to evolve for our entertainment.

## Embracing the Australian Diva

The Australian diva has evolved from a range of cultural influences to become a figure of warmth and accessibility, celebrated worldwide as an archetype of the creative free spirit.

Iconic Australian performers navigated the competitive international music industry of the 1970s and 80s, honing their craft and introducing a new brand of ‘Aussie’ appeal to the global mass market. Maintaining their connection to home throughout their career, these divas have inspired generations of artists across the country to bring their own lived experience to the way Australian performers are recognised internationally.

Fully embraced by audiences both at home and overseas, Australian pop artists are free to be themselves, creating self-determined personas that make them powerful contenders on the diva stage around the world.

[return to CONTENTS](#)

(Moving image and audio track)

**Clip from ‘Padam Padam’ music video by Kylie Minogue, 2023**

**Directed by Sophie Muller**

Courtesy of Warner Chappell Music Ltd

**Written by Rycroft and Wroldsen**

Courtesy of Mushroom Music

**Jessica Mauboy performing ‘We Got Love’, Eurovision Song Contest, 2018**

Courtesy of SBS © EBU

**Written by Mauboy/Egizii/Musumeci**

Courtesy of Universal Music Publishing Pty Ltd

**Clip from ‘You’ music video by Marcia Hines, 1977**

Courtesy of © 1977 Sony Music Entertainment Australia Pty Ltd

**Written by Tom Snow**

© Beechwood Music Corporation / Snow Music

Courtesy of EMI Music Publishing Australia Pty Limited

**Clip from ‘I Go to Rio’ music video by Peter Allen, 1977**

Courtesy of Peter Allen Family Trust and Australian Broadcasting Corporation Library Sales

**Written by Allen/Anderson**

Irving Music, Inc., Woolnough Music, Inc.

Courtesy of Universal Music Publishing Pty Ltd

**Kate Miller-Heidke performing 'Zero Gravity', Eurovision Song Contest, 2019**

Courtesy of SBS © EBU

**Written by Kate Miller-Heidke, Keir Nuttall and Julian Hamilton**

© Sony Music Publishing (Australia) Pty Limited / EMI Music Publishing Australia Limited

**Running time: approximately 6 minutes**

## **Costume worn by Kylie Minogue in the music video for 'Padam Padam' from the album *Tension*, 2023**

Kylie Minogue (born 1968) won the hearts of television audiences as Charlene on *Neighbours* in 1986. Her hit 'Locomotion' launched a pop career that sees her ranked as one of the most successful Australian recording artists of all time. Beloved by an intergenerational fan base including the LGBTQ+ community, her strong sense of style has made her a muse to the world's leading fashion designers. 'Padam Padam' was a TikTok phenomenon and a Grammy Award-winning single that brought renewed energy to Kylie's career and major success in the United States.

**Catsuit designed by Thierry Mugler**

**Boots designed by Maison Ernest**

On loan from Kylie Minogue

(Image)

**Kylie Minogue in the music video for 'Padam Padam', 2023**

Photograph by Erik Melvin

Courtesy of Kylie Minogue

(Image)

## **Olivia Newton-John as Sandy in Grease, 1978**

Directed by Randal Kleiser

Paramount Pictures / Album Stock Photo – Alamy

## **Baby grand piano and bench belonging to Olivia Newton-John, customised in 2019**

The idea for Olivia Newton-John's blue piano was prompted by the rich turquoise waters of The Bahamas where she spent her birthday with husband John Easterling. It was a colour Newton-John came to call 'Bahama blue' which she described as her 'spirit colour'.

### **Manufactured by Steinway and Sons, 1962**

### **Customised by Jim Wilson**

Gift of Krystyna Campbell-Pretty, 2025. Pending donation through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program.

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

## **Handwritten lyrics for ‘My Blue Piano’ by Olivia Newton-John, 2019**

### **Reproduction of handwritten lyrics**

Gift of Krystyna Campbell-Pretty, 2025. Pending donation through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program.

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

### **Jacket worn by Olivia Newton-John during her concert residency at the Flamingo Las Vegas, 2014–16**

Olivia Newton-John (1948–2022) was one of Australia’s best-loved entertainers. She was a teen popstar, Eurovision finalist, recording artist, screen idol, and music video pioneer. Newton-John’s portrayal of Sandy in the 1978 film *Grease* brought her global success and the iconic leather jacket worn in the movie’s closing scenes became a reoccurring motif throughout her career on stage. This version was created by Brian Rennie and the rhinestone studs were added by Emmy Award-winning Australian designer Perry Meek.

### **Designed by Brian Rennie and Perry Meek**

Gift of Krystyna Campbell-Pretty, 2025. Pending donation through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program.

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

## **Star Trail**

**(Kids' Label)**

Look at the rhinestones that spell out Olivia's name on her jacket.

Imagine if you could decorate your favourite item of clothing with words, drawings or patches.

### **What would you choose?**

## **Shirt worn by Peter Allen in the music video for 'I Go to Rio', 1977**

Charismatic showman Peter Allen (1944–1992) achieved success in Australia and overseas with his exuberant live performances, chart-topping hits, and heartfelt ballads. An expatriate living in the United States, Allen's connection to home remained profound and led him to write his most influential song 'I Still Call Australia Home'. The Hawaiian shirt was a signature look for Allen during the 1970s. This shirt was one of many in his collection, which he

wore on stage and in the music video for his groundbreaking hit 'I Go to Rio'.

Gift of Larry Rinehart, 2006

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**Costume worn by Kate Miller-Heidke for *Eurovision – Australia Decides*, Gold Coast, 2019**

Kate Miller-Heidke (born 1981) effortlessly traverses pop and opera. Classically trained, she has broken new ground in contemporary music, staying true to herself with her unique voice and vulnerable lyricism. Miller-Heidke represented Australia at the 2019 Eurovision Song Contest with her song, 'Zero Gravity', which revealed her experience with postnatal depression. She wore this costume for the first televised performance of *Eurovision – Australia Decides* where she won the public vote to proceed to the international stage.

**Bodice designed by Gwendolynne Burkin**

**Skirt designed by Design Bordello**

Gift of Kate Miller-Heidke, 2025

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

## **Dress worn by Jessica Mauboy in the Eurovision Song Contest, Lisbon, 2018**

Jessica Mauboy (born 1989), a Kuku Yalanji and Wakaman woman from Darwin, rose to fame on *Australian Idol*. She was the first Indigenous artist to reach number one on the ARIA Album Charts and was inducted into the NIMA Hall of Fame in 2025. With a celebrated career as a musician and actor, Mauboy is a role model for a new generation of First Nations performers and uses her platform to campaign for Reconciliation. Mauboy represented Australia at the 2018 Eurovision Song Contest with her song 'We Got Love' and performed to an audience of 200 million viewers worldwide.

**Designed by Angela White and William Lazootin**

On loan from Jessica Mauboy

## **Outfit worn by Marcia Hines on the cover of *Ladies and Gentlemen*, 1977**

Marcia Hines (born 1953) was fearless when she left Boston at 16 years old to star in the Australian production of the revolutionary rock musical *Hair*. The diva became the first Australian female artist to have a platinum-selling album and was crowned 'Queen of Pop' from 1976 to 1978. Hines is a mainstay of the Australian music and theatre scenes and a mentor for new generations of divas as a judge on *Australian Idol*. This ensemble was created by pioneering fashion designer Linda Jackson and was lent to Hines to wear on the cover of her album *Ladies and Gentlemen*.

### **Designed by Linda Jackson**

Gift of Linda Jackson AO, 2025

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

## Disrupting the Diva

The defiant Australian diva uses the power of their voice to push boundaries and embrace individuality. Through subversive modes of performance and playful reinterpretations of gender stereotypes, these artists have become symbols of empowerment and social critique.

Loud, courageous, and often political, provocative frontwomen reject the manufactured image of female performers with force and call for change through their art and self-expression. Their electric stage presence, incisive lyrics, and idiosyncratic styles have redefined femininity in a male-dominated genre.

These punk sensibilities also permeate the theatrical stage. Iconoclasts in cabaret and comedy have forged their own paths by blending high camp performance with wit and sincerity. They pay homage to the rebellious nature of the artforms and wield their divine power for self-expression and satire.

[return to CONTENTS](#)

(Image)

**Chrissy Amphlett of Divinyls performing on the *Australian Made* tour, Subiaco Oval, Perth, 1987**

Photograph by Bob King

Gift of The Age, 1995

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**Tunic worn by Chrissy Amphlett, c.1985**

Chrissy Amphlett (1959–2013) was the first Australian female post-punk icon. Amphlett emerged from the male-dominated Sydney pub-rock scene as the lead singer of Divinyls and shot to international stardom with the band's hit 'I Touch Myself' in 1990. The song became an anthem of self-love and inspired women to take control of their sexuality. Amphlett's stage presence was unparalleled and remains in the psyche of fans who witnessed her on stage. The schoolgirl uniform is synonymous with her image, its suggestion of youth juxtaposing her provocative lyrics and fierce demeanour.

**Designed by SABA**

Gift of Chrissy Amphlett, 2006

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**(Moving image and audio track  
video contains strong language and adult themes)**

**Divinyls performing 'Only Lonely', *Australian Made* tour,  
1987**

**Directed by Richard Lowenstein**

Courtesy of Helium Pictures

**Written by Christina Amphlett and Mark McEntee**

© EMI Music Publishing Australia Pty Limited

**Amyl and The Sniffers performing 'Jerkin', *Cartoon  
Darkness World Tour*, Sidney Myer Music Bowl, Melbourne,  
2025**

**Directed by James Gorter**

**Written by Amy Taylor, Declan Mehrstens and Bryce Wilson**

Courtesy of Amyl and The Sniffers

**Running time: approximately 3 minutes**

**Outfit worn by Amy Taylor for the *Cartoon Darkness World Tour*, Sidney Myer Music Bowl, Melbourne, 2025**

From working at a supermarket in Mullumbimby, Amy Taylor (born 1996) has reached global fame as the lead singer of Amyl and The Sniffers. Influenced by performers from AC/DC to Dolly Parton, Taylor is a force in the modern punk revival. Her explicit lyrics champion female agency and criticise world leaders while her acerbic Australian humour and fierce sensibilities have garnered a cult following. Made from whoopee cushions, this ensemble embodies her tongue-in-cheek humour and originality.

**Two-piece designed by Andie Wheeler (Nevada Clothing)**

On loan from Amy Taylor

## **Costume worn by Meow Meow in *Meow Meow's Pandemonium*, London, 2016**

Meow Meow (ageless, global) destabilises the traditional conventions of the seductress vamp in her portrayal of the 'post-postmodern diva'. Her powerhouse voice, comic genius, huge heart and relentless intellect have seen her sell out New York's Carnegie Hall. Her unique theatre and orchestral creations have been staged at iconic venues like the Hollywood Bowl, London's Royal Albert Hall, the Sydney Opera House and the Berlin Philharmonie. Meow Meow's award-winning original works have been commissioned by David Bowie, Mikhail Baryshnikov and Pina Bausch and major international arts festivals among others. This costume is inspired by performers Mata Hari, Maud Allan and the Salomé dancers of the 1900s, Sarah Bernhardt, Cléo de Mérode, and the American ecdysiast of the 1930s to '60s Gypsy Rose Lee. Meow Meow took inspiration from Orry-Kelly's designs for the 1962 film version of *Gypsy* and the musical based on *Gypsy's* memoirs.

**Original design by Liz Roberts, reworked by Amanda Hitten and in this iteration by Isaac Lummis and studio (AUS). Fabric found in Shanghai by Meow Meow, embellishments in Paris**

**and London antique markets. Feather adornment Andrea Lauer (NYC). Bloomers from Brecht's Women 1996.**

On loan from Meow Meow

**Artificial roses and cigarettes used by Meow Meow in performance**

On loan from Meow Meow

**(Image)**

**Meow Meow, 2024**

Photograph by Karl Giant

Courtesy of Meow Meow

**Gown worn by Dame Edna Everage, *Royal Variety Performance*, The London Palladium, 2013**

Created by Barry Humphries (1934–2023), Edna Everage rose from humble beginnings as the suburban housewife from Moonee Ponds to self-proclaimed Damehood. Her ability to parody those she professed to admire saw her rub shoulders with the world's biggest stars and adored by generations of fans worldwide. Dame Edna's comic wardrobe and trademark spectacles have contributed to her mega-stardom. She wore this gown to take a seat in the Royal Box next to the now King Charles III and Queen Consort Camilla Parker Bowles.

**Designed by Stephen Adnitt**

Gift of Krystyna Campbell-Pretty, 2025. Pending donation through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program.

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

## **Spectacles worn by Dame Edna Everage, c.1990s**

### **Designed by David Cox**

Gift of Krystyna Campbell-Pretty, 2025. Pending donation through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program.

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

## **Costume worn by Reuben Kaye in *The Butch is Back*, 2021**

Cabaret star and drag artist Reuben Kaye (born 1984) is renowned for his politically charged and confrontational performances.

Kaye's quick wit, impressive vocal range, and commanding stage presence have seen him win multiple awards and sell out shows at local and international festivals. Weaving deeply personal stories with unfiltered views, he has led a new age of performers that use the power of the stage and social media to celebrate queer culture and generate political change.

### **Skirt designed by Mister Frockhard (Tristan Seebohm)**

### **Suit designed by Kinglsey Hall**

Gift of Reuben Kaye, 2025

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**Horsetail microphone accessory used by Reuben Kaye,  
2021**

Gift of Reuben Kaye, 2025

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**(Moving image and audio track via headphones  
video contains strong language and adult themes)**

**Reuben Kaye performing in *The Butch is Back*, Malthouse  
Theatre, Melbourne, 2022**

**Directed by Eva Otsing**

**Musical direction and arrangements by Shanon D Whitelock**

Courtesy of Reuben Kaye

**Dame Edna Everage at the *Royal Variety Performance*,  
London Palladium, 2013**

Courtesy of ITV Archive

**Meow Meow performing in *Meow Meow's Pandemonium*  
with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, Royal Festival  
Hall, 2016**

Courtesy of Meow Meow

**Clip from *In the Company of Actors* featuring Cate Blanchett, Robyn Nevin and Hugo Weaving, 2007**

**Directed by Ian Darling**

Produced by Shark Island Productions

Courtesy of Shark Island Institute

**Tina Arena interviewed by Ellen Fanning on 7:30, 2018**

Courtesy of Australian Broadcasting Corporation Library Sales

**Tina Arena performing 'Buenos Aires' as Eva Perón in *Evita*, Opera Australia and John Frost in association with David Ian Productions, 2018**

Courtesy of Opera Australia

**Written by Lloyd-Webber/Rice**

Courtesy of Universal Music Publishing Pty Ltd

**Running time: approximately 9 minutes**

# Embodying the Diva

Australian audiences have connected with powerful female characters since the visiting international acts of the late 19th century. The Australian tour of the ‘divine’ French actress Sarah Bernhardt created a benchmark for the stage through her extraordinary skill to both transform classic heroines and debut captivating lead roles.

Imported musicals and plays provided opportunities for local artists to shine in roles made famous by leading ladies on Broadway and in the West End. Australian performers channel their unique energy and versatility to portray beloved characters, becoming drawcards for audiences by bringing a fresh perspective and voice to the stage.

Today, these Australian divas have solidified their place on the local and international stage. They capture and personify multifaceted female characters and reclaim treasured roles as their own.

[return to CONTENTS](#)

**Costume worn by Tina Arena as Eva Perón in *Evita*, Opera Australia, John Frost and David Ian Productions, 2018**

Tina Arena (born 1967) is one of Australia's highest-selling artists. Since emerging in the 1970s as child star 'Tiny Tina', she has made history as the first Australian female artist to win both Song and Album of the Year at the ARIA Music Awards in 1995. Arena portrayed Eva Perón in the Australian production of the musical *Evita*, embodying the legendary diva's ascent from poverty to become the First Lady of Argentina. Her passionate vocals coalesced with Perón's ambition to create a transformative performance.

**Designed by Timothy O'Brien**

Gift of The Gordon Frost Organisation and Opera Australia, 2020

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**Tina Arena as Eva Perón in *Evita*, Opera Australia, John Frost and David Ian Productions, 2018**

**Photograph by Jeff Busby**

Courtesy of Jeff Busby and Opera Australia

**Costume worn by Cate Blanchett in the title role of *Hedda Gabler*, Sydney Theatre Company, 2004**

Cate Blanchett (born 1969) appeared in her first major role in the Sydney Theatre Company (STC) production of *Oleanna* in 1993. Her breakthrough on screen was as a young Queen Elizabeth I in *Elizabeth*, which won her a Golden Globe Award for Best Actress. Blanchett is praised for her ability to transform into multifaceted characters such as Hedda Gabler, who rejects the societal expectations of women in 19th-century bourgeois society. Blanchett and her husband Andrew Upton were co-artistic directors of STC from 2008 to 2013 which extended her creativity behind the scenes.

**Designed by Kristian Fredrikson**

On loan from Sydney Theatre Company

(Image)

**Cate Blanchett performing in the title role of *Hedda Gabler*, Sydney Theatre Company, 2004**

Photograph by Dean Lewins/AAP Image

## Defining the Australian Diva

Down to earth and self-assured, the Australian diva has been defined by a generosity of spirit that has fostered new talent and forged strong connections with audiences throughout our performing arts history.

Since the early 20th century local audiences have welcomed the return of triumphant Australian opera singers, becoming ever more discerning with increased exposure. A tradition of encouragement and mentorship ensured the next generation of singers benefitted from the experience of seasoned performers. This support also led to the formation of professional companies that facilitated the career paths of emerging artists.

From the broad appeal of popular entertainment to the heights of grand opera, the bond between performer and audience has been a life force for the Australian diva. While regularly elevated to ‘legendary’ status by an adoring public, the Australian diva is also expected to retain a level of authenticity that keeps them famously grounded.

[return to CONTENTS](#)

## **Costume worn by Emma Matthews as Almirena in *Rinaldo*, Opera Australia, 1999**

Soprano Emma Matthews (born 1970) joined Opera Australia in 1993 and rose quickly through the ranks. Known for her star quality and ability to connect with audiences, Matthews has often been compared to Dame Joan Sutherland and has performed roles made famous by the diva to great acclaim. Matthews' portrayal of Almirena required a pure vocal sound in keeping with the angelic qualities of the role. Learning how to manoeuvre the expansive train of her costume required special attention during rehearsals and a level of control to match the serenity of the performance.

**Designed by Michael Wilkinson**

Purchased with funds donated by Jeremy Vincent, 2017

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

(Image)

Emma Matthews as Almirena in *Rinaldo*, Opera Australia, 1999

Photograph by Jeff Busby

Courtesy of Jeff Busby

(Moving image and audio track)

Joan Sutherland performing the 'Mad Scene' in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, The Metropolitan Opera, 1982

© 1982 provided by The Metropolitan Opera. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

**Running time: 4 minutes**

(Image)

Joan Sutherland in the title role of *Norma*, The Australian Opera, 1985

Photograph by Branco Gaica

Gift of Opera Australia, 2019

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**Nightgown worn by Joan Sutherland in the title role of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, The Australian Opera, 1980**

Dame Joan Sutherland (1926–2010) rose to international stardom after a triumphant performance as Lucia di Lammermoor at Covent Garden in 1959 and became known as ‘La Stupenda’. Sutherland was renowned for her interpretation of the notoriously difficult mad scene, which she performed during highly anticipated appearances at home and abroad throughout her career. Famously down to earth and collaborative, Sutherland worked closely with designers to add depth to her performance.

**Designed by Michael Stennett**

Gift of Opera Australia, 2019

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

[\(Image\)](#)

**Gertrude Johnson as The Queen of the Night in *The Magic Flute*, 1922**

**Photograph by Vaughan and Freeman**

Gift of the Australian National Memorial Theatre Ltd, 1988

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**Costume worn by Gertrude Johnson as the Queen of the Night in *The Magic Flute*, British National Opera Company, 1922**

Gertrude Johnson (1894–1973) received career guidance from Dame Nellie Melba before moving to London in 1921 where she joined the British National Opera Company. She made her Covent Garden debut as the Queen of the Night in *The Magic Flute* in 1922 and performed the role for the first radio broadcast of a live opera transmitted by the BBC in 1923. Johnson returned to Australia in 1935 and established the Australian National Theatre Movement to provide work and training in opera, ballet, and drama for emerging artists.

**Designer unknown**

Gift of the Australian National Memorial Theatre, 1979

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

## **Robe worn by Nellie Melba as Desdemona in *Otello*, c.1900**

Melbourne's own Dame Nellie Melba (1861–1931) made her professional debut in 1887 at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels. She performed in opera houses around the world, mixing with royalty and the rich and famous. While still at the height of her career, Melba chose the Yarra Valley's Coldstream as the location for her Australian residence. Her death in 1931 made international headlines and prompted nationwide mourning. Throughout her career Melba worked with Parisian couturier Jean-Philippe Worth which reflected her diva status and worldly appeal.

### **Designed by Jean-Philippe Worth**

Conserved by Vicki Car, Barbara van Ernst Conservation Intern,  
2025

Gift of Pamela, Lady Vestey, 1977

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**Headdress worn by Nellie Melba as Desdemona in *Otello*,  
c.1924**

**Designer unknown**

Gift of Pamela, Lady Vestey, 1977

Australian Performing Arts Collection,

Arts Centre Melbourne

**Nellie Melba, c.1902**

**Photograph by H. Walter Barnett**

Transferred from the Dennis Wolanski Library, Sydney Opera  
House, 1997

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

## **Dress worn by Gladys Moncrieff in *Many Happy Returns*, Tivoli Circuit, 1959**

Affectionately known as 'Our Glad', Gladys Moncrieff (1892–1976) was one of the highest-paid performers in Australia. Her big break came in 1921 when she played Teresa in *Maid of the Mountains*. Moncrieff's star power was evident through her adoring fans, affectionately called the Gallery Girls, who presented her with flowers at homecomings, stage doors or by throwing them on stage during performances. In 1959, audiences witnessed Moncrieff in her last stage role wearing this gown in Harry Wren's production of *Many Happy Returns*.

### **Designed by Lucele**

Gift of Elsie Wilson, 1978

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

[\(Image\)](#)

### **Gladys Moncrieff, c.1935**

Photographer unknown

Transferred from the Dennis Wolanski Library, Sydney Opera House, 1997

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**Buckles worn by Nellie Stewart as Nell Gwynne in *Sweet Nell of Old Drury*, c.1902–31**

Nellie Stewart (1858–1931) was one of the most adored Australian performers of her time. Known for her beauty, intelligence, and versatility, Stewart rose to fame in the 1880s performing in Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, lavish musicals, and pantomimes. Stewart's celebrity and adoration extended beyond the stage. Her stylish outfits were often detailed in the press, and devoted fans collected photographs that showed her radiant image. In her early forties, Stewart debuted her signature role of Nell Gwynne in *Sweet Nell of Old Drury*, which she performed regularly over the next three decades.

Gift of Michael Lynton, 1998

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**Cabinet Card of Nellie Stewart as Nell Gwynne in *Sweet Nell of Old Drury*, 1902**

**Photograph by Talma Studios**

Gift of Geoff Harman, 2025

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**(Image)**

**Nellie Stewart as Prince Charming in *Cinderella*, 1901**

Photograph by Talma Studios

Gift of Betty Petherbridge and Family, 1999

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**Star Trail**

**(Kids' Label)**

Nellie Stewart played the role of Prince Charming in the pantomime *Cinderella* in 1901.

Did you know that back in the 1800s and early 1900s, the young male lead role (called the principal boy) was traditionally played by a woman dressed in boy's clothes?

And more than 200 years earlier, in the time of William Shakespeare, the roles of women were only played by young men and boys.

# Act I: Creating the Diva

Compliment or criticism, aspiration, or condemnation, today the word ‘diva’ holds a myriad of meanings. Taken from the Latin for ‘goddess’, the term became widely used in the 19th century to describe an exceptional female opera singer. But over the years, the definition of a diva has expanded, been subverted, tarnished and, ultimately, embraced.

Spanning opera, film, music and the stage, DIVA celebrates how trailblazing artists, regardless of gender, have challenged the status quo and pushed the boundaries of their art to unapologetically own their diva crown. Divided into two acts, creation and reclamation, the exhibition puts these iconic performers centre stage, exploring how the word has been redefined and celebrating the people that embody it.

In Act I, we meet the original divas, those divinely talented opera singers of the 19th century, and the generations they inspired. Against a backdrop of changing attitudes to femininity, power and creativity, these leading ladies conquered the stage and the screen, campaigning for equality along the way. Although worshipped by their adoring fans, they also encountered criticism

and disdain for daring to step outside the box. The multifaceted diva was born.

## The Rise of the Diva

Opera was all the rage across Europe and America in the 1830s. Its leading female stars – known as prima donnas or ‘first ladies’ – attracted a large and adoring fan base, who worshipped their exceptional, otherworldly voices.

Composers created powerful roles for these talented singers, offering them extraordinary music and complex characters worthy of their creativity and ambition. The operas they starred in often told the stories of goddesses from classical mythology, and so the term ‘diva’ began to be associated with divine heroines. The cult of the diva had emerged.

Success, fame and wealth gave these artists independence and status unparalleled at the time by any other profession available to women. But as the century progressed, divas had to negotiate a rapidly changing world where women’s rights and new technology were shifting perceptions of female performers, both on stage and in society.

[return to CONTENTS](#)

(Image)

## **Lyda Borelli**

Photograph by Mario Nunes Vais

Courtesy of Italian Ministry of Culture, ICCD-GFN Nunes Vais  
Collection

### **Sculpting the diva**

For centuries, sculptors looked to the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece and Rome for inspiration. By the 19th century, the same reverence was given to exceptional female opera singers. French writer and critic Théophile Gautier was among the first to describe the opera singer as a 'diva'. For him, a diva's talent was divinely bestowed, transforming the woman into a goddess. Artists used representations of classical goddesses as models when depicting these performers, reinforcing this association. But these images removed the diva's sense of self and agency, trapping them in stone, both elevated and detached from society.

### **Bust of Juno, 1850**

#### **Made by Copeland & Co., Stoke-on-Trent**

Porcelain

V&A: 2713-1856

## **Bust of Adelina Patti, 1869**

**Made by Ludovic Durand Marble**

ROH Collections, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

## **Giuditta Pasta as Norma in Bellini's *Norma*, about 1831**

The Italian soprano Giuditta Pasta (1797–1865) played a significant role in defining the diva. Her voice suited the bel canto (Italian for 'beautiful song') style of opera, which was defined by vocal dexterity, mastery of tone and a dramatic interpretation. As one of the most famous singers of the 19th century, Pasta performed across Europe. She was known for her collaborations with the composer Vincenzo Bellini who created the title role of his opera *Norma* with her exceptional voice in mind.

## **Unknown artist**

Pastel on paper

Acquired with the support of the Friends of the V&A

V&A: S.1692-2014

## Goddesses on Stage

The late 19th-century fascination with divas saw them revered as goddesses on stage. But off stage, a feeling of unease was brewing regarding feminine creative power and freedom.

Successful opera singers were able to transcend the boundaries of gender and class because they were financially independent, but they were prevented from being part of respectable society.

Many Victorians viewed women who pursued careers on stage as ‘independent, defiant, seductive, renegade, marginally feminine and de-classed’. Still, these early opera stars were trailblazers who fought against the stigma attached to them, took on complex and powerful roles, and worked to elevate their position and public image through their art.

## **‘Twenty Years a Diva’ from the *Illustrated London News*, 27 June 1908**

This page commemorates the Australian soprano Nellie Melba’s (1861–1931) appearance at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, over 20 consecutive seasons. Melba’s star power is apparent in that fact that she had her own permanent, exclusive dressing room at the opera house. Gifted with business acumen, Melba secured copyright on her stage name (derived from her hometown of Melbourne) and was unusually forceful in negotiating terms for her appearances.

Reproduction of magazine page

## **Nellie Melba broadcasting from Chelmsford, 1922**

Melba’s international career spanned a period of great technological change. In 1920, she became the first singer to broadcast live on the radio for the Italian communication pioneer, Guglielmo Marconi, from his factory in Chelmsford, Essex. Embracing the potential of this new media, her voice was heard by thousands, transporting opera beyond the opera house and into the world.

## **Unknown photographer**

Reproduction of photograph

## **Maria Malibran as Desdemona in Rossini's *Othello*, 1830**

The Spanish diva Maria Malibran (1808–36) led a dramatic, unconventional life, forging her own artistic and financial independence, and captivating audiences with her originality of expression. Malibran inspired some of opera's greatest composers and later acted as a muse to Maria Callas. Tragically, Malibran's pioneering career was cut short following a fatal horse-riding accident. Here she is painted as Desdemona from Rossini's *Othello*, draped in goddess-like clothing and raising her eyes heavenwards.

## **Engraved by Charles Turner after Henri Decaisne Print**

ROH Collection, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

## **Maria Malibran as Rosina in Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, 1825**

The composer Gioachino Rossini described Maria Malibran as a musical genius with 'a superior mind, breadth of knowledge and unimaginable fieriness of temperament'. Malibran's performance as Rosina at the King's Theatre in London launched her short but impactful career. This sketch of the singer, head meekly bowed, highlights how even the most successful divas could be minimised by the male gaze.

### **Portrait by Alfred Edward Chalon**

Ink and watercolour on paper

V&A: E.3327-1922

## **Playbill for *Giulietta e Romeo* at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, 4 June 1830**

From the 17th century, women were allowed to perform on stage, regularly playing young male roles as their voices were higher pitched. Malibran is listed on this playbill in the role of Romeo in Nicola Vaccai's opera. When performing Bellini's version in 1832,

Malibran substituted the next to last scene with the Vaccai version she preferred, a reflection of her status and creative power

**Printed by W. Reynolds**

Ink on paper

ROH Collections, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

**Jenny Lind as a marble bust, about 1888**

Jenny Lind was mythologised as a model of piety, domesticity and purity, but as a consequence, her personality was overshadowed. Here her beauty has been idealised in classical form. Victorian society often reinforced this goddess-like image in a quest for respectability. Media stories projected an elevated image of the diva, rather than celebrating her individuality and creativity.

**Engraved by W. Roffe**

Ink on paper

Gabrielle Enthoven Collection

V&A: S.3415-2013

## **Hand-coloured prints of Jenny Lind, mid-19th Century**

In 1850 Lind embarked on a year-long performance tour of North America following several successful European outings. Lind negotiated contract terms and appearance fees with showman P.T. Barnum, who arranged the tour. Lasting nine months, it was an unprecedented success, making Lind and Barnum enormous sums of money. Lind was able to establish several musical academies for girls in her native Sweden with the proceeds.

Ink on paper

V&A: S.1187-2013 and S.1191-2013

## **Image from a song sheet cover depicting Jenny Lind as Maria in *La Fille du Régiment*, ca. 1847**

The prima donna Jenny Lind (1820–87) had her debut London season in 1847, taking the city by storm. Known as the ‘Swedish Nightingale’, she was heralded as an extraordinary talent. At her debut performance Lind allegedly had to give two encores for an aria because the conductor, transported by her voice, dropped his baton and applauded along with the audience. Queen Victoria

herself was an admirer, attending a number of Lind's premier performances. After seeing her performance as Maria, the Queen remarked in her journal that Lind had 'had a great triumph, acting and singing exquisitely'.

Chromolithograph

Ink on paper

V&A: S.3305-2009

**Jenny Lind, about 1845–70**

**Drawn by Daniel Maclise**

Pencil on paper

Forster Bequest

V&A: F.88: 363

**Travel writing box belonging to Jenny Lind, about 1847**

**Made by Jennens & Bettridge**

Papier maché box with painted scenes

V&A: S.276-1987

## **Jug depicting Jenny Lind, about 1847**

As Jenny Lind fever swept Britain, specially commissioned items and artworks collected by her fans reflected the diva's celebrity status and fame. The opera star's image was disseminated across a countless range of products, including this commemorative jug.

**Made by J & M.P. Bell & Co.**

Transfer-printed earthenware

Acquired with the support of the Friends of the V&A

V&A: S.1654-2014

## **Shoes worn by Adelina Patti in *La Traviata* and *La Sonnambula*, about 1860–1890**

Silk, diamanté, sequin, lace, suede

ROH Collections, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

ROH/TUR/COS/0005764

## **Adelina Patti performing at the Royal Albert Hall, 1901**

Here, Adelina Patti is shown captivating a vast audience at London's Royal Albert Hall. The media's fascination with Patti included stories that delved into everything from her beauty secrets to contracts. On her US tour, the Los Angeles Times divulged that 'the diva was paid \$5000 to sing two songs and received a large allowance and a private car for her own exclusive use'.

## **Painted by Allan Stewart, probably for The Illustrated London News**

Paint on drawing board

Given by Sir William Ingram

V&A: S.390-2011

## **Cartes-de-visite of Adelina Patti, about 1870–1900**

### **Unknown photographer**

Albumen, carbon print

Bequeathed by Guy Little

V&A: S.138:361-2007, 138:363-2007, S.138:359-2007,  
S.138:351-2007, S.138:368-2007 and S.138:352-2007

**Music sheet cover for *La Diva* quadrille featuring Adelina Patti, about 1865–70**

In 1883, the year of the first published use of the term ‘diva’ to refer to a distinguished female singer recorded by the Oxford English Dictionary, Adelina Patti (1843–1919) was in her prime. This Spanish-born Italian opera singer travelled across America and was revered throughout Europe. Using her independent wealth, Patti was able to commission Franz Winterhalter, one of Europe’s most admired artists, to paint her portrait. The artist also painted European queens, empresses and princesses.

**Printed by H. Davison, London**

Ink on paper

ROH Collections, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

## Fame and Wealth

Opera singers like Jenny Lind and Adelina Patti were worshipped by admirers across Europe and America. Their diva status gave them financial independence and agency at a time when most women struggled in the face of confining patriarchal expectations of them as solely fulfilling the roles of wives and mothers. Patti, who at the height of her fame was the most recognised woman in Britain after Queen Victoria, was an astute businesswoman who negotiated her own contracts. Lind was an international star who was able to donate large sums of her wealth to charity. Both divas benefited from the emerging technology of photography, which carried their images far and wide.

## Cartes-de-visite

Patented in 1854, these small photographic portraits became a popular way to spread images of celebrities. Performers could promote their repertoire, appearing in costume as favourite characters. Devoted fans would collect and trade photos of their most-beloved artists such as Adelina Patti, Jenny Lind, Ellen Terry, Edith Craig, Marie Lloyd, Vesta Tilley, Eleonora Duse and Sarah Bernhardt.

Bequeathed by Guy Little

V&A: S.133:453, 524, 542-2007; S.137:27, 49,  
106-2007; S.138:61, 66, 317, 351-2007; S.140:604,  
608-2007; S.146:593, 597, 608, 618-2007

**Running time: approximately 2 minutes**

Did you know that photography has been around for nearly 200 years?

In the 1800s, people used to leave calling cards if nobody was home when they visited, and it became very popular to include a photograph of yourself on these 'carte de visites'.

**Can you imagine leaving a picture of yourself if your friend wasn't at home?**

# Victorian Drama Queens

In the Victorian era, theatre was largely a male domain. The few, exceptional women who managed to break through on and off stage held a unique position within society. At a time when the majority of women were barred from pursuing an education or occupation, being a performer offered a chance to carve out independence and power. And, despite being denied the same rights and status afforded to men, some divas were able to use the position earned through their talents to challenge traditional Victorian perceptions of femininity and bring about social and political change.

Victorian theatre stars, the divas of the spoken word, found their voices and artistic freedom through acting, creating bold female characters on stage. Outside the theatre, in the music halls, female performers from the working classes played up to the male gaze but also subverted it, overcoming misogyny and sexism to advocate for workers' rights. They engaged in industrial action, contributing to the wider fight for women's equality and freedom.

[return to CONTENTS](#)

## Actresses for Change

The stage provided divas with a platform to assert their independence and gain the power of celebrity. Ellen Terry, the Victorian ‘Queen of Drama’, was celebrated for her interpretations of Shakespeare’s strong female roles, which inspired a huge fan base. Off stage, her work with the Actresses’ Franchise League paved the way for women’s rights. The music hall star Marie Lloyd, adored for her cheeky sense of humour, threw her popularity behind causes like the 1907 music hall strike, asserting that ‘We stars can dictate our own terms. We are fighting not for ourselves, but for the poorer members of the profession’.

## Engagement and salary book for Oxford Music Hall, London 1908–18

As seen here, Marie Lloyd’s salaries easily eclipsed those of her peers, sometimes ten times the amount. A sign of her enduring public popularity, she was guaranteed to draw a crowd, which gave her the leverage to demand higher wages. On her death, over 100,000 people gathered in London to watch her funeral

procession. The poet T.S. Eliot called Lloyd's death a 'significant moment in English history'.

### **Made by Oxford Music Hall**

Ink on paper

V&A: S.57-1988

### **Kaftan from Ellen Terry's personal wardrobe, ca.1910**

Dame Ellen Terry (1847–1928) is regarded as one of the greatest actors of the British stage. Epitomising the Victorian beauty ideal, she was a muse of the Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic movements. Portraits and other imagery boosted Terry's celebrity and placed her within the world of fine art, with all the associations of respectability that it carried. This helped to legitimise a stage career that for many was still an unacceptable occupation for a morally upstanding woman.

Batik-print on silk

V&A: S.1415-1984

## **Gown worn by Eleonora Duse for recital performances, about 1905**

The Italian actor Eleonora Duse (1858–1924) was born into a theatrical family and began performing aged four. Enigmatic and private off stage, Duse nonetheless gained international popularity and legions of adoring fans through her commitment to a naturalistic acting style, which she called ‘eliminating the self’. Duse limited the use of theatrical practices like make-up and elaborate costumes, instead favouring immersive emotional honesty. Subversive at the time, this technique would usher in a new modernist acting style.

### **Unknown maker**

Lawn cotton, lace

V&A: S.1393

## **Silver plated filigree necklace worn by Sarah Bernhardt, about 1899**

Bernhardt's performances were celebrated for their expressiveness, intensity and flamboyance. She was often cast to play complex leads – Oscar Wilde wrote his play *Salomé* especially for her, although British censors banned the production before she could perform in it. She performed many male roles throughout her career and reputedly wore this necklace to play Hamlet in 1899. In this same year, Bernhardt took on the management of a theatre she renamed after herself, remaining there until her death in 1923.

### **Unknown maker**

Silver plated filigree, paste stones

V&A: S.414-1984

## Power of the Stage

Like opera divas performing tragic roles, stage divas like Sarah Bernhardt could communicate intense emotion through their dramatic interpretation of strong characters. Over her stellar career, Bernhardt challenged gender boundaries and took on powerful stage roles intended for both men and women, from Hamlet to Joan of Arc. Her artistic excellence was recognised throughout Europe and across the Atlantic. Her fame provided her with the agency to create and define her own ‘divine’ image through costumes and art, reflecting and encouraging the public’s fascination with the diva.

## Sarah Bernhardt as Medea (‘Médée’), 1890s

The French actor, producer and theatre manager Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923) rose to become one of the most famous women on stage. ‘The Divine Sarah’, as she was known, captivated audiences with her distinctive voice and unconventional personality. Bernhardt’s appearance was undoubtedly part of her appeal. Famously tall and thin, with uncontrollably curly hair, her look

accentuated the air of mystique she embodied – romantic, untamed and otherworldly. Touring internationally, by her death Bernhardt was undoubtedly an early global superstar.

**Unknown maker**

Ink on paper

Harry Beard Collection

V&A: S.3620-2009

**Bernhardt in her dressing room, 21 July 1894**

**Drawing by Charles Paul Renouard, published by The Graphic**

Ink and paper

Harry Beard Collection

V&A: S.3611-2009

## **The Daily Herald's poster on the death of Sarah Bernhardt, 23 March 1923**

Bernhardt was arguably one of the first modern celebrities to understand and harness the cult of celebrity. She made the most of her colourful private life, encouraging a mystique that entranced the media and her fans. Openly bisexual, she had many famous lovers, owned a menagerie of wild animals and would travel with her own coffin that she reportedly slept in. On the day of her funeral, over a million people lined the streets of Paris to pay their respects. Her extraordinary talent inspired the likes of later divas like Marilyn Monroe and Barbra Streisand.

Ink on paper

V&A: S.4966-1995

## **Poster for *Jeanne d’Arc* with Sarah Bernhardt, 1890**

Bernhardt commissioned this poster to advertise her stage appearance as Joan of Arc. She had an instinct for self-promotion, harnessing new lithograph printing technology to share her own image and publicise her theatrical ventures. She became inextricably linked with the Art Nouveau style through her work with the illustrator and poster designer Grasset and his associate Alphonse Mucha.

### **Designed by Eugène Grasset**

Colour lithograph on paper

V&A: E.190-1921

## **Poster supporting the Music Hall Strike, 1907**

Marie Lloyd lent her support to a series of strikes that were organised to fight increasingly poor working conditions and low wages for her fellow music hall performers. Despite wider industry backlash and personal career repercussions, Lloyd purposefully used her celebrity to finance the movement and raise public awareness of the struggle.

**Printed by Co-operative Printing Society, published by J.B. Williams**

Paper and ink

Gabrielle Enthoven Collection

V&A: S.1603-2012

### **‘The End of the Hunger Strike’, about 1910**

At the turn of the century, the fight for women’s right to vote, known as the women’s suffrage movement, encountered opposition and hostility. This poster makes light of the suffering of imprisoned suffragettes on hunger strike to advertise Plasmon’s porridge oats. Despite the legitimacy of their cause, suffragettes were derided as unfeminine fanatics, embittered troublemakers and disturbers of the peace.

**Designed by Anita Reed, printed by Raphael Tuck & Sons Ltd.**

Reproduction of poster

Given by Ogilvy Benson

## **Music for ‘You Can’t Stop a Girl from Thinking’ sung by Marie Lloyd, 1897**

Marie Lloyd (1870–1922) was a music hall entertainer. Born in east London, she played to predominantly working-class audiences. Her act was bawdiness dressed as sweetness, loaded with innuendo and often delivered with a knowing wink. Although incredibly popular with audiences, alongside her success, Lloyd’s risqué lyrics and provocative performances meant she spent her career defending herself against claims of indecency from the patriarchal upper class, censors and political groups.

### **Song sheet published by Francis, Day and Hunter**

Ink and paper

V&A: S.75:1989

## **Music for ‘The German Prince’ sung by Vesta Tilley, 1896**

Vesta Tilley (1864–1952) was one of Britain’s leading male impersonators, performing in music halls as characters like the upper-class dandy ‘Burlington Bertie’. At the time, it was shocking for women to be seen wearing trousers, let alone embodying male

characters. Her act, which was popular but also quietly subversive, pushed the limits of what was possible for women through entertainment. By the 1890s she was Britain's highest earning woman.

**Song sheet designed by Harry G. Banks, published by Francis, Day and Hunter**

Chromolithograph

Harry R. Beard Collection, given by Isobel Beard

V&A: S.423-2009

**Eleonora Duse, 1924**

Eleanore Duse's international profile rose following successful tours of Europe and South America. In 1885 she formed her own theatre company, the Drama Company of the City of Rome, where she took on the roles of actor, manager and director – positions of power that were exceptional territory for a woman at this time. Internationally revered, her fans included Charlie Chaplin and James Joyce.

**Drawn by Rosina Matovani Gutti**

Pastel on paper

V&A: S.533-2018

**Page from *Illustrated London News* titled 'Miss Ellen Terry's Jubilee – The Great Actress in Famous Roles', 1906**

Ink on paper

V&A: 38041021503354

**Page from *The Sketch* titled 'The Greatest Actress of Her Generation', 1856**

Ink on paper

V&A: 38041021503404

**Print of Ellen Terry as Mistress Page in 'The Merry Wives of Windsor', ca.1913**

**Original illustration by Pamela Coleman Smith (1878-1951)**

V&A: 38041021504071

## **Ellen Terry's 'Triumphant Women' speech book, 1911**

Later in her progressive career, Terry turned to touring and lecturing, often favouring the subject of Shakespeare's female characters. She would carry two books to speak from, both featuring heavy annotation and edited thoughts. The title of this book is 'Some of Shakespeare's Heroines / The Triumphant Women'. The other volume concentrated on Shakespeare's 'Pathetic' women, from his tragedies.

### **Unknown printer and publisher**

Reproduction of book page

© National Trust Images

## Dancers and Showgirls

As the 20th century dawned, a new generation of dancing divas took the world by storm. A fresh taste for spectacle, access to new artistic spaces and the shifting perception of women in society enabled female performers to reach new heights of star power and harness their art to express changing perspectives and ambitions. From ballet to burlesque, intoxicating forms of dance and entertainment gave select performers the agency to carve out independent careers as dancers, showgirls and vaudeville stars.

Working within the confines of patriarchal societies, dancing divas often received less status and respect than other performers. Undeterred, artists like Isadora Duncan fought for their desire to empower women through their pioneering work. By contrast, showgirls performing anonymously under the scrutiny of the male gaze were rarely allowed such creative freedom, until the arrival of game-changing performers like Josephine Baker. She harnessed her popularity to battle against racism and sexism, becoming an inspiration for future generations.

[return to CONTENTS](#)

## The Liberating Body

Artists like Isadora Duncan and Loïe Fuller added new perspective to the idea of the diva, as they used their bodies as a medium for expression. For them, dance was a way of conveying freedom which challenged public perceptions of the art form. Fuller harnessed the character of Salomé and her infamous Dance of the Seven Veils as a way to experiment with new choreography and communicate her artistic and sexual power. For Duncan, the stage was a space for women to discover their sense of creative self. She went on to establish a dance school that ‘would not be a school of dance, but a school of life’.

### **Loïe Fuller’s debut performance at the Folies-Bergère, 1893**

The visionary American performer Loïe Fuller (1862–1928) enthralled audiences with her fluid movements. Her inventive use of flowing costumes and stage lighting created spectacular illusions and caused a sensation in avant-garde Paris and beyond. Her performance as Salomé particularly electrified the role of the dancing diva and acted as a bridge to modern dance. Swirling

across the stage, Fuller captured the freedom of Salomé while claiming the character as her own.

**Made by Jules Chéret**

Colour lithograph

V&A: E.112-1921

**(Moving image)**

**Josephine Baker in *La Sirène des Tropiques* (1927)**

Directed by Henri Étievant and Mario Nalpas, France

© Lobster Films

**Running time: approximately 30 seconds**

## **Josephine Baker print, *Le Tumulte Noir* ('The Black Craze'), 1929**

As the first global Black superstar, Baker harnessed European audiences' fascination with 'exoticism' and non-western culture. Though such stereotypes are extremely offensive, Baker captivated fans through her creative and sexual power on stage. French artist, Paul Colin, Baker's one-time lover and life-long friend, captured Paris's jazz scene and this image evokes Baker's distinctive choreography. Following her success on stage, Baker starred in the film *La Sirène des Tropiques* in 1927. The film's colonial stereotypes and racialised Cinderella-inspired narrative is highly problematic today, but Baker delivered a charged, entertaining and enduring performance.

**Designed by Paul Colin**

Lithograph with pochoir colouring

V&A:38041800162273

***La Sirène des Tropiques* ('Siren of the Tropics') starring  
Josephine Baker, 1927**

**Made by Leon Clement & Co. Lithography**

Reproduction of chromolithograph poster

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

V&A: S.3611-2009

**Josephine Baker in military uniform, 1940s**

Josephine Baker (1906–75) first appeared onstage as a vaudeville dancer in New York. She arrived in Paris in the 1920s, taking the city by storm and fuelling its new obsession with Black culture. Baker channelled her power and popularity towards social and political causes. During the Second World War, she became a spy for the French Resistance, using her freedom of movement as an entertainer to ferry intelligence. Following the war, she provided a crucial voice in the fight for racial equality. In 2021, she became the first Black woman to be inducted into the Panthéon, France's mausoleum for celebrated national heroes.

Reproduction of photograph

## **Costume worn by Tamara Karsavina in 'La Cantinière', 1920s**

This costume is based on early 19th-century uniforms worn by cantinières, the women who served refreshments to French military regiments. Featuring trousers and an overskirt, it combines both traditional masculine and feminine elements while also allowing freedom of movement. By the 1900s ballet costumes were incorporating a range of modern silhouettes as alternatives to the traditional tutu. After settling in London in 1918, Karsavina played an instrumental role in the development of British ballet inspiring future generations with her dancing and coaching.

### **Designed by José de Zamora**

Silk, metal, braid, cord and muslin

Given by the Royal Academy of Dance

V&A: 1513-1982

## **Tamara Karsavina as Salomé, July 1913**

Prima ballerina Tamara Karsavina (1885–1978) trained at the Imperial Ballet in St Petersburg. From 1909 Karsavina regularly starred with the itinerant ballet company the Ballets Russes, soaring to international fame in the title role of Igor Stravinsky's *The Firebird*. The influence of the dance diva extended into wider society as Karsavina's bold, asymmetrical costume designed by Serge Sudeikin for Salomé became a talking point for fashionable London.

Reproduction of image from The Theatre Journal

## **Isadora Duncan dancing in Breslau, Poland (formerly Germany), 1905**

The American dancer Isadora Duncan (1877–1927) was a visionary artist, influencer and philosopher. Her pioneering choreography and free expression took inspiration from classical art and American athleticism, favouring fluid movement over traditional rigid ballet techniques. She believed that the 'free modern woman would be more beautiful and more glorious than all women of

past centuries'. Duncan danced a tribute to Sarah Bernhardt on the night of her death.

### **Painted by Edward Gordon Craig**

Watercolour and pencil on paper

Arnold Rood Collection of Edward Gordon Craig, given by  
Professor Arnold Rood

V&A: S.196-2008

### **Delphos dress, about 1920–23**

By the end of the 19th century, dress reformers protested against the tight lacing of corsets, believing a change in fashion could help shift the position women held in society. In stark contrast to the constraints of the complicated garments of Victorian fashion, Fortuny's innovative designs were inspired by Greek drapery and adapted to the shape of the body. Similar dresses were worn by the avant-garde dancer Isadora Duncan on and off stage echoing her strong sense of self, femininity and sexuality.

### **Designed by Henriette Nigrin for Mariano Fortuny**

Silk, amber beads

Given by Elfrida Thornycroft

V&A: T.22-1985

(Image)

## **Isadora Duncan dancing, about 1910-20**

Unknown artist

© Victoria and Albert Museum, London

## **Costume design for Bette Midler's NBC TV special 'Ol' Red Hair is Back', 1977**

Bette Midler (born 1945) is an icon in the world of entertainment. Inspired by her early life in Hawaii, the legendary designer Bob Mackie created a pearl string jewelled bikini for Midler to wear as she burst from an enormous clam shell in a TV special. Her outrageous and entertaining performance recalls the legacy of 1920s showgirl goddesses and playfully echoes Botticelli's painting *The Birth of Venus*. Mackie has worked with generations of divas to design phenomenal stage styles and performances.

**Design by Bob Mackie**

Watercolour and ink on paper

Bob Mackie Design Group, Ltd.

**Falbalas et Fanfreluches ('Frills and Flounces'),**

**Almanach des modes, 1924**

The French artist George Barbier designed fashionable stage costumes and sets for the Folies Bergère in Paris – the stage that launched Josephine Baker's career. His Art Deco aesthetic echoed the architecture of the theatre and defined the style of the 1920s showgirl. This illustration, with a classical goddess emerging from an oversized shell, has become a timeless showgirl trope.

**Illustrated by George Barbier**

Hand-coloured process engraving, ink on paper

V&A: E.614-1954

## **Costume worn by Kylie Minogue in the *Kylie Showgirl: The Greatest Hits* tour, 2005**

Kylie Minogue's tours are the ultimate platform for her thriving creative spirit. One of Kylie's most enduring theatrical personas is the showgirl, an identity she adopted to explore her own evolution as a performer for her *Greatest Hits* tour. Working with a range of designers, each act featured a different interpretation of the persona. John Galliano's blue feathered masterpiece was based on a Las Vegas showgirl and opened the concert in spectacular fashion.

### **Designed by John Galliano, Mr Pearl and Stephen Jones**

Gift of Kylie Minogue. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2006

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

### **Star Trail**

**(Kids' Label)**

Performers sometimes have to make very quick costume changes between acts.

Kylie had to change out of this costume so quickly that the lacing of her corset had to be cut with scissors.

**Can you imagine only having 30 seconds to change costume?**

### **Costume for Bette Midler's *The Showgirl Must Go On* Las Vegas residency, 2010**

Building on Baker's legacy of the showgirl diva, from 2008 to 2010 the actor, singer and entertainer Bette Midler performed 300 shows of *The Showgirl Must Go On* at Caesar's Palace, grossing \$72 million. Featuring showstopping renditions of Midler's greatest hits, the superstar, known as 'The Divine Miss M', performed in feathered headdresses and decked out in sequins.

#### **Designed by Bob Mackie**

Ostrich feathers and sequins

On loan from the Private Collection of Dr Chris and Angie Schneider

## **Showgirl costume worn at Murray's Cabaret Club, 1960s**

The showgirl archetype stemmed from the can-can dancers of late 19th-century Paris. Individual talent blurred into a chorus line of sexualised dancers performing in sync, with little opportunity for personal success. Future generations were able to reclaim the showgirl persona, away from the male gaze, for their own creativity and expression.

### **Unknown maker**

Silk velvet, wire, elastic, plastic, glass, wool felt (two piece costume); bugle beads, ostrich feathers, metal, cut-glass gems, elastic (headdress)

V&A: S.502-1985 and S.951-1984

## Silent Goddesses

As the silent film industry flourished, divas moved from the stage to the screen. These new roles had a huge impact on public perceptions of the diva, as early producers and directors constructed films around the personality and star quality of these performers. The role of the diva was central yet silent in this new art form which, largely controlled by men, often caricatured archetypes of femininity into broadbrush personas like vamp or sweetheart.

Despite having no voice on screen, trailblazing stars of this era shifted the perception of what a diva could be on and off stage. Speaking up against the unequal treatment they received and forging independent careers by taking up positions behind the camera as producers, costume designers and directors.

[return to CONTENTS](#)

## The Femme Fatale

Echoing the tragic heroines of opera, the first dramatic roles for the divas of early cinema were intense archetypes like the seductive femme fatale – a popular character for many stars. Lyda Borelli, one of the first Italian actors to make the transition from theatre to film, caught audiences' attention with her decadent, vampish persona. In Hollywood, Theda Bara took on the role of Cleopatra, shifting perceptions of the female body and demonstrating how a performer could take control of her own image and sexuality. But the femme fatale was relatively short-lived, as by the late 1920s Clara Bow's girlish 'it girl' had become the feminine ideal in cinema.

### **Portrait of Marlene Dietrich in *No Highway in the Sky*, 1951**

Arriving in America from Germany, Marlene Dietrich (1901–92) was known for her androgynous glamour. The bisexual diva was rumoured to be in the 'sewing circle' – a code for lesbian, bisexual or bi-curious women in Hollywood. Often cast in a femme fatale role, her louche swagger and magnetic sexual confidence were seen at the time as traditionally male behaviours, and Dietrich

experimented with gender-bending fashion on and off screen. Hers was a new expression of queer desire that subtly altered representations of women in film.

### **Photograph by Angus McBean**

Gelatin silver print

V&A: S.1581-2015

### **Lois Weber behind the camera, 1927**

The trailblazing actor and director Lois Weber (1897– 1939) was a defining presence of the silent movies era. A pioneer in Hollywood, she was the first American woman to run her own film studio and publicly campaigned against the typecasting of and limited opportunities for female film actors. An outspoken feminist, Weber's movies often centred on social and moral issues particularly relevant to women, such as social inequality, birth control and abortion.

### **Unknown photographer**

Bison Archives photographs collected by Marc Wanamaker,

Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

### **Greta Garbo in *Mata Hari*, 1931**

Enigmatic, celebrated and glamorous, the Swedish American actor Greta Garbo (1905–90) nonetheless loathed the Hollywood marketing machine. Her screen presence made her an iconic star almost despite herself. Often cast as the seductress – here she plays Mata Hari, the exotic dancer and First World War spy – Garbo soon tired of the predictability of her roles and retired from acting aged 36. Ironically, this only furthered her mystique. A line from one of her early films has now become part of her legend: ‘I want to be alone’.

### **Photograph by Clarence Sinclair Bull**

Gelatin silver print

V&A: THM/PHO/PEO//GARBO/1

## **Poster for *It*, starring Clara Bow, 1927**

Clara Bow's (1905–65) meteoric career began after winning a talent-spotting contest for budding film stars. In 1926 she signed a contract with Paramount Studios, who eagerly promoted her as the ultimate 'it girl', a carefree, vivacious and irresistible character. Bow's onscreen persona was mirrored by her 'live-for-the-moment' private life. Though audiences loved this behaviour, it meant she felt like she was never taken seriously as an artist.

She represented an aspirational, modern take on femininity that championed a rejection of the rigid moral values of the previous generation. Cropped hair and drop waists replaced corsets and bouffant styles. These were self-assured, liberated women who embraced the opportunities of a modern age.

### **Reproduction of poster**

Photograph by Herbert Dorfman/Corbis via Getty Images

## **Costume designed for Clara Bow film *The Wild Party*, 1929**

### **Designed by Travis Banton**

Cotton voile, rayon, jet beads and chenille appliques

From the permanent collection of the Hollywood Heritage

## **Mary Pickford make-up case, about 1938**

Throughout the 1920s and '30s, Pickford was considered the most famous woman in the world, a household name rivalled only by Charlie Chaplin. Combining her star persona with business sense, she capitalised on her popularity by launching a line of branded make-up products. Mary Pickford Cosmetics Inc. offered fans an accessible and affordable way to emulate their favourite star's look.

### **Produced by Leichner**

Tin (case) and assorted make-up products

From the permanent collection of the Hollywood Heritage Museum

## **Mary Pickford on the cover of The Ladies' World magazine, April 1915**

The Canadian American actor and producer Mary Pickford (1892–1979) was a pioneer in the development of early Hollywood. Billed as 'America's Sweetheart', Pickford represented something sweeter and less threatening than the vamps and flappers seen in silent films previously. She defined the 'ingénue' role in cinema, an innocent persona that was exemplified by her blonde ringlets.

Her hairstyle was so famous that in her early career fans would write letters addressed to ‘the girl with the curls’.

### **Reproduction of magazine cover**

Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

### **Costume worn by Carole Lombard in *We’re Not Dressing*, 1934**

Winning her first contract at just 16, Carole Lombard (1908–42) rose to become one of the definitive comic actors of the ‘Golden Age of Hollywood’. When her Paramount contract ended in 1937, Lombard refused to tie herself to long and limiting contracts and decided to go solo. The freelance life she chose gave her agency over choice of roles, salary and working conditions. In 1938 she became the first artist to negotiate a share of box office profits into her deal.

### **Designed by Travis Banton**

Silk

On loan from the Norman Tipton

## **Costume worn by Theda Bara in *Cleopatra*, 1917**

Theda Bara (1885–1955) was one of cinema's early sex symbols, marketed as an 'exotic' femme fatale. Despite being born and raised in America, she was promoted variously as the daughter of an Arab sheikh or an Italian sculptor.

Bara's Cleopatra costumes mixed Egyptian inspiration with burlesque seduction. It is thought that she created her own film costumes, perhaps inspired by her tailor father and wig-maker mother. Such provocative looks were later banned under the Hays Code of 1930, which stated 'costumes intended to permit undue exposure or indecent movements [...] are forbidden'.

### **Unknown maker**

Silk, glass, silver thread and plastic (later addition)

On loan from the private collection of Dr Chris & Angie Schneider

(Image)

## **Theda Bara as Cleopatra, 1917**

Unknown photographer

Public Domain

# Hollywood Divas

As silent films gave way to ‘talkies’, actresses finally had a voice on screen. Hollywood welcomed a new kind of legendary, larger-than-life diva who radiated supernova levels of star power. Yet behind the scenes, performers were still constantly considered inferior to their male counterparts.

Successful female artists took on the battle for equality. But as these divas acquired power and public visibility, and with that an assertiveness and drive to rock the status quo, so came increasingly negative associations with the term. Instead of being thought of as ambitious and talented, female stars were now equated with being difficult and demanding, a misogynistic perception that stubbornly took hold.

In this ‘Golden Age of Hollywood’, film studios became increasingly involved in the private lives of their stars, changing their appearances, their names and supplying intimate details to gossip magazines.

[return to CONTENTS](#)

## **Poster for *Cleopatra*, 1963**

Elizabeth Taylor's (1932–2011) dazzling beauty and striking screen presence captivated press and audiences alike. She made a virtue of the tabloids' relentless interest in her extraordinary life of fame and fortune, including eight marriages and several brushes with death. Taylor played cat and mouse with the media, understanding that in terms of the box office, all press was good press. Later in life she would use her international platform and hold on the public's imagination to campaign for HIV/AIDS relief and other humanitarian causes.

### **Published by 20th Century Fox**

Ink and paper

## **Elizabeth Taylor on the cover of *Screen Stories*, September 1962**

Ink and paper

## **Headpiece worn by Beyoncé in *L'Officiel* magazine, 2011**

Like Elizabeth Taylor with Cleopatra, when wearing this headpiece Beyoncé channelled the status, power and beauty of historical African queens and figures from West African mythology and religion. Commissioned from Vicki Sarge by stylist Jenke Ahmed Tailly, the design is specifically reminiscent of Oshun, a goddess of love, fertility and water in the Yoruba religion.

### **Designed by VICKISARGE**

Copper alloy and paste

V&A: M.61-2023

## **Star Trail**

**(Kids' Label)**

The style of this headpiece worn by Beyoncé was inspired by African queens in history.

**What kind of headpiece would you like to wear?**

**Who would inspire you?**

**Lyda Borelli in *Rapsodia Satanica* (1917)**

Directed by Nino Oxilia, Italy

Collection Eye Filmmuseum, the Netherlands [FLM55949]

**Mary Pickford in *Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall* (1924)**

Directed by Marshall Neilan, USA

Courtesy The Mary Pickford Foundation

**Clara Bow in *It* (1927)**

Directed by Clarence Badger, USA

Photoplay Productions Ltd

**Marlene Dietrich in *Morocco* (1930)**

Directed by Josef von Sternberg

© 1930 Paramount Pictures Corporation / Courtesy of Universal Studios Licensing LLC

**Greta Garbo in *Grand Hotel* (1932)**

Directed by Edmund Goulding

Courtesy Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc

**Mae West in *I'm no Angel* (1933)**

Directed by Wesley Ruggles

Courtesy of Universal Studios Licensing LLC

**Bette Davis in *All About Eve* (1950)**

Directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz

Courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox. All rights reserved. Bette Davis™ is a trademark of the Estate of Bette Davis.

[www.BetteDavis.co](http://www.BetteDavis.co)

**Marilyn Monroe in *Some Like it Hot* (1959)**

Directed by Billy Wilder

Courtesy of MGM Media Licensing

**Judy Garland in *A Star is Born* (1954)**

Directed by George Cukor

Courtesy Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.

**Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra* (1963)**

Directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz

Courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox. All rights reserved.

Courtesy the Estate of Richard Burton / Courtesy the Estate of Elizabeth Taylor

**Running time: approximately 5 minutes**

## Power Struggles

Hollywood divas could be made or broken by the studio system. Despite her early success as a silent film star, Gloria Swanson faced ageism and double standards for women as her career progressed. Bette Davis too lost out on roles as punishment from studio executives set on bending her will to theirs. But others like Joan Crawford exemplified how boldly taking back control of one's career could result in artistic as well as box office success. Judy Garland, exploited by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios from childhood, would later gain iconic status and admiration for her struggle to survive the industry.

## Rebel Icons

Some provocative divas decided to use Hollywood gossip for their own means, leaning into their non-conformist public personas to battle for artistic freedom. In words from her own screenplay for *I'm No Angel* (1933), the scandalous sex siren Mae West purred, 'When I'm good, I'm very good, but when I'm bad, I'm

better'. Katharine Hepburn inspired a new generation with her independent spirit and refusal to fit the starlet mould. And global icon Marilyn Monroe described what was seen as diva-ish behaviour as, 'People think that why I'm late is some kind of arrogance... I think it is the opposite of arrogance... I want to be prepared when I get there to give a good performance to the best of my ability.'

## **Marilyn, 1967**

One of the most iconic images of the 20th century, Andy Warhol's silkscreen paintings of Marilyn speak to her enduring visual power. Warhol used a still from the movie *Niagara*, which had helped establish her trademark look – platinum curls, red lipstick and beauty mark. Far beyond a portrait of one of the world's most recognised faces, this image has become a universal signifier of glamour, beauty and the feminine ideal.

### **By Andy Warhol, using a photograph by Gene Kornman**

Silkscreen print

Acquired from Rowan Gallery, London

V&A: CIRC.122-1968

## **Costume designed for Marilyn Monroe in *Some Like It Hot*, 1959**

Monroe's quick wit and comic timing brought depth to her portrayal of Sugar 'Kane' Kowalczyk, a character who is devastatingly alluring but with a sadness at her core. Now a movie classic, this is considered by many to be her greatest movie performance. This costume was made for the film and its promotion.

### **Designed by Orry-Kelly**

Silk satin, silk fringing

Given by the British Film Institute

V&A: S.1647-2015

## **Marilyn Monroe, 1962**

Marilyn Monroe's (1926-62) one-of-a-kind Hollywood stardom was born out of a unique blend of sexuality and vulnerability. Debates still linger as to whether her on-screen guise as the ultimate blonde bombshell was foisted on her by the studios, or a canny move on her own part. Ultimately, however, the snare of extreme

fame she became entangled in irreparably damaged her mental and physical health. The year this shot was taken saw increasingly erratic behaviour from Marilyn, and in August she died from a barbiturate overdose.

### **Photograph by Arnold Newman**

Reproduction of print

### **Poster for *Sunset Boulevard*, 1950**

Gloria Swanson (1899–1983) was already one of Hollywood’s most bankable stars when she declined a \$1 million contract with Paramount to join Pickford’s United Artists in 1925. There, she made her name as a pioneering filmmaker in her own right, setting up The Swanson Production Corporation. After a career decline following the introduction of ‘talkies’ Swanson took an acting break, returning in 1950 with *Sunset Boulevard*. Her turn as Norma Desmond has become an iconic movie performance.

Reproduction of poster

## **Poster for *The Philadelphia Story*, 1940**

The personification of a modern woman, Katharine Hepburn (1907–2003) was independent, athletic and assertive, famously bucking glamorous trends for streamlined menswear-inspired style. Although already an accomplished actress, by 1938 she had suffered a string of critically lauded but financially disastrous releases. Undeterred, she acquired the rights to *The Philadelphia Story*, a beguilingly witty romantic comedy. Hepburn sold the rights to MGM on condition that she star in the movie.

Her performance earned her a third Academy Award nomination.

### **Reproduction of poster**

## **Mae West American Movie Star poster, 1988**

The quote, taken from *I'm No Angel*, has become synonymous with the film's star, Mae West (1893–1980). A queen of the double entendre, she was known for her portrayal of sexually liberated women, outspoken political views and risqué costumes. West realised the value of her provocation and played up to her controversial image to heighten her profile. In her early career, she

was charged with moral indecency during the run of her self-written, produced and directed play *Sex*.

**Designed by Alan Fletcher for Pentagram Design Ltd**

Ink screenprint on paper

Given by Alan Fletcher

V&A: E.408

**Costume worn by Judy Garland in *In the Good Old Summertime*, 1949**

Judy Garland (1922–1969) grew up in the Hollywood studio system after beginning her career as a vaudeville performer. As a child star she was moulded into an all-singing, all-dancing image of American perfection, but the toll of maintaining this image irreparably damaged her mental health. Nevertheless, she persevered, achieving stardom not only in movies but on TV, the stage, and as a recording artist.

**Costume designed by Irene Sharaff**

Wool

On loan from the Norman Tipton Collection

## Poster for Judy Garland at Carnegie Hall, 1961

Reproduction of poster

Public domain

## Costume worn by Vivien Leigh in *Duel of Angels* at the Apollo Theatre, 1958

Vivien Leigh's (1913–67) tumultuous life was inextricably tied to that of her great love, the actor Laurence Olivier. A talented, award-winning actor, Leigh spent her career battling assumptions that her success was due to her beauty and relationship with Olivier. Leigh also garnered a reputation for being difficult to work with, unfairly based on her struggles with bipolar disorder and depression.

Leigh inspired a devoted fanbase with her portrayal of the tragic heroine Paola in the play *Duel of Angels*. Though primarily a stage actor, Leigh is best remembered for her film roles like Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). An English rose playing a southern belle, Leigh became the first English woman to win the Best Actress Academy Award.

## **Made by Bermans after sketches by Christian Dior**

Wool and synthetic blend, silk velvet, silk, cotton, metal

Given by the British Theatre Museum Association

V&A: S.84-1978

## **Scrapbook page from the Vivien Leigh Archive, 1941**

Reproduction of page from scrapbook

V&A: THM/433/4/2/7, Vivien Leigh Archive

## **Costume from *Mildred Pierce*, 1945**

Starting her career as a vaudeville dancer and progressing to silent movie 'it girl', Joan Crawford (active 1924–77) became a top tier Hollywood actor and was named Time magazine's first ever 'Queen of Movies' in 1937. Crawford's ambition and drive far outstripped her early chorus dancer roles. By the end of the 1930s, Crawford fell from being one of Hollywood's highest paid stars to being labelled 'box office poison' due to failing ticket sales. A career hiatus followed, broken by her Academy Award winning turn as troubled mother Mildred Pierce, a role her peers had shunned due to associated age implications. Crawford

accepted the Award from her bed, having avoided attending the ceremony due to doubts she would lose to Ingrid Bergman.

**Designed by Milo Anderson**

Synthetic textile

From the Norman Tipton Collection

**Poster for *Mildred Pierce*, 1945**

Reproduction of poster

## Opera Voices

While the word ‘diva’ has been adopted and adapted across different genres and media, the opera diva remains a constant force. Contemporary opera divas are still relevant and powerful embodiments of the divine performer, attracting global audiences with their timeless voices. The term ‘diva’ remains most closely associated with the extraordinary prima donna – usually a soprano or a mezzo-soprano singer – often performing in the title role in opera productions across the globe. In its truest context, the word is synonymous with a performer who is gifted with an exceptional voice, dazzling star quality and unshakeable sense of self, the powerful combination of which combine to attract an international following of fans. Today, opera houses continue to create their programmes around the availability of divas, as directors and conductors support these singers in their quest to reimagine and redefine opera’s leading roles.

[return to CONTENTS](#)

**(Online only)**

## The Modern Opera Diva

Modern opera divas continue to perform roles from across opera's rich history, from Norma to Salomé. Composers created these roles to challenge the vocal and emotional gymnastics of virtuoso performers. But today the world of opera has evolved, and so too have the divas that drive it. The environment has become more inclusive in terms of race, class and gender, allowing diverse voices to rise to stardom. Technology and scenography have also advanced, as dazzling stage effects, costumes and set designs accentuate the complex characters and tragic narratives. The star power of the opera diva continues to shine and command the worship of a global fan base.

## **Costume for *Norma* at the Royal Opera House, 1952**

In 1952, Callas made her London debut at the Royal Opera House. Initially she insisted on wearing a dress she had performed in at La Scala in Milan but set and costume designer Alan Barlow persuaded her to try this costume, which worked in unison with his classical staging. Callas greatly identified with the role of Norma. Famed director Franco Zeffirelli described the symbiosis, saying: 'In a way it was her own story. Maria after all is a high priestess – the high priestess of her art. As Norma, Maria created the maximum of what opera can be.'

### **Dress, cloak and belt**

### **Designed by Marcel Escoffier**

Nylon, wool and rubber

ROH Collections, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

## **Designs for the Royal Opera House production of *Norma*, 1952**

Maria Callas performed *Norma* more than any other opera during her career. 'Casta Diva', the opera's most famous aria, became

one of her signature performances. Alan Barlow's scenography for the Royal Opera House's production in 1957 conjured a sublime, magical atmosphere for Bellini's timeless opera – the perfect stage for Callas as the High Priestess Norma to sing the iconic aria. Dramatic clouds reveal beams of moonlight in a dark forest to illuminate the diva.

### **Costume design for *Norma*, 1952**

#### **Designed by Alan Barlow**

Watercolour and pencil on paper

Acquired with the support of the Friends of the V&A V&A: S.2255-2014

### **Set design for Act I of *Norma*, 1952**

#### **Designed by Alan Barlow**

Watercolour and ink on paper

Acquired with the support of the Friends of the V&A  
V&A: S.1717-2014

## **Set design for Act II of *Norma*, 1952**

**Designed by Alan Barlow**

Watercolour, gouache and ink on paper

Acquired with the support of the Friends of the V&A

V&A: S.1723-2014

## **Costume for *Tosca* at the Royal Opera House, 1964**

Callas was renowned for the instinctive musicality, intelligence and brilliant dramatic presence that she brought to all her roles. She wore this dress at the close of her legendary career, in her final operatic performance as Floria Tosca, a role she had performed throughout her career. Director Franco Zeffirelli's staging was opulent and glamorous, providing the perfect setting for one of opera's greatest divas to bring one of opera's most tragic roles to life.

## **Dress, shoes, reticule, tiara, and necklace, 1964**

**Designed by Marcel Escoffier**

ROH Collections, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

**Programme for gala performance of *Tosca* at the Royal Opera House, London, on 5 July 1965**

**Published by Royal Opera House**

Ink on paper

ROH Collections, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

**(Moving image and audio track)**

**Maria Callas as Floria Tosca in *Tosca*, at the Royal Opera House, London, 1964**

For many, Maria Callas (1923–77) remains the ultimate opera diva. Despite fascination with her private life, and scandalous stories about her feuds and love affairs, Callas stayed focused on her role as an artist seeking perfection, stating ‘I am a woman and a serious artist’. Through the visceral power of her voice and the roles she performed, Callas connected to the past and revived the popularity of bel canto singing and 19th-century Italian opera. She epitomised the power, talent and struggles that define divadom, overcoming obstacles to become a timeless icon.

Her artistic achievements were such that she became known as 'La Divina' – 'the divine one'.

In this clip from one of her last stage performances, Callas performs the aria 'Vissi d'arte' ('I lived for art') from Act II of Puccini's *Tosca*. With her almost 3-octave vocal range and an expressive bel canto style, Callas was for many the definitive performer of the role of Floria Tosca, the diva of Rome.

ITV Archive

**Running time: approximately 2 minutes**

### **Maria Callas as Violetta in *La Traviata*, Royal Opera House, 1958**

This iconic portrait immortalises the vivid beauty, power and emotion of Callas as La Divina. The American-born Greek soprano's intensity on-stage and commitment to her art gave her a reputation as an unswerving perfectionist. This, combined with her fiery temperament, charisma and peerless voice saw her define the diva in the 20th century. After her tragically early

death from a heart attack aged 53, the legend of Maria Callas lives on through her music and image.

Photograph by Houston Rogers

Reproduction of photograph

V&A: S.2255 – 2014

### **Leontyne Price as Aida in *Aida* at the Royal Opera House, 1973**

Leontyne Price (born 1927) was the first African American soprano to receive international acclaim and stardom. Price was particularly famed for her portrayal of Verdi's *Aida*, which she sang to great acclaim in 1973. Performing against the backdrop of racial segregation in the US, Price fought racism and went on to inspire generations of divas, including Jessye Norman, Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey.

#### **Photograph by Donald Southern**

Reproduction of photographic print

© Royal Opera House

## **Fairuz at the Olympia, Paris, 1979**

Fairuz (born 1934), known as ‘the Soul of Lebanon’ or the ‘Callas of Arabia’, is one of the most legendary Middle Eastern singers of all time. Rising to stardom from outside the world of opera, she began her career as a chorus singer at a Beirut radio station, but her talent was rapidly recognised. Fairuz has performed across the world, from the Damascus Opera House to the MGM Grand in Las Vegas, demonstrating that the term ‘diva’ crosses cultures, genres and continents, and that an exceptional voice can enable the diva to travel and command an international fanbase.

### **Photograph by Jean-Claude Francolon**

Reproduction of photograph

Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images

## **Marian Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C., about 1939**

In 1939 contralto singer Marian Anderson (1897–1993) was barred from performing at a segregated venue in Washington, despite her glowing international reputation. Outraged, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt invited her to perform instead on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Anderson sang the patriotic song ‘My Country

'Tis of Thee' to an enthralled audience of 75,000 people. The incident sparked anger and debate, and became a pivotal moment in the US Civil Rights movement.

### **Reproduction of photograph**

Everett Collection Historical/Alamy Stock photo

### **Costume for Jessye Norman in *Ariadne Auf Naxos* at the Royal Opera House, 1985**

During her career, Norman refused to perform opera roles with which she felt no empathy. Avoiding opera's wronged, scorned and unloved women, Norman preferred to embody strong roles like Ariadne, a princess from Greek mythology. This sparkling jewelled turban and diaphanous purple costume were created for her performance in Richard Strauss's *Ariadne Auf Naxos*, which traces the dramatic life of the goddess-like character.

### **Designed by Lore Haas**

Chiffon, crêpe de chine, silk, diamanté and jet sequins

ROH Collections, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

## **Jessye Norman as Ariadne in *Ariadne Auf Naxos*, 1985**

African American soprano Jessye Norman (1945–2019) began singing in her church choir in her hometown of Augusta, Georgia. Segregation in the US made opera a tough career choice for a Black performer. Norman's international breakthrough came in Germany in 1968 at the Deutsche Opera Berlin. From her interpretation of Elisabeth in Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser* to the role of Ariadne in Richard Strauss's opera, Norman's voice was well suited to dramatic German operas.

Norman performed Ariadne opposite fellow African American diva Kathleen Battle as Zerbinetta. On her death in 2019, the New York Times described her as 'a diva in the best way'.

### **Photograph by Zoe Dominic**

Photographic print

ROH Collections, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

## Poster advertising *Anna Bolena* starring Joan Sutherland at the Royal Opera House, 1988

The Australian singer Joan Sutherland (1926–2010) had one of the most virtuosic and versatile voices of the 20th century. She is recognised for reviving the bel canto style. Following in the footsteps of early opera divas, she performed tragic roles created for the likes of Nellie Melba and Maria Malibran. Sutherland brought a no-nonsense perspective to the life of the diva, stating ‘If I wasn’t reasonably placid, I don’t think I could cope with this sort of life. To be a diva you’ve got to be absolutely like a horse.’

Sutherland’s breakthrough performance in Franco Zeffirelli’s Royal Opera House production of Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* in 1959 secured her place in the pantheon of opera divas.

### Unknown maker

Ink on paper

V&A: S.829-1995

## **Costume for *Lucia di Lammermoor*, 1959**

**Designed by Franco Zeffirelli**

Cotton sateen, cotton lace, silk, linen, plastic beads, synthetic pearls, glass diamante, metal fastenings, synthetic cord.

V&A: S.1089:1 to 10-1997

## **Poster advertising *Norma* at the Royal Opera House, 1967**

Bellini's *Norma* is an all-encompassing role that expresses the multifaceted talent of the diva. The intensely vulnerable character finds herself caught in a conflict between passion and purity, which finds its culmination only in death. Joan Sutherland and Maria Callas both performed this iconic bel canto role at the Royal Opera House in the 1950s and 60s. Today their memorable voices live on through recordings.

**Designed by Peter Hatch Partnership, printed by A.E. King & Jackson Ltd.**

Ink on paper

V&A: S.735-1995

# Timeline: Redefining the Diva

## Moments in Time

First wave Feminism: 1850s to 1930s

Second wave Feminism: 1950s to 1980s

Third wave Feminism: 1990s to 2010s

Fourth wave Feminism: 2010s onwards

## Media and Meaning

1826 – First use of the term ‘diva’ in an opera context

1883 – First published use of ‘diva’ to refer to ‘a distinguished female singer’ cited by the Oxford English Dictionary

1912 – Universal, the first major Hollywood studio, is established

1930s – Cinema overtakes theatre as the main form of public entertainment in the UK and USA

1974 to 79 – Judy Chicago creates *The Dinner Party*, an iconic artwork celebrating women’s history

1991 – *Riot Grrrl Manifesto* published, a rallying call from the feminist punk scene

1998 – VH1 Divas Live concert held in New York

2003 – Myspace launches, offering artists the chance to promote their music without a label

2010 – Instagram launches

2015 – Definition of ‘diva’ updated in the Oxford English Dictionary to include ‘a person, typically a woman, who is self-important, temperamental, and extremely demanding’

## **Society and Politics**

1848 – Declaration of Sentiments presented at Seneca Falls Convention, the first recorded women’s rights convention

1882 – Married Women’s Property Act passed in the UK

1928 – Equal Franchise Act passed in the UK

1954 – The American civil rights movement begins

1961 – Female contraceptive pill becomes available

1964 – Civil Rights Act passed in America

1969 – Stonewall Riots begin the day after Judy Garland’s death, marking a turning point in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights

1970 – Equal Pay Act passed in the UK

1985 – The Guerrilla Girls, a group of feminist female artists devoted to fighting sexism and racism within the art world, formed

1991 – Anita Hill testified that US Supreme Court Justice nominee Clarence Thomas sexually harassed her at work

2010 – The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women founded

2017 – Women’s March held worldwide, one of the largest human-rights demonstrations in history

2017 - #MeToo movement, encouraging people to speak out about sexual violence and harassment, gains international attention

2019 – Time’s Up organisation started by women in Hollywood advocating for safety and equity in the workplace

2022 – US Supreme Court overturns Roe v Wade after 50 years removing federal abortion rights

## **Literature**

1929 – Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* published

1963 – Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* published, fanning the second wave of feminism

1994 – *Diva* magazine first published

2014 – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *We Should All be Feminists* essay published

### **Australian Impact**

1902 – The Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902 granted women in Australia the right to vote

1962 – The Commonwealth Electoral Act 1962 granted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples the right to vote

1970 – Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* published

1992 – Eddie Mabo’s victory in the High Court overturned the doctrine of *terra nullius*, paving the way for the recognition of the land rights of First Peoples across Australia

2000 – Cathy Freeman becomes the first Indigenous Australian woman to win an individual gold medal in the 400-metre race at the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games

2010 – Julia Gillard becomes the first woman to be elected as Prime Minister of Australia

2017 – Australia legalises same-sex marriage

[return to CONTENTS](#)

## Act II: Reclaiming the Diva

Since the 1960s, an era of sexual liberation and political activism, modern divas have built on the foundations laid by previous generations to reimagine the term. Now, the definition of a diva has exploded across different types of entertainment, as performers of all genders reclaim the word as an expression of their art, voice, and sense of self. Unpredictable has become creative, aggressive powerful, the control freak, a perfectionist, and the rebel a game-changer.

Act II of this exhibition re-examines our perception of the diva in today's popular culture, shifting from negative associations with the word towards empowered positives. Here, we celebrate a selection of stars from the diva galaxy. These revolutionary artists are a force for change in society, challenging everything from institutional racism to embedded industry norms. With creativity and vision, they embody how talent, dedication, and the ability to create art out of who you are, exist at the very core of what it means to be a diva.

# Run the World

Second Wave Feminism, the women's rights movement that began in the 1960s, saw a new generation of women rail against the limitations imposed on them by society. This struggle for independence played out in the microcosm of the music industry, where successful female performers were often exploited and undervalued. Artists like Barbra Streisand channelled their diva power to battle male-dominated studios and negotiate their rights, achieving 'firsts' for female artists in the process. Today, global megastars like Adele and Beyoncé continue this journey, navigating the business on their own terms to gain artistic and financial success.

Enterprising divas from the music industry like Rihanna have also extended their reach into the world of business, taking control of their image and career trajectory. Channelling their creativity into brands that span art, fashion, film, beauty and more, these successful entrepreneurs create, rule and run their worlds.

[return to CONTENTS](#)

## **Priyanka Chopra at the UNICEF Snowflake Ball, 2019**

Actor, singer and producer Priyanka Chopra (born 1982) took Bollywood by storm following her win of the Miss World pageant in 2000. Defying expectations of what a beauty pageant winner can achieve, she has become one of India's highest paid actresses. Chopra pivoted from Bollywood to Hollywood and now makes films through her own production company. As a tireless campaigner and fundraiser for human rights and environmentalism, Chopra has been appointed a UNICEF goodwill ambassador and Forbes magazine named her one of their 100 Most Powerful Women in 2018.

### **Photograph by Michael Loccisano**

Reproduction of photograph

Getty Images for UNICEF USA

RIHA

## **Lata Mangeshkar, EP cover, 1965**

Lata Mangeshkar (1929–2022) was India’s leading Bollywood playback or ‘ghost’ singer, meaning she recorded the vocals that female actors would lip-sync to on-screen. Known as the ‘Nightingale of India’, over her 80-year career Mangeshkar’s beloved voice helped shape India’s national identity. In 1999 she was asked to join India’s Parliament and was awarded India’s highest civilian award in 2001, the Bharat Ratna. On her death, she was honoured with a state funeral.

Published by Columbia Records

Ink and paper

## **Poster for Mahal, 1949**

Mangeshkar’s big break came when she recorded the song ‘Aayega Aanevala’ for the 1949 Bollywood hit film *Mahal*, directed by Kamal Amrohi. Her voice made such an impact that she was credited publicly, which was almost unheard of in an industry where playback singers were expected to be heard but not seen. Her success inadvertently sparked a revolution where the ‘ghost’

singers that drove the Bollywood industry would now be recognised in their own right.

Ink and paper

On loan from NMK/Hyphen Films Ltd.

***Janet Jackson's Rhythm Nation 1814, album cover, 1989***

Janet Jackson's Rhythm Nation 1814 was an experimental mix of pop, R&B and rap that explored social and political issues. The record cemented Jackson's (born 1966) creative autonomy, wrestled from the shadow of her famous brothers, the pop group The Jackson 5. A figurehead for Black pride and female independence, she also set the standard for the modern pop concert experience, inspiring every dancing diva since. In 1990 she received a nomination at the Grammys for Best Producer for this record, the first woman ever to be recognised in this way.

Published by A&M Records

Ink and paper

## ***I am...Sasha Fierce* album artwork, 2008**

Album track ‘Diva’ opens with lyrics that define the diva as ‘a female version of a hustler’, reclaiming the word for a new generation. Operating within a still largely male-dominated music industry as a solo artist, Beyoncé has achieved unparalleled levels of success with anthems of self-empowerment and independence. In 2023 she became the most awarded artist in Grammy history after four wins for her 2022 album *Renaissance*.

### **Published by Sony Music Entertainment**

Ink on Paper

## **Beyoncé performing at Glastonbury Festival, 2011**

Beyoncé’s (born 1981) live performances are almost peerless. Her vocal virtuosity – even while executing high-energy precision choreography – is legendary. This image captures Beyoncé at Glastonbury in 2011, where she became the first solo woman to headline the Pyramid Stage in over two decades. She would go on to wow crowds at Coachella in 2018. The follow-up film *Homecoming* – written, directed and executive produced by

Beyoncé herself – was a career-defining moment. It won her a Grammy Award for Best Music Film in 2019.

**Photograph by Denis O’Regan**

Hahnemühle Photo Rag paper

On loan from Denis O’Regan

**(Moving image and audio track)**

**Clip from ‘Umbrella’ music video, by Rihanna ft. JAY-Z, 2007**

The Grammy award-winning, global smash hit ‘Umbrella’ catapulted Rihanna into a new stratosphere of pop superstardom. It also marked a transition in her performance persona – graduating from

a wholesome pop starlet to something edgier, more provocative and more her own in terms of both sound and style. Alongside the music video’s now iconic monochromatic visuals, this has become a definitive Rihanna track.

**Directed by Chris Applebaum**

© 2007 The Island Def Jam Music Group

## **Dress, coat and mitre worn by Rihanna for the Met Gala, 2018**

At the 2018 Met Gala, the global superstar and billionaire entrepreneur Rihanna (born 1988) showed the world how far the modern diva has come. She fearlessly subverted the meaning of the word 'diva' as 'goddess' by reimagining herself as the ultimate symbol of male religious power – the pope. This look captures the essence of Rihanna's iconic appeal – a willingness to experiment and challenge boundaries, which is felt across the inclusive and empowering brands she has built as an artist, innovator and activist.

### **Designed by John Galliano for Maison Margiela**

Plastic, metallic embroidered twill, leather,  
metal hardware, encrusted crystals and beads

Rihanna's Private Collection

## **Costume worn by Elton John for his 50th birthday party, 1997**

Sir Elton John (born 1947) has reshaped the craft of pop culture with his unforgettable songs and his flamboyant, extravagant style. For his 50th birthday, Elton sought inspiration from the court fashions of King Louis XIV. The voluminous curly wig, complete with a mechanised galleon that shot out puffs of smoke, topped an ensemble that was so large Elton had to be transported to the party in a furniture lorry. Living the diva, on and off stage!

**Designed by Sandy Powell**

**Made by Annie Hadley and Dominic Young**

Silk, cotton, lace, synthetic textile, lamé, sequins,  
rhinestones, feathers, plastic tinsel, fibreglass,  
glass, metal, leather, plastic

The Collection of Sir Elton John and David Furnish

## **Costume worn by Barbra Streisand as Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl*, 1968**

A colossus of showbusiness, Barbra Streisand's (born 1942) career has spanned six remarkable decades. She is one of a handful of performers to have earned the coveted 'EGOT' title, having won at least one of each of the following awards: Emmy, Grammy, Oscar and Tony. *Funny Girl* was Streisand's big career break – on Broadway and later through a Hollywood adaptation of the musical. The role was ideal, highlighting her soaring vocals, and allowing her playfulness, humour and sensitivity to shine. Streisand's formidable performance in what was unbelievably her debut film role won her the Academy Award for Best Actress.

### **Designed by Irene Sharaff**

Silk, sequins and beads

On loan from the Norman Tipton Collection

## **Poster for *Yentl*, 1983**

*Yentl* was a passion project for Streisand. She fought with studios for over a decade to get the movie into production as she was deemed too inexperienced, too old and, crucially, too female for the role by the largely male studio executives. Streisand became the first woman to star in, write, produce and direct her own movie and the first woman to win a Golden Globe for best director.

An all-time best-selling recording artist, Streisand signed her first contract with Columbia Records aged 21, stipulating that in return for a lesser fee, she would retain full artistic control of her songs and output. Streisand's autonomy and longevity have served as an inspiration for countless other divas, including Donna Summer, her collaborator on 'No More Tears'.

Published by MGM/UA Entertainment Company

Ink and paper

## **'No More Tears (Enough is Enough)', cover artwork, 1979**

Published by Columbia Records

Ink and paper

## **Grace dress and bolero worn by Adele on the cover of British Vogue, 2021**

Adele's (born 1988) stratospheric career began soon after graduating from the BRIT School in 2006. Signed at age 18, her first album, *19*, set the tone for her career: autobiographical albums with heartfelt lyrics coupled with a low public profile between releases. With four albums, she has secured her spot as one of the biggest pop stars in the world, selling over 120 million records. In 2021 Adele made history by appearing on the covers of both US and British Vogue simultaneously, marking her public return after a long hiatus. Her style has gradually evolved from casual indie to high-glam gloss, but she has retained her approachable appeal – disarmingly relatable, humble yet brash, and resolutely British in her humour.

### **Designed by Vivienne Westwood**

Silk, nylon net

Vivienne Westwood Haute Couture 2021

## **Adele on the cover of British Vogue, November 2021**

**Photograph by Stephen Meisel**

Ink and paper

(Image)

## **Adele performing in Hyde Park, 2021**

Photograph by Gareth Cattermole / Getty Images for Adele

## **Ensemble worn by Sade for her *Love Deluxe* world tour, 1993**

Nigerian-born British singer Sade (born 1959) rose to stardom in the 1980s with her namesake band. Her warm, smooth voice, signature style and distinctive music combine to make an unmistakable whole. Operating beyond trends and fads, Sade has stayed true to her artistic vision, cultivating a dedicated fanbase despite long breaks between albums and tours. Sade embodies the sensual, minimalist sound of modern British soul. As a lyricist, she engages listeners with powerful themes including immigration and slavery. Handwritten lyrics reveal Sade's

inspirations, and her intimate creative process. This ‘suit of light’, covered in hundreds of mirrored stones and weighing nearly 3 kg, empowered Sade on stage.

**Designed by Gioia Meller Marcovicz**

Silk, net, elastic, glass, silver foil

Courtesy of Sade

**Handwritten lyrics for ‘Immigrant’ by Sade, 2000**

Ink and paper

Courtesy of Sade

## **Dolly Parton doll, about 1978**

Starting life in a one-room cabin in rural Tennessee, today Dolly Parton (born 1946) has sold over 100 million records. Her song writing skills and immutable charm have won over critics who underestimated her as a ‘dumb blonde’. In 1986 she opened Dollywood, a theme park that draws on her savvy understanding of her brand appeal. She is also a philanthropist known for donating books to children through her foundation’s Imagination Library.

The self-styled ‘Backwoods Barbie’, Parton’s distinctive hyper-feminine look is intrinsic to her brand – towering blonde hair, picture-perfect makeup and rhinestone-bedazzled outfits tailored to accentuate her famously voluptuous figure. In the 1970s Parton licensed her iconic image, allowing fans to take home a miniature slice of the larger-than-life Parton fantasy.

### **Produced by the Goldberger Doll Mfg. Company**

Polyvinyl chloride, synthetic textile, ink and paper

(Image)

## Parton performing on *The Tonight Show*, 2016

Andrew Lipovsky / NBCU Photo Bank / NBCUniversal via Getty Images.

## I Want to Break Free

Modern divas are boundary pushers who sculpt their worlds and vault the limits of self-expression. These ambitious performers capture public imagination through their strong sense of individuality and bold creativity. From the outrageous to the sublime, there is nothing a diva can't do or be.

Through art and voice, image and sound, some pioneering divas have freed themselves from binary expectations of gender and beauty, channelling fluid identities that resonate with creativity and empowerment. Experimenting with music, lyrics and costume, these artists work alongside designers and musicians to create eye-catching, barrier-smashing performances that encourage others to challenge norms and express their true selves.

For some artists, their diva persona became stronger and more defined when they broke free from partnerships or bands to forge their own solo careers. These liberated performers own their sense of self and are not afraid to celebrate their originality.

[return to CONTENTS](#)

## **Freddie Mercury on tour with Queen, 1974**

An undisputed rock legend, Freddie Mercury (1946– 91) described his band, Queen, as ‘regal and majestic. Glamour is part of us, and we want to be dandy. We want to shock and be outrageous instantly’. Although shy in private life, Mercury’s public persona was flamboyant and hedonistic. His theatrical stage looks played against those of other male bands which were more traditionally masculine. While he never confirmed his sexuality publicly, the band’s name, image and even lyrics were to some extent influenced by Mercury’s queerness.

### **Photograph by Denis O’Regan**

Hahnemühle Photo Rag paper

On loan from Denis O’Regan

## **Costume designs for P!nk’s Funhouse tour, 2009**

Singer-songwriter P!nk (born 1979) stands defiantly outside the norms that generally define the popstar ideal. Mixing powerhouse vocals with a rebellious and individual take on her sound and look, she has pushed against criticisms for being ‘too masculine,

having too many opinions, for having a body that is too strong'. Championing self-acceptance, she has amassed a global mainstream following and has been embraced by the LGBTQ+ community.

Bob Mackie's design on the left recalls the iconic cropped yellow jacket Freddie Mercury wore on tour with his band Queen in 1986. P!nk has previously spoken of her admiration for Mercury's unapologetic determination to be himself, regardless of whether it chimed with the zeitgeist or met with disapproval from society at large.

### **Designs by Bob Mackie**

Watercolour on paper

Bob Mackie Design Group, Ltd.

### **Pages from the *Hurricane* tour design bible, 2008**

Grace Jones is known for the physicality and unpredictability of her performances. Nearly five decades into her career she continues to defy expectations, employing costume design in particular to maximise the theatricality of her shows. These pages

illustrate the process of constructing and fitting this explosive look for Jones's *Hurricane* tour, designed by Eiko Ishioka and made by Eric Winterling.

**Made by Eric Winterling**

Ink and paper

On loan from Eric Winterling

**Ensemble worn by Doja Cat, at the Daily Front Row Awards, 2022**

Doja Cat (born 1995) burst onto the music scene in 2014.

Unforgettable fashion choices and irreverent humour are key to her persona, reflected in looks which combine the sensual with the absurd. Championing female sexual agency, these often run counter to the hyper-sexualisation of women in popular music, actively defying the male gaze. This bold power suit complements Doja Cat's commitment to push against convention with playfulness and style.

**Designed by Viktor&Rolf**

Wool, silk, metal, polyester

Viktor&Rolf Haute Couture

## **Ensemble worn by Lizzo at the Global Citizen Live event, New York, 2021**

Lizzo (born 1988) is best known for her upbeat music that combines hip-hop, R&B, gospel and classical flute. Despite intense criticism levelled at her due to her size and body shape, Lizzo worked to normalise the female body in ways seldom seen in popular culture.

Lizzo served a regal look in this faux ermine cape from Viktor&Rolf's Autumn 2021 couture collection. The accompanying glittery sash is emblazoned with a lyric from Lady Gaga's single 'Born This Way': 'Don't be a Drag, just be a Queen'. An anthem of liberation, the song's message of embracing one's authentic self aligns with Lizzo's own ethos.

### **Designed by Viktor&Rolf**

Faux fur and polyester

Viktor&Rolf Haute Couture

## **Customised shoes worn by Prince, about 1994**

Prince (1958–2016) is remembered as one of the most exceptional musical artists of the 20th century. He achieved global acclaim with his extraordinary musicianship and inimitable style. Prince's androgynous look and unapologetic sex appeal were key to his success.

These bespoke performance shoes include a customised reinforced heel that supported his energetic dance moves. The zip features Prince's 'Love Symbol' – a mix of the male and female gender symbols with nods to religious imagery and musical notation. Today, similar symbols are used to signify gender identities that exist outside the binary.

### **Unknown maker**

Satin, brass, leather

V&A: S.1012:1,2-2017

## **Lovesexy, album artwork, 1988**

The artwork for Prince's tenth studio album caused controversy on its release in 1988. Knowingly provocative, the cover featured a nude Prince in a submissive pose, flanked by a collage of flowers.

Prince defiantly rejected gendered norms and embraced the sensuality of his own body, encountering protest from mainstream media. Some shops went as far as to boycott the album and refused to stock it based on the imagery.

**Published by Paisley Park Records and Warner Bros. Records**

Ink and paper

(Image)

**Prince performing at Wembley Arena, London, 1986**

© David Corio

## **Ensemble worn by Lil Nas X, at the MTV Video Music Awards 2021**

Lil Nas X (born 1999) has disrupted the music industry with his subversiveness, culture-shifting hits and internet-savvy self-promotion. Unapologetically himself as a queer Black man, the rapper, singer and songwriter operates within musical genres that often remain hostile to representations of masculinity that diverge from the traditional. This eye-catching look channels both Lil' Kim and Prince – two stars whose style and attitude have inspired Lil Nas X's artistry.

### **Designed by Gianni Versace**

Silk (jacket); silk and elastane (trousers)

Courtesy of Versace

### **Star Trail**

**(Kids' Label)**

Performers can use the power of fashion to express who they are. Lil Nas X broke gender rules by wearing an outfit that is half-suit and half-gown.

### **What do you think Lil Nas X is expressing with this outfit?**

## **What story does your style tell about you?**

### **Costume worn by P!nk for her *Funhouse* tour, 2009**

P!nk is known for the physicality of her stage shows, which often incorporate jaw dropping aerial acrobatics. Bob Mackie designed the costumes for her *Funhouse* tour and for this look melded a Napoleonic structured jacket with a flouncy showgirl train in a reconfigured image of feminine power. P!nk wore this costume for the show's dazzling opening sequence, where she emerged on an aerial rope from a door in the stage floor.

#### **Designed by Bob Mackie**

Satin, synthetic fabric, organza and jet stone buttons

Courtesy of P!nk Archives

### **'Vulva pants' as worn by Janelle Monáe for her 'Pynk' music video, 2018**

Identifying as non-binary, Janelle Monáe (born 1985) has always experimented with different styles of androgynous representation. In a break from her usual monochrome looks, Monáe caused

sensation with these pink ruffled trousers worn for her song ‘Pynk’, which she described as ‘a celebration of creation, self-love, sexuality and pussy power’. These now iconic ‘vulva pants’ are emblematic of female sexuality, agency and empowerment.

**Designed by Duran Lantink**

Cotton, synthetic textile

On loan from Duran Lantink

**Costume from Annie Lennox’s ‘Little Bird’ music video, 1992**

Lennox released her first solo album *Diva* in 1992, signalling a departure from Eurythmics and a move towards a bold new creative approach. Lennox wrote or co-wrote all ten tracks, including five hit singles. The album was certified platinum on UK release and has since sold over seven million copies worldwide. One of the five hit singles from Lennox’s *Diva* album, the lyrics to ‘Little Bird’ metaphorically describe Lennox’s transition to a solo artist. The accompanying music video saw Lennox – dressed as a cabaret-style master of ceremonies – share the stage with lookalike actors representing versions of her previous music video

personas. Throughout the song she attempts to control these doppelgangers as they vie for the spotlight.

### **Made by Hilary Wili**

Silk, plastic sequins, synthetic textile, elastic and metal fastenings

Annie Lennox Private Collection

### **Annie Lennox in *Diva* album shoot, 1992**

Photograph by Satoshi Saikusa

Silver gelatine prints

Annie Lennox Private Collection

### **Annie Lennox on the cover of *The Face* magazine, October 1983**

Singer-songwriter and activist Annie Lennox (born 1954) achieved massive global success as one half of the duo Eurythmics with partner Dave Stewart. Lennox established a distinctive and groundbreaking chameleon-like persona. Her signature

androgynous style blended masculine suits with cropped hair and bold make-up, challenging the accepted stereotype of a female performer. As Lennox put it: 'I love to be individual, to step beyond gender'.

**Photograph by Peter Ashworth**

Ink and paper

Annie Lennox Private Collection

***Slave to the Rhythm*, album cover, 1985**

Jamaican-born Grace Jones (born 1948) began her professional life as a model in New York, switching to music in 1977 when she was signed by Island Records. By 1985 Jones was a household name, as much for her subversive imagery and audacious persona as for her music. Her frequent collaborator the French photographer Jean-Paul Goude designed the sleeve artwork for this record, which mirrored her diva persona: uncompromisingly larger than life and not quite of this world.

**Designed by Jean-Paule Goude, published by Island Records**

Ink and paper

V&A: E.733:1-1997

## Grace Jones on stage at Drury Lane, London, 1981

### Photographs by David Corio

Gelatin silver print

© David Corio

### Sculpted bustier, about 1980

Jones's stagewear has always been a reflection of her identity – experimental, provocative and unswayed by trends or conventional gender norms. On stage, she uses fashion to explore an alternative version of female power. She combines the illusion of semi-nudity with a traditional masculine silhouette and a high fashion take on hard-edged femininity. Confrontational and sexual, her style never panders to the male gaze.

Jones's sound is as unique as her persona. Mixing everything from reggae, funk and disco to showtunes and new wave, Jones combines these styles with her distinctly deep voice that some early listeners would sometimes mistake for a man. Progressive in sound, her musical output is fearless, fluid and as genre-bending as Jones herself.

**Designed by Issey Miyake**

Fibreglass

V&A: T.6-2020

## Backlash Blues

Modern divas have used the power of their voices as a force for transformation, enacting political and social change and speaking up for underrepresented groups. Over time, performers like Aretha Franklin and Joan Baez have courageously put their careers and reputations on the line to challenge the status quo and galvanise audiences to question injustice and prejudice.

This was particularly true during the American civil rights movement, when singers from across musical genres used the platform their fame afforded them to call for action. Protest songs by artists like Nina Simone railed against systems of oppression and inequality and provided an inspiration for future generations of activists. But even with the protection afforded by their iconic status, these performers faced a vicious backlash, not just because of their message, but for the colour of their skin. Today, divas continue to build on the legacy of previous generations, harnessing their star power to campaign for causes they believe in, from global feminism to gay rights.

[return to CONTENTS](#)

## **Print from The Rivington Place Portfolio by Sonia Boyce, 2007**

The British Afro-Caribbean artist Sonia Boyce (born 1962) made this portfolio on behalf of Rivington Place, the first public arts centre in London to be built since 1968. Her etching draws on reminiscence sessions, for which she interviewed women about their memories of Black female singers. The linear ‘haloes’ around each name describe a rhythmic pattern suggestive of the grooves in vinyl records and the idea of sound waves.

### **Made by Sonia Boyce**

Reproduction of a print

## **Nina Simone, London, 1984**

Nina Simone (1933–2003) is remembered for her musical genius, and commitment to using her voice to fight for change for Black people. Intent on studying classical piano, Simone was rejected by the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music, almost certainly because of her race. Undaunted, she pivoted to jazz and popular music.

As the battle for racial equality in America gathered momentum, Simone's work became political. She wrote many protest songs like 'Backlash Blues', 'To Be Young, Gifted, and Black' and 'Mississippi G\*ddam' that became anthems for the US civil rights movement. Her activism had consequences – her records were boycotted, labels withdrew their support, and concert promoters and venues started to doubt her appeal. Simone left America in 1973, spending time in Barbados and Africa before eventually settling in France.

### **Photograph by David Corio**

Gelatin silver print

© David Corio

### **Flyer for a Pre-March Freedom Rally with Nina Simone, 1966**

Simone associated with Black cultural leaders and writers like Dr Martin Luther King Jr. and Lorraine Hansberry. Aligning herself with the US civil rights movement alienated some of her white fanbase, and in the South some of her songs were banned and records

destroyed. But she was committed to the cause, performing at pivotal events like this freedom rally and the Selma to Montgomery march in 1965.

Reproduction of flyer

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift from the Trumpauer-Mulholland Collection

### **Sheet music for 'Respect', 1967**

Franklin's song 'Respect' has become the ultimate anthem for social change. Originally written and recorded by Otis Redding as a ballad, Franklin rearranged the song in 1967, speeding it up and switching the lyrics to a female perspective. A global hit on release, it would become an unofficial anthem of Black freedom struggle and later Second Wave Feminism from the 1970s onwards.

Reproduction of original sheet music Helen Hersh Collection  
Courtesy of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, Cleveland, Ohio

## **Poster for a Nina Simone concert, London, 1977**

**Unknown maker**

Ink on paper

V&A: S.4392-1995

## **Aretha Franklin performing at the Hammersmith Odeon, 1968**

The 'Queen of Soul', Aretha Franklin's (1942–2018) voice is one of the most celebrated in history for its power, range and tone.

Throughout her life, Franklin was immersed in activism and fought for women's and civil rights. As a teenager she appeared with Dr Martin Luther King Jr. on the gospel tours her father, a Baptist minister, took her on. Publicly and privately, Franklin was a committed civil rights advocate, offering financial aid as well as using her diva status to support political and social protests.

**Photograph by David Redfern**

## **FBI ‘Wanted’ poster for Angela Davis, 1970**

In 1970, Aretha Franklin offered to pay the bail of Angela Davis, a well-known political activist and member of the Black Panther Party, when she was arrested for her alleged involvement in the death of a court judge. Franklin stated ‘Angela Davis must go free. Black people will be free. I’ve been locked up... and I know you got to disturb the peace when you can’t get no peace’.

Reproduction of poster

Courtesy of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, Cleveland, Ohio

## **Ella Fitzgerald admiring a display of her records, 1958**

Ella Fitzgerald (1917–96) is one of the definitive voices of jazz. Her voice broke colour barriers in America in the 1950s and ‘60s, times of extreme racial discrimination and civil unrest. Her manager Norman Granz was himself a committed civil rights activist and was instrumental in encouraging her to broaden her repertoire in response to the changing zeitgeist. Rerecording

American classics by the likes of Duke Ellington and Cole Porter ensured the longevity of her career.

### **Photograph by Harry Hammond**

Reproduction of photograph

V&A: S.11161-2009

### **Jumpsuit worn by Ella Fitzgerald, about 1970s**

Despite her megastar status, in 1955 Fitzgerald was arrested for allegedly violating segregation laws by singing to a mixed audience. Undeterred, she refused to let racial prejudice impede her. She became the first Black performer to win a Grammy and in 1988 was awarded the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) Image Award. This vibrant, eye-catching jumpsuit reflects her optimistic spirit and unstoppable work ethic.

### **Designed by Don Loper**

Crêpe, velour and metal

V&A: S.38-2018

## **Billie Holiday, 1991**

Perhaps the defining voice of jazz, Billie Holiday (1915–59) changed music history with ‘Strange Fruit’, a song about racially-motivated lynchings. Holiday premiered the song in 1939 at the famously integrated New York club Café Society, and it became a repertoire staple, despite being emotionally difficult for her to perform.

This mixed media assemblage by artist Reginald Case centres on an archival photograph of Billie Holiday with the musicians Ben Webster and Johnny Russell in Harlem in 1935. Holiday introduced syncopation and improvisation that would in turn impact the course of jazz singing.

### **Made by Reginald Case**

Mixed media assemblage

Given by the artist in memory of his son, Stephen Thomas Case

V&A: E.51-2008

## **Miriam Makeba, London, 1988**

Nicknamed 'Mama Africa', Miriam Makeba (1932–2008) was a South African singer, actress and activist who lived under the country's oppressive apartheid regime. Inspired by American singers like Ella Fitzgerald and the activism of Nelson Mandela, she sang protest songs in support of the anti-apartheid struggle. While in London she befriended American singer Harry Belafonte, who helped build her global career. Makeba went on to become one of the first internationally celebrated African music stars. As her fame rose, reprisals increased. She was exiled from her home nation and branded a militant and extremist. She finally returned to South Africa in 1990 following the end of apartheid.

### **Photograph by David Corio**

Gelatin silver print

© David Corio

## **Glastonbury headliners poster, 2022**

In 2022, the Glastonbury Festival coincided with the news that the US Supreme Court had ruled that women in the United States no

longer have a constitutional right to abortion, upending the landmark case Roe vs. Wade from 1973. Performers including Billie Eilish, Olivia Rodrigo, Lily Allen and Phoebe Bridgers railed against the decision on stage, using their platform to decry the ruling as a devastating rollback of human rights that will jeopardise women's lives.

### **Printed by the Glastonbury Free Press**

Ink and paper

**(Moving image and audio track via headphones)**

### **Voices for Change**

The artists in these clips used their voices to highlight racial injustice, enabling social and political change. Whether confrontational like Simone, empowering like Franklin or solemn like Holiday, this was mass entertainment with a purpose, carrying messages in support of the US Civil Rights movement made universally palatable through music.

### **March on Washington, 1963**

Courtesy Shutterstock

**Nina Simone performing 'Backlash Blues', 1976**

Courtesy BMG Rights Management

**Black Lives Matter mural, New York, 2020**

Courtesy Shutterstock

**Black Lives Matter protest, London, 2020**

Courtesy Shutterstock

**Aretha Franklin performing 'Respect', about 1967**

Courtesy Warner Music Group

**Miriam Makeba addresses the Special Committee against  
Apartheid, 1963**

Courtesy of the United Nations

**Running time: approximately 3 minutes**

## **Placard for Global Feminist short film, 2019, and Global Feminist t-shirt, about 2019**

Annie Lennox founded The Circle in 2008, an NGO which supports the rights and empowerment of women worldwide. Her 1999 Global Feminism short film spotlighted sobering statistics using placards like this one.

### **Placard made by The Circle**

### **T-shirt designed by Annie Lennox for The Circle Ink and paper (placard), cotton (t-shirt)**

Annie Lennox Private Collection

## **PJ Harvey, 1995**

Singer-songwriter, multi-instrumentalist and poet PJ Harvey (born 1969) is known for her experimental and constantly developing sound and aesthetic. Her recent albums have interrogated ideas of nationalism, political corruption and the suffering caused by war. In 2013 she released the song 'Shaker Aamer', which highlighted the plight of the last British citizen held at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp. Harvey is the only artist in

history to have won the Mercury Music Prize twice and in 2013 received an MBE for services to music.

**Photograph by David Corio**

Silver gelatin print

© David Corio

***The Hollow of the Hand* special edition book, 2015**

PJ Harvey published this first collection of poetry in collaboration with photographer and filmmaker Seamus Murphy. The result of their travels to Afghanistan, Kosovo and Washington D.C., the book was their artistic response to the issues they encountered on their travels, including the human

cost of international conflict and local inequality. Harvey's 2016 album *The Hope Six Demolition Project* put these thoughts to music.

**Published by Bloomsbury, 2015**

**Words by Polly Jean Harvey, images by Seamus Murphy**

Ink on paper

## By Myself

To be a diva is to be at the top of your game. But this position of exceptional talent can be both powerful and lonely. The diva exists at the centre of an extraordinary world, surrounded by professional teams who support and cultivate their creativity, yet only they can step out on stage and deliver.

Divas embody the tension that exists between public persona and private life. The fame and success a diva generates gives them the ability to inspire fans worldwide. In turn, however, their light shines so brightly it fosters an insatiable sense of curiosity about their personal life, leading to invasions of their privacy. Tragically, the pressure that comes with being a diva has driven some performers to dark depths, and the world has lost some of its most dazzling stars. Many of today's divas strive to keep something back for themselves and assert control over their personal lives and public image, sometimes choosing to retreat from the spotlight.

[return to CONTENTS](#)

## **Costume worn by Liza Minnelli in New York, New York, 1977**

Like her mother, Judy Garland, Liza Minnelli (born 1946) has lived her life in the public eye, balancing exceptional talent with a tumultuous private life and battles with addiction. She defied personal torment with anthems of survival including 'Cabaret' and 'Maybe This Time' that won her a legion of devoted fans, particularly within the LGBTQ+ community. Minnelli wore this striking emerald dress in the movie *New York, New York*, during which she belted out the now world-famous title track.

### **Designed by Theadora Van Runckle**

Sequins and polyester

On loan from the Norman Tipton Collection

## **Costume design for *The Judy Garland Show*, 1963**

Minnelli first appeared on screen at age three in her mother Judy Garland's film *In the Good Old Summertime*. They shared a stage again for the American TV programme *The Judy Garland Show*. Bob Mackie designed these playful, complementary looks worn

for one 1963 episode. They reprised the outfits for a joint concert at London's Palladium the following year.

**Designed by Bob Mackie**

Ink and watercolour on paper

Bob Mackie Design Group, Ltd.

**Britney Spears at the American Airlines Arena, Miami, 2004**

The multi-platinum, Grammy award-winning 'Princess of Pop' Britney Spears (born 1981) is one of the most successful entertainers in music history. Her chart-smashing hits defined an era of teen pop. Britney's songs have often grappled with her relationship with fame, and in 2021, an explosive documentary revealed that she had spent 13 years under a conservatorship that controlled her finances, career decisions and personal life. Britney's loyal fans instigated the #FreeBritney movement, demonstrating the power of diva worship.

**Photograph by Frank Micelotta**

Reproduction of photograph

Getty Images

## **Dusty Springfield at Philip Records recording studio, 1962**

With her soulful voice and trendsetting look, Dusty Springfield (1939–99) became one of the popular faces of the ‘Swinging Sixties’ and a camp icon, performing on music shows and reaching an audience of millions on TV and radio. Determined to keep her private life her own, Springfield endured constant media scrutiny surrounding her sexual orientation throughout her career, eventually coming out as bisexual in 1970. Considering this tension between public and private, Springfield stated, ‘Sometimes the ladies give too much of themselves, sometimes not enough’.

### **Photograph by Harry Hammond**

Reproduction of photograph

V&A: 15297-2009

## **Edith Piaf in her apartment in Paris, 1955**

Edith Piaf (1915–63) wrote and performed songs of love and loss in a voice that the French author Jean Cocteau described as ‘like black velvet’. When she died, thousands lined the streets of Paris

to watch her funeral procession. Paris Match reported that there was ‘an electricity of the heart between Piaf and the people of France’. She started her career in Paris’s music halls and became one of France’s top entertainers and recording artists, writing her own lyrics that echoed her personal struggles, passions and addictions.

### **Photograph by Hugues Vassal**

Reproduction of photograph

© Hugues Vassal

### **Harlequin catsuit worn by Siouxsie Sioux, about 2007**

Singer, songwriter and producer Siouxsie Sioux (born 1957) exploded onto the London punk scene in the late 1970s. Siouxsie and the Banshees mixed experimental melody with darkly fantastical lyrics and a unique aesthetic which went on to define the goth scene. Combining fetish wear with heavy graphic makeup and teased hair, Siouxsie remains a totemic figure of the punk and goth subcultures.

Across her five-decade career, the legendary fashion designer Pam Hogg has created striking and outrageous looks for divas from Lady Gaga to Rihanna. This catsuit was worn by Siouxsie Sioux on tour and on the TV show *Later with Jools Holland* in 2007.

### **Designed by Pam Hogg**

Lycra

Harlequin catsuit on loan from Pam Hogg

### **Outfit worn by Debbie Harry on Blondie's European tour, 1979**

Lead singer of Blondie, the glam punk and new wave band, Debbie Harry's (born 1945), style was a colourful mix of grubby punk aesthetics with a sheen of glamour, combining deconstructed or repurposed garments with vintage finds and custom designs. As she put it, 'Fashion should always be a little dangerous'. Harry and designer Stephen Sprouse had a collaborative relationship, and he would often dress her in asymmetrical styles and minimal, modern prints, as seen here.

### **Designed by Stephen Sprouse**

Synthetic textile and elastic

Given by Blondie

V&A: S.283-1980

## **Ensemble worn by Billie Eilish at Glastonbury Festival, 2019**

Billie Eilish (born 2001) is a pioneering artist of her generation. The youngest ever headliner of Glastonbury, she is fearless when expressing herself. The lyrics to her song 'Not my responsibility' are a biting critique of the media and public's obsession with body image. Eilish emerged on the music scene as a teenager in 2015 with a distinctive look of baggy, androgynous clothes worn for comfort and to avoid scrutiny of her body. This ensemble designed by Stella McCartney is inspired by the iconic Beatles film *Yellow Submarine*. Recently, Eilish has embraced a more glamorous look for events like the Met Gala, but still favours her freer style while performing.

### **Designed by Stella McCartney**

Cotton

On loan courtesy of Billie Eilish

Since she was 11 years old, Billie Eilish has written songs about how she sees the world, exploring everything from friendship and love to body image and her feelings.

**What would you write a song about?**

### Poster depicting Debbie Harry, late 1970s

Inspired by Andy Warhol's iconic screen print style, this poster of Debbie Harry is emblazoned with her instantly recognisable look. Her signature style combined a rebellious attitude with vintage glamour. Harry's influence on pop culture is undeniable. From hanging out at Studio 54 with Warhol himself to touring with David Bowie, Harry has become an icon of effortless cool and a pioneer for women in punk.

**Designed by Brian Maloney**

Screen print

V&A: S.3643-1995

## **Poster for Janis Joplin's performance at the Royal Albert Hall, London, 1969**

Janis Joplin (1943–70) is known for her blistering vocals and introspective take on psychedelic rock music. Inspired by Black artists like Bessie Smith, Joplin's interests and style saw her ostracised

from her conservative hometown in Texas. She escaped to San Francisco, home of the countercultural movement and within three years had signed her first record contract. Joplin sold out her debut show in London, which was described by one reviewer as 'the comfortingly embodied voice of love, pain, yearning, freedom and ecstatic experience.'

### **Reproduction of poster**

Courtesy of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, Cleveland, Ohio

## **Janis Joplin lyrics and chord chart, 1960s**

Joplin rose to fame as frontwoman for the band Big Brother & the Holding Company. Her talent and ambition soon exceeded that of her bandmates, and she went solo in 1969. Undeterred by criticism of her outlandish behaviour and style – Joplin embraced the sexual freedom, drug experimentation and beatnik fashions of the late '60s – she shattered expectations for white female pop stars in the 1960s and has left a lasting legacy of rebelliousness, defiance and the power of combining strength with vulnerability.

### **Handwritten lyrics for 'Cry Baby', 1960s**

#### **Written by Janis Joplin**

Reproduction

Courtesy of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, Cleveland, Ohio

### **Handwritten chord chart for 'Kozmic Blues', 1960s**

#### **Written by Janis Joplin**

Reproduction

Courtesy of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, Cleveland, Ohio

## **Patti Smith, 1979**

Punk pioneer and visionary Patti Smith (born 1946) emerged from the male-dominated creative scene of 1970s New York. Witty, acerbic and confrontational, Smith rewrote the punk rulebook with her introspective and sometimes fantastical lyrics that dealt with personal experience. Alongside her one-time partner and creative collaborator Robert Mapplethorpe, Smith influenced a generation of women to embrace their individuality and creativity, especially if it meant going against the grain.

### **Photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe**

Reproduction of a print

## **Missy Elliot at the Hit Factory Recording Studio, New York, 1998**

Missy Elliot (born 1971) released her debut album *Supa Dupa Fly* in 1997. Its inventive beats and fantastical imagery established her as a breakthrough mainstream success, revolutionising the sound and look of contemporary hip-hop. Her visual language, which blends magic realism with Afrofuturism and the uncanny, saw her transform the music video scene. As a producer, Elliot

started her own label, The Goldmind Inc., and has worked with the likes of Beyoncé and Whitney Houston.

### **Photograph by David Corio**

Silver gelatin print

© David Corio

### ***The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, album artwork, 1998**

Ms Lauryn Hill's (born 1975) landmark solo album fused gospel, reggae, hip-hop and soul to create a unique sound. It was hugely successful and influential, winning five Grammys, including Album of the Year. The title refers to Carter G. Woodson's *The Miseducation of The Negro*, a revolutionary text advocating social and education change for African Americans. Charting a similar story of emancipation, Hill's debut album claimed a new space in hip-hop culture for Black feminism, featuring songs about love, loss, motherhood and self-representation.

### **Published by Sony Music Entertainment**

Ink and paper

## **Dress worn by Amy Winehouse to the Brit Awards, 2007**

Amy Winehouse (1983–2011) was one of the outstanding singers of her generation. Her diary-style lyrics laid bare the torments of love and addiction she experienced. Despite her passion for music, she said of her voice, 'If I could give it back just to walk down that street with no hassle, I would'. Tony Bennett described her as 'One of the truest jazz singers I ever heard, she should be treated like Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holliday'.

She was the first female artist to win five Grammys for a single album with *Back to Black* in 2006. She wore this dress to the Brits in 2007, where she won Best Female Artist.

### **Designed by Thornton Bregazzi for Preen**

Synthetic textile

On loan from Preen

## **Amy Winehouse performing at Shepherd's Bush Empire, 2007**

Jo Hale / Stringer. Getty Images

## **Dress worn by Whitney Houston at Grammy Awards, 1994**

Perhaps the definitive pop vocalist, Houston came from a line of inimitable singers including her mother Cissy Houston and cousins Leontyne Price and Dionne Warwick. Her technique and inventiveness, mixing gospel influences with dance pop melodies and soaring ballads proved an unbeatable mix. Houston wore this Marc Bouwer dress the night she won three Grammys, including Record of the Year for 'I Will Always Love You'. Bouwer and Houston enjoyed a long collaborative relationship, and he designed her stage and red carpet looks for over two decades.

### **Designed by Marc Bouwer**

Stretch jersey, rhinestones, beads

On loan from Steven Ciccone

## **Dress design, 1994**

**Design by Marc Bouwer**

Ink and paper

Private collection

## **Whitney Houston performing at Wembley Arena, 1988**

With an incomparable voice spanning three octaves, Whitney Houston (1963–2012) has been credited with being the first ‘pop diva’. Her talent was overshadowed by media intrusion into her personal life and later substance abuse problems. Tragically, Houston died alone in a hotel room where she was staying ahead of the Grammy awards. She lives on today through her music, and her compelling talent continues to inspire future generations.

**Photograph by David Corio**

Silver gelatin print

© David Corio

## Express Yourself

Today the term ‘diva’ has expanded to encompass powerful singers from a variety of genres, branching out from rock, pop and soul into the worlds of punk, rock, hip-hop and rap. As well as stretching the limits of musical styles, dynamic performers from Janis Joplin to Missy Elliot have shocked and enthralled audiences with their arresting, often provocative songs, and trailblazing artistic visions.

Unafraid to transform and reinvent themselves, shapeshifting divas like Madonna, Björk and Lady Gaga are revered for the ability to constantly reimagine their aesthetic. They express themselves in myriad ways, including spectacular stage scenography, other-worldly costumes and music videos that harness the latest technology. This unconstrained energy is often conveyed through the creation of on-stage characters that intersect art, story, fashion and fantasy, combining to form a multifaceted diva that is constantly in flux.

[return to CONTENTS](#)

## **Poster for Vanity Fair with Madonna on the cover, 1991**

The best-selling female artist of all time, Madonna's (born 1958) refusal to conform, unstoppable drive and business acumen transformed the worlds of music and fashion and has affected discourses surrounding feminism, sexuality and ageism. Madonna wore a Monroe-inspired Bob Mackie look for this 1991 cover shoot. By then, she had completed her legendary *Blond Ambition* tour and released *The Immaculate Collection*, which remains the best-selling compilation record by a solo artist.

### **Published by Condé Nast**

Ink and paper

Given by Cassius Matthias

V&A: E.1082-2002

## **AIDS Awareness trading card depicting Madonna, 1993**

A lifelong ally of LGBTQ+ communities, Madonna appeared on this AIDS awareness trading card in the 1990s. She challenged the stigma surrounding HIV/ AIDS, using her public platform to fundraise and educate. Madonna included an AIDS factsheet in

her 1989 album *Like a Prayer* and was honoured with AmFAR's (Foundation for AIDS Research) first Award of Courage.

**Designed by Greg Loudon, produced by Eclipse Enterprises**

Printed ink on paper

V&A: E.170-1997

**Poster for 'Vogue', album cover design, 1990**

'Vogue' was released to support Madonna's role in the movie *Dick Tracy*. It became the best-selling single of 1990 and was accompanied by a now iconic black and white video featuring Madonna and a group of drag-scene vogue dancers performing a perfectly choreographed routine. Adept at capturing the cultural zeitgeist, Madonna introduced underground ball culture to mainstream pop with this song.

**Made by Christine Lacey**

Ink and paper

Given by Greenwich Mural Workshop

V&A: E.162-2011

## **Gown and mask worn by Björk for performance in Reykjavik, Iceland, 2021**

The Icelandic experimental artist Björk (born 1965) continues to reinvent herself musically and visually. She began writing music aged 11 and was a member of the rock band the Sugarcubes, before going on to forge a stratospheric solo career. Sometimes described as ‘post-human’, Björk creates a new world for each album cycle, a landscape of visuals, stage design and costume. Together they build a holistic environment reflecting the intent at the heart of the music.

This gown speaks to Björk’s penchant for dramatic, showstopping stage-wear that is transformative and otherworldly. It is at once unabashed spectacle, protective armour and exploratory speculation into hybrid futures.

### **Gown, 2019**

#### **Designed by Maison Valentino**

Silk

On loan from Maison Valentino

## **Moth mask, 2021**

**Designed by James Merry**

Solid silver

On loan from James Merry

## **Björchid and Ghost Orchid masks worn by Björk, 2016–21**

James Merry, Björk's artistic collaborator, designed these otherworldly masks. Worn during her performances, they transform Björk into a fantastical hybrid being that meld the human form with technology, flora and fauna. These masks are all handmade, skilfully fashioned from a single sheet of metal.

**Designed by James Merry**

Solid silver, vinyl, cotton thread, plastic beads

On loan from James Merry

**(Image)**

## ***Fossora*, album cover artwork, 2022**

**Photograph by Viðar Logi, creative direction**

by Björk and James Merry.

© Viðar Logi

## **Gown worn by Lady Gaga for the Golden Globe Awards, 2019**

Lady Gaga (born 1986) is one of the defining divas of the 21st century. A singer, songwriter, musician, actor and activist, her influences range from avant-garde performance art to classic Hollywood glamour. She constantly reinvents herself, whether singing jazz standards with Tony Bennett or exploring performance art with Marina Abramovic.

Gaga wore this gown to accept the Golden Globe award for Best Original Song for 'Shallow', in *A Star is Born*. In 2020 Gaga was named the muse and ambassador for a new Valentino perfume, continuing a tradition kicked off by Elizabeth Taylor with the 1985 release of her fragrance Passion.

### **Designed by Maison Valentino**

Silk

On loan from Maison Valentino

## **Lady Gaga wearing slime dress by Bart Hess, 2010**

Nick Knight created this image for the release of Lady Gaga's second studio album. *Born This Way* was a celebration of the freedom to live authentically, personal evolution and transformation. It reintroduced Gaga with a new visual identity that moved away from the dark, edgy glamour of her debut album *The Fame*. Gaga was reborn as 'the beginning of the new race... a race which bears no prejudice, no judgment, but boundless freedom'.

### **Photograph by Nick Knight**

Hand-coated pigment print

On loan from Nick Knight

(Moving Image)

## **Clip from ‘Born This Way’ music video by Lady Gaga, 2011**

In this video, director Nick Knight captures Lady Gaga’s spirit of reinvention as she is born into a dark, kaleidoscopic universe that shifts from the beautiful to the unsettling. Knight has an enduring creative relationship with Gaga which includes the creation of large-scale projections for the Monster Ball and Chromatica world tours.

**Directed by Nick Knight**

© Interscope, 2011

**Running time: approximately 2 minutes**

# A Star is Born

To play the diva requires exceptional talent, dedication and the pursuit of perfection, but also the behind-the-scenes support of creative teams who work to construct and maintain captivating personas. In many ways, divas throughout history have been a fantasy, or a performance in themselves.

A diva's public image can take many forms, from symbols of female empowerment to high camp icons for LGBTQ+ and drag communities, from showbiz drama queens to unstoppable activists. Maintaining this iconic status takes a lot of work, and can cast a negative light on divas as demanding and excessive, both in their behaviour and lifestyle. But the true measure of a diva lies in their legacy and influence, and the way their art, voice and actions inspire fans, and impact culture and society. Each generation of divine performers inspires the next, creating a shimmering pantheon of artists whose power and creativity cannot be extinguished.

[return to CONTENTS](#)

## **Design for costume worn by Cher at MGM Grand opening, 1978**

Design by Bob Mackie

Ink and watercolour on paper

Bob Mackie Design Group, Ltd

## **Design for costume worn by Cher to promote perfume launch, about 1987**

**Design by Bob Mackie**

Ink and watercolour on paper

Bob Mackie Design Group, Ltd

## **Costume design for ensemble worn by Cher at the inaugural Rock Music Awards, 1975**

Long-time friends and collaborators, Cher and costume designer Bob Mackie have worked together closely for years to create her spectacular stage costumes and show-stopping red carpet looks. Mackie recalls that in the 1970s, on her self-named TV show, Cher would wear up to 20 costumes in an hour-long programme, describing the diva as ‘looking good in so many things, the more interesting and exotic, the better’.

## **Design by Bob Mackie**

Ink and watercolour on paper

Bob Mackie Design Group, Ltd

## **‘Flame dress’ design for Tina Turner, 1977**

Design by Bob Mackie

Ink and watercolour on paper

Bob Mackie Design Group, Ltd

## **Star Trail**

**(Kids’ Label)**

Look at the shapes, colours and details in these costume designs

– can you find a costume behind you that matches?

**Have you ever thought about designing an outfit or piece of clothing?**

**What do you think are the most important elements to show in a design drawing?**

**Costume worn by Kylie Minogue in *Kylie Aphrodite Les Folies* tour, 2011**

The image of Aphrodite, the goddess of love emerging from the sea, inspired the elaborate and highly technical set for Kylie's *Aphrodite Les Folies* tour. Dolce & Gabbana designed Kylie's costumes, fully embracing the heavenly charms of Aphrodite with floaty lengths of pale chiffon, rows of pearls and an array of sparkling accessories.

**Designed by Dolce & Gabbana**

Gift of Kylie Minogue, 2015

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**Clam shell stage prop from the opening act of the *Kylie Aphrodite Les Folies* tour, 2011**

**Designed by Josh Zangen**

Manufactured by PRG

Gift of Kylie Minogue, 2019

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

## **Gown and wellies worn by Dame Shirley Bassey for Glastonbury Festival, 2007**

Shirley Bassey (born 1937) is a powerhouse vocalist whose voice has taken her from humble beginnings in Cardiff to global fame. A trailblazing artist, her first single 'Burn My Candle' was banned by the BBC for its alleged sexual innuendo. Undeterred, Bassey soon won over UK and US audiences. Cultural icon and Dame Commander OBE, she is glamour personified.

Over her eight-decade career, Bassey has performed on many stages, from New York's Carnegie Hall to Buckingham Palace. But her iconic performance for the 'legend' slot at Glastonbury introduced a younger generation to her music and style. Wearing a fabulous sequined gown, slit to the thigh to reveal bespoke diamante-embellished wellies, Bassey showed the world how a diva does festival chic.

### **Gown designed by Julien Macdonald**

Silk, diamante, feathers, glass beads

On loan from Dame Shirley Bassey

## **Customised wellies**

### **Designed by Julien Macdonald**

Rubber, glass, plastic, metal, silk

On loan from Dame Shirley Bassey

## **Original musical score to ‘Diamonds are Forever’, 1971**

The recording of a sweeping *James Bond* theme song has unofficially become a marker of a great diva. Bassey is the ultimate Bond diva, the first to do it with 1964’s ‘Goldfinger’ and the most prolific.

‘Diamonds are Forever’ was her second Bond performance and she also went on to record the theme for *Moonraker*. Other performers including Tina Turner, Adele, Madonna and Billie Eilish have since taken the helm.

### **Composed by John Barry**

Ink and paper

On loan from Dame Shirley Bassey

**Kylie Minogue performing 'Aphrodite' in *Kylie Aphrodite*  
*Les Folies* tour, 2011**

Courtesy of Warner Music Australia Limited

**Written by Pallot/Chatterley**

Courtesy of Mushroom Music (Reservoir 416 / Blue Raincoat Music Publishing) and Universal Music Publishing Pty Ltd

**Running time: approximately 2 minutes**

**Costume worn by Cher to promote her perfume launch and costume design, 1987**

Cher has transformed into an Egyptian goddess many times in her career. Here Mackie created a glittery 'naked dress'. A look he originated for Cher for the 1974 Met Gala, it has gone on to become a red-carpet favourite for many divas. For Mackie, the naked dress is not about shock value or getting a perfect selfie – it is about the craftsmanship that goes into making a woman's body look flawless and creating that nude illusion.

## **Designed by Bob Mackie**

Synthetic textile, silk velvet and crystal beads

On loan from Cher

## **Costume worn by Cher at MGM Grand opening in Las Vegas, 1978**

Cher began her career as one half of the popular duo Sonny & Cher but lived in the shadow of her husband Sonny Bono, who controlled her career. Cher later remembered how, 'Five years before I left him, I wanted to leave, but the show was so popular that I was afraid'. After they divorced, Cher rose to forge a magnificent solo career. She found independent fame and empowerment on television, revolutionising the variety show format. Bob Mackie's costume creations bolstered Cher's transformation.

## **Designed by Bob Mackie**

Chiffon, satin, aluminium, pheasant feathers, crystal and glass beads

On loan from Cher

## **Ensemble worn by Cher at the inaugural Rock Music Awards, 1975**

Global icon Cher (born 1946) set the trend for divas to be known by a single name. Over the course of her unrivalled career, she has reinvented herself in every decade, as a 1960s hippie, queen of the '70s TV variety show, a rock and dance diva in the 1980s and '90s, and more recently as Vegas headliner and *Mamma Mia!* movie star. She wore this two-piece embellished ensemble at the 1975 Rock Music Awards, when she presented the award for Rock Personality of the Year to Elton John.

### **Designed by Bob Mackie**

Chiffon, satin and crystal

Bob Mackie Design Group, Ltd.

## **Bob Mackie's 'Flame dress', 1977**

Tina Turner (1939–2023), dubbed the 'Queen of Rock 'n' Roll', found fame with the Ike & Tina Turner Revue in the 1950s and '60s. The act was wildly successful, with Turner known for her blistering vocals and furiously energetic performance but behind the scenes, Ike was an abusive husband. Breaking free from him, Turner embarked on a solo career, reclaiming independence and success on her own terms. A long-time friend and collaborator, Bob Mackie created many high-octane looks for Turner over the course of her career. This costume is perhaps the most famous. Known simply as the 'Flame Dress', fellow divas Beyonce and RuPaul have both worn versions of the look in iconic tribute.

### **Designed by Bob Mackie**

Chiffon, synthetic textile, mylar, crystal and plastic sequins

Bob Mackie Design Group, Ltd

# Act III: Diva Constellations

**Video Designer** Tal Rosner

**Technical Consultant / Systems** Nick Joyce

**Technical Consultant / Mapping** David Shepherd

**Lead Animator** Darren Culley

**Boards Development** Tali Oliver

**Additional 3D** Dale Croft

**Video Content Producer** Rachael Shepherd

Marlene Dietrich Photograph by Eugene Robert Richee / John Kobal Foundation / Getty Images Tina Turner Photograph by Paul Natkin / Getty Images Janis Joplin Photograph by Michael Ochs Archives / Getty Images Marilyn Monroe Ian Dagnall Computing / Alamy Stock Photo Mariah Carey Photograph by Paul Bergen / Redferns / Getty Images Nina Simone Photograph by Michael Ochs Archives / Getty Images Shirley Bassey Photograph by Harry Hammond / Victoria and Albert Museum Maria Callas Photograph by Houston Rogers / Victoria and Albert Museum Isadora Duncan Unknown artist / Victoria and Albert Museum Adele Photograph by Gareth Cattermole / Getty Images for Adele Josephine Baker Photograph by Michael Ochs Archives / Getty

Images Cher Photograph by Bob Riha Jr / Getty Images Rihanna

Photograph by Christopher Polk / Getty Images Dolly Parton

Photograph by Tom Hill / WireImage / Getty Images Liza Minnelli

Photograph by Silver Screen Collection / Getty Image

[return to CONTENTS](#)

# Australian Postlude

## **Costume worn by Kate Miller-Heidke in the 2019 Eurovision Song Contest**

Kate Miller-Heidke (born 1981) effortlessly traverses pop and opera. Classically trained, she has broken new ground in contemporary music, staying true to herself with her unique voice and vulnerable lyricism. Miller-Heidke represented Australia at the 2019 Eurovision Song Contest with her song 'Zero Gravity'. The ambitious performance featured the physically and vocally demanding spectacle of soaring above the stage on a five-metre 'sway pole' devised by performing arts company Strange Fruit.

## **Costume designed by Steven Khalil**

## **Headpiece designed by Chantelle Ford (Ford Millinery)**

Gift of Kate Miller-Heidke, 2025

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**Costume worn by Caroline O'Connor as Reno Sweeney in  
Anything Goes, Opera Australia and John Frost, 2015**

Costume worn by Caroline O'Connor as Reno Sweeney in Anything Goes, Opera Australia and John Frost, 2015 Caroline O'Connor (born 1962) has performed in theatres on Broadway and in the West End. In 2001, O'Connor appeared as tango dancer, Nini Legs in the Air, in Baz Luhrmann's iconic film *Moulin Rouge*, which led to her Broadway debut as Velma Kelly in *Chicago*. In 2004, O'Connor played American musical theatre star Ethel Merman in Cole Porter's biopic *De-Lovely*. Merman starred as feisty nightclub performer Reno Sweeney in the original Broadway production of *Anything Goes*, so it was fitting that O'Connor followed her footsteps in the 2015 Australian production.

**Designed by Dale Ferguson**

Gift of John Frost AM, 2019

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**Costume worn by Lucy Durack as Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde*, The Gordon Frost Organisation and the Ambassador Theatre Group, 2012**

Lucy Durack (born 1982) is one of Australia's leading ladies on stage and screen. Durack made her start on television before being cast in the iconic role of Glinda in the first Australian production of *Wicked* in 2008, which ran for a record-breaking four years. In 2012, Durack starred as the character Elle Woods in the Australian production of *Legally Blonde*. The performance won her both a Helpmann Award and Sydney Theatre Award for Best Lead Actress in a Musical.

**Designed by Gregg Barnes**

Gift of John Frost AM, 2019

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**Costume worn by Jill Perryman as Dolly Levi in *Hello, Dolly!*, The Gordon Frost Organisation, 1995**

Jill Perryman (born 1933) had a career as a leading lady in Australia spanning 70 years. She made her stage debut at the age of three and learnt her craft in popular musicals of the 1950s and 60s such as *Call Me Madam*, *South Pacific*, and *Funny Girl*. Her first big break came in 1965 when she replaced American star Carole Cook as Dolly Levi in the first Australian production of *Hello, Dolly!*. 30 years later Perryman revisited the role for the anniversary production of the musical.

**Designed by Tim Goodchild**

Gift of John Frost AM. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2001.

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**Justine Rettick as Amneris in *Aida*, National Theatre Opera Company, Melbourne, 1948**

**Photograph by Helmut Newton**

Gift of Justine Hall (née Rettick), 2011

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**Marie Collier in the title role of *Tosca*, Covent Garden Opera Company, London, c.1965**

**Photograph by Reg Wilson**

Gift of Alfred Douglas Atkinson, 1994

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**Reg Livermore in *Sacred Cow*, 1979**

**Photograph by Craig Lamotte**

Gift of Reg Livermore AO, 2006

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**Robyn Archer in *Tonight: Lola Blau*, The Space, Adelaide, 1979**

**Photograph by Robert McFarlane**

Purchased, 1985

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**Outfit worn by Kylie Minogue in the music video for 'Spinning Around' from the album**

***Light Years*, 2000**

This year marks the 25th anniversary of Kylie Minogue's chart-topping hit, 'Spinning Around'. Introducing a change of direction stylistically, the song and music video gained iconic status and Kylie's famous gold hot pants have become an enduring legacy.

**Top designed by Chloé**

**Hotpants designer unknown**

Gift of Kylie Minogue. Donated through the Australia Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2004.

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

**Outfit worn by Kylie Minogue in the music video for  
'Spinning Around' from the album *Light Years*, 2000**

**Top designed by Alexander McQueen**

**Shorts designed by Stella McCartney for Chloé**

Gift of Kylie Minogue. Donated through the Australia  
Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2004.

Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

[return to CONTENTS](#)