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# Femmes, Furs, & Farce: Queer Dress & Art in Early-Mid 20th Century America

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## ABSTRACT

The focus of this research paper is the utilization of queer self-styling in personal life and queer art in the United States from 1905-1955. This paper aims to add to the current conversation in queer theory and historical dress by addressing a current fragmentation of existing study through an approach that synthesizes several decades, subcultures, and styles of dress. Continuing the investigation into the role of fashion in queer history, this paper focuses heavily on both personal and media-related topics, including the queerness of the early cinema industry and the prevalence of lesbian pulp novels. The framework used to collect data was a qualitative, inductive approach; this research was conducted using thematic historical image analysis with a basis in ethnographic study to analyze and organize results. After compiling 44 photos from the first half of the 20th century and dividing them into the categories "Personal Photos" and "Queer Art," the investigation showed 6 themes that were pervasive throughout the collection: Subversion, Covertness, Performance, Romantic Connection, Community, and Camp. Ultimately, it was found that self-styling in the early-mid 20th century was employed by queer individuals and communities for a diverse range of functions, from concealment to performative self-expression. These results carry implications for analyses of modern-day uses of dress in queer spaces and sociological conceptions of symbolic interactionism. Future investigations should focus on applying the themes deduced in this paper to other geographies and periods of history, as well as on expanding the image database created in this study.

## Introduction & Historical Context

The word queer is, for the purpose of this research, defined as any identity or expression falling outside ascribed conceptions of heterosexuality and binary gender presentation—outward presentation not strictly aligned with one's assigned sex at birth. Despite 'queer' originating as a derogatory term denoting queerness as inferior by way of peculiarity,[1] it will be used throughout this paper both as a means of reclamation and an all-encompassing identifier. During the first half of the 20th century, versions of the earlier queer community were more dispersed and overarchingly 'queer' rather than broken down into specific sub-groups, like the modern-day lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ+) community.

The United States saw complex, massive social upheavals in the 20th century, including in regards to queer community and art. The late 1800s and early 1900s can be most clearly represented by the era of "romantic friendships": particularly close relationships between two same-sex individuals, which often become the

[1] Coles, Gregory. "The Exorcism of Language: Reclaimed Derogatory Terms and Their Limits." *College English* 78, no. 5 (2016): 424–46. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44075135.

cause of dispute between varied queered and assumedly heterosexual readings.[2] This period of time is notable in its existence prior to the emergence of sexology as a study and the conception of sexual identity as a role in and of itself.[3] As cinema gained traction as an industry and a cultural institution, beginning in the 1920s, queerness began to be able to be read in film figures' costuming, mannerisms, and characterizations. Explicitly queer archetypes were created, such as the 'sissy' and 'pansy,' and, beginning in the 1930s, the 'New Woman.' This latter characterization was expressed in women either overtly, through stylistic signifiers such as a "tailored suit, monocle, and short hair," or, more commonly, through "lesbian connotations."[4] While implied lesbianism was acceptable in major stars like Ginger Rogers and Marlene Dietrich due to its ability to be concealed, more explicit overtones like tomboyishness were represented more seriously. Strict restrictions on representation of queer-coded characters, instituted in 1937 by the Production Code Administration (PCA) shifted the landscape of queer expression to a more covert one.[5]

At its beginning in the 1930s and 40s, the 'queer community' as we might understand it today was akin to more small and discrete groups of individuals with shared identities, rather than a nation-wide collective. The community was the site of distinct subcultures of self-styling, defined as the deliberately selected fashion—clothing, accessories, makeup, and gestures—making up the personal style of an individual or group of people. An example of community self-styling is lesbian butch-femme culture,[6] which was most apparent in its original form between the end of World War II and the beginning of the Gay Liberation Movement in 1969.[7]

Queer communities during both the era of butch-femme culture and earlier years took inspiration from queer icons of the cinema in developing their own styles and communication,[8] as well as referencing the queer individuals surrounding them, rather than established heterosexual standards of the time.[9] For example, covert and detailed symbols like pinky rings, a particular styling of a handkerchief, "the length of one's fingernails, or how to hold a cigarette" were all aspects of self-styling originating from, and understood within, the butch-femme community, as opposed to replications of heterosexual relationships.[10] Overlapping, and no doubt interplaying with, this cultural stage was the emergence and prevalence of pulp novels, which provided accessible, otherwise-lacking literary lesbian representation, despite being directed at a heterosexual male audience and often disregarded by scholars because of their "low-brow," vulgar, and unsophisticated characteristics. Pulp

[2] VanHaitsma, Pamela. "Stories of Straightening Up: Reading Femmes in the Archives of Romantic Friendship." *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 6, no. 3 (2019): 1-24. https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.6.3.0001.

[3] Richardson, Diane. "Patterned Fluidities: (Re) Imagining the Relationship between Gender and Sexuality." *Sociology* 41, no. 3 (2007): 457-74. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42857007.

[4] Lugowski, David M. "Queering the (New) Deal: Lesbian and Gay Representation and the Depression-Era Cultural Politics of Hollywood's Production Code." *Cinema Journal* 38, no. 2 (1999): 3-35. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1225622.

[5] Lugowski, *Queering the (New) Deal*, 21-22.

[6] Valk, A. M.. "Lesbian Feminism." Encyclopedia Britannica, December 21, 2018. https://www.britannica.com/topic/lesbian-feminism.

[7] Genter, Alix. "Appearances Can Be Deceiving: Butch-Femme Fashion and Queer Legibility in New York City, 1945–1969." *Feminist Studies* 42, no. 3 (2016): 604-31. https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.42.3.0604.

[8] Lugowski, *Queering the (New) Deal*, 26-27.

[9] Genter, *Appearances Can Be Deceiving*, 624.

[10] Genter, *Appearances Can Be Deceiving*, 611, 612, 624.

novels, or 'pulps,' were "inexpensive paperbacks" published in the mid-twentieth century that depicted formulaic narratives, including many sexualized lesbian relationships.[11] Depictions of lesbian characters, on occasion in clear butch-femme dynamics, adorned the covers of these novels,[12] providing media depictions of queer dress, however accurate or inaccurate to the everyday styles of queer individuals themselves during the mid-20th century.

The issue of queering history is a contentious one. Dominant narratives in historical spaces tend to work to make history appear less queer than it was, whether through malicious erasure, unwillingness to ascribe modern labels to past stories, or careless overlooking of queer sensibilities. My study will be working within the discipline of history, and as such, it is necessary before delving into the content of history itself to recognize the lens through which I will be viewing it; in this instance, a distinctly queered one. It is imperative to both be wary about imposing modern queer labels on those who existed before the formation of those very identities and avoid ignoring potential queerness in an attempt to further heterosexist narratives.[13]

## Literature Review

As stated, the issue of 'queering' vs. 'straightening' the past is an issue highly discussed within queer history studies; one exemplified deftly in Pamela VanHaitsma's study on the use of archival research in discovering queer narratives. VanHaitsma argues for an intentionally queer reading of archives, particularly in regards to romantic friendships between femme-presenting women, as a means to take a critical perspective on dominant, traditional readings of pre-sexological relationships. Arguing that a lack of explicit statements about queerness in historic texts—especially primary correspondence—does not work as evidence of celibacy/straightness, she posits that queer people may find pleasure in "secrecy, revelation, and trickery" by *intentionally* passing as cisgender or heterosexual.[14] Richard Thompson Ford provides a non-queered view on this issue with his assertion that binary gendered clothing has "offered a sense of identity, satisfying eroticism, and comfort in one's own skin for generations of men and women,"[15] and that dress often prioritizes symbolism over physical comfort because "there is a lot more to comfort" than tactile sensation.[16] The focus of this research lies in how that notion can be applied to queer individuals specifically. Emphasizing the role of symbolism and meaning in fashion, these arguments support the idea that queer individuals through history had the ability to consciously control the openness of their own identity through personal style.

Samuel W.D. Walburn explores a similar theme of intentional personal concealment in the context of 1930s queer men's culture and attests to the benefits of reading queerness into history. According to Walburn, queer individuals and communities in the early 20th century often had to communicate covertly, through messaging that only those like them would pick up on. His case study on the work of Paul Cadmus, a queer painter active throughout the 1930s and 40s, establishes that, while historians have read queer themes into Cadmus's work, they have largely failed to pick up on some of the more deeply embedded representations specifically

[11] Foote, Stephanie. "Deviant Classics: Pulps and the Making of Lesbian Print Culture." *Signs* 31, no. (2005): 169-90.https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/432742.
[12] Keller, Yvonne. "'Was It Right to Love Her Brother's Wife so Passionately?': Lesbian Pulp Novels and U.S. Lesbian Identity, 1950-1965." *American Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2005): 385-410. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40068271.
[13] VanHaitsma, *Stories of Straightening Up*, 4-6.
[14] VanHaitsma, *Stories of Straightening Up*, 17-18.
[15] Ford, Richard Thompson. *Dress Codes: How the Laws of Fashion Made History*. N.p.: Simon and Schuster, 2021.
[16] Ford, *Dress Codes*, 136

intended for understanding by those in the queer community.[17] Alix Genter corroborates this notion in her paper on 20th century butch-femme fashion culture within the lesbian community; her research informs the understanding that subcultures who exist as subversions of widely acceptable behaviors (e.g. queerness) will develop means of—often discreet—in-group communication.[18]

Annamari Vänskä explores queer signifiers further through a specifically dress-oriented lens in her paper on queer fashion history exhibits, claiming it detrimental to view history while strictly focusing on individual identity, as doing so restricts nuance, leaves little room for intersectionality, and leads to confusion on whether a person's work can be considered 'queer.'[19] This, while mostly in agreement with VanHaitsma, Walburn, and Genter's points about viewing history through a queer lens, diverges by taking emphasis off personal identity and placing it on the art, creation, and fashion itself. Vänskä and Genter make a near-identical claim in their respective studies about the significance of dress to the queer community in the 20th century, both emphasizing how small details of a queer individual's outfit make it discernible to other members of the community.[20] Genter applies this notion of detailed expression to butch-femme culture, explaining how differences between butches and femmes, when not immediately apparent, was expressed through physical gestures and interpersonal dynamics.[21]

Concepts of queer representation in the early-mid 20th century, in the forms of cinema, art, and literature, play into this conversation as well. David Lugowski's study on queer representation in 1930s American cinema finds that queer fashioning in film, while most often offensive and stereotypical, at times led to queer characters who were "treated with affection and even respect by others [...] within individual films."[22] Laura Horak identifies two distinct eras of cross-dressing women in cinema; the first, from 1908-1921, was marked by rural settings and "stage conventions." The second, from 1922-1928, shifted to a younger, more cosmopolitan characterization of cross-dressing women—with a significant increase in romantic plotlines.[23] When entering the age of pulp novels, a differing phenomenon can be observed. Depictions of lesbian dynamics in these books were both themselves modeled after butch-femme archetypes of the period, and, in some cases—in what Yvonne Keller refers to as 'pro-lesbian' pulps—served as influences for emerging lesbian cultures and fashions.[24] Each of these points demonstrates the use of personal expression in the early-mid 20th century both as a form of individualized expression and a response to representation from other queer individuals and media depictions.

A clear, rich conversation exists on the topic of queer expression in 20th century America, examining a broad scope of art forms, purposes, and cultural ramifications. Despite these available analyses and chronologies, however, there is a definitive lack of a more condensed, uniform study which synthesizes the implications of queer dress over a larger span of time. This paper will contribute to the current conversation on queerness in the first half of the 20th century by providing a cohesive examination of queer dress, especially in its community-centric uses. For example, butch-femme culture is a community-centric use of dress, as it demonstrates

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[17] Walburn, Samuel WD. "'A Most Disgraceful, Sordid,Disreputable, Drunken Brawl': Paul Cadmus and the Politics of Queerness in the Early Twentieth Century." *The Purdue Historian* 8, no. 1 (2017): 1-14. http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/puhistorian/vol8/iss1/2.

[18] Genter, *Appearances Can Be Deceiving*

[19] Vänskä, Annamari. "From Gay to Queer—Or, Wasn't Fashion Always Already a Very Queer Thing?" *Fashion Theory* 18, no. 4 (2014): 447-63. https://doi.org/10.2752/175174114x13996533400079.

[20] Vänskä, *From Gay to Queer*, 451

[21] Genter, *Appearances Can Be Deceiving*, 624

[22] Lugowski, *Queering the (New) Deal*, 27

[23] Horak, Laura. *Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women, Lesbians, and American Cinema, 1908-1934*. E-book ed., Rutgers UP, 2016.

[24] Keller, *'Was It Right to Love Her Brother's Wife so Passionately?'*

identity within the queer community to fellow queer individuals. Through delving into the cultural significance of dress to the queer community, its function as an in-group signal to other queer-identified individuals, and the impact of evolving media representation of queerness, this study will integrate depictions of queer dress in an ethnographic historical image analysis to create a more synthesized picture of the era than previously established. Through this research, I aim to answer the question: How did queer individuals and communities utilize self-styling in personal life and queer art in the first half of the 20th century in the United States?

## Methods

The study of this topic is imperative so we, as a community of historians and queer theorists, are better able to understand historical queer dress in an age of developing mass media as well as rapid formation of queer identities, communities, and stark shifts in popular dress. My research will serve to shine a more comprehensive light on the topic; to create a full picture out of a currently-fragmented history. I hypothesized that the first half of the 20th century would be able to be analyzed through a collection of well-defined, if overlapping and interacting, themes of queer dress as it related to representation. This, as stated, necessitates that I will be observing history with the acknowledgement of queerness's potential presence in all facets of historical life and culture, rather than with the assumption of queerness. In order to best address this goal, this research paper aims to answer my research question through an ethnographic historical image analysis.

Given these considerations, it is necessary to expound upon each aspect of my research methodology in this study. I will be conducting qualitative research, which focuses on thematic analysis and induction of meaning and patterns from gathered data. Here, this is the most effective method to utilize so I am able to use the data—in the form of historical photos—to form my own themes and conclusions. Ethnographic research is a form of qualitative research that examines a specific culture or group of people, especially as they relate to the world at large through their own perspectives. My research contains an ethnographic basis, rather than a distinctly ethnographic method, as it fixates specifically on queer culture.

A historical method is most clearly used here, as I reflected on the past to interpret meaning from the events of history and worked to amalgamate them into a consolidated narrative. Within this paper, this has meant observing, analyzing, contextualizing, and integrating selected American queer images from the first half of the 20th century to best fulfill my ultimate purpose. In regard to the research design I undertook, a process of image analysis was the most effective. Image analysis is a method involving the collection of preexisting photos and illustrations to determine patterns in social phenomena. Utilizing image analysis provided me a way to extract themes from existing resources; to draw narratives from previously-disjointed pieces of media and effectively explore 20th-century queer expression through a new, condensed, contextualized lens.

I conducted secondary research that did not deal with living subjects or harmful substances, so I did not require an Institutional Review Board for approval. Further, there are no potential ethical issues because this study had no human participants. My completed research resulted in a collection of images from the first half of the twentieth century, through which I have found and quantified themes about queerness, dress, and expression. This acts as an accumulation to be read alongside this study, as well as a database for future research to reference and explore further. I utilized thematic analysis of the images and pieces of art I collected in my research, creating a framework for organization that developed as I progressed through my investigation. This approach is fitting for my research because I examined existing content in a newly created collection, from a new lens. Thus, my analysis required qualitative thematic study that observed details of dress and art with specificity and care. No particular permissions were needed to conduct this study since I drew all of my data from preexisting resources.

This research design is not without limitations. Finding a truly wide breadth of media to analyze—so as to avoid overrepresenting a certain demographic or geographic location—was difficult given a fixed set of resources to pull from. Further, interpretation and categorization of themes in the collected pieces is susceptible

to personal bias given my own place within queer community discourse. It is with this acknowledgement that I follow Pamela VanHaitsma's model of conscious self-situating;[25] my research is informed by a queer lens both deliberately, through research design, and personally, as a self-identified queer individual with my own experiences in deliberate dress. Finally, the age of the media I collected means its complexities are not able to be fully accessed and accounted for. It is impossible to know what media has been lost to time, and what details are unable to be fully realized today due to schisms between technology of 1905-1955 and that of the modern age.

In conducting my research, between November and January, I focused on accumulating databases to draw images from, and researching books, paintings, and films that would be applicable to my study. Following this, I shifted to extracting themes and building a framework for data analysis from the garnered media in January and February. By late February, I drew conclusions from the analysis and translated my findings into my final paper. The ultimate iteration of this study contributes to the landscape of research by providing a consolidated, overarching examination of queerness. Its contributions include a better understanding of the direct connections between dress and queerness in history, synthesis of multiple forms of media, and more comprehensive study of the entire first half of the twentieth century. In order to better future studies, this research necessitates extensive and precise care when viewing history with queer identity in mind. Furthermore, it places emphasis on dress as a significant marker of the communities, identities, and cultures of historical society, particularly as it relates to queerness within the first half of the twentieth century.

## Data Analysis

To begin my image analysis, I first collected photos depicting historical queerness, beginning in 1905 and ending in 1955. Using various sources, such as dedicated queer image databases (e.g. Lesbian Herstory Archives[26] and The Yale Film Archive[27]), I amassed 44 photos in total, and divided them into two categories, 22 images each, to compare: Personal Photos and Queer Art. Each photograph is known to have either a queer subject(s), queer creator, or queer implications through the styling. After aggregating the photos into a table where they are displayed in chronological order (see Appendix A for full collection), I analyzed the styling found in the images to determine a series of themes that run throughout the group. Ultimately, I isolated 6 individual themes that describe the purpose or effect of the dress seen in each image: Dress as Subversion, as Covertness, as Performance, in Romantic Connection, in Community, and as Camp. Photos can exemplify multiple themes, but themes are not multiplied for each individual subject in the photo. For example, the still from the 1931 film *Morocco*[28] is categorized as Subversion, Performance, and Romantic Connection. These themes, and the way they're expressed through specific aspects of styling, reveal the uses of dress for queer communities throughout the time period and allow conclusions to be drawn about the diverse means of expression the photos depict.

Data Table: Thematic Identification

| Theme | Definition | Frequency in | Frequency in |
|---|---|---|---|

[25] VanHaitsma, *Stories of Straightening Up*

[26] "Lesbian Herstory Archives." Digital Culture of Metropolitan New York. https://dcmny.org/do/069ca086-b543-4147-832a-55d1adf0e932.

[27] "The Yale Film Archive Collection of LGBT Films, DVD's, and Videos." Yale University. https://yrihs.yale.edu/research-resources/yale-film-archive-collection-lgbt-films-dvds-and-videos.

[28] von Stenberg, Josef. *Morocco*. 1930. Photograph. http://pre-code.com/morocco-1930-review-with-marlene-dietrich-and-gary-cooper/.

| | | Personal Photos | Art |
|---|---|---|---|
| Subversion | Dress that subverts traditional (hetero- and cis-normative) expectations of gender presentation | 11 | 10 |
| Covertness | Dress which aligns with traditional expectations of gender presentation and often allows for the concealment of queerness | 10 | 7 |
| Performance | Dress explicitly for the purpose of performing a particular image of gender to an audience, given the context of the photo | 3 | 5 |
| Romantic Connection | Dress in photos of stated or interpreted queer romantic pairings | 6 | 13 |
| Community | Dress for the purpose of shared identity with others in a collective queer community | 8 | 2 |
| Camp | Dress over-exaggerating traditional expectations of gender in a theatrical or farcical manner | 2 | 7 |

Subversion of expectations about dress imposed under a system oppressive to queerness was a pervasive theme, which appeared in the photos primarily in the form of cross-dressing. The majority of subversive examples of dress, 89.7%, are those of masculinized dress on those perceived to be women. Recurring themes throughout these photos include hats, bow ties, and tuxedo suits in the earlier years of the time frame (e.g. *Two Women*[29]); and by the late 40s and 50s, such repeated aspects shift to short hair—cropped above the shoulder—button-up shirts, and pants or shorts. Feminized subversive dress often portrays the luxurious and high-class elements of femininity: furs, bold makeup, pearls, velvet, etc. Eight photos contain both Subversion and Romantic Connection, in which at least one individual in the couple is dressed subversively, and five photos contain both Subversion and Community. This overlap is notable, indicating that subversive dress may have been used as a means to find other queer folk to share connection with; or, that the security of being around other queer folk allowed subversion to persist and flourish because of either the comfort of a romantic partner or social protection from a group of shared identity.

Conversely, many of the images display examples of dress that *did* fit into the norms of the era. The photos classified within Covertness are those seemingly aligning with the expectations of the subjects' gendered clothing. For (perceived) women, this includes skirts, dresses, longer, styled hair, and a subtly made-up face. In the images of pulp novel covers, the women in covert clothing tend to be styled in lighter colors or have lighter hair—an aspect to be touched on again in later sections. Two examples of covert dress include military uniforms: one personal photo, *Davis & J.C.*,[30] and one piece of art, *Women's Barracks.*[31] The former shows

[29] Forsyth, D.H. *Two Women.* 1905. Photograph. https://apps.lib.umich.edu/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/lgbtheritage/item/1811?exhibit=106&page=803.

[30] *Davis & J.C.* 1951. Photograph. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/photo-collection-shows-19th-and-20th-century-gay-relationships-180976161/.

[31] Torres, Tereska. *Women's Barracks*. 1950. Illustration. https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2032924.

two men in uniforms and Garrison caps in front of one another on a bench, while the latter shows three women in a changing room in various levels of undress from their uniforms. The sexualization of the feminine example displays how the sexualization of women, especially by the later years of this study, was a means of communicating covertness—particularly in pulp novels. This sexualization, emphasizing the hidden queerness of a character, appears through low necklines, lingerie, or a suggestive recline on a bed or other surface.

Alternately, the masculine examples of covertness most frequently appear in suits, blazers, ties, and pants; in the 1910s, they appear in button-up shirts without the formal wear, as in *E. Thieniann & M. Hunter*.[32] It is, of course, true that not every queer individual dressed covertly with the intent of being hidden, as not every queer person wished to dress obviously queer. However, the effect of concealment is nevertheless present, and thus must be understood as a facet of self-styling given the impossibility of knowing the true desires of these subjects in an era which would have punished them for expressing a venture into queerness. There is oftentimes a juxtaposition in these images between covert clothing and overtly queer romantic acts, notable in *Wonder Bar*.[33]

The images falling under Performance tend to be exaggerated portrayals of gender, and thus overlap considerably with Camp—37.5% of images marked for Performance are marked with both. Importantly, not all dress in Queer Art is considered Performance just because the piece is created for an audience. For clothing to be Performance, the individual in dress must be intentionally exuding an image portrayed through self-styling in a performative, entertaining context within the setting of the image. Each image which embodies this theme demonstrates a concern with presenting the self in a certain way to an audience, whether that audience is predominantly queer or not. Some examples of Performance, like *Buddy Kent,*[34] are in the interest of authentic self-expression and autonomy over one's own presentation. It is because of that self-consciousness that the expression tends to be emphasized and meticulously stylized. This can be seen through the vivid makeup and jewelry in *Billy Lorraine*[35], the contrast between the presentations of *Buddy Kent*[36] and the accessorized ensemble worn by Marlene Dietrich in *Morocco*.[37] In several feminized costumes in Queer Art, sexualization *is* a performance, not just literally as part of a piece of art but as a hyper-feminized version of a fantasy. Personal photos are not portrayed with such exaggerated features, though this is possibly a result of lack of public access to more personal, intimate photos.

Many of the photos used in this study can be considered overtly queer in the first place because of the inclusion of a queer romantic couple. There is variation, however, in how these pairings are styled and portrayed. 43.37% of images under this theme show couples with little-to-no contrast between the gendered styling of the pair, such as in *Welch and Wood*[38] and *Wonder Bar.*[39] This percentage is much higher within the Personal Photos category, at 83.33%, a statistic which shows that queer art may tend to exaggerate the heteronormativity of queer couples through dichotomous styling. In contrasted couples, there is often one subject styled as more

[32] *E. Thieniann & M. Hunter*. 1910. Photograph. https://thequeerreview.com/2020/11/01/exclusive-interview-hugh-nini-neal-treadwell-loving-a-photographic-history-of-men-in-love/.
[33] Berkeley, Busby, and Lloyd Bacon. *Wonder Bar*. 1934. Photograph. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1225622.
[34] *Buddy Kent*. Circa 1940. Photograph. https://dcmny.org/do/d5081d71-c806-4ef3-9b4d-2f0f86621593.
[35] *Billy Lorraine*. 1930. Photograph. https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/jm214p352.
[36] *Buddy Kent*, Circa 1940
[37] von Stenberg, *Morocco*, 1930
[38] *Welch and Wood*. 1918. Photograph. https://apps.lib.umich.edu/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/lgbtheritage/item/1824?exhibit=106&page=803.
[39] Berkeley, Busby, Bacon, *Wonder Bar*, 1934

feminine and one more masculine (e.g. *Queen Christina*[40]). If otherwise, one may be styled as more domineering or powerful, usually dressed in more gaudy, richly-colored clothing, with more striking makeup and positioned with arms above or around the other subject in the image, such as in *Dracula's Daughter.*[41] Passion and longing are further concepts that align with this theme, regardless of dress or gendered dynamics. This occurs especially in photos meant for queer audiences or no audience at all, like *Rocky Nook Labor Day 1910*[42], where two men stand, entangled, atop a rock in a tight embrace. Contrastingly, in images intended for non-queer audiences, this boldness is replaced. In pulp novels, two women on the cover in many instances turn away from each other, with the more feminine, less domineering woman casting her gaze downward and covering her torso, often already revealed by form-fitting clothing or dipping necklines (e.g. *Spring Fire*[43]), indicating a sense of shame for any sapphic inclinations. This diversity of expression in romantic dynamics is representative of the diversity of expression as a whole, of how multifaceted the realm of queer dress—and queerness itself—is.

Several of the photos portray a community of queer individuals rather than strictly a romantic pairing. For example, the personal photos of women from 1940-on are images of lesbians within the era of butch-femme culture, who likely could have used their styling as a way of communicating membership within that social group. One instance of this is the photo *Ira Jeffries,*[44] which shows a community of teenage lesbians brought together by their shared subversion and queerness. As discussed, this was a time period before the establishment of a formal, unified queer community, so queer individuals and groups in these photos had to actively endeavor to find a place of community and belonging. This, itself, ties back to Subversion and Covertness—one could either self-style in a manner that would contrast societal standards, making it easier to be identified in a queer space, or in a manner that would hide queer sensibilities for safety and comfort in an oppressive society. It is thus that the importance of subtleties in dress and expression become apparent. For example, *The Fleet's In!*[45] may seem like an example of covert dress at first glance, but the queerness embedded into it, like the blonde individual in drag towards the right of the painting, make it recognizable to a queer audience. By design, the subtleties of queer dress will only be able to be perceived by those meant to understand it, and this notion reinforces the ability of style to be used as a tool for communication, symbolism, and connection.

Camp, here, is defined as any gendered expression which is deliberately over-exaggerated or satirical. While some instances are intended for comedic purposes, they do not have to be; I originally entitled this theme 'Farce,' but determined that label would be an exclusion of a wider narrative seen in the pictures. The subcategory of Farce is best exemplified by *A Florida Enchantment*[46] and *Bringing Up Baby*[47]—in the latter, a male character dons a frilly pink nightrobe and is seen pouting over his transformation. 77.78% of the occurrences of Camp fall under Queer Art; likely because it is most often a stylized form of dress meant for a wider audience. The over-exaggerated aspects of dress are nearly all feminine in this category as well, such as shimmering hair

[40] Mamoulian, Rouben. *Queen Christina.* 1933. Photograph. http://pre-code.com/queen-christina-1933-review-greta-garbo-john-gilbert/.
[41] Hillyer, Lambert. *Dracula's Daughter.* 1936. Photograph. https://www.horrorhomeroom.com/coded-queerness-in-draculas-daughter-1936/.
[42] *Rocky Nook Labor Day 1910.* 1910. Photograph. https://thequeerreview.com/2020/11/01/exclusive-interview-hugh-nini-neal-treadwell-loving-a-photographic-history-of-men-in-love/.
[43] Packer, Vin. *Spring Fire.* 1952. Illustration. https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/masters_theses/4184.
[44] *Figure 12: Ira Jeffries.* 1948. Photograph. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.15767/feministstudies.42.3.0604.
[45] Cadmus, Paul. *The Fleet's In!* 1934. Illustration. http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/puhistorian/vol8/iss1/2.
[46] Drew, Sidney. *A Florida Enchantment.* 1914. Photograph. https://news.wjct.org/arts-culture/2014-07-09/controversial-silent-film-shot-in-jacksonville-st-augustine-returns-to-the-silver-screen.
[47] Hawks, Howard. *Bringing Up Baby.* 1938. Photograph. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bringing-Up-Baby.

adornments in *Salomé*,[48] gold pieces in *The Sign of the Cross,*[49] and bright blue eyeshadow and red lips in *The Middle Mist*.[50] Camp serves a dual purpose here; to both ridicule a patriarchal, heteronormative society's expectations of gender roles and presentations, and to take power over one's own expression to revel in opulence and excess.

## Conclusion

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, dress was used as an imperative tool in the expression and communication of queerness. Both in individuals' personal lives and in queer art and media from the era, fashion came with a diverse set of implications that could be harnessed for anything from performative self-expression to total concealment. Six major themes defined queerness's relationship with dress during this time period: Subversion, Covertness, Performance, Romantic Connection, Community, and Camp. Each of these core elements of styling coalesce to create a picture of the significance of queer dress in a unique historical period, after the creation of sexology and rudimentary queer communities but before the takeoff of the queer liberation movement. This study demonstrates how those who understood their identity and queerness expressed themselves in a boom of media and opportunities for expression, and reveals the formation of a group unable to be identified collectively by appearance creating their own language through dress to do so. The wide variation in clothing shows the importance of self-styling as a wholly personal choice, and the possibility of expressing queerness to find both oneself and others in fashion's subtleties.

Through an ethnographic historical image analysis, this study examined dress portrayed in personal queer photographs and pieces of queer art between 1905 and 1955. Because of the significance of dress in symbolic expression (e.g., presentation of gender, socioeconomic class, social status, etc.) and the distinct utility queer people have long found in fashion as a means to either flaunt or conceal one's queerness, the combination of these two facets was an apt realm for analysis. Throughout the 20th century, dress also served as a tool to express membership within the queer community, even if strictly to others within the same culture. This study aimed to fill the 'gap' in current historical research by providing a more cohesive, longitudinal understanding of both historical queerness and historical dress.

My findings do come with limitations. I hand-picked images for this study, not randomly sampled them from a database. Coding for data charts and thematic analysis was done on my own, which introduces subjectivity. As noted in previous sections, my own place within this historical conversation as a queer individual—as well as the limitations above—make my study susceptible to bias. However, also as addressed, I acknowledge this aspect of the research as the neutral presence of a queer lens rather than essentially detractive; given the findings of this paper it may, in fact, be apt, as I fit into the conversation around the queerness of dress in social structures myself. A further limitation of this study is lacking access to images; there are many photos which I have been unable to attain because of paywalls, website censorship, distance from archives, etc. In further studies, I would encourage a wider breadth of pictures from a greater variety of sources. Lastly, there are several personal photos in my collection (e.g. *Dusk*) which have no certified date, but rather a range of years listed as potential origins. This imprecision could have affected my data and analysis.

Future research on this topic would benefit from a sample of photos from a wider variety of sources. In addition, the inclusion of textual analysis such as personal accounts could prove useful in furthering this conversation. This study carries with it implications for the field of sociology, where my research could be well-

[48] Bryant, Charles, and Alla Nazimova. *Salomé*. 1922-23. Photograph. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Salom%C3%A9_(film).

[49] DeMille, Cecil B. *The Sign of the Cross*. 1932. Photograph. http://pre-code.com/the-sign-of-the-cross-1932-review-with-fredric-march-and-claudette-colbert/.

[50] Renault, Mary. *The Middle Mist*. 1945. Illustration. https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2032920.

applied to the theory of symbolic interactionism, which emphasizes and studies the use of symbols (including dress) in the persistence of society. Analyzing the topic of dress and its facets more deeply, through a more symbolic lens, would certainly benefit the wider discussion on queerness in society, both historically and presently. The information garnered from this research allows for a better understanding of the history of styling and its uses for queer individuals and groups. By observing both personal and public images, a wider scope for analysis was formed, which itself permits more complete insight into a facet of history often overlooked or disregarded. This research highlighted the imperative uses of self-styling in the first half of the 20th century, established the pervasiveness of queer themes throughout mediums and decades, and illuminated the boundless diversity of queer dress, even in a system intent on suppressing that very expression.

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