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COSTUME BALLS

HABILLER L'HISTOIRE, 1870-1927

Edited by Cynthia Cooper. Photographs by Laura Dumitriu

A Journey Back in Time with Costume Balls

Extravagant costume balls were the pinnacle of society entertainments in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, attracting a motley but glittering array of characters drawn from literature, art, nature and fantasy. But on those occasions where history served as muse, kaleidoscopic chaos gave way to rollicking monumental pageantry. Impersonating builders of nations and empires, bedecked in powdered wigs and silk stockings and stepping lightly to minuets and quadrilles, guests revelled in whimsical anachronism as they performed core myths of colonial destiny, racial superiority, and imperial futures.

The invitation to reimagine oneself as an alter ego inspired by history or fantasy was no less than an opportunity of a lifetime, occasioning study, expense, and a trip to the photographer's studio. *Costume Balls - Dressing Up History, 1870-1927* explores a treasure trove of 40 extant garments and archival images from the McCord Stewart Museum in Montreal, Canada that captures the immediacy of a series of historically themed fancy dress balls. With lavish detail photography juxtaposed with archival images, it brings into conversation curators and conservation experts from the McCord Stewart Museum who delve into minute details of extant material culture to reveal unexpected histories and connections.

Three curatorial essays introduce the unparalleled cache of extant costumes. **Cynthia Cooper** offers current insight into the appeal of dressing up at this historical moment, and the foundational myths at play in the choice to represent figures from the past. **Jonathan Lainey** looks at the way extant objects from Indigenous cultures were deployed in fictional representations of the "Indian." **Zoë Tousignant** explores the popularity of composite photography as a means of recording these costumed spectacles. **Caterina Florio**, Head of Conservation, describes the challenges involved in restoring the impressive corpus of 40 outfits featured in the exhibition.

[Exhibition: McCord Stewart Museum, Montreal, November 14, 2024 – August 17, 2025](#)