



*Butch Chanel, Wigstock, NYC, 1992.*  
 Photograph by Michael James  
 O'Brien, c. 2013.

## A QUEER HISTORY OF FASHION: FROM THE CLOSET TO THE CATWALK

From Cristóbal Balenciaga and Christian Dior to Yves Saint Laurent and Alexander McQueen, many of the greatest fashion designers of the past century have been gay. Indeed, it is widely believed that most male fashion designers are gay. Is this just a stereotype? Or do gay men really have a special relationship with fashion? To what extent have lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people also made significant contributions to fashion? Do gay styles set trends that straight people follow? Fashion and style have played an important role within the LGBTQ (lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-queer) community, both pre- and post-Stonewall, and even as early as the eighteenth century. Yet surprisingly little has been published about high fashion as a site of gay cultural production. But if we look at the history of fashion through a queer lens, exploring the aesthetic sensibilities and unconventional dress choices made by LGBTQ people, we see how central gay culture has been to the creation of modern fashion.

It was Fred Dennis, senior curator of costume at The Museum at FIT, who came up with the idea of organizing an exhibition about fashion and homo-

sexuality. I was immediately convinced that this was an extremely important subject, albeit one that is complicated and controversial. My essay, based on research for our exhibition, is only a very preliminary outline. However, we also commissioned essays from some of the world's most acclaimed scholars of gay history and style – Christopher Breward, Shaun Cole, Vicki Karaminas, Jonathan D. Katz, Peter McNeil, and Elizabeth Wilson. They investigate topics such as the history of gay and lesbian styles, their influence on fashion, and the context in which designers' lives and works form part of a broader gay history. Some members of the LGBTQ community have proudly proclaimed their significant role in fashion. Writing for *The Advocate* in 1997, Fred Gross argued that “The vast numbers of gay men and lesbians working in the industry” provided “compelling proof that fashion owes its very life to the gay sensibility.” Yet he also observed that the fashion world remained “strangely closeted.”<sup>1</sup> More than a decade later, although many designers are openly gay, the subject of fashion and homosexuality remains an open secret. We know it, but we don't name it – except on the internet where gossip flourishes.

Who cares whether a designer or other fashion professional is gay? Today, at least in much of the world, “discretion” about one's sexual identity may no longer derive from a fear of direct homophobic retaliation (“I'll be fired”), but rather from a sense that “It's nobody's business, because it is irrelevant to my work.” Even people who are technically “out” may not want to be labeled as gay or lesbian, because they don't want their work to be stereotyped – or their own accomplishments minimized. As the singer k. d. lang put it, “I'm a lesbian, but my music isn't lesbian music.”<sup>2</sup> Within the fashion world, a number of designers apparently agree with Marc Jacobs, who once said, “I don't believe my sexuality has any bearing on how I design clothes.”<sup>3</sup>

But can something as important as one's sexual identity ever be completely irrelevant to an individual's creative work? In their history of homosexuality in the American theater, Robert Schanke and Kim Marra argue that “sexuality permeates people's beliefs, actions, and social relations.” If sexuality is “a historical force,” as they suggest, then it is “far from irrelevant”; it is, in fact, entirely legitimate to ask why homosexuals have played such an important role in fashion. Indeed, *not* to write the history of gays and lesbians in fashion “is to be complicit in what has been called ‘inning,’ the perpetuation of systematic denials that foster the climate of shame and risk surrounding same-sex

eroticism.”<sup>4</sup> This would seem to be a compelling reason to explore the subject of fashion and homosexuality. Furthermore, to echo William Mann's book on gays and lesbians in Hollywood, we believe that, by seeing these fashion “pioneers” not only as designers, fashion professionals, and trendsetters, “but also as *gay men and lesbians*,” we can “cast new light not only on their experiences but also on the very history” of fashion itself.<sup>5</sup>

While planning our exhibition, Fred Dennis and I decided that we would not “out” living designers, but we believe that it is entirely legitimate to discuss the sexuality of the deceased, since there is nothing shameful about variant sexuality. On the contrary, we hope that our exhibition and book will help foster a climate of inclusion for those who have often been marginalized as a result of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gendered expression. In light of the fact that LGBTQ people are still being harassed, arrested, and murdered in many countries around the world, we believe that it is especially important now to speak openly about sexuality and to emphasize that gay rights are human rights.

How do we know who was gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender? Documentary evidence of sexual acts or desires is elusive, although not impossible to find. There have always been some people who were open about their sexuality, people who kept diaries or wrote letters, talking about their love life – or those of their acquaintances. However, “the ‘burden of proof’ for homosexuality has traditionally been held far higher than that for heterosexuality.”<sup>6</sup> Like many Hollywood costume designers, Gilbert Adrian (1903–1959), for example, was overtly gay within his circle, wearing capes and extravagant clothing, when in 1939, he married the movie star Janet Gaynor, perhaps as protection against growing homophobia in the studio system. Yet, as Mann observes, there are still those who try “to situate . . . Adrian (Adrian!) as heterosexual. (Who's next, Liberace?)”<sup>7</sup> In later decades, of course, as homosexuality was legalized and became increasingly accepted, more designers have come out publicly. Biographers and journalists have also found that individuals' friends, lovers, and even relatives have been more willing to speak candidly about previously taboo subjects.

*A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk* seeks to explore the “gayness” or “queerness” of fashion by focusing on several related themes. Firstly, we draw attention to the historic presence of gay men, lesbians,



Leigh Bowery.  
Photograph by  
Fergus Greer.

bisexuals, and transgender people in the fashion system, not only as fashion designers, but also as journalists, photographers, hairdressers, make-up artists, stylists, retailers, and models. Secondly, we stress the creativity and resistance to oppression expressed by LGBTQ subcultural and street styles, which have often transgressed sex and gender roles. These styles demonstrate that it is not only as fashion *professionals* that gays, lesbians, and “queers” have influenced the world of fashion and style. Thirdly, by exploring the relationship between fashion and gay culture, we suggest how dissident ways of relating to fashion as a cultural form have resulted in a gay or queer sensibility that embraces both idealizing and transgressive aesthetic styles. Ultimately, we argue that fashion history cannot truly be understood without taking account of the creative contributions of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, and other “queer” individuals and communities.

We are aware that the word “queer” has often been used in a derogatory sense. However, in recent years it has increasingly been appropriated by many LGBTQ people. We chose to use it here because, for many people, “queer” seems more encompassing than “gay.” We recognize, however, that for many other people, the word still carries negative connotations. The use in our title of the expression, “the Closet,” is also problematic, because many LGBTQ people have been neither “inside” nor “outside” the closet, but have rather revealed or concealed their sexuality, more or less overtly or discreetly, according to the situation. They might be “out” to their friends and colleagues, but “in” to their parents and the state authorities. As Bill Blass wrote in his memoir, “I have lived most of my life in a contradictory position – with one part of myself safely in the closet and the other out and up to all kinds of things.”<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, “the Closet” is a vivid metaphor to convey how “the history of oppression, and consequent secrecy, of differently inflected sexualities, has meant that gay men and lesbians have evolved not only coded clothing *practices* by which they might recognize others with a similar sexual orientation or interest, but also a nuanced vocabulary for *reading* dress.”<sup>9</sup> By using the subtitle “From the Closet to the Catwalk,” we do not mean to imply that history shows a pattern of steadily increasing sexual “liberation.” It does not. In many ways, it was easier to be gay in 1925, or even 1900, than in 1950. The term “Catwalk” refers to recent decades, roughly from 1970 on, when gays and lesbians were increasingly visible and influential players in fashion. By