



VIDEO TRANSCRIPTION

A Queer History of Fashion
From the Closet to the Catwalk

JOHN BARTLETT

Designer

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Video length: 5:11 | This video is online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=M-6thRNwISk

When I started my brand it was 1992, and I was 29 years old; openly gay, and many of my colleagues—buyers, editors—were all openly gay. The first collections, the first five years or so, when I started, I especially explored sexual identity, gender, male-female, the whole dialogue between the two. And many of my editors, buyers, were very uncomfortable with the idea of gay designers showing gay-inspired clothing. It was really interesting for me because it took a long time I think for that kind of look, not that other people were not doing this, but it took a long time for people to, kind of, for their eye to adjust. And the idea of just seeing men as sexual objects or seeing clothing as sexual items.

One of the shows that I did that was a spring show; it was based on Cuba in the 60s which was a very interesting dangerous time. I showed a bunch of guys coming out one after another in bathing suits and by the end of the show all 25 models were sitting on sort of a makeshift dock that was the runway, staring out into the audience. Typically at a fashion show, the models are being stared at and they are the objects of desire or interest. In my finale I had all the models sitting on the dock staring out at the audience and it was very interesting because many of the editors all sitting front row—men—were gay, comfortable with their sexuality, but this made them very, very uncomfortable, and I could see a lot of people kind of squirming because they were being looked at by other men, I guess in a more public way. I remember the review that I received from DNR at the time and it read something along the lines of, 'instead of being king of menswear fashion week, John Bartlett is King of 8th Avenue.' And I remember being really insulted because I loved what I showed; I thought it was powerful, and exciting, and erotic, and I hated that I was kind of put into a box as a gay designer showing gay clothes. I think with the industry starting to embrace menswear as a larger growing sector up there for department store business—that a lot of men and their wives and girlfriends started shopping and men became known as metrosexuals and started caring a little bit more about how they looked—and the idea that that kind of thing is only for gay men really kind of went by the wayside.

I grew up in Cincinnati OH in the 70s, late 60s, 70s, and one of my first memories really as a boy was noticing other boys, noticing other men, and even before I had a word for it, I also knew that it was not accepted, I knew that it was wrong in society at least in those days. And I remember making a decision very early on in my childhood subconsciously that that was unacceptable behavior and I really had to just put it up on a shelf. I knew somewhere deep down inside that as I became older, a teenager, an adult, that I would be able to explore and express myself fully as a gay man, but in those days before I had a word for it, I just knew that it was 'wrong.' It was 'wrong' for boys to like things that were feminine, it was 'wrong' for boys to think about how they looked, there were a lot of things that I learned very quickly that were not acceptable. So I just put it up on a shelf, and I lived a lot of my life sort of as a half a person; play-acting until I knew that I was safe to be myself fully. I came out to my parents and then subsequently to my siblings and friends at the end of high school so I entered college as a gay man, still a little bit closeted—I just shared it with certain people—but by the end of my four years at Harvard I was completely out and there was not a big issue. By the time I moved to New York and started taking classes at FIT, I really started to experiment with my style.

Every day at FIT was kind of like a costume party and I loved coming to school in leopard print bell bottoms and a blonde wig one day and then head-to-toe leather the next day, and it was a wonderful

time for me to really experiment with my identity as a young gay man in my twenties, my early twenties. And New York allowed that kind of freedom, not that it was completely safe, but it was really—if you watched yourself, it really allowed that kind of freedom to explore oneself fully. It was amazing. ▼