

RESS ROOM PHOENIX ART MUSEUM PRESENTS MAJOR FASHION EXHIBITION OF GENDER-FLUID, BODY-POSITIVE DESIGNS BY '60S-MOD LEGEND RUDI GERNREICH

Phoenix Art Museum presents major fashion exhibition of gender-fluid, body-positive designs by '60s-mod legend Rudi Gernreich

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Exhibitions and Special Installations Fashion Design

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Fearless Fashion: Rudi Gernreich underscores designer's enduring influence on notions of beauty, identity, and gender

PHOENIX (UPDATED December 21, 2020) – From April 7 through September 26, 2021, Phoenix Art Museum will present *FEARLESS FASHION: RUDI GERNREICH*, an exhibition that focuses on the significant social and cultural impact of the work of Rudolph “Rudi” Gernreich (1922–1985), the acclaimed designer best known for innovative designs such as the “monokini” topless swimsuit, the thong, unisex clothing, and pantsuits for women. Organized by the Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles, *Fearless Fashion* will present more than 80 ensembles, along with original sketches, letters, personal papers, photographs, press clippings, and newly filmed oral histories of Gernreich’s friends and colleagues, to provide a broader understanding of the late

designer's life and how his work continues to influence fashion trends and current perceptions of beauty, gender, and identity.

"Fearless Fashion: Rudi Gernreich offers a significant opportunity to explore how fashion has the power to effect social change," said Tim Rodgers, PhD, the Sybil Harrington Director and CEO of Phoenix Art Museum. "The exhibition sheds light on Gernreich's life and how his forward-thinking designs responded to and challenged societal pressures and cultural forces that attempted to marginalize him and others. We are excited to share this meaningful exhibition with our audiences in Arizona and to continue our commitment to presenting artworks that present a diversity of thought, experience, and action."

Born in 1922 in Vienna, Austria, Gernreich, who was Jewish, fled Nazi oppression as a teen and immigrated to Los Angeles, where he continued to face discrimination. He eventually found safe haven in the performing arts community and the gay rights movement, which drove him to seek social change and promote a truer expression of self through fashion design. Gernreich was propelled to fame when he launched his "monokini" design and, throughout his career, continued to create trailblazing designs that illustrated his dedication to inclusivity, non-conformity, and liberation.

FEARLESS FASHION chronicles Gernreich's rise to prominence and underscores how his designs revolutionized the perception and understanding of beauty in the fashion industry. Developed by Bethany Montagano (formerly of the Skirball) and Skirball co-curator Dani Killam—with support from acclaimed fashion designer and exhibition creative adviser Humberto Leon of Opening Ceremony and Kenzo—the exhibition is organized into the following seven sections:

Becoming Rudi Gernreich traces the designer's childhood in Vienna through his immigration to the United States in 1938. Visitors will learn about Gernreich's early life in Los Angeles, with particular focus on his participation in the interracial Lester Horton Dance Theatre and his role as the second founding member of gay rights organization the Mattachine Society. This portion of the exhibition also highlights his first jobs in the fashion industry, including his work with Hollywood costume designer Edith Head, entrepreneur Hattie Carnegie, and clothing manufacturer and fellow Austrian immigrant Walter Bass, with whom he shaped the aesthetics of California sportswear.

Dance and Theater illuminates Gernreich's interest in freedom of movement through the Swan and Duotard costumes he created for the Bella Lewitzky Dance Company performance *Inscape*, as well as other theatrically inspired ensembles from throughout his career.

Minis, Mods and Pantsuits focuses on the 1960s and 1970s, exploring Gernreich's support for second-wave feminism. Featured garments, such as the mod "micro-mini" skirt and the pantsuit for women—including his "Marlene Dietrich" and "George Sand" ensembles—pushed boundaries and challenged ideas of how women should dress and present themselves.

Swimsuits and Undergarments showcases Gernreich's knit bathing suits, the wireless "no-bra" bra, thong underwear, and the topless "monokini," many of which remain staples of contemporary fashion. These garments exemplify how Gernreich prioritized functionality and comfort in his designs.

Youth Culture and Politics explores how Gernreich responded to the crises of his time, particularly student protests, growing racial tensions in the United States, and armed conflicts around the world such as the Vietnam War, by creating a military-inspired collection.

Unisex Solidarity features the designer's Unisex Collection of 1970, in which he stripped away gender markers and presented garments that could be worn interchangeably by any person. Caftans, for example, abstract the bodies of the exhibition's mannequins and reflect Gernreich's interest in gender fluidity.

Experimental Fashion and Legacy illustrates how Gernreich's cutting-edge use of sheer fabrics, leather, vinyl, dog leashes as belts, exposed zippers, and metal springs continues to influence mainstream fashion.

In addition, the exhibition showcases a whimsical environment titled **Concept to Rack** that illuminates the relationship between Gernreich, model and muse Peggy Moffitt, and various retailers, including LA's Jax Boutique, for which he designed activewear. New video oral histories of several of Gernreich's colleagues and friends, including modern dancer Don Martin, fashion designer Renee Firestone, and models Barbara Flood and Léon Bing, will also be featured throughout *Fearless Fashion*, while media stations play historical footage of Gernreich fashion shows, along with what is widely regarded as the first fashion video, *Basic Black*, featuring Gernreich, Moffitt, and hair stylist Vidal Sassoon.

"*Fearless Fashion* is such a timely and important exhibition," said Helen Jean, the Museum's Jacquie Dorrance Curator of Fashion Design. "It underscores Gernreich's rejection of conventional ideas of identity and his commitment to promoting gender fluidity, body positivity, and the equality and beauty of all people. This inclusive approach to humanism and the desire to empower others to define who they are and who they are not through the clothing they choose to wear is something that will resonate with contemporary audiences, many of whom are still advocating for the same issues and rights that Gernreich also fought for through his work, blazing a trail decades earlier."

About the Exhibition

Fearless Fashion: Rudi Gernreich will be on view from April 7 through September 26, 2021 in Steele Gallery. The exhibition is organized by the Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles. Its premiere at Phoenix Art Museum is made possible through the generosity of the Jacquie Dorrance Curator of Fashion Design Endowment, The Kelly Ellman Fashion Design Endowment Fund, Lee and Mike Cohn, The Virginia M. Ullman Foundation, The Arizona Republic | azcentral, and Arizona Costume Institute, with additional support from the Museum's Circles of Support and Museum Members.

This special-engagement exhibition is free for Museum Members; veterans and active-duty military; and youth aged 5 and younger. All special-engagement exhibitions are included with general admission. For a full breakdown of general-admission prices, including admission during voluntary-donation times on Wednesdays from 3 – 7 pm and the first Friday of each month from 3 – 7 pm, please see [PHXART.ORG/VISIT/](https://phxart.org/visit/).

Download high-resolution photography [HERE](#). To request interviews, contact the Communications Office of Phoenix Art Museum at 602.307.2003 or SAMANTHA.ANDREACCHI@PHXART.ORG.

About Phoenix Art Museum

Since 1959, Phoenix Art Museum has provided millions of guests with access to world-class art and experiences in an effort to ignite imaginations, create meaningful connections, and serve as a brave space for all people who wish to experience the transformative power of art. Located in Phoenix's Central Corridor, the Museum is a vibrant destination for the visual arts and the largest art museum in the southwestern United States. Each year, more than 300,000 guests engage with critically acclaimed national and international exhibitions and the Museum's collection of more than 20,000 works of American and Western American, Asian, European, Latin American, modern and contemporary art, and fashion design. The Museum also presents a comprehensive film program, live performances, and educational programs designed for visitors of all ages, along with vibrant photography exhibitions made possible through the Museum's landmark partnership with the Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. To learn more about Phoenix Art Museum, visit [PHXART.ORG](https://phxart.org), or call 602.257.1880.

About the Skirball Cultural Center

The Skirball Cultural Center is a place of meeting guided by the Jewish tradition of welcoming the stranger and inspired by the American democratic ideals of freedom and equality. We welcome

people of all communities and generations to participate in cultural experiences that celebrate discovery and hope, foster human connections, and call upon us to help build a more just society.

To learn more about the Skirball Cultural Center, visit [SKIRBALL.ORG](https://www.skirball.org).

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