

Costume Balls

Dressing Up History
1870–1927



Press release
For immediate release

Costume Balls: Dressing Up History, 1870–1927

Montreal, November 12, 2024 – Beginning November 14, 2024, the McCord Stewart Museum presents *Costume Balls: Dressing Up History, 1870–1927*, a unique introduction to the world of fancy dress balls, some dating back 150 years. The exhibition captures the splendour and extravagance of these entertainments, where guests transformed themselves into a colourful array of characters for an evening. Over 40 dazzling costumes from the Museum's collection, as well as photographs of costumed ball-goers, souvenir publications and programs, capture all the scope and pageantry of these prestigious occasions. The exhibition takes a critical look at these social events that, though offering an unusual amount of freedom at a time when behaviour was highly codified, also helped further colonial and imperial projects.

Costume Balls: Dressing Up History, 1870–1927 opens its doors on the centenary of one of these grand balls, held November 14, 1924, at the Mount Royal Hotel in Montreal. Presented by La Presse and in collaboration with LaSalle College Montréal, a member of LCI Education, the exhibition runs until August 17, 2025.

“Of extraordinary nature and scale, the exhibition and companion book are the culmination of a research project that only the McCord Stewart Museum could have carried out successfully. Mobilizing the expertise and ingenuity of several departments, the project explored a relatively untapped area of Canadian social history and used a cross-disciplinary approach to study a variety of objects from the Museum's remarkable collections. It also led to the development of original practices in the conservation, reproduction and presentation of historical costumes and objects,” explains Anne Eschapasse, President and CEO.

A focus on History

While ball-goers in search of ideas drew from many aspects of popular culture to choose their characters, the exhibition highlights the predominance of history as a source of inspiration. The many photographs featured in the exhibition reveal guests' enthusiasm for embodying figures from Canada's past at historically themed balls.



Rice Studio Limited, *Magdeleine Hébert as "Marie-Thérèse de Bourbon," Montreal, 1927.*
 Gift of Magdeleine Garneau Monast, M2017.41.4, McCord Stewart Museum



Dress worn by Magdeleine Hébert as "Marie-Thérèse de Bourbon" in 1927.
 Gift of Magdeleine Garneau Monast, M2017.41.1, McCord Stewart Museum



William James Topley, *Alice Scott as "A Deck of Cards,"*
Ottawa, 1887, Library and Archives Canada, e011536971



Dress worn by Alice Scott as "A deck of cards" in 1887.
 Gift of Katherine Cleaver, M2014.111.961-3, McCord Stewart Museum





Wm. Notman & Son, *Maud Terroux as "The Baronne de Beaumouchel," Montreal, 1898*, II-123133, McCord Stewart Museum



Dress worn by Maud Terroux as "The Baronne de Beaumouchel" in 1898, M966.53.11-3, McCord Stewart Museum



Immortalizing the evening of a lifetime

A visit to the photographer's studio was a must for those attending a fancy dress ball or skating carnival, so they could create lasting mementoes of themselves in the costumes made for these often once-in-a-lifetime social events. Visitors to the exhibition will find many portraits made by William Notman of Montreal and William J. Topley of Ottawa, who ran the leading photo studios of the time.

"This exhibition tells an extraordinary story by bringing together some of the most extraordinary material in the Museum's collections. Rarely do visitors get a chance to see so many garments from the 19th century—which have survived in spite of being created to last a single evening—in an exhibition space, alongside images of the people who wore these costumes. And rarely do we see captured in photography such a lighthearted side of life from a time when public presentation of the self was a most serious matter," says Cynthia Cooper, exhibition curator.

Dressing up colonial violence

A century and a half ago, costumes that caricatured the "Other" were popular choices. The exhibition examines the history of this practice as an act of colonial violence.

"Looking beyond the glamour and spectacle of the motley array of characters at these balls, visitors will discover the ball-goers' shared vision of exclusion—who they portrayed as 'Other,' often with an incongruous mix of cultural objects and elements created as costume," explains Cynthia Cooper.

"The exhibition delves into the fictions of Indigeneity that were very present at one historical ball, juxtaposing objects from the Museum's Indigenous Cultures collection with images of their use by white ball-goers. We look at why this is so difficult and disturbing from an Indigenous perspective," notes Jonathan Lainey, Curator, Indigenous Cultures.



© Laura Dumitriu – Musée McCord Stewart



© Laura Dumitriu – Musée McCord Stewart

An unprecedented research project

The exhibition is the culmination of research into the practice of fancy dress, begun over 30 years ago by Cynthia Cooper, Head, Collections and Research and Curator, Dress, Fashion and Textiles, long before she joined the McCord Stewart Museum in 1998. Her work with the Museum's extensive collections has enabled her to make some astonishing discoveries related to this topic, the latest of which are now being presented to the public for the first time in the exhibition and the catalogue.

Putting 40 costumes from the McCord Stewart Museum's renowned Dress, Fashion and Textiles collection on display required a colossal effort from the Museum's team. The limits of traditional conservation practice had to be pushed to allow all the costumes to be displayed, as Caterina Florio, Head, Conservation, explains: "Given the fragile—or even damaged—condition of some garments, we took a long, hard look at the approaches we could take. This led us not only to question traditional conservation treatments, but also to make bold decisions and experiment with new ideas for preserving material integrity."

"While *Costume Balls: Dressing Up History, 1870–1927* shines a spotlight on the extravagance of period costumes, students completing their studies in Costume specialization within the Fashion Design program will be given the opportunity to create contemporary designs inspired by the theme of the exhibition for presentation at a related Museum event. This unique collaboration between LaSalle College Montréal, a member of LCI Education, and the McCord Stewart Museum embodies the essence of tradition and innovation. The initiative not only emphasizes the historical legacy of the exhibition, it showcases how young designers are taking a creative, modern approach to passing on expertise," says Andrew McNally, Dean of Fashion at LaSalle College.

The book *Costume Balls: Dressing Up History, 1870–1927*

Edited by Cynthia Cooper. Photographs by Laura Dumitriu.

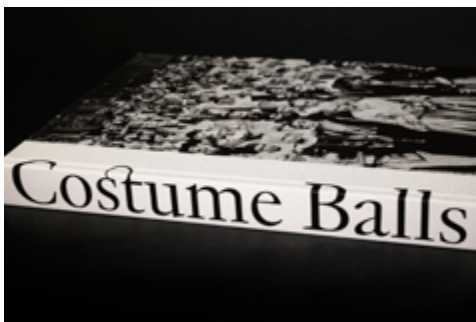
Co-published by 5 Continents Editions and the McCord Stewart Museum, this book, beautifully illustrated with recent and archival photographs, features contributions from several of the Museum's specialists. Cynthia Cooper looks at the appeal of fancy dress costumes from a contemporary perspective and examines the foundational myths behind the choice of historical figures represented; Jonathan Lainey, Curator, Indigenous Cultures, investigates how Indigenous cultural belongings were used to create fictional representations of the "Indian"; and Zoë Tousignant, Curator, Photography, explores the popularity of composite photography as a means of recording these costumed spectacles. In the epilogue, Caterina Florio, Head, Conservation, describes the challenges involved in treating the impressive group of 40 ensembles featured in the exhibition.

Co-publishers: McCord Stewart Museum and 5 Continents Editions

288 pp., hardback, available in English and French versions

CAD \$65

On sale at the Museum Boutique



A fun and educational tour for families

Ongoing

An interactive family tour invites young and old alike to share in the excitement of attending a costume ball. Children from the period serve as guides on this journey of discovery, made up of interactive stations. An activity booklet will be available, in which children can record their ideas for the perfect costume as they visit each station. These include a photobooth-style photographer's studio and a space for creating a photomontage.



Curatorial and production team

An exhibition produced by the McCord Stewart Museum.

Curator: Cynthia Cooper, Head, Collections and Research and Curator, Dress, Fashion and Textiles, McCord Stewart Museum

Project manager: François Vallée, Head, Exhibitions, McCord Stewart Museum

Scenography: Mélanie Crespin

Design: Laurent Pinabel

Audiovisual production: Mirari

Activities related to the exhibition

Nocturne – Costume Balls

Thursday, February 13, 2025, 5 to 10 p.m. – Paid activity – At the Museum

On February 13, 2025, the Museum invites the public to immerse themselves in the festive atmosphere of Victorian fancy dress balls. This costume ball is an opportunity to transcend convention and express one's identity by moving between the visible and invisible, in a world of black-and-white dreams, crepe paper, drag karaoke hosted by the talented Barbada, and much more!

On the program: exhibition tours, costume-making workshop, drag karaoke, and cash bar and refreshments.

Tickets: \$15 – member: \$5

Symposium – *Costume Balls: Dressing Up History, 1870–1927*

Thursday, March 20, and Friday, March 21, 2025 – At the Museum and online

A symposium* on the making of the exhibition *Costume Balls: Dressing Up History, 1870-1927* will be held at the McCord Stewart Museum on March 20 and 21, 2025.

* More information coming soon

Hours and admission

Regular schedule

Tuesday to Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., except Wednesdays (10 a.m. to 9 p.m.)

Summer schedule – From June 24

Tuesday to Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., except Wednesday (10 a.m. to 9 p.m.)

Holiday schedule

Monday, December 23:	10 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Christmas – Wednesday, December 25:	Closed
Boxing Day – Thursday, December 26:	12 p.m. to 5 p.m.
Monday, December 30:	10 a.m. to 5 p.m.
New Year's Day – Wednesday, January 1:	Closed
The day after New Year's – Thursday, January 2:	12 p.m. to 5 p.m.
March Break – Monday, March 3:	10 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Easter Monday – Monday, March 31:	10 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day – Tuesday, June 24:	10 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Canada Day – Tuesday, July 1:	10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Fees

Adults: \$20 | Seniors: \$19 | Students (18 to 30): \$15 | Indigenous persons: free | 17 and under: free*

Wednesday evenings: free (*To All the Unnamed Women* and permanent exhibition) or \$10 (2nd floor exhibitions).

\$2 discount on [online ticket](#) purchases.

First Sunday of the month: free for Quebec residents.

Unless otherwise specified, participation in activities is included in the price of an exhibition ticket.

The McCord Stewart Museum would like to thank [BMO Financial Group](#) for the free Wednesday evenings, the [Fondation J.A. DeSève](#) for free admission for children aged 12 and under, and the Rossey Foundation for free admission for young people aged 13 to 17.

*Free admission for ages 17 and under on presentation of ID. Offer valid for general public visits only. Groups of more than 15 people and organized groups must refer to the group rates.

*Free for children 12 and under. Maximum of three children per adult. Offer valid for general public visits only. Organized groups must refer to the group rates.

About the McCord Stewart Museum

A landmark in the heart of Montreal for over 100 years, the McCord Stewart Museum bears witness to the history of Quebec's metropolis as well as its influence in Canada and around the world, celebrating the vitality, creativity and diversity of the communities that make it up.

The Museum amplifies their voices by interpreting and disseminating the remarkable heritage under its custody: [six expansive collections](#) of 2.5 million images, objects, documents and works of art that make it one of North America's leading museums.

In keeping with its commitment to decolonization and sustainable development, it creates stimulating [exhibitions](#) and educational, cultural and community-engagement [activities](#) that look at the social history and contemporary issues affecting its audiences through a critical and inclusive lens, inspiring them to take action for a fairer society.

About the Dress, Fashion and Textiles collection

The McCord Stewart Museum holds the largest collection of Canadian garments and accessories. Its Dress, Fashion and Textiles collection consists of over 27,000 items made or worn in Montreal over the past three centuries. The custodian of many examples of mid-20th century high fashion by Montreal, Canadian and international designers and couturiers, the Museum preserves the heritage of the development of Montreal's apparel industry and retail clothing sector. In the fall of 2019, the Museum launched [EncycloFashionQC](#), a unique online reference tool providing access to over 500 entries documenting who's who in the Quebec fashion industry, from the 19th century to today.

Download the high resolution images
Source: McCord Stewart Museum

Information and interview requests:

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In collaboration with

