

The History of Drag

The first mention of cross-dressing as 'drag' was in an 1870 edition of the UK Reynold's Newspaper where an invitation to an event was literally spelled out as "we shall come in drag, which means men dressed in women's costumes". This concept was not new; cross-dressing on theatre stages was the norm, as women were forbidden to perform.

It has been theorized that the term 'drag' evolved from the motion of dragging long gowns, trains and petticoats across a stage floor. Across the world, there have been, and still are, many variations of what might be considered 'drag'. Kabuki Theatre, mime, Kathalki, K  çek dancers, the Peking Opera, and Vaudeville are some of the oldest forms of drag, dating back hundreds of years.

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, off the stage, dressing as anything other than masculine (if the wearer was male) or feminine (if the wearer was female) was strictly monitored and enforced. In fact, by the late 1800's, more than 40 of the United States had passed laws banning cross-dressing, perhaps to justify society's determination of ideal femininity. If this type of performance art was lauded on the stage, off the stage, it was demonized.

Through the 1900's to modern day, drag performances have been dynamic. In the 20's and 30's, drag evolved to mimic 'realness', providing such flawless performances and costumes that audiences would question if they were actually in drag! Prior to and post this period, drag performers enhanced and exaggerated the feminine look and manner. Drag is very much about thumbing one's nose at social conventions, and nobody does it better than drag queens, kings, and non-binary performers.

By 1950, activism and advocacy were becoming a force to be reckoned with, and drag queens were leading the charge. Continued crack-downs on queer gathering places, including drag performances, created ripples of defiance that grew to waves. In 1969, a violent police raid at the Stonewall Inn became the flashpoint for the formation of the Gay Liberation movement, setting the precedent for today's ongoing fight for LGBTQ+ fights and equalities. Drag artists like Marsha P. Johnson and Storm   DeLarverie became figureheads and voices of the fight for equality.

It is important to note that as a result of these confrontations, in 1970, a year after the uprising, the very first gay pride marches took place in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Chicago to commemorate the anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. Countries across the world continue to mark this anniversary by hosting Pride celebrations each June.

By the 1990's a former incarnation of drag queen was regaining popularity, one that was more traditional in style and affect. RuPaul, arguably the most well-known drag queen of all time, was making a name for himself in prime time television. RuPaul modelled and appeared on daytime television talk shows, including his own, giving makeovers and introducing queer theory to audiences that could not get enough. He brought drag to a global audience, and continues to do so today, opening the door to so many drag performers to follow their gifts and talents to the stage. As a result, drag has become an integral part of performance arts. It's popularity continues to grow, and shows no sign of slowing down. After all, drag performance has always been about rebellion and subverting societal norms. It has never been more important to stand up and make spaces for the queer community, so do it with the utmost of style and flair!