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Mining the History of Costume: Fantasy and Fact
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May 29 – June 1, 2013
Las Vegas, Nevada

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THURSDAY JURIED ORAL PRESENTATION

Gypsy Rose Lee and the Clothes She Did Not Take Off

Anne K. Reilly, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

A burlesque star who strip teased her way to fame and fortune, who better than Gypsy Rose Lee (January 9, 1911 – April 26, 1970), to understand the importance of the clothes one decides to wear, or not wear as the case may be? *The New York Times* announced her death with the pronouncement, “[she] made the strip tease an art form.”¹ In the subsequent obituary article, the section devoted to honoring her achievements was sub-headed in bold with the words, “Sophistication and Panache.”² The entertainer known as Gypsy was truly an artist with sophistication and panache. Or possibly more apt, she was an artist *of* sophistication and panache. The true genius of Gypsy’s career was her talent as her own image-maker. Her own stylist before professional stylists for celebrities existed, she created an alluring self-presentation for her stage performance that she later seamlessly expanded to her public persona; Gypsy the performer, Gypsy the celebrity, and Gypsy the person as she saw herself, became all one-and-the-same. And as a strip tease entertainer – a woman who put on to then take off clothes, a woman who understood the power of wearing and not wearing clothes – what better medium to create the celebrity Gypsy than her clothing; especially the clothes she wore beyond the stage lights and in front of the flashbulbs.

This paper examines the mostly off-stage, non-costume, sartorial choices Gypsy wore for her public appearances, and how she deliberately used high-end fashion and couture to manipulate not just her appearance, but also her identity. Specifically, this paper discusses the importance of Gypsy’s personal and professional friendship with the American couturier, Charles James (July 18, 1906 – September 23, 1978), as part of her deliberate effort to create, and ultimately perform, a new persona beyond her burlesque fame. Fashion, an important signifier of a woman’s image, alters beauty and creates glamour; fashion affects views of femininity as well as class. By wearing James’ artistic and expensive clothes, Gypsy manipulated her public’s perceptions, attaching a higher-class association than usual to her profession, and ultimately expanding her celebrity reach.

Using research gathered from studying Gypsy’s ensembles now in The Costume Institute and the Brooklyn Museum’s Costume Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, periodicals, and the Gypsy Rose Lee Archives at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Gypsy’s self-created persona will be explored. Her fashion choices, along with so many other seemingly frivolous considerations, affected her success. The couture wearing Gypsy understood this, and self-styled her own celebrity creation.

¹ “Gypsy Rose Lee Is Dead at 56: Made Strip Tease an Art Form,” *The New York Times*, April 27, 1970, 33.

² “Gypsy Rose Lee Memorial Service Tomorrow,” *The New York Times*, April 28, 1970, 41

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