

*BURLESQUE*  
*BODIES*  
*BOUNDARIES*

Exhibition Dossier – Raleigh Smith

[https://www.canva.com/design/DAFUeKyseyg/I7P81cpXXO8iANHuvRfN6Q/view?utm\\_content=DAFUeKyseyg&utm\\_campaign=designshare&utm\\_medium=link&utm\\_source=publishpresent](https://www.canva.com/design/DAFUeKyseyg/I7P81cpXXO8iANHuvRfN6Q/view?utm_content=DAFUeKyseyg&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link&utm_source=publishpresent)

# Burlesque, Bodies, and Boundaries

## Narrative

Burlesque, Bodies, and Boundaries will be an exploration into the history of burlesque and its evolution into what it is today. Exploring the political, social, and economic aspects that influenced it as well as the iconic women that lead the industry. A key focus of this exhibition is to take an industry most do not understand as anything more than a strip show for men and changing the narrative to show the women that created and drove it into popularity today.

Starting in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century up until current times, this exhibit will analyze powerhouses such as Madame Vestris, Bettie Page, and Josephine Baker. As well as current burlesque stars such as Dita Von Teese and their costumes and styles. Starting with Madame Vestris, the exhibition will dissect the origin of both the word Burlesque and what it meant at the time. Also exploring the satire performances, it started as and working its way into the world of follies at music halls during the Great Depression and war times.

A major focus will be Josephine Baker, an American born French living black woman who took the world by storm in the 20's and 30's. She started at the ripe age of 13 in the United States touring with different groups performing comical skits in 1919. She attempted to advance in American groups but was discriminated for her color and size. She eventually took over the place of one of the girls and ended up driving the box office and thus her career took off and brought her to Paris. The exhibit will analyze her life briefly and how American audiences rejected her when she left for Paris, while *white* showgirls and burlesque dancers continued to work and were not nearly as degraded. Her life is of exemplary interest and the exhibit will touch on various parts of her life and how these women were not just beautiful but powerful. From being an undercover correspondent for France during WWII and a sub-lieutenant in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, she was a powerhouse. Telling her story is vital to this exhibition, exploring how women's bodies being exposed does not diminish their intelligence, power, strength, and overall empowerment.

The exhibit will carry the viewer from these years into the 50's where many stars were born and popularized, both what they wore and what was permitted to wear in each state at the time. This segment will focus on **boundaries**. Using references from a catalogue that was produced on state regulations pertaining to strip teasing. This exhibit will focus on the United States and France. The exhibition will end with the movie Burlesque starring Cher and Christina Aguilera, a movie that popularized Burlesque further in a modern way. Consisting of 12 objects with prints, posters, photographs, and costumes, there will be a range of works to explore the history of Burlesque.

## Logistical Considerations

Venue – The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Square Footage Needed – 2000 sqft – performance space intertwined throughout – needs room

Exhibition Furniture – pedestals, dress forms, stage, 19<sup>th</sup> century furniture, full. Mannequins, burlesque champagne glass (itself an object)

Special Equipment – extra hands may be needed

## Checklist

Burlesque originated in nineteenth-century music hall entertainments and vaudeville. In the early twentieth century, it emerged as a popular blend of satire, performance art, and adult entertainment. The word derives from the Italian *burlesco*, which, in turn, is derived from the Italian *burla* – a joke, ridicule, or mockery.

Divided into

Early/Origin

Evolution

Modern

1.

Madame Vestris

Samuel Lover

Watercolour

c. 1826

16 3/4 in. x 13 in. (425 mm x 330 mm)

NPG 2786



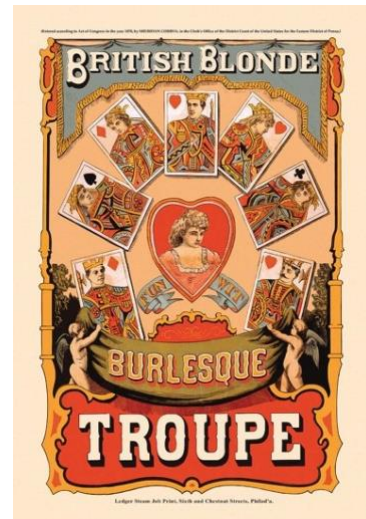
2.  
Madame Vestris, fitting on her breeches for the character  
of Macheath  
J.L. Marks  
London  
V&A Museum  
19<sup>th</sup> century  
S. 257-2012



This description is for both of the first images. Madame Vestris is an extremely notable woman for being the first woman stage manager/theatre owner in England (and many other places) and also a performer herself. She was known to wear pants in acts and play men in many plays and other theatre performances. The portrait shows her in a typical feminine way for the time and the second is her in her pants in a drawn caricature. I think these set a proper preface for the origins of burlesque as it was satirical and not yet what it evolved to be.

3.  
British Blonde Burlesque Troupe  
Library of Congress  
1865  
2014637275

I chose this as a poster to display since it is one of the first and major burlesque troupes of the time. I think having a poster with that key word “Burlesque” is a strong addition to the exhibition.



4.

## Victorian Burlesque Costumes

\*\*\*\*\*



These photographs are extremely important, **to me,** as it is the true basis of what burlesque was. These

costumes are what women would wear to juxtapose the female identity. The horse for instance for being what a woman should not. They would act anything but lady-like and float about the stage denying every stereotype they could. Poking fun at social, political, and even economic happenings. Women did not wear pants besides for things like this and a small wore pants for rural activities, but that number was small.

5.

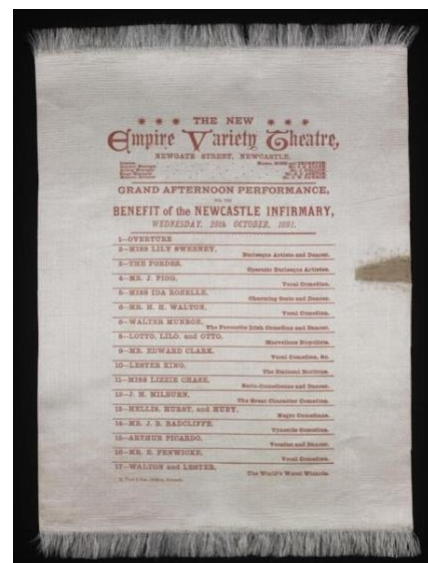
Possibly? Some sort of programme

Silk Programme

1891

R. Ward and Sons

S.30-2007



I think this program accompanies the basis well for the start of Burlesque. I chose this one in particular due to the usage of the word “negroes” and further talking about Josephine Baker and how she was bashed by America with this word. I think it will be a proper juxtaposition of treatment of WOC specifically and how they deciphered during this time and the discrimination of all kinds.

6. Talk about the great depression and the war

Photo - "The Luncheon Belles" "1920" "Dolly, Ma ?, Nora, Lena, Toots, Dora"

Photograph

[Burlesque Hall of Fame](#)

Description

Written with Black Sharpie - "Remember the Old Days"

Entry/Object ID

2010.05.695

Collection

Dixie Evans Collection



The 1920's were a good time for Burlesque and

this image truly brought me joy. I think that the freedom of the body on film as early as 1920 is amazing. We often think of the 1920's as a crazy time but lifting of the hem lines was crazy for them, no waist was crazy for them, and that wasn't even till later in the 20's, so this image is just very striking to me. I think it would be a great opportunity to talk about how people move towards escapism during troubling times and how they would perform at music halls and underground clubs, but NOT completely nude. Which begs the question of the origin of this

photograph? I think the mystery of it is even more the fun.

7.

Josephine Baker and her Cheetah, Chiquita

Photograph

----Look up further info



8.

Josephine Bakers Banana Skirt

Chateau des Milandes

Accompanied by video of banana dance

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9jNCm6CVV0>



This is for the whole section of Josephine Baker. I think it is extremely important to not only show diversity of the world during this time in a thing like Burlesque but also the different views of the world. She was successful in France and hated in USA. Her story is truly interesting and the discrimination was immense but she persevered and was the most photographed woman at the time. She was a secret spy during WWII, had a cheetah, and choreographed her own dances. She was truly an amazing woman and to highlight her would be showing the true dancing origin



of what we know today. I think the banana skirt is her most famous costume and dance and has lots of controversy. In my research, I found so much hate on saying she was being “monkey-like” for the white man, that it was forced, that it was a humiliation of black people and herself, and I think that it is so disgusting for her legacy! Shedding light on the fact that she did what she wanted to do, did her own dances, for her own sake and enjoyment is vital. She showed off her culture not for people to laugh at but rather for herself and love of dancing.

9.

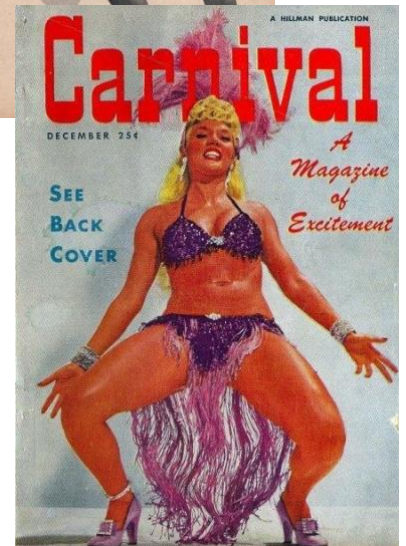
Carnival Magazine Christmas 1953

\*\*determined to find it somewhere

Bettie Davis – major Burlesque star

Mention other major stars

Find mag and maybe digitize where you can swipe through on a screen and view the different states?



This would be a key component for the boundaries and bodies portion.

This edition of carnival with bette davis ( a major Burlesque star) shows

how much skin you can show in every state. I think this is so interesting

and also if we could have a digitized version for people to swipe through

to find their state that would be so fun, as well as a print copy. This moving into the costumes

will discuss all the major stars in the 40's to 70's, to the resurgence in the 90's.

10.

Carmine and Hayworth Vintage

1960's Burlesque Costume



11.

Carmine and Hayworth Vintage

1960's Rhinestone Burlesque set



Talk about

**1958 Burlesque Pageant Miss Exotic world was born**

**Dwindled and stayed tame 50's,60's,70's**

**More clothes came off which was the birth of the modern day stripped but Burlesque acts continued in their own fashion as well**

## BURLESQUE IN MODERN FILM

12.

Dita Von Teese

2022

Don't Worry Darling referencing the 50's  
Costume and glass



1992

Putting the tease back in strip tease  
The typical commercial burlesque performance we know

Well known

Came back in the 80's with the revival of burlesque

Lots of 90's performers that reinvented burlesque in NYC and spread all over the world

\*\*\* champagne glass included in the exhibition design with mannequin inside with lingerie

Has her own lingerie line – talk about being a modern woman and entrepreneur

13,14,15,16. Burlesque movie

## Costumes

with Christina Aguilera and Cher

need to track down

the green dress, pearl lingerie, and Chers ringmaster look, tough lover look hunt down!!



## Marketing Tactics

- Implementing as Met Gala theme = major success
- Covered by major publications
- Selects key interviewers and hosts
- Partner with Burlesque troupes such as Brown Girl Burlesque, Lesburlesque, Les Vixens
- In exhibit performances
- Talks with burlesque historians – costume focus



December 6, 2022

Mrs. Jessica Holden  
Director of Funding  
Condé Nast

Dear Jessica,

The Metropolitan Museum of Art respectfully requests \$50,000 towards the execution and installation of the exhibition: ***Burlesque, Bodies, and Boundaries*** that will be presented on the museum's lower floor level from May 12, 2024 – September 3, 2024.

As Condé Nast being the leader of fashion publications and having funded multiple of our past fashion exhibitions, we would be overjoyed to continue working with you on this exhibition.

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### **Financials**

The estimated budget for *Burlesque, Bodies, and Boundaries* is \$120,000 and The Metropolitan Museum of Art is prepared to release a full proposal to Condé Nast detailing our request of \$50,000. We have also reached out to various other supporters from different backgrounds such as the NYSCA, private foundations, philanthropists, and government funding.

Thank you so much for the consideration to work with The Met again. Condé Nast does so much for our institution and are grateful for the continued support, we hope to discuss this soon!

Yours Truly,

Raleigh Smith  
Grant Manager  
raleighsmith@themet.com