

Marlene Dietrich
DRESSED FOR THE IMAGE



National
Portrait
Gallery

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Marlene Dietrich (1901–1992) brought androgyny to the silver screen through her roles in such movies as *Morocco* (1930) and *Seven Sinners* (1940). The biggest Hollywood star at a time when “talkies” were still new, Dietrich captured men’s hearts and women’s admiration on screen and off. She challenged the strictly limited notions of femininity of the time through her lifestyle and fashion. Relying on her good looks, striking voice, sense of humor, and no-nonsense personality, Dietrich achieved international fame during her long career. The National Portrait Gallery’s “Marlene Dietrich: Dressed for the Image” is the first exhibition in the United States to examine the life and career of the glamorous, forward-looking actor and film pioneer.

Born and raised in Berlin, Dietrich came of age during the Weimar era between the end of the First World War and the onset of the Nazi regime. Although born into wealth and privilege, Dietrich lost her father in 1908, and her stepfather and uncle died during World War I. Dietrich, her mother, and her sister were excused from society’s limitations on well-off women and began to earn their own living. Dietrich dreamed of becoming a classical violinist but reportedly injured her hand while in her teens; she pursued a career in the theater instead. In 1923 she married Rudolf Sieber, a film professional whom she met while filming *Tragodie der Liebe* (Tragedy of Love). They had one child, Maria, in 1924.

Berlin’s decadent social atmosphere in the 1920s was the perfect environment for the free-thinking Dietrich to develop her creative abilities. Between 1922 and 1929, she performed in twenty-five theater shows and seventeen films in Vienna and Berlin; her real success, however, was in Berlin’s bawdy cabaret scene. As she became immersed in the vibrant culture, she embodied what we now refer to as the trailblazing “New Woman,” cutting her hair short and dressing in masculine clothes to communicate her female independence.



above: Dietrich family by Erich Sellin, 1906 (printed later)

below: Dietrich by Joël-Heinzelmann Atelier, 1918

Unless otherwise noted, all images are from Deutsche Kinemathek—Marlene Dietrich Collection Berlin, Germany.



Dietrich's big break came in 1930, when film director Josef von Sternberg noticed her performance in *Zwei Krawatten* (Two Ties). He cast her in *Der blaue Engel* (released in English as *The Blue Angel*). After it premiered in Berlin on March 31, 1930, Dietrich signed a contract with Paramount Studios and left Germany for Hollywood.

Paramount produced six films starring Dietrich and directed by von Sternberg: *Morocco* (1930), *Dishonored Woman* (1931), *Blonde Venus* (1932), *Shanghai Express* (1932), *The Scarlet Empress* (1934), and *The Devil is a Woman* (1935). Dietrich, who had embraced bisexuality without a second thought since her late teens, never took American puritanism seriously. In *Morocco*, wearing a man's tuxedo, Dietrich played Amy Jolly, a French nightclub singer. During one of the most supreme moments in early mainstream cinema, Dietrich, as Jolly, smiles a devilish grin and proceeds to share a kiss with a woman. Only Dietrich's unique mixture of insouciance, intelligence, and enigma could have pulled off such a performance for an American audience. *Morocco* made her an instant star and garnered her an Oscar nomination.



Today, gender-bending, including a woman kissing a woman—witness Katy Perry's "I Kissed a Girl (and I Liked It)"—or a woman wearing a man's tuxedo, is not unusual. In 1930, however, bisexuality and androgyny for American audiences was nothing short of a revolution. Yet in that year, Dietrich created a palatable figure of lesbianism for American consumption. Dietrich's frank sensuality and witty intelligence became her trademark. In 1957, the British theater critic Kenneth Tynan wrote of Dietrich, "She has sex but no positive gender. Her masculinity appeals to women and her sexuality to men."

Emboldened by her fame, Dietrich surrounded herself by the best in the business. She credited von Sternberg in the creation of her image, but her acumen for assessing and strategizing an effective look improved and sustained it. Dietrich's face is always lit from above, to create a halo

above: Scene from Josef von Sternberg's *Der blaue Engel* (*The Blue Angel*), 1930

below: Dietrich in *Morocco* by Eugene Robert Richee, 1930

in her hair and to highlight her cheekbones, as well as from the right side, to create a shadow on her nose, which otherwise would look imperfect. In 1960, she told a reporter for the British Sunday newspaper *The Observer*, "I dress for the image. Not for myself, not for the public, not for fashion, not for men." In *Song of Songs* (1933), the first film she made without von Sternberg, she brought in a full-length mirror in order to check the lighting in every scene before it was shot. It was Dietrich—not the film's director, Rouben Mamoulian—who told the cameraman how to light her face. Dietrich created all aspects of her iconic image, which she would endlessly redefine throughout her long career.

Since *Morocco* had made her a star, Dietrich's habit of wearing men's trousers became even more noticeable. For today's woman, putting on trousers is not a compelling statement about independence and expression. However, in the 1930s, before Dietrich made it fashionable, it was unheard of for women to wear garments considered suitable only for men. Stars who followed her example, like Katharine Hepburn or Anna May Wong, helped popularize this early moment of cross-dressing. Dietrich wrote that she was not the first woman to do so—the British performer Vesta Tilley and her American equivalent, Ella Shields, both did it before her—but they were male impersonators, whereas Dietrich made the phenomenon seem natural and feminine. In 1933, while en route to Paris via Cherbourg on the German luxury ocean liner the *Europa*, Dietrich created a stir when she enjoyed the open-air deck in a white pantsuit. Hearing of this, the head of the Paris police department warned that Dietrich would be arrested if she wore such clothing in Paris. Upon her arrival in the city, she stepped off the train wearing her most mannish tweed suit, complete with her hair slicked back under a beret and sunglasses fashioned after the traditional lesbian signifier, the monocle. Dietrich was not arrested; in fact, the chief of police apologized and sent her a sandalwood bracelet as a gift. Dietrich used her image—and her star power—to teach the Parisian police a lesson in freedom of choice.



clockwise from above:

Dietrich by Don English, 1932

Dietrich in *Song of Songs* by Eugene Robert Richee, 1933

Dietrich on the SS *Europa*, Cherbourg, France, by Paul Cwojdzinski, 1933

Rudolf Sieber and Dietrich by Keystone View Company, May 20, 1933



Dietrich was never without a sense of responsibility. As an actor, she was the consummate professional, knowing every line and remaining faultlessly punctual. These traits reflected her sense of *pflicht*, the German word for the sacred duty or obligation one has to respect others. It is difficult to imagine how heartbroken Dietrich must have felt when, as early as 1933, she began to suspect that the German government was betraying its own integral respect of freedom. She considered herself German to the core: Prussian discipline had formed Dietrich's backbone, and Weimar culture had defined her *pflicht*. Yet when Joachim von Ribbentrop (Nazi Germany's top diplomat) approached Dietrich in 1937 to star in propaganda films supporting Adolph Hitler and the Nazi regime, she refused, calling Hitler an idiot in interviews. Instead, she applied for American citizenship, demonstrating her allegiance to her own moral compass rather than to her homeland.



During her long career, Dietrich achieved many milestones and survived many blows. In 1933 she was the highest-paid actor at Paramount Studios, receiving \$125,000 per film. Paramount paraded her as their exotic star; she was their answer to MGM's "Swedish Sphinx," Greta Garbo. By May 1938, however, several failed movies earned her the label "Box Office Poison"—a title she shared with Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, Greta Garbo, and Katharine Hepburn. When Paramount cancelled her contract, Dietrich had unanticipated free time on her hands and decided to visit her family. Instead of meeting them in Germany, she arranged a reunion with her mother and her older sister in Austria. Gravely disappointed when both refused to flee Germany, she was ashamed to realize that her sister even supported Hitler. Feeling tired and bruised, Dietrich went to recuperate on the French Riviera, where she began an affair with writer Erich Maria Remarque. Although Rudolf Sieber was her faithful life companion, and she valued his advice more than anyone else's, Dietrich maintained what we know today as an open marriage. Her numerous lovers—including Josef von Sternberg, Claudette Colbert, Dorothy Di Frasso, Mercedes de Acosta, Yul Brynner, Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Gary



Cooper, James Stewart, Brian Aherne, John Gilbert, Edith Piaf, and Jean Gabin—colored her as even more glamorous and fueled gossip columns. In 1952 Ernest Hemingway described her magnetism, saying, “If she had nothing more than her voice, she could break your heart with it.”

Dietrich was granted American citizenship in 1939. Appropriately, this same year she made her spectacular career comeback in *Destry Rides Again*, a film in the most quintessential American film genre: the western. Starring alongside James Stewart, Dietrich played Frenchy, a saloon singer. With her trademark sensual charisma, she also performed her own stunts with graceful agility—including throwing a chair at Stewart, who ducked just in time. At thirty-eight, an age when many actresses are passed over, Dietrich proved that she was unstoppable. Evoking her performances in *Morocco* and *Shanghai Express*, she rekindled androgyny in her next film, *Seven Sinners* (1940). In it, her hit song, “The Man’s in the Navy,” almost rivaled her effusive charm in the *Destry* song, “See What the Boys in the Back Room Will Have.”

Vehemently opposed to Nazism, Dietrich gave more than 500 performances in the European theater of war from 1943 to 1946, raising money for war bonds and entertaining Allied troops—often on the front lines—with the USO. When asked why she put her life at risk to support American soldiers’ morale, she responded, “It was the decent thing to do.” In 1944, she became one of several performers that the OSS employed for its European radio broadcasts meant to create friction between soldiers of the Axis. Dietrich’s rendition of “Lili Marlene” became a favorite among German soldiers despite Nazi attempts to ban it. For her service during the war, two American generals independently nominated her for the highest government award to a citizen, the Medal of Freedom, which Dietrich received in 1947. That same year the French awarded her their equivalent, making her a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor. She valued these recognitions above any praise for her film performances.



above: Dietrich in *Destry Rides Again* by an unidentified artist, 1939

below: Dietrich posing with her jeep by an unidentified artist, 1944

Dietrich continued to star in motion pictures throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, including Billy Wilder's *Witness for the Prosecution* (1958), Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958), and Stanley Kramer's *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961). As her film career faded, Dietrich began a thriving singing career that recalled her formative years in cabaret. She performed all over the world, including Las Vegas, Paris, and Berlin, wearing costumes that were daringly sheer, yet in their exquisite design were as stunning as they were sexy. She also remained androgynous, wearing her iconic classic top hat and shirrtails through the 1970s. Dietrich controlled her image until age made it impossible to maintain such flawless, masculinized femininity any longer. In the mid-1970s, she moved to Paris, where she lived out the remainder of her life in near-seclusion. She died there on May 6, 1992.

Performers such as Madonna, Beyoncé—and more recently Janelle Monáe, Evan Rachel Wood, and Miley Cyrus—have each taken cues from Dietrich's example of cross-dressing, and their influence continues Dietrich's original reversals of gender and sexuality. "Marlene Dietrich: Dressed for the Image" explores how one notable American defined freedom, serving as the model for both men and women for generations to come. She remains a symbol of anti-Nazism, a fashion icon, and an influential figure of the LGBTQ community.

Kate C. Lemay
Historian



above: Dietrich with parachutists by George Horton, March 1945

below: Dietrich outside Nuremberg by Lin Mayberry, April 1945

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