INTRODUCTION

Sir Noël Coward (1899-1973) was one of the twentieth century’s most prolific and successful playwrights, songwriters, actors, and directors. (He was also a poet, novelist, memoirist, painter, producer, filmmaker, philanthropist, TV and cabaret performer, and even a spy.) In virtually all of these roles, he crafted an image of impeccable style and sophistication.

His work, still enjoying enormous worldwide popularity nearly fifty years after his death, is often noted for its dazzling verbal wit. Yet for Coward’s contemporary audiences, his productions were also visual feasts. He collaborated with some of the leading designers and artists of his time, an extraordinary creative network whose contributions are spotlighted in this exhibition. The look of Coward’s shows was as essential as his dialogue and music in evoking his theatrical world, creating an international impact that reverberates to this day.

There was, however, much more to Coward’s style than just chic costumes and décor. His humour was often a deflecting mirror that allowed him to probe deeply into social and emotional complexities. As a gay man (at a time when homosexuality was criminalised in Britain) who also surmounted significant barriers of class, he brought to his art the acute perceptions of an outsider and an anarchic comic edge. He pushed boundaries by dramatising sexuality with candour, and modelled an alternative vision of masculinity. He built a family around him of friends and collaborators, offering stellar professional opportunities to women that was rare for his time.

Underlying the delightful surface appeal of these visuals are sentiments and aspirations that still touch us profoundly. Just like Coward’s plays and songs, the art and style on view here often still seem fresh, contemporary, surprising - and true.

Brad Rosenstein
Curator
Coward initially broke through as a song and sketch writer as well as a performer in musical revues. The magic and glamour of London’s West End theatres enchanted a suburban boy who came from what he termed ‘genteel poverty’, fueling his ambitions and inspiring his enduring fascination with the city and its people. Although many of the Coward songs launched in the revues have become classics, what has often been forgotten is how daring and even experimental their stagings were in this unique form. It was in the revues that Coward began his lifelong collaborations with leading couturiers, artists, and designers for his sets and costumes, and where he first explored the collision of his Victorian–Edwardian sensibility with cutting-edge modernity that would become his trademark.
WAYS AND MEANS

Coward staunchly championed women as his collaborators at a time when most creative jobs in the theatre were held by men. Gladys Calthrop was his designer of choice for over twenty-five years, and Doris Zinkeisen was another favourite who demonstrated comparable versatility. The couturiers Edward Molyneux, Norman Hartnell, and Victor Stiebel all dressed his leading ladies with trend-setting style, and Cecil Beaton brought his signature sparkle. Although Coward would work with several renowned American talents over the years, it was no accident that he gravitated to British designers. They typically blended great style with restraint, rich fabrics with a rigorous sense of tailoring and architecture: in short, they provided a fundamental Englishness that Coward prized, the essential element in his work.

Edward Henry Molyneux (British, 1891-1974)
Costume for Amanda (Gertrude Lawrence) in Act I of Private Lives, 1930 (modern reconstruction)

Karl Sandys (Noël Coward) and Louise Charteris (Gertrude Lawrence) in ‘The Astonished Heart’ / Tonight at 8:30, National Theatre, New York, 1936
DESIGN FOR LIVING

From the beginning of his career, Coward had an instinct for self-promotion, and skillfully utilized the power of his image to maintain his public presence. The silk dressing gown which had become his trademark in the 1920s was a look he cleverly updated over the years to keep pace with contemporary fashion. Coward would escape from the pressures of his demanding career in his extensive travels, often to tropical climes, and through his amateur hobby of painting. His adopted home of Jamaica became his ideal subject, and although he jokingly referred to his primitive painting style as ‘touch and Gauguin,’ he capture many of the island’s textures and moods with a sharp directorial eye.
**MARVELLOUS PARTY**

In the years since his death, Coward has only seemed to grow in popularity. His plays are still performed worldwide, his work steadily adapted for television and cinema, and his songs have become classic standards. Current generations have adopted him as a venerated gay icon, and he continues to speak to admirers of his work across the spectrum of identity. His name still connotes sparkling wit, romance, and glamour, all crystallized in a sense of style that continues to have a significant impact to this day. The items on display in this section of the exhibition, from fashion designer Anna Sui’s 2017 dresses to costumes from the 2020 film version of *Blithe Spirit*, were all inspired by Coward and his world, and represent only a small sampling of his enduring legacy.

Anna Sui (American, born 1964)
Green jacquard dress, gold lace blouse with lace collar and cuffs, necklace - Autumn/Winter 2017 collection
Courtesy of Anna Sui. Photo by Matt Crockett.

Charlotte Walter
Costume for Madame Arcati worn by Judi Dench in *Blithe Spirit*, 2020 (detail)
Rust velvet coat, teal dress covered with gold lace, fingerless gloves, necklace, feathered velvet turban. Courtesy of STUDIOCANAL Limited. Photo by Matt Crockett.
NOËL COWARD: ART & STYLE

THE EXHIBITION IS JOINTLY PRODUCED BY THE NOËL COWARD FOUNDATION, THE NOËL COWARD ARCHIVE TRUST, AND THE CITY OF LONDON CORPORATION

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Noël Coward at Look Out, Firefly Hill, Jamaica, 1950s
Photo by Cole Lesley. The Noël Coward Archive Trust.

NOËL COWARD
ART & STYLE

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