

A Rare View of the Met Gala

For most of us, fashion's party of the year ends with the red carpet. But our reporter got a look inside.

By **Matthew Schneier** Photographs by **Landon Nordeman**

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Sometime before sunset, as a crowd of spectators watched from behind barricades across the street, six shirtless musclebound men hoisted a velvet divan onto their shoulders. Lady Gaga had performed a kind of high-art striptease, doffing gown after gown until she reached her fourth and final outfit, but already the next performance was set to begin.

On the couch reclined what appeared to be a golden idol, regal in repose. It was, in a way: Billy Porter, an actor who understands the opportunity afforded by an occasion — thus the entourage.



Kim Kardashian West, Kendall Jenner, a replica of Jared Leto's head, and Jeff Bezos. Landon Nordeman for The New York Times

Celine Dion Landon Nordeman for The New York Times

The hunks lowered him to the ground, and he stepped off, spread his golden wings and posed for the crowd, which roared. Then he ascended the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, carpeted in pink for the evening, and plunged into the Met Gala, the fashion industry's biggest party of the year.

The Met Gala is the annual fund-raiser for the Met's Costume Institute, and tied to its spring exhibition. This year's, "Camp: Notes on Fashion," celebrates the pervasive influence of camp. It was up to the evening's co-chairs — besides Gaga, Anna Wintour of Vogue, Alessandro Michele of Gucci, Serena Williams and Harry Styles — and their invited guests to make a case for the theme.

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"The thing that I love is that this brings dignity back to the form," Mr. Porter said. "Flamboyance, camp — most of the time, it's a pejorative. This is a reclamation."

He had reclaimed camp for himself in a look by the Blonds, a New York label, which sprang, Mr. Porter said, "out of Ryan Murphy saying to me I should do the entire five-outfit montage from 'Mahogany.'" He'd settled for one.



Lady Gaga Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Mindy Kaling, left, in Moschino, and Ashley Graham, in Dapper Dan-Gucci. Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Lupita Nyong'o Landon Nordeman for The New York Times

Camp is tricky for fashion, which often is camp without understanding itself to be. Camp celebrates artifice and artificiality, flamboyance and theatricality, but can quickly deflate if forced.

It proved no less challenging for many of the guests, who came dressed as extravagant versions of themselves. “What is camp?” asked Celine Dion, who arrived in a beaded curtain of fringe by Oscar de la Renta and a peacock-feather headdress. “I got very confused.”

She paused and leaned in conspiratorially. “And I was not the only one.”

Is it camp to be a cheeseburger, as Katy Perry was, dressed as a crystal-encrusted sandwich? (A costume change: She had entered as a chandelier, fully lit.) No, just potentially dangerous. “You’re a slider? Let me eat you!” the rising rapper Lizzo cried with delight when the two met near the entrance. “I hope you’re vegan.”

“This is an Impossible Burger,” a meatless alternative, Ms. Perry replied.

Is it camp to carry around a replica of your own head, as Jared Leto did? Not really, just creepy, though it makes for good selfies. Derek Blasberg took one with both Letos.

Is it camp to be Joan Collins? We have a winner. Of course it is, and “of course” the theme resonated with her, said Ms. Collins, wafting through the Met’s Petrie sculpture court in white feathers and radzimir by Valentino.

Ms. Collins, especially in her incarnation as Alexis Carrington of “Dynasty,” is a camp legend, invoked by other guests as a North Star — “These are some Alexis Carrington shoulders,” Samantha Barry, the editor of *Glamour*, said of her outfit — and Ms. Collins accepted such tributes with the grace of a once and future queen.

“I was called camp so many times,” she said. “The camp bitch.”

In the courtyard, the crowd swelled to elbow-knocking fullness, a hum of giddiness and a traffic jam of gown trains. “It’s out of this world,” said Max Hollein, the new director of the Met, celebrating his first gala, “and very different, of course.”

Even in the world of high-stakes fund-raisers, it's unusual to see Jeff Bezos, the billionaire founder of Amazon, kibitzing with Awkwafina, a breakout star of "Ocean's 8" and "Crazy Rich Asians." (In a life-imitating-art twist, "Ocean's 8" was a caper comedy about robbing the Met Gala.) "You're hard to miss!" Mr. Bezos told her merrily.

Everywhere one looked, unlikely wires were crossing. Over here, Shawn Mendes, the pop star, chatting with James Charles, a YouTube beauty vlogger, attired for the occasion in a shirt of chain-mail safety pins. Over there, Tiffany Haddish, the comedian, was offering around fried chicken out of her purse; the designer Gabriela Hearst eagerly accepted a piece.

"I stay ready, baby," Ms. Haddish said, black-tie gala or no black-tie gala. "I got your back. That's from my kitchen, baby."



Billy Porter, in a golden catsuit and wings by the Blonds. "It went viral, worldwide," the director Ava DuVernay told him inside the gala.
Landon Nordeman for The New York Times

More camp:

SLIDE SHOW
Met Gala 2019: Photographs From the Red Carpet May 6, 2019



Further yonder was Lena Dunham in a dress that read "RUBBERIST" and a conspicuous glitter. "Honestly? My life's dream was to have glitter and Astroglide mixed into a paste that I could then apply all over my body," she said. "I'm looking to slide into someone's DMs. Physically."

In such quarters, even those who ordinarily cannot escape attention could, at least momentarily. Gigi Hadid, who came with Michael Kors, Ms. Haddish and Bette Midler, was nearly unrecognizable under a sequined cap and spidery pairs of white eyelashes. "Everyone thinks I'm Bella," she whispered, referring to her equally ubiquitous sister. "It's kind of great."

Dinner was called, but still they kept streaming in: Tom Brady and Gisele Bündchen, Kanye and Kim Kardashian West, Nicki Minaj, Cardi B with a team of four to hoist her enormous red train, Zendaya in a faithful re-creation of Cinderella's blue gown with a magical stylist-godfather, Law Roach, waving a magic wand.

"Oh, I love you've got a smoke machine," Kate Moss said to her, when the wand coughed forth smoke, to atmospheric effect. "That's genius."

It was also camp. "To be camp, you don't need just a dress," Mr. Michele, the creative director of Gucci, had opined at the evening's outset. "You need to bring yourself, you know?"

He'd also brought tables full of guests: one for him and one for his collaborator Dapper Dan, with Mr. Leto and his two heads, Florence Welch, the actress Hari Nef and the playwright Jeremy O. Harris and others among them. But Mr. Michele had shimmied up the carpet with just one, Mr. Styles, whom he'd dressed in a see-through blouse, dangling pearl earring and trousers that crawled, corset-like, up his trunk.

The start of a new look, perhaps? "This is the start of something, yeah," Mr. Styles said. "But I trust him. I think clothes are supposed to be fun. And camp is about enjoying yourself."



Michael Kors and Gigi Hadid. Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Cardi B, in a Thom Browne gown that took 35 people to create. Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Frank Ocean gets a snap of Mr. Bezos. Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



The actor Cody Fern in Maison Margiela Artisanal. Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Kylie Jenner, left, and Kendall Jenner, both in Versace. Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



21 Savage, left, and Dapper Dan. Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Sinéad Burke and Ryan Murphy. Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Alex Rodriguez and Jennifer Lopez. Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Sophie Turner Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



From left, Ezra Miller, Michael B. Jordan and Cara Delevingne. Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Elle Fanning Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Solange Knowles and Ciara. Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Kacey Musgraves Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Awkwafina, in Altuzarra. Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Mary-Kate Olsen and Ashley Olsen. Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Hailey Bieber Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Christine Schwarzman, left, and Lena Dunham. Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Nicki Minaj Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Amy Fine Collins Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Doutzen Kroes Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Amber Valletta, left. Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Bevy Smith Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Miley Cyrus and Corey Gamble. Landon Nordeman for The New York Times



Jordan Roth Landon Nordeman for The New York Times

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