



Marlene Dietrich: A Woman's Works

Posted by [Anne Akers](#) / 22 Jun 2017

We think we know them. We watch them on television and in movies. We claim to know everything about Hollywood's biggest stars, but do we really? The National Portrait Gallery comes closer than ever to describing perfectly the life of Marlene Dietrich. As one of the first in-depth exhibits in the United States, Marlene Dietrich: Dressed for the Image encompasses more than forty-five historical objects including photographs, correspondence, and film strips all relating to her life, career, and cultural influence. The chronological exhibit is anchored by larger, expanded photos designated for each important section showcased in the exhibit. As a most captivating and current exhibit, there is something for everyone to gain from exploring the life of this extraordinary woman.

As curator and historian, Kate Lemays very first extensive exhibit at the National Portrait Gallery the exhibit showcases some of Dietrich's most powerful and influential moments. Born in Germany on December 1901, the exhibit begins shortly into Dietrich's childhood which took place during a very progressive time during the First World War. As we move chronologically down the length of the corridor we can see the progression of her career. From her beginning modeling to her, with the help of her right hand man Josef von Sternberg, becoming more comfortable with photographs and lighting. We begin to see her understand how to light her own photographs and really take charge of what she wants. We also see her comfort level expressed in movies from *The Blue Angel* (1930), her first sound picture, to *Morocco* (1930), the debut of her girl on girl kiss, and finally to *Song of Songs* (1933), where she began to master her image.

Not only was she a star on the big screen, she always excelled in helping those around her. After applying and being granted American Citizenship in 1939, Dietrich wanted to do her part to assist the men fighting over seas in the Second World War. During her time in her open-marriage, her other life lover, John Gabin, left for Germany and without hesitation Dietrich followed him to war. She joined the U.S.O, raised money from Hollywood stars, and continued to perform for the troops. She was very dedicated to the soldiers and amorously called them her boys. It was because of her clear dedication and service for the 18 months while overseas that two American generals nominated her for the Medal of Freedom.

Out of all the photos and clips in the exhibit, I believe the most powerful display is the picture chosen for the main title image. Dietrich is wearing her most masculine tweed suit, circular bifocals, slicked back hair, and is leading her husband off the docks in Paris in 1933. Dietrich always believed in actions over words. She is famously quoted as saying I dress for the image. Not for myself, not for the public,

not for fashion, not for men. Making statements like the one made previously mentioned in Paris showcases Dietrichs respect of choice. She was making statements supporting womens rights and the LGBTQ community before it was as well-known as it is now. This exhibit is extremely current and timely for present day society when we shouldnt be shying away from sexuality, female independence, war, ageing, or standing up for what is right. The exhibit couldnt have come at a more perfect time, now more than ever, when it is important for both women and men to push the boundaries and test the rules of society. As Marlene Dietrich being one of the most influential women to pioneer the efforts to normalize the conversation about sexuality, the exhibit offers a deep look into the life of an important Hollywood star, as well as continues important societal conversations. It is true, as they say, that without change and adaptation, a society would never progress.