

NEWS RELEASE

2701 N. Sepulveda Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90049-6833

TEL: (310) 440-4500
FAX: (310) 440-4595

E-MAIL: communications@skirball.org
WEBSITE: www.skirball.org



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Media Contacts:

Emma Jacobson-Sive, (323) 842-2064, emma@ejs-media.com

Mia Cariño, (310) 440-4544, communications@skirball.org

Skirball Cultural Center announces

FEARLESS FASHION: RUDI GERNREICH May 9–September 1, 2019

Exhibition underscores the fashion pioneer's forward-looking embrace
of gender fluidity and body positivity

Fashion is not expected to be a social message. A designer is not expected to say something other than, "Here is another dress." But I would not be in this if that were the only thing required of me.—Rudi Gernreich, 1971

LOS ANGELES, CA—Through his groundbreaking collections, Rudolph "Rudi" Gernreich (1922–1985) was more than one of the most prominent fashion designers of his time. His body of work shows how he conceived of fashion as a liberating force—a platform for innovative design that challenged conventional notions of beauty, identity, and gender. The Skirball Cultural Center presents the first exhibition to focus on the social and cultural impact of Gernreich's vision. On view from May 9 through September 1, 2019, *Fearless Fashion: Rudi Gernreich* will feature more than eighty ensembles—including the topless swimsuit, the thong, unisex clothing, and pantsuits for women—that earned Gernreich worldwide acclaim. Also on view will be original sketches, letters and personal papers, photographs, press clippings, and newly filmed oral histories of friends and colleagues that shed new light on how Gernreich continues to influence fashion today.

Propelled by his personal history and political beliefs, Gernreich sought to effect social change. Bethany Montagano, Skirball exhibition curator, explained, "After fleeing Nazi oppression as a teen, Rudi Gernreich immigrated to Los Angeles, where he encountered discrimination again. He would eventually find safe haven in the performing arts world and the gay rights movement. These early experiences fueled his commitment to promoting a truer expression of self and designing clothes that proclaimed, 'You are what you decide you want to be,' as Gernreich himself put it."

Montagano continued, "At the Skirball, where we are guided by the Jewish tradition of welcoming the stranger, we are inspired by how Gernreich did just that: his apparel welcomed everyone into the fold—regardless of race, religion, gender, sexuality, and body type—broadening the scope of who is 'fashionable.' We hope that visitors are inspired by Gernreich's fearless fashions and his lifelong credo that style is about freedom and authenticity."

Exhibition Overview

Gernreich was catapulted into celebrity by his controversial "monokini" and is often remembered for his

longstanding collaboration with renowned model Peggy Moffitt. Developed by Montagano and assistant curator Dani Killam—with the expert support of acclaimed fashion designer and exhibition creative adviser Humberto Leon (of Opening Ceremony and Kenzo)—*Fearless Fashion: Rudi Gernreich* will offer a broader understanding of the designer's life and work in seven sections. Throughout the gallery, Gernreich's ensembles will be draped on custom mannequins with flat feet, in keeping with his insistence on bare feet or sensible low-heeled shoes for his models.

The exhibition starts with **Becoming Rudi Gernreich**, charting his childhood in Vienna and his immigration to the United States in 1938. It portrays his early days in LA, as he joined the Lester Horton Dance Theatre, an interracial and socially engaged dance troupe, and became the second founding member of gay rights organization the Mattachine Society. Visitors will learn about Gernreich's first jobs in the fashion industry, working for Hollywood costume designer Edith Head and entrepreneur Hattie Carnegie among others, and eventually partnering with clothing manufacturer and fellow Austrian immigrant Walter Bass, with whom he helped shape the aesthetics of California sportswear.

The section **Dance & Theater** highlights Gernreich's interest in freedom of movement. His Swan and Duotard costumes for the Bella Lewitzky Dance Company performance *Inscape* will be displayed in dramatic poses, exemplifying how Gernreich's clothing allowed the body to move freely.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Gernreich expressed support for second-wave feminism through fashions that upended expectations of how a woman should look and dress. The section **Minis, Mods & Pantsuits** shows how Gernreich provided new clothing options to women, pushing boundaries with his mod "micro-mini" and helping to make pantsuits—such as his "Marlene Dietrich" and "George Sand" ensembles—acceptable womenswear.

In **Swimsuits & Undergarments**, visitors will see how Gernreich rejected archaic body ideals and championed functionality and comfort. His knit bathing suits, devoid of structures that limit mobility, favored a more natural silhouette. His wireless "no-bra" bras and thong underwear became bestsellers, paving the way for them to become staples of contemporary fashion. This section also addresses how Gernreich's forward-thinking, body-positive designs resulted in backlash: for example, his topless "monokini" swimsuit of 1964 brought him notoriety, as critics ranging from the Soviet Union to the Pope thought it signaled the end of morality in the US.

Youth Culture & Politics explores Gernreich's responses to the crises of his time. Many of his garments touched explicitly on student protests, growing racial tensions in America, and armed conflicts around the world. On view, for example, will be his collection inspired by military uniforms. Gernreich created it in protest of the Vietnam War, but it took on added meaning when the Kent State shootings broke out in 1970.

Gernreich's vision of the future was brought to life in his Unisex Collection of 1970, in which he stripped away gender markers altogether. The section **Unisex Solidarity** showcases garments that could be worn interchangeably by anyone, a revolutionary notion in fashion at the time. His jumpsuits and caftans abstracted the body, highlighted utilitarian design, and posed new questions about gender fluidity. Gernreich explained, "I see unisex as a total statement about the equality of men and women. Their different sexual natures no longer need the social support of differences of dress. Unisex reveals nature, our common humanity. It doesn't hide or confuse it" (1970).

The final section is **Experimental Fashion & Legacy**, which illustrates how Gernreich's cutting-edge use of sheer fabrics, leather, vinyl, dog leashes as belts, exposed zippers, and metal springs crossed over into mainstream fashion.

Also within the gallery is a whimsical environment titled **Concept to Rack**, highlighting Gernreich's design process in relationship to various retailers, including LA's Jax Boutique, for which Gernreich designed activewear. A photo opp will invite visitors to try out their most "fearless," creative poses in front of a large-scale contact sheet of Moffitt wearing a Gernreich caftan. Here visitors will also discover how Gernreich shattered high-fashion precedent by selling his designs at mid-range retail chain Montgomery Ward, which made his ready-to-wear designs accessible to American women nationwide.

Throughout the sections are new video oral histories of several of Gernreich's colleagues, including modern dancer Don Martin, fashion designer Renee Firestone, and models Barbara Flood and Léon Bing. Additional media stations will play historical footage of Gernreich fashion shows, as well as a promotional reel widely regarded as the first fashion video, *Basic Black*, featuring Gernreich, model-muse Peggy Moffitt, and hair stylist Vidal Sassoon.

"Rudi Gernreich's trailblazing fashions were fun, sometimes funny, and always freeing," concluded Montagano. "It had an openness and honesty that excluded no one, inviting everyone to reject conformity, celebrate difference, and embrace those who feel marginalized. It is a message that resonates to this day."

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Fearless Fashion: Rudi Gernreich is organized by the Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles. The exhibition and its related educational programs are made possible by generous support from the following donors:

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About the Skirball

The Skirball Cultural Center is a place of meeting guided by the Jewish tradition of welcoming the stranger and inspired by the American democratic ideals of freedom and equality. We welcome people of all communities and generations to participate in cultural experiences that celebrate discovery and hope, foster human connections, and call upon us to help build a more just society.

Visiting the Skirball

The Skirball Cultural Center is located at 2701 N. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90049. Museum hours: Tuesday–Friday 12:00–5:00 pm; Saturday–Sunday 10:00 am–5:00 pm; closed Mondays and holidays. Museum admission: \$12 General; \$9 Seniors, Full-Time Students, and Children over 12; \$7 Children 2–12. Exhibitions are always FREE to Skirball Members and Children under 2. Exhibitions are FREE to all visitors on Thursdays. For general information, the public may call (310) 440-4500 or visit skirball.org.