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# Viva la diva! A dizzying celebration of star-power down the ages

Judith Woods



## Exhibition

### DIVA

V&A, London SW7



What is a diva? Is it Lady Gaga in a meat dress, Marilyn Monroe breathlessly channelling the innocent vamp, Sir Elton as Louis Quatorze in a mile-high wig? Truthfully, once any word appears on T-shirts, mugs and babygrows, it loses much of its meaning and all of its force; whatever the protected

characteristics of a diva, I think we can all agree that ubiquity isn't supposed to be one of them.

Regardless of the fast-fashion optics and high-maintenance clichés, divas are not 10-a-penny. Far from it. Cometh the confusion, cometh the V&A's summer blockbuster, a joyous reminder of the elemental power, the dizzying theatricality, the towering self-belief of the diva as defined and redefined through history and culture. Told through photographs and objects, portraits and costumes, DIVA is less an exhibition than a son-et-lumière full-body immersion that ingeniously taps into something far more potent; our own memories.

Here comes the science bit; visitors wear state-of-the-art

headsets delivering 360-degree surround sound that are nothing like the glorified Walkmans of old. Instead, the headsets are fitted with technology that interacts with sensors on each display, triggering an extraordinary soundtrack as you walk through the space; Maria Callas singing *Casta Diva*, Dusty Springfield's haunting *You Don't Own Me*, Barbra Streisand pleading *Don't Rain on My Parade*.

While Rihanna's 2018 Met Gala papal ensemble is a show-stopper and I defy anyone not to smile aloud at Shirley Bassey's bespoke Swarovski-studded wellies made for her 2007 Glastonbury appearance, politics is present too; Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Joan Baez.

There are bound to be grumbles about the relative amounts of exposure given to different divas, but that's only 'cos we care. Hand on heart, I couldn't think of a single star who was missing from the pantheon and I felt that Prince, RuPaul and rapper Lil Nas X, whose purple off-the-shoulder Atelier Versace pantsuit-and-train is on display, had all earned their place in the glittering firmament.

While contemporary names such as Billie Eilish and Doja Cat will be the crowd-pleasers for Generation Z, there's a great deal of scholarship too. The entrance takes you into a dimly lit downstairs gallery, to meet the original divas and to discover that the Italian term, which means "goddess", was first used around the 16th century to describe female performers whose divine talents made them appear supernatural.

By the 18th century, the term was synonymous with prima donnas, opera singers of exceptional voices and charisma who dominated the art form and commanded almost cult-like status among their fans. Unlike their female peers in the chorus, they had financial and personal independence, both of which were highly unusual in the industry.

Victorian London provided a stage for the likes of Adelina Patti, Ellen Terry and Sarah Bernhardt, fostering the notion of divas as individuals, whose eccentricities and challenging behaviour – by the constricting standards of the day – added to rather than detracted from their allure.

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Music-hall legend Marie Lloyd used her platform to highlight the plight of the working-class poor, but personal happiness remained elusive – as it does for many of our most creative souls.

The TikTok brigade might struggle to imagine a world in which women can't be the stars, showrunners and mistresses of their own destiny, but my generation is old enough to remember that fame costs; for every Beyoncé there's a Whitney, for every Madonna reinventing herself there's an Amy, a Marilyn unable to escape their demons.

As I drifted through the decades, I welled up at Judy Garland's sublime contralto, revisited my first bittersweet love to Sade and danced like nobody was watching from the opening chord of Lizzo's *About Damn Time*. It's a rare experience that can pack such poignancy and punch and still leave you wanting more, but then that's the genius of any prima donna. Viva la diva!

*Saturday to April 2024; vam.ac.uk*

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**Divine talent: Cher, Elton John and Diana Ross in 1975**