



GLBT
Historical
Society
museum & archives

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Performance, Protest and Politics: Virtual Exhibition Explores Art and Advocacy of Rainbow-Flag Creator Gilbert Baker

San Francisco — The GLBT Historical Society has unveiled an online version of its exhibition “Performance, Protest and Politics: The Art of Gilbert Baker,” which opened at the GLBT Historical Society Museum on November 1. The exhibition uses textiles, costumes, photographs and ephemera to paint a complex portrait of artist Gilbert Baker (1951–2017), who designed the iconic rainbow flag. The online exhibition opens on Monday, April 27 at glbthistory.org/gilbert-baker-exhibition.

First displayed at the 1978 San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade, the rainbow flag has transcended its humble, hand-sewn origins to become an internationally recognized symbol of the LGBTQ community. Yet the success of this design has in some ways overshadowed the larger story of its creator and his exceptional creative work.

“Performance, Protest and Politics” examines how Baker blurred the lines between artist and activist, protester and performer, emphasizing his intuitive understanding of the ways art can serve as a powerful means to address political and social issues. Over the course of four decades, Baker melded his artistic gifts with his devotion to justice, employing a range of media and approaches — including sewing, painting, design and performance — to advocate for positive social change.

The exhibition has been co-curated by Jeremy Prince, who has curated and overseen numerous exhibitions at the GLBT Historical Society Museum; and Joanna Black, the archivist who oversaw the donation of the Gilbert Baker Collection to the GLBT Historical Society’s archives in 2017.

Referring to the many extravagant costumes on display, Prince notes that Baker employed drag “as a vehicle to critique injustice and express outrage. From Betsy Ross to Pink Jesus, from Lady Liberty to the uniform of a concentration-camp prisoner, Baker’s drag wardrobe and personas represent the intersection of patriotism, discrimination and social justice.”

By exploring the less well known dimensions of Baker's wide-ranging oeuvre, the exhibition places the rainbow flag back into the unexpected and evocative context of his exceptional life as an activist and artist. "We highlight some of the political flashpoints of Baker's life and how his creative responses at those moments reveal a multilayered character — a man intent on being publicly seen and using his visibility as a declaration," says Black.

"Performance, Protest and Politics: The Art of Gilbert Baker" opens online Monday, April 27 and can be experienced at glbthistory.org/gilbert-baker-exhibition.

For more information, visit the GLBT Historical Society website at www.glbthistory.org.

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About the Curators

Joanna Black is the archivist at the William E. Colby Memorial Library at the Sierra Club's National Headquarters in Oakland, California. She was director of archives and special collections at the GLBT Historical Society from 2016 to 2018. Black holds a B.A. in creative writing from San Francisco State University and a master's in library and information science from the University of California, Los Angeles.

Jeremy Prince is the Collections Specialist at the San Diego History Center in San Diego, California. He began volunteering at the newly opened GLBT Historical Society Museum in 2011. From 2014 to 2019, he served as the society's director of exhibitions and museum operations. Prince holds an M.A. in early modern European history and museum studies from San Francisco State University.

About the Museum

Open since January 2011, **the GLBT Historical Society Museum** is the first stand-alone museum of its kind in the United States. Its Main Gallery features a long-term exhibition on San Francisco LGBTQ history, "Queer Past Becomes Present." Its Front Gallery and Community Gallery host changing exhibitions. The institution also sponsors forums, author talks and other programs.

The museum is a project of the GLBT Historical Society, a public history center and archives that collects, preserves, exhibits and makes accessible to the public materials and knowledge to support and promote understanding of LGBTQ history, culture and arts in all their diversity. Founded in 1985, the society maintains one of the world's largest collections of LGBTQ historical materials.

For more information, visit the GLBT Historical Society website at www.glbthistory.org.

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One of the original eight-color rainbow flags flying at United Nations Plaza during San Francisco Gay Freedom Day 1978; photograph by Crawford Barton, Crawford Barton Papers (1993-11), collection of the GLBT Historical Society.



Gilbert Baker holds the rainbow flag against a pink background, 1989; photograph by Robert Pruzan, Robert Pruzan Collection (1998-36), GLBT Historical Society.



Gilbert Baker as a bloodied Lady Justice on the fifth anniversary of the murders of San Francisco supervisor Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone, November 27, 1983; photograph by Daniel Nicoletta, used with permission.



Gilbert Baker (right) wearing his international flags gown on a Golden Gate Bridge-themed float, ca. 1987; photograph by Robert Pruzan, Robert Pruzan Collection (1998-36), GLBT Historical Society.



Gilbert Baker (center) as Pink Jesus in the 1990 International Lesbian and Gay Freedom Day Parade; photograph by Robert Pruzan, Robert Pruzan Collection (1998-36), GLBT Historical Society.

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