

The Secret Side of Mardi Gras: Dance and Gender in Old-Line Carnival Balls, 1870-1920

After parading through the streets each season, Mardi Gras organizations called “krewes” retreat to private, lavish balls. The oldest groups—old-line krewes—emerged in the mid-19th century and ruled modern Mardi Gras from the Civil War until World War I. Their balls created a world full of possibility: krewemen became gods, kings, and knights while their daughters became queens and maids. As the old-line krewes cultivated a sense of fraternity, they used their bodies to proclaim class status and shared values. The crux of these performances relied on specific modes of expression—dancing and social choreographies that resulted in tableaux vivants, mock coronations, and ballroom dancing.

RECONSTRUCTION

Tableaux Vivants ripe with images of chivalrous knights and mythic heroes dominated early krewe balls. By embodying these identities, krewemen touted the elite, masculine body as a protector of tradition and as a champion of Southern values while mitigating anxiety about Confederate defeat and Radical Republican politics.

GILDED AGE

Mock Courts and regal, grand march processions took center stage when select debutantes began their social career as a krewe queen or maid. These women used scripted bodies to cultivate performative power—promenades, curtseys, and bows became choreographed exhibitions of elite femininity.

PROGRESSIVE ERA

Ballroom Dancing and ensuing romance became most important to krewemen and guests in the early 20th century. Through waltzes, then ragtime ditties, dancers engaged in flirtatious bodily conversations that forged krewe dynasties and ensured the survival of a social power system for generations to come.



Mistick Krewe of Comus Tableaux Vivant, 1870



Mistick Krewe of Comus Queen, 1893



Krewe of Proteus Ball, 1907

What's Next? Several “cracks in the consensus” emerged that warrant further investigation:

- Elite women's own krewe balls
- Formation of African American & Middle-Class krewes
- “French Balls”: Prostitutes crowned Carnival queen by krewemen at topsy-turvy parties

These sites of performativity challenged old-line hegemony and reinforced dance's core role in the creation of diverse Mardi Gras identities, such as the satirical gay krewes that emerged in the 1970s and today's post-Katrina “everyman” dance marching groups.

Jen Atkins, PhD
School of Dance
jatkins@fsu.edu