

## News Release

### **V&A acquires the Tommy Cooper Collection celebrating the life and career of one of Britain's best-loved comedy stars**

vam.ac.uk | @V\_and\_A



The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) is delighted to announce the acquisition of the Tommy Cooper Collection – the largest collection of its kind tracing the life and legacy of the much-loved British comedian Tommy Cooper (1921 - 1984). The acquisition strengthens the Museum's collections documenting key figures in British comedy from Ronnie Barker to Tony Hancock, Dame Edna Everage and Morecambe and Wise. It also joins the Museum's holdings of the legendary Windmill Theatre, the scene of one of his earliest stage appearances.

The Tommy Cooper Collection comprises over 116 boxes of archive material and 24 props and posters to chart the career of the outwardly shambolic magician and comedian known for his trademark fez, flustered face, bungling stage persona and razor-sharp comedy. From his early career in the army to the height of his television stardom and status as national treasure, the collection also sheds light on Cooper's scrupulously organised working methods, the business side of his vocation and the extent of his writing. Cooper only used a small percentage of all the material he amassed as part of his 'Gag File', a system for storing his jokes, ordered alphabetically with the meticulousness of an archivist. The collection also includes Cooper's writings, some jotted down on backs of posters and shirt packaging cardboard, as well as documents relating to the inner workings of his career, such as contracts from 1946 to his death in 1984 – including those he could not fulfil following his unexpected passing during a live performance.

Other highlights from the collection include stage props, such as Cooper's infamous 'Head Twister' illusion; details of early auditions at the BBC and engagements; a folio notebook full of his gags; personal correspondence; posters; theatre programmes and merchandise charting his career spanning almost four decades. A selection of these objects will go on public display for the very first time in the V&A's Theatre and Performance Galleries in the autumn. The V&A will also make the archive available for research, once cataloguing has been completed, and digital records will also be available on Search the Collections.

Simon Sladen, Senior Curator of Modern and Contemporary Performance at the V&A, said: *“The Tommy Cooper Collection offers a fascinating insight into one of the best-loved entertainers of the 20th century and reveals much about his practice, process and legacy. Although it doesn’t contain one of his iconic fezzes, the rich collection contains thousands of hand-written gags as well as unique examples of his comedy props. Since 2010, the V&A has been collecting material that helps tell the story of British Comedy and we are delighted to welcome the Tommy Cooper Collection as the latest addition to the National Collection of Theatre and Performance.”*

Tommy Cooper’s friend and fellow entertainer Ken Dodd said: *“Tommy was truly a great and wondrous comedian. He possessed and was possessed by the comic spirit. He loved laughter and he loved to laugh. I’m sure he would have been very proud to see so many people enjoy his sense of humour.”*

Vicky Cooper, daughter of Tommy Cooper said: *“It is wonderful that the V&A has acquired the Tommy Cooper Collection and that the public will get to see some of his material on display later this year. I hope it brings as much enjoyment to people as he did when he was alive. My dad would be very proud knowing he was now represented in the National Collection of Theatre and Performance, sitting alongside the likes of Ronnie Barker’s archive and costumes worn by Morecambe and Wise and Stan Laurel.”*

Tommy Cooper, once described by Kenneth Tynan as Britain’s ‘*best new clown...the hulking, preposterous conjuror, who is always in a jelly of hysterics at the collapse of his own tricks*’, was a fanatical magician and consummate showman who discovered the comedy in failed magic tricks as a teenager in the canteen of the firm where he was apprenticed as a shipbuilder in Hythe, Hampshire. After wartime service with the Horse Guards and valuable experience performing with the Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes and the Combined Services Entertainment, he met the jazz musician Miff Ferrie whose job as Entertainments Director at London’s Windermere Club secured him his first engagement there in November 1947. Previously that year he had failed initial auditions at both the Windmill Theatre and with the BBC.

Managed by his agent Ferrie throughout his career, Cooper went on to star in his own television shows, to perform for the Queen, Royal Family and the Royal Household at Windsor castle, to appear in three Royal Variety shows, and to become one of Britain’s most original, highest-paid, most impersonated and best-loved entertainers of the 20th century. Cooper lived in Chiswick, west London with his wife and two children from 1955 until his death in April 1984. He died after collapsing during a live broadcast from Her Majesty’s Theatre, London. Earlier this year the comedian was honoured with a blue plaque on his former home, recognising his contribution to popular entertainment.

- ENDS -

### **Notes to Editors**

For further PRESS information please contact Laura Mitchell in the V&A press office on +44 (0) 20 7942 2503 or email [l.mitchell@vam.ac.uk](mailto:l.mitchell@vam.ac.uk) (not for publication).

A selection of press images are available to download free of charge from [pressimages.vam.ac.uk](http://pressimages.vam.ac.uk)

### **About the V&A**

The V&A is the world's leading museum of art and design with collections unrivalled in their scope and diversity. It was established to make works of art available to all and to inspire British designers and manufacturers. Today, the V&A's collections, which span over 5000 years of human creativity in virtually every medium and from many parts of the world, continue to intrigue, inspire and inform.