

V&A acquires Tommy Cooper's Fez

vam.ac.uk | @V_and_A

5 December 2016



The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) is delighted to announce the acquisition of one of Tommy Cooper's iconic fezzes. The fez joins the V&A's National Collection of Performing Arts, which also includes the recently-acquired Tommy Cooper Collection – the largest collection of its kind tracing the life and legacy of the much-loved British comedian Tommy Cooper (1921 - 1984). From 6 December 2016, Cooper's fez, along with a selection of objects from the collection, including posters, hand-written jokes and a section of his meticulously organised 'Gag File', will go on public display for the first time in the Museum's Theatre and Performance galleries.

Legend has it that when performing in Cairo during the Second World War, Cooper mislaid his army-issue helmet and took a fez from a nearby waiter to wear for the show. The hat looked comically small on Cooper's 6ft 3" frame and became his trademark. The fez has been donated to the V&A by the former advertising executive, Hans van Rijs. Cooper gave Hans the fez when they met in 1984 to discuss a Dutch TV commercial that he was to star in for Bassett's Winegums. The advertisement was never made, as Cooper died suddenly a few days after the meeting.

Of the meeting, Hans van Rijs, said: "I travelled to London to meet Mr Cooper in the first week of April 1984 to discuss his script for a Dutch TV commercial for Bassett's Winegums. I arrived at his house around 10.30 and was offered something to drink. We finalised the script and he gave me his fez to take back home with me, so that the special effects team could begin animating it for the advert. He died a few days after we met, so sadly that advert was never made."

Simon Sladen, Senior Curator of Modern and Contemporary Performance at the V&A, said: *"It is wonderful news that we now have an authentic fez in addition to the Tommy Cooper Collection at the V&A. Cooper's fez is an icon of 20th century British comedy. It's thrilling that we can display it alongside his hand-written gags and unique examples of his comedy props to give visitors a fascinating insight into one the best-loved entertainers of the 20th century."*

Tommy Cooper 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.

- 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 (not for publication).

A selection of press images are available to download free of charge from pressimages.vam.ac.uk