Digital guide to THNOC holdings related to Tiana’s Bayou Adventure research

Rex breastplate (1893)

Perched on the king’s float as Rex in 1893, John Poitevent rode behind the title float (“Fantasies”) and the *boeuf gras* (the fatted bull of Carnival, represented by a live bull in early Rex parades). Each year, the self-proclaimed “King of Carnival” and “Monarch of Merriment” is chosen from the membership of the Krewe of Rex, historically a group of wealthy, civic-minded businessmen. As a leader in the railroad industry and one of the most prominent lumbermen in the South, Poitevent fit the mold. Founded in 1872, the Krewe of Rex has aimed to support the city by promoting Carnival as a tourist attraction and providing philanthropy under its mission “Pro Bono Publico” (“for the public good”).

(Rex breastplate created for 1893; bronze, leather, glass, rhinestones, satin; The Historic New Orleans Collection, gift of Edward B. Poitevent II, Eads Poitevent Jr., and William Poitevent, 2012.0100.1)

Chief Howard Miller Mardi Gras Indian suit (2018)

Using bright red feathers, rhinestones, and beads of all sizes, Chief Howard Miller has created a piece of modern folk art rooted in centuries of New Orleans African American history and culture. Chief Miller, known for his use of rhinestones and masterful sewing, has masked Indian for over 50 years, creating a unique suit each year. His tribe, the Creole Wild West, has an oral tradition that traces the group’s origins to the 1830s, and the group is documented in the historical record beginning in the 1880s. The beaded scenes on the vest and apron depict the Tramps, the early 20th-century predecessors of the Krewe of Zulu. Miller added a turquoise beaded necklace to the suit in recognition of the influence of various Native American tribes in New Orleans African American culture.

(Mardi Gras Indian suit created for 2018; feathers, beads, rhinestones, turquoise, canvas, shoes, synthetic hair, plastic; by Chief Howard Miller; The Historic New Orleans Collection, acquisition made possible by the Laussat Society, 2021.0052)

Dorians King costume (1938)

United by shared business interests and a desire to promote trade and tourism, a wave of new krewes formed in New Orleans in the waning years of the Great Depression. Many did not parade, but hosted annual balls with kings, queens, captains, and other royalty selected from their membership.

This king’s costume was worn in 1938 by William G. Zetzmann Sr. at a Venetian-themed ball hosted by the newly formed Krewe of Dorians. President of Zetz 7-Up Bottling Company, chairman of the Convention and Visitors Bureau, and a director of the International Trade Mart, Zetzmann was involved with many krewes from the 1930s through his death in 1962, including Hermes, Babylon, Moslem, and Virgilians. Dorians still exists today, hosting its traditional bal masqué each Carnival season.

(Dorians King costume created for 1938; silk, sequins, silver, paper, rhinestones, glass, metal; The Historic New Orleans Collection, gift of Sherrian Zetzmann, 2005.0346)
Mystic Club Queen Crown and Scepter (1955)

Founded in 1922, The Mystic Club recently observed their 101st anniversary. The Club is one of the few Krewes that selects a married woman for its queen, rather than a young debutante. This crown and scepter from the Mystic Club are accessories typical of what a queen would wear to a Mardi Gras ball during the 1940s and '50s. They would accompany floor-length gowns made of satin, often with beading from top to bottom. The Mystic Club was known for its extravagant stage settings that depicted literary romances and historical events.

Montine McDaniel Freeman wore these accessories to a ball on February 19, 1955, with the theme “After the Battle of New Orleans.” The material is gilded metal with rhinestones. The gown she wore is also lavishly decorated: the bodice is neatly designed with rhinestones and sequins that are carried out in a geometric pattern down the front. The most exotic and outstanding features—the capped sleeves with shoulder pieces of stiff wire—also are embellished. Crisscrossed beaded straps on the back are anchored with a large flower of rhinestones, matching the one in front.

“Old King Cole” float for Twelfth Night Revelers parade, “Mother Goose’s Tea Party” (1871)

Mardi Gras as we know it began in New Orleans during the second half of the 19th century, when groups of white men gathered to form krewes, put on public parades, throw private balls, and tailor each celebration to a specific theme. The topics could be satirical, historical, fantastical, and exotic, and were often influenced by the popular literature and prevailing decorative movements of their day.

The invitations, costumes, and float designs from the first few decades of New Orleans Mardi Gras krewes, often called “the Golden Age of Carnival,” are stunningly detailed and beautiful. This example from the Twelfth Night Revelers (or TNR) depicts the nursery rhyme “Old King Cole” and includes such charming details as a piping Pekinese pup. TNR is the second-oldest Carnival krewe, founded in 1870, and is credited for starting some of the most important Mardi Gras traditions to date. Examples include being the first to add debutantes as queens, maids, and other members to their royal court, as well as including political satire as an organizational theme. However, their most notable contribution was normalizing and instituting the practice of “throws,” after a masked Santa Claus figure in 1871 tossed an array of ornaments during the krewe’s parade.

("Old King Cole" float for Twelfth Night Revelers parade, "Mother Goose’s Tea Party” created for 1871; watercolor and ink on Bristol board by Charles Briton; The Historic New Orleans Collection, 1975.177.1)
“Lightning” float for Babylon parade, “Capricious Nature” (1941)

Carnival has been canceled a total of fourteen times since the first-ever parade, organized by the Mystick Krewe of Comus, rolled out in 1857. After the United States entered World War II in 1941, there were no parades or balls for the next four years while the city focused its energies on the war effort. This electric float design by the Knights of Babylon, following the theme of “Capricious Nature,” may hint at the gathering storm to come. Mardi Gras was officially canceled in mid-December 1941 after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and it is assumed this design was made in the months leading up to the new year.

The Knights of Babylon present a traditional parade with several signature mule-drawn floats made of papier mâché. Babylon utilizes traditional Carnival practices, like keeping their same basic designs and dimensions used from their founding around 75 years ago, instead of the now heftier and larger floats used in modern day.

(“Lightning” float for Babylon parade “Capricious Nature” created for 1941; ink on paper by Charles C. Steppe; The Historic New Orleans Collection, gift of Raymond Hoffman, 1992.85.906)


Proteus is a traditional “old-line” white and all-male krewe, and is one of several that still include flambeaux, traditionally Black men who carry oil-fueled torches to light the parade. In 1991 the New Orleans City Council enacted a law that would ban discrimination of any kind (including on the basis of race, religion, gender, disability, or sexual orientation) in social clubs. Organizations had to certify they did not discriminate to receive parading permits. In response, Proteus, along with several other older krewes, decided to halt their parading activities. However, after a 1995 Federal Circuit Court ruled that such clubs “have a right of private association under the First Amendment,” the law was withdrawn, and Proteus promptly resumed parading in 2000.

Louis Andrews Fischer (1901–1974) originally created “Hummingbird” for the 1973 Proteus parade, which was abruptly canceled due to rain. Like many of the designs for that year’s theme, “Tales Sea Shells Tell,” her work was recycled for the 1974 parade's “Living Jewels” festivities. Fischer, named after her father, graduated from the Newcomb School of Art in 1921 and by her early adulthood had a reputation for creating fantastical scenic designs. Many of the designers for the “old-line” krewes in their first century were female. Fischer followed in the footsteps of Carlotta Bonnecaze, Jennie Wilde, Ceneilla Bower Alexander, and Leda Hincks Plauche as a designer for Proteus, Rex, Momus, or Comus. Aside from her annual contributions to the Carnival-season floats, Fischer was part of the creative community of the French Quarter, often hosting fellow artistic and literary friends, including Sherwood Anderson and William Faulkner, at her apartment in the Pontalba buildings.

(“Hummingbird” float for Proteus parade “Living Jewels” created for 1974; watercolor on paper by Louis Andrews Fischer; The Historic New Orleans Collection, gift of the Crescent Club, 2010.0720.75.3)

The Boeuf Gras is a representation of the fatted ox, traditionally the last meat eaten before the beginning of Lent. Comus was the first parade to include a live boeuf gras in its 1867 procession, and other early Carnival parades often included an ox, either paraded on the street or hoisted on top of a float. The Rex parade last featured a live ox in 1901, and it wasn’t until 1959 that the group reintroduced the boeuf gras in papier-mâché form. Today the pure white garlanded boeuf graces the third float in Rex, following His Majesty’s Bandwagon.

THNOC is the archival repository for the School of Design, the corporate name of the Krewe of Rex. The collections include 150 years of original costume and float designs, organizational papers, and captain’s letters covering the creation of elaborate balls and parades. In the late 19th century, Carnival captains traveled to France to order costumes, jewelry, and papier-mâché float decorations from Parisian ateliers. By the 20th century, New Orleans Carnival drew its own workforce of skilled designers, costumers, and artisans. Carnival craftsmanship evolved alongside local traditions. Floats grew from mule-drawn cotton carts in the 1800s, to trash wagons in the early 1900s, to big-rig chassis in the 1950s. In the late 20th century, float builder Blain Kern revolutionized Mardi Gras parades by leasing the extra-large chassis and building bigger, lighter floats from plywood and carved Styrofoam to accommodate more and more riders. Now referred to as Kern Studios, the company grew to become an international organization with expertise in entertainment production and specialty fabrication. Their innovative style is on display year-round at the company’s Mardi Gras World attraction here in New Orleans.

("Boeuf Gras" float for Rex parade “Look to the Stars” created for 1977; tempera on paper by Danny Frolich, Kern Artists; The Historic New Orleans Collection, gift of the School of Design, 1977.74.4)

Zulu coconut (1952)

Formed in 1909 out of a loosely organized group called the Tramps, and incorporated in 1916, the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club is the oldest African American parading krewe. Inspired by vaudeville entertainment, the krewe adopted blackface makeup and other stereotypes from popular minstrelsy to stage a satire of white Carnival culture. Unfortunately, white observers in the early 20th century missed the satire and saw the reinforcement of Black stereotypes. Zulu’s use of blackface came under fire during the civil rights movement and remains controversial.

There are several personas in the Zulu pantheon, including the Big Shot, Witch Doctor, Mayor, Ambassador, Province Prince, Governor, and Mr. Big Stuff, who all vie for attention during the parade but ultimately serve the king. Zulu’s king is the only Carnival monarch chosen by election. Candidates run lengthy campaigns that become social battles involving everything from barbecues to bumper stickers, as they try to win over their fellow krewe members.
Zulu coconut (1952) (cont’d)

Zulu coconuts are one of, if not the, most coveted throw of Carnival. Zulu riders decorate and distribute a few hundred coconut shells apiece each year, after they are shaved, cleaned, and emptied of milk and meat. Today many riders create elaborate works of art, but in the past simple and elegant designs like this one were the norm. The exact history of coconuts as a Zulu throw is a little murky, but they may have been distributed as early as 1910, in one of the first Zulu parades. It seems the tradition of cleaning and decorating coconuts began in the 1940s. The King of Zulu in 1952 was William Boykins, who may have personally decorated this “King of 1952” coconut!

(Zulu coconut created for 1952; coconut, paint; The Historic New Orleans Collection, gift of Stephen Hinks, 1952. Zulu King photo: LouisianaDigitalLibrary.org)