

CSA NEWS

Costume Society of America • Spring 2014

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CSA 40th National Meeting
and Symposium 2014

May 28 - 31, Baltimore, Maryland

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Talking Manicures with Suzanne Shapiro

By Marcella Milio

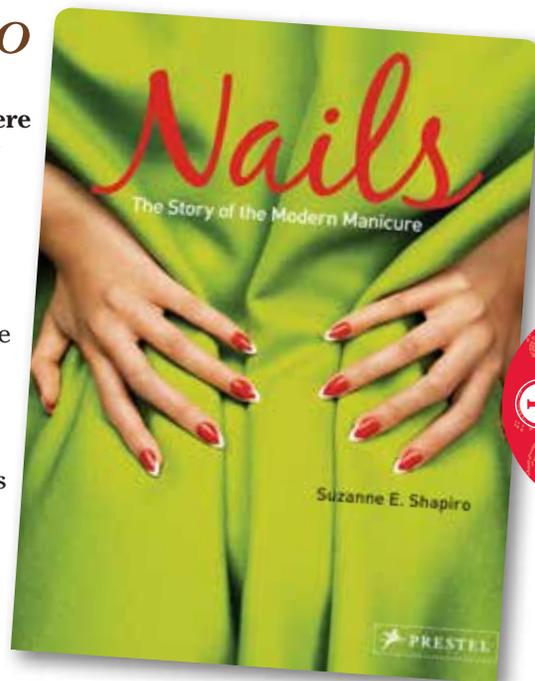
Suzanne Shapiro's book *Nails*, due out this spring, covers the history of nails, their adornment, and their influence on the broader topic of beauty in fashion. I had first come across Suzanne's research at the Annual Richard Martin Costume Studies Symposium at NYU in 2009. Since then nail art has become an increasingly important part of fashion, featured in fashion magazines like *Vogue* and on the hands of women everywhere. I sat down with Suzanne to catch up on her research and talk manicures.

1. What inspired you to do a book on the history of nails?

When I moved to New York City ten years ago, I was struck by the sheer number of nail salons; they're on practically every block. I wondered when women began to care so deeply about nails as an aspect of beauty and found that no one had really explored the cultural significance of the manicure in great depth. When I began my own research, I quickly realized what a surprisingly rich topic it was—worthy of a graduate thesis and then eventually, a whole book.

2. What sources were most useful for your research?

As historians, we're lucky to be present in this golden age of digitization, and digital collections like the *Vogue* Archive, the *TIME* Archive, and the *American Periodicals* and *New York Times* databases figured highly into my research. I found marvelous documents and images in library



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special collections across the country, in person at the *Condé Nast* archives, and sometimes quite serendipitously, flipping through popular magazines found at stoop sales and the like. I'm quite indebted to scholars like Kathy Peiss and Aileen Ribeiro for their compelling examinations of women's beauty rituals through time.

3. You state that manicures reflect not only larger style trends, but also changing ideals of femininity. Can you explain this?

Yes, the link between nail fashions and women's changing values is quite remarkable. For example, bright and deep colors of nail polish were considered risqué

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Talking Manicures

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when they first appeared in the 1920s and early '30s. This style statement suited the generation of young women who dared to dress more provocatively, drink with the boys, and dance all night! Through the century, painted manicures became a well-accepted part of beauty, but still managed to reflect new feminine ideals. As another example, French manicures and other understated styles worked well for the career women of the '80s who wanted to convey a certain professional polish.

4. Was there an era you found most interesting for nails?

I found the 1930s particularly intriguing. Despite—or because of—the newness of nail polish, there was a lot of experimentation: unusual colors like onyx and jade green, numerous moon manicure variations, and even novel packaging like mini champagne bottles, for example, in commemoration of Prohibition's repeal. Beauty writers buzzed about the new possibilities in manicuring while Hollywood movies showcased chic nail fashions; even certain artists celebrated painted nails in their work. In the face of the

Depression, nail culture really flourished, not unlike what's happened in recent years.

5. You discuss and illustrate the experience of ordinary women, as well as the influence of well-known personalities. Who, for you, are the most significant nail icons?

Hollywood stars like Carole Lombard and Rita Hayworth invariably sported chic manicures, and their studio portraits often benefited from the glamour of their painted nails. As entertainers, Barbra Streisand and Cher showcased long, extravagantly manicured nails, which track star Florence Griffith-Joyner took to the next level. And today, there's hardly a pop star that doesn't make nail art a regular part of her identity-shifting wardrobe.

6. What exactly is nail art and when did it begin?

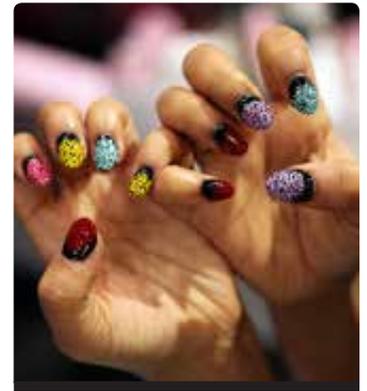
I'd define nail art as adornment beyond solidly-painted nails. I've come across surprisingly early instances, worn by daring and creative personalities: diamond-pierced nails in 1900 and photo-decoupage nails in 1914, for example. Nail art with decorative motifs became a minor trend in the



Above: Nail Queen contestants at the Tokyo Nail Expo. Photos: Adroniki Christodoulou

Right: Nail art by WAH London
Photo: Lauren Michelle Pires

anything-goes 1970s and later became an aspect of urban flair in the '80s and '90s. In recent years, the nail care industry has innovated an endless array of do-it-yourself decorative appliques and unique finishes. Women of all ages are increasingly inclined to experiment with this novel aspect of beauty; it's low-cost and low-stakes and they can just rub it off when they change their mind.



7. Women seem to keep coming back to red nail polish as the classic look. Why?

In cosmetics, warm colors like red and pink appeal to our instincts, giving the impression of vitality and passion. Yet when we reach for red nail polish, we also tap into our collective memory. It's a way to borrow the glamour of Jazz Age flappers, Hollywood screen sirens, and disco divas—all from one little bottle. 🍷



Left: Photograph by Dawn DiCarlo featuring nails by Madeline Poole.

Middle: Period nail-product advertisement
Right: period nail-product advertisement