

VINCENT ASTOR GALLERY THE SHELBY CULLOM DAVIS MUSEUM

September 18, 2013 - February 28, 2014

· PIONEERING POET OF LIGHT ·  
**FLORENCE VANDAMM**  
& THE VANDAMM STUDIO



NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS  
DOROTHY AND LEWIS B. CULLMAN CENTER



· PIONEERING POET OF LIGHT ·  
**FLORENCE VANDAMM**  
 & THE VANDAMM STUDIO

“...she is one of the few who use their camera as an artist can use his brushes...”

*Greater London Illustrated, October 1911*

In October 1911, Florence Vandamm was described as “one of the Rembrandts of Modern Photography” in the *Greater London Illustrated*. The article, which ran with a self portrait, began: “... she has won medals and prizes at most of the leading exhibitions...she is one of the few who use their camera as an artist can use his brushes ...a creative instinct and the wonderful light and shade effects which are so characteristic of her work distinguish it at once in a group.” In London and, after 1923, New York, she was a pioneer, managing a successful studio that documented live performance. The images appeared in magazines, newspapers, promotional flyers, and programs and form our collective visual iconography of dance, musicians, and theater. They could have been just documentation, as were the performance photographs of her predecessors, such as the Byron and White Studios. But her concern with the sculptural and emotional qualities of light gave Vandamm’s images the impact of being at a live performance. She worked during periods of great creativity in performance, production, and design, and was the ideal photographer to document the experimentation.

**Front Cover:**  
 Florence Vandamm,  
 photographed by  
 Joseph Costa, 1960

**Left :**  
 Florence Vandamm  
 directing the light and  
 cameras to document  
*The Constant Wife*,  
 1951, with John Emery,  
 Katharine Cornell and  
 Brian Aherne.

**Below:**  
 Audrey Richardson,  
 in the photograph used  
 to promote her 1913  
 violin recital, London.



*Vandamm*



**Right:**  
Dorothy Parker, 1924,  
photographed at the back of  
Harold Ross' brownstone.

**Upper Left:**  
Doris Humphrey, 1928

**Lower Left:**  
Edward Everett Horton,  
posed in the studio, late  
1950s



The exhibition is based on the Vandamm Collection, which she assembled from negatives, contact and key sheets, and prints remaining at the Studio when it closed in 1962, and transferred to The Library. Artifacts and prints from the Vandamm Collection, complemented by additional prints and published material from the Library's extensive iconography collections of 20th century performance, cover her over 50 years of her life as a professional photographer (1908 – 1963), and the 40 year existence of the Vandamm Studio. The photographs were used in periodicals, newspapers, books and promotional flyers, posters and programs, which are displayed in cases.

The East wall, as you enter, portrays her early career. Born in 1882, Florence Vandamm opened her first photography studio in 1908 in her native London. Concentrating on portraiture of musicians and authors, her photographs were reproduced in concert flyers and book jackets, as well as newspapers and periodicals throughout the English-speaking world. She was included in Royal Photographic Society competitions and featured in the 1914 Women's Kingdom Exposition gallery of noted women photographers. Her portraits for flyers and programs excelled at showing movement -- whether in a violinist, or Sybil Thorndike, crawling on the studio floor as Medea.





Her portraits of Suffragist actresses and writers brought her assignments and publication opportunities for Condé Nast. A World War I widow, she married American engineer George Robert Thomas and trained him as a photographer, using the name “Tommy Vandamm.” When the Vandamms moved to New York in 1923, the transition was made easier by her stringer status for Nast’s *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue* and by the transatlantic careers of many of the performers and writers whom she photographed. Soon, Vandamm made New York connections that would impact the Studio’s next 4 decades. Through Alice and Irene Lewisohn, she documented the experimental music and early modern dance scene around their Neighborhood Playhouse. The Vandamms connected to the Theatre Guild, Inc., which produced experimental and mainstream theater, and to two pairs of actor-managers – Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, and Katharine Cornell with her director Guthrie McClintic.

**Left:**  
Mildred Smith in  
*Beggar’s Holiday*, 1947

**Below:**  
Stage crew portrait for  
*Macbeth*, 1941, including  
Maurice Evans (in  
costume), Perry Watkins  
(far left), director Margaret  
Webster, Tommy  
Vandamm, and lighting  
designer Jean Rosenthal.



24



200



203



207



214



219



223



225



227



230



231



232





The Gallery is organized to reflect the two primary jobs of the Studio – portraiture and production documentation. The variety of portraiture and how it fits into performance documentation fills the south wall. Florence Vandamm is often said to have “invented” the head-shot. That 8” x 10” neutral photograph represents the personality and potential of the subject and a Vandamm head-shot was considered good luck and a symbol of status in the Broadway and classical music worlds. But of greater importance were her expansions of 8” x 10’s” to function as head-shots which portray not the performer, but the character, in movement and costume and photographs that represented the specialties and styles of comics. She mimicked her author portraits with photographs of production or songwriting teams, and stage crews. She could do glossy glamour, but preferred strong faces with minimal make-up. Although the Vandamms briefly went Hollywood, with over 60 sittings over five weeks in the industry’s pivotal summer of 1928, they chose to return to Broadway and their 57<sup>th</sup> Street home studio.

The Theatre Guild, the Lunts, Cornell, and many other British and American actors presented a major production every Broadway season, followed by a national tour. The job and art of documenting stage performance, highlighted on the West wall, became a mainstay of the studio’s output and income. After photographing the first and later rehearsals, the Vandamms read scripts, viewed previews and performances, and talked to the producers and designers to develop a planned post-performance shoot during the 1st week of the run. They photographed major plot moments, groupings and close-ups. Tommy and their assistants handled the cameras and Florence directed the lighting to create a package of images for promotion. They also documented every dressed set (with and without performers) for the production teams of theaters along the tour route. Finally, they photographed the stage crew on the set as an acknowledgement of their contributions to the show.

The performance displays look in depth at images created for five disparate productions – a revue, two modern-dress melodramas, *Hamlet*, and a “costume drama,” that spans the 19th century. Additional selections show their prowess at representing the plays’ atmosphere, movement styles, and plots, as well as the trust that they inspired in performers and producers. They experimented with points-of-view, shooting angles, and, briefly, color photography in the effort to best illustrate the productions and performers.

**Left:**  
Key sheet of portraits  
and head shots of  
Miriam Hopkins, ca. 1941

**Below:**  
Dolores Costello in  
her dressing room,  
Hollywood, 1928





**Right:**  
Oscar Hammerstein II  
watching rehearsals of  
*Allegro*, 1947

**Upper Left:**  
Humphrey Bogart in  
*The Petrified Forest*, 1935

**Lower Left:**  
John Bubbles as Sporting  
Life in the original cast of  
*Porgy & Bess*, 1935



Perhaps the most widely published and least understood visual record of 20<sup>th</sup> century performing arts, the output of the Vandamm Studio has largely been utilized only as illustrated backdrop for the retelling of Broadway history. The prints, contact sheets, and negatives of theater, music and dance in London (1908 – 1923) and New York (1924 – 1963) are among the Library for the Performing Arts' most requested treasures. We welcome you to discover the visionary photographer and portraitist who lent her talent and name to the studio. With a career spanning over five decades, Florence Vandamm was one of the most prolific and widely published commercial photographers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

These and many additional images by Vandamm and from the Vandamm Collection can be found in The Library's Digital Gallery at [www.nypl.org](http://www.nypl.org). Please also visit the blog channel, Vandamm, and staff blogs from the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts for additional images and information on performance and documentation. Photographs by Florence Vandamm and Vandamm Studio are © Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

*Light and Line: Depicting Performing*, is a series of occasional series of exhibitions highlighting The Library's holdings in performance photography, illustration and caricature. Please visit the related Fall exhibitions, which include *The Line King's Library* on Al Hirschfeld (Donald and Mary Oenslager Gallery, October 17, 2013 – January 4, 2014) and *Michael Peto Photographs: Staged in Britain* (Plaza Corridor Gallery, October 3, 2013 – January 4, 2014).







**Left:**  
Katharine Cornell  
in *Romeo and Juliet*,  
1938 revival

**Upper Right:**  
Lynn Fontanne,  
photographed resting  
behind the scenery  
during a rehearsal  
of Noel Coward's  
Point Valaine, 1935

**Lower Right:**  
Gertrude Lawrence,  
photographed in costume  
for *Candle Light*, 1929.



## CREDITS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*Pioneering Poet of Light: Photographer Florence Vandamm & the Vandamm Studio* was developed by The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts: Jacqueline Z. Davis, Barbara G. and Lawrence A. Fleischman Executive Director; Barbara Cohen-Stratynier, Judy R. and Alfred A. Rosenberg Curator of Exhibitions. The exhibition was curated by Cohen-Stratynier and designed and installed by The Performing Arts Museum staff: Caitlin Whittington, Designer, with Melissa Bartz, Graphics intern; and René Ronda and Dennessa Usher, Installers. Gallery media developed with Mike Diekmann, Manager of Play-back and Interactives. Conservators: Grace Owen and Erin Murphy.

Plans for an exhibition and professional biography of Florence Vandamm grew out of ongoing conversations with Phyllis Magidson, Curator of Costume and Textiles, Museum of the City of New York, and curator Kohle Yohannen during their research for an MCNY exhibition on the designer, Valentina. We are deeply grateful to them, and to the many staff members for their assistance and support, especially Jeremy Megraw, Karen Nickeson, and Annemarie van Roessel of the Billy Rose Theatre Division. We thank also LPA staff and volunteers who have notified me of their Vandamm discoveries over the years, volunteer Mana Allen, and the dozens of Performing Arts Museum interns over the past 10 years for their continuing enthusiasm and contributions to the project.

Material in the exhibition is from the Vandamm Collection and other holdings of the research divisions of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts: Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, and the Music Division, as well as the Schomburg Center for Black History and Culture.

We are grateful to the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, and the Library of Congress for allowing us to show reproductions of early London Vandamm photographs in their collections.

Scenery documentation for *Victoria Regina*, 1935  
Prop master for *Victoria Regina*. The candelabra and wax flowers are in the scenery below.



## PUBLIC PROGRAMS

THURSDAY

October 10 at 6:00 p.m.

### **Florence Vandamm & the Women Who Made Theatre**

Curator Barbara Cohen-Stratyner will discuss Florence Vandamm's photo-documentation of the women writers, directors, designers, and actress-managers in London (1908-1923) and on Broadway (1924 - 1962), followed by a curatorial tour of the exhibition.

THURSDAY

October 24 at 6:00 p.m.

### **Light and Line: Depicting Performing**

The curators look at the illustrators and photographers who covered Broadway and popular entertainment in the 20th century and how they used black and white to create our memories.

### **Bruno Walter Auditorium**

111 Amsterdam Avenue  
[www.nypl.org/lpa](http://www.nypl.org/lpa)

Programs take place in the Bruno Walter Auditorium. Admission to all LPA programs is free and on a first come, first served basis. Doors open 30 minutes prior to each program unless otherwise noted.

All programs are subject to last minute change or cancellation. For the latest information, visit us online at [www.nypl.org/events/programs/lpa](http://www.nypl.org/events/programs/lpa) or call 212.642.0142.





New York  
Public  
**Library**

The New York Public Library  
for the Performing Arts  
DOROTHY AND LEWIS B. CULLMAN CENTER

[www.nypl.org/lpa](http://www.nypl.org/lpa)

Charles Weidman and Martha Graham in the  
Neighborhood Playhouse production of *Pagan Poems*, 1928

Photographs by Florence Vandamm and Vandamm Studio are  
© Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.