

THE EVOLVING HISTORY OF COSPLAY IN AND BEYOND JAPAN

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Introduction

As an independent scholar, I was honoured to be asked to give an updated version of my cosplay presentation at FANS 2022. That was the fifth full revision of the presentation. For this essay in *The Phoenix Papers*, the text has been updated, with additional links to reference materials and an exciting video documenting the first known Japanese convention cosplay. The illustrations to the presentation are not repeated within this text, but the slides are attached.

I'm delighted to note that cosplay research has become more rigorous, more detailed, and more inclusive in the decade since the first iteration of this presentation. Fans, independent scholars, and academics have all contributed to this process. These contributions are sometimes through specific cosplay-directed research, such as the work of Edmund W. Hoff, sometimes through cosplay information shared as part of a wider exploration in another area, such as the translations from Japanese magazines published by Tim Eldred on his website devoted to the TV series *Star Blazers/Uchuu Senkan Yamato*, and sometimes through research on other topics in languages beyond Japanese and English, as when an exploration of the growth of anime fandom in France in the 1970s led me to a nineteenth-century newspaper report on an event run by author Jules Verne in 1877. Hoff and Eldred have both done superlative work on

accessing and sharing early cosplay records in Japanese magazines, and this has helped to clarify many misconceptions about the early history of cosplay in Japan.

The aims of this essay are threefold: To update my previous work on the topic; to reiterate cosplay's cross-cultural social and historical context as a development of the human urge to embody forces greater than ourselves and summon their qualities into our own personae; and to offer a clear, evidence-based global timeline of costuming and cosplay as fannish activities related to science fiction and fantasy (hereafter SFF) and media artefacts.

In order to achieve this, I will first summarise the early history of costuming for ritual and social purposes, and its development across a number of world cultures. This will be a brief overview and I encourage anyone interested in exploring these cultures further to review as many visual and verbal texts as possible. I will document the emergence of SFF and media costuming at the earliest verifiable SFF events in Europe and the USA, and will conclude by outlining the history of cosplay in Japan and its spread across international boundaries into cultural soil prepared by many years of indigenous and historical tradition.

The footnotes to this essay contain many references, and the final slide for the presentation at FANS also includes references that may be helpful.

Genesis

The first version of this presentation, over a decade ago, was made after I discovered that some respected American fan costuming websites stated as fact something I knew to be incorrect. The word cosplay was coined in Japan in the early 1980s, and I had seen photographs of cosplaying friends in Japan dating from the late 1970s. Yet these costuming sites stated that the concept of cosplay was exported from America to Japan after Japanese fans visited the 1984 World Science Fiction Convention in Los Angeles. The claim that American SFF conventions originated cosplay – not the word but the concept – was made in explicit terms.

This claim did not stand up to evidence available in English at the time I first read it. It appeared to be based on a single interview given by a Japanese guest via an interpreter at an American convention. The basic idea of cosplay – taking on another character for symbolic, ritual, or personal reasons – long predates the colonisation of America, and the act of cosplaying at public events and SFF conventions was established before the twentieth century outside America and Japan.¹

For religious purposes, the Japanese, like many other ancient peoples including the First Nations of North America, have been costuming to represent magical and natural forces since time immemorial. I believe we can't understand the history of cosplay, in Japan or elsewhere, without understanding the history of cosplay in global culture before the word was invented.

¹ Fanlore, s.v. "Cosplay, Historical Origins," <https://fanlore.org/wiki/Cosplay>

The tradition of transforming the self to represent or embody a character or a force of nature, as a means of accessing qualities and powers that individuals or communities need, is very ancient. In many traditions, including the Celtic and the Egyptian, priests and shamans wore animal pelts or tattooed themselves with animal designs to strengthen their rituals and call on the powers of the animal spirits. Ancient Egyptian gods assumed animal or half-animal forms, so their priests wore ritual masks in those animal forms to intercede between gods and humans.

Dressing up, guising, mumming, masquerading – a key component of town fairs, local fêtes, parties, and SFF and media conventions, goes back deep into humanity's history, when people made ritual masks and took on the personae of animals, spirits, and gods. We cannot truly know what was in the minds of ancient peoples in non-literate cultures, but from the wisdom carried forward by contemporary members of surviving ancient cultures, we learn that the impulse to dress as and personify a spirit or natural force is connected with a need to contact higher powers, to influence the course of life for the community or individuals, and to expand individual consciousness – for the benefit of the tribe, but also for personal growth, knowledge and power.

It's about control, self-enrichment, and appropriation. Here I use the word appropriation with positive intent: Ancient peoples sought to appropriate some of the powers they perceived as influencing their lives, either to build a relationship with those powers, or perhaps to acquire some control over them. I believe that as scholars we cannot investigate the origins of cosplay without at least considering its

intersections with global history, global imperialism, race, faith, anthropology, psychology, and media. Ancient peoples like Japan's Ainu and Yayoi, the sophisticated civilisations of Africa, the Pacific and the Arctic, more recent cultures in mediaeval Europe, and the French and British incursions into North America, are all part of the prehistory of cosplay.

As humans formed larger, more settled communities, the impulse to use costume and roleplay to get in touch with higher consciousness didn't die away. The mediaeval mystery plays performed all over Europe continued this impulse to connect with spiritual powers through re-enactment. Some mystery cycles are still performed in their original locations today, most famously the Passion Play at Oberammergau in Austria and the Chester Mystery Cycle in England.² Walking in the footsteps of divinities and patriarchs, assuming their identity and re-enacting their lives, these communities transform cosplay into public prayer, a repeated affirmation of belief that these stories matter to this community on a fundamental level. Mystery plays are sometimes reinstated in cities that abandoned them during the Reformation. For the past decade, a Christian group has performed the Passion of Christ and the Nativity all over the UK, with a Passion Play in London every Eastertide since 2010.³

The traditions of Europe are likely to be most familiar to scholars working in nations colonised from Europe, but we have much to gain by considering the many other traditions that use costume,

masks, or makeup, such as the huge range of rituals in African or Inuit cultures. Cosplay can be viewed as a modern extension of these diverse and ancient global spiritual traditions.

Masks have assumed a wider public importance in the present day as COVID-19 has swept the world, reminding us of historic plagues when doctors wore masks stuffed with herbs and other prophylactics. This has led to renewed interest in the role of masks in human culture, particularly from the medical profession.⁴ Although masks are not so significant in costuming as once they were, and even the term masquerade has been largely replaced by the term cosplay, they still speak to the transformative role of costuming, and further study is needed in this area.

Detachment from the Spiritual

The European Reformation shifted the faith of millions to a more reserved, less elaborate form of religion. Protestants in general disapproved of dressing up and pretence, seeing the old mystery plays as idolatrous superstition, and perhaps also fearing the transformative power and authority of ritual performance. Later, as the Age of Enlightenment swept through Europe, only rural peasant communities took the old traditions seriously, but even sophisticated people still found social and political uses for assuming another identity. There were secret societies such as the Hell Fire Club, with arcane, profane, or licentious rituals carried out in masks. There was also the excess and impunity of Carnival.

² <https://www.passionsspiele-oberammergau.de/en/home>;

<https://chestermysteryplays.com/>

³ <https://www.wintershall.org.uk/our-story>

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<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jpc.15162>

Carnival in Venice began in 1162 as a post-war victory celebration, was cancelled by the Holy Roman Emperor in 1797, but continued to bubble under the surface of society in a series of private celebrations. It was fully reinstated in 1979 and continues to this day.⁵ It spread across Europe in the form of Mardi Gras, Fat Tuesday, a last explosion of sin and self-indulgence before Lent began six weeks of self-denial on Ash Wednesday.

Venetians masked and disguised their clothing with enveloping cloaks called dominos, not just at Carnival time but for most of the year.⁶ This disguise let them pursue political and sexual intrigues with less risk of being caught. The masks worn by highwaymen originated in carnival masquerade dress and had the same purpose – the concealing of one’s ordinary, safe identity as a law-abiding person to assume the role of brigand and murderer.

The Costume Ball: From Immoral Foreign Practice to British Social Status Symbol

Masked balls and costume balls became very popular in eighteenth-century Europe. Public theatres often held them. In Britain the press labelled them as licentious and foreign, imported from loose foreign places such as Venice, Rome, and Spain, as early as 1718. Their potential for inverting gender, status, and

all other social norms was widely and often disapprovingly chronicled.⁷

This continued into the nineteenth century, when costume balls acquired a level of respectability denied to riotous theatre masquerades. Queen Victoria and her husband Prince Albert gave costuming a Royal seal of approval with their three *bals costumés* (costume balls) at Buckingham Palace. Prince Albert was a fancy dress enthusiast, having often attended costume parties in his youth, and he and the Queen saw their patronage of costume balls as a way to support the declining Spitalfields silk industry.

The Royal Family’s costumes for the mediaeval ball of 1842 were designed by costume historian James Robinson Planché. With over two thousand guests, the Spitalfields weavers and tailors must have been kept busy. The Queen and Prince Consort cosplayed King Edward III of England and his queen, Phillipa of Hainault (considered by many to be England’s first Black queen because of her mixed-race ancestry).⁸ The Georgian Ball followed in 1845, and the Restoration or Stuart Ball in 1851. Queen Victoria’s costume from the Restoration Ball is conserved at Buckingham Palace and is still displayed from time to time.⁹ These were not masked events – the whole purpose here was to be seen at the ball, honoured by an invitation from the Royal couple and displaying your wealth, historical knowledge, and taste as extravagantly as possible.

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<https://www.italymask.co.nz/About+Masks/History+of+the+Venice+Carnival.html>

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<https://www.italymask.co.nz/About+Masks/History+of+Venetian+Masks.html>

⁷ Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnavalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction* (Stanford: UP, 1986).

⁸ <https://www.rct.uk/collection/404540/queen-victoria-and-prince-albert-at-the-bal-costume-of-12-may-1842>

⁹ <https://www.rct.uk/collection/74860/queen-victorias-costume-for-the-stuart-ball>

Many other costume balls were held in England, either as private parties or to raise money for charity, with costumes ranging from historical figures and fantasy folk such as fairies to characters from literature and everyday life.¹⁰ This Royally-endorsed amusement even extended across the British Raj.¹¹ By this point, the mask as an essential element of masquerade had been largely discarded, although some costumes demanded masks or concealing headpieces.

Science Fiction Costuming

1877 marks the first documented event we can call an SFF convention, and the first documented examples of SFF cosplay and media-based cosplay – hence the first documented convention cosplay. Jules Verne, a hugely popular French author and one of the fathers of modern science fiction, held a *bal travesti* (fancy dress ball) for the citizens of his home town of Amiens – in other words, a convention - in the spring of 1877. There were around 500 attendees, many dressed up as characters or mechanical items from Verne’s SF and non-SF works.

The Parisian newspaper *Le Monde Illustré* presented a report with illustrations.¹² This is the baseline of convention cosplay history to date:

¹⁰ Rebecca N. Mitchell, “The Victorian Fancy Dress Ball, 1870-1900,” *Fashion Theory*, 21, no. 3 (2017): 291-315.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2016.1172817>

¹¹ Bradley Shope, “Masquerading Sophistication: Fancy Dress Balls in Britain’s Raj,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 39, no. 3 (2011): 375-392.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2011.598741>

¹² Jules Verne, *bal travesti* in *Le Monde Illustré Paris*, 14 April 1877

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6384591x.tex?image>

Evidence for the earliest documented SFF convention, the earliest documented example of cosplay at a convention, and the earliest documented SFF and media-based cosplay.

I should clarify my use of these terms. I define an SFF convention as an event to which the public can pay for or otherwise obtain access (i.e.: not a private party) at which the main focus is on activities relating to science fiction and fantasy. SFF cosplay is costuming based on science fiction or fantasy characters, and media cosplay is costuming based on characters from media including comic books, radio, theatre, films and television. Media characters can be, but need not be, SFF related; media creations include many historical characters, and characters from the everyday world. Also, there can be many iterations of the same character from literary and other media formats. Since Verne wrote over forty stage plays, most performed before 1877, it seems reasonable to include Verne cosplayers in both media and SFF categories.

It was 1891 before Britain got in on the SFF convention act; but the British, with Royal patronage of costume balls to inspire them, did so in grand style. The venue was a site of major national cultural significance, the Royal Albert Hall. Prince Albert the Prince Consort, that enthusiastic cosplayer, had died in December 1861. His devastated Royal widow had opened the Hall, part of his grand scheme to promote the understanding of the arts and sciences among the British public, ten years later.¹³

The first British convention was a charity fundraiser, like so many masquerade balls at the time and many

¹³ <https://www.royalalberthall.com/about-the-hall/news/2012/march/why-was-the-hall-built/>

conventions since. Herbert Tibbits, founder of the London Massage and Galvanic Hospital, put together a committee made up of titled ladies and ornaments of society to raise funds for his Massage School and the London West End Hospital. This committee organised a number of events, including the 1891 fundraiser. This was the first documented event in Britain to be specifically based on a bestselling SFF novel, Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1871 book *The Coming Race*.

The book's main focus was the Vrilya, a race powered by a mysterious force called Vril. The event publicity invited the Vrilya and their human admirers to gather and celebrate in London. Fancy dress (Vrilya cosplay) was encouraged. So attendees were actively invited, not merely to socialise, but to dress up and step into the world of the Vrilya.

Queen Victoria's own costumers, makers of many outfits worn at her Buckingham Palace balls, supplied costumes based on the book. One young lady interpreted the heroine, Princess Zee, in a black satin gown and tiara adorned with electric lights, an innovation not noted in many other cosplay sources before the twentieth century. There was a dealer's area, and at least one active sponsor, makers of a new drink called Bovril, which is still available in Britain today. There were concerts and other entertainments. The convention book and publicity materials are archived at the Royal Albert Hall and the book can be viewed on their website.¹⁴

Some might dismiss Verne's 1877 *bal travesti* in France as missing some of the

elements that we consider vital parts of an SFF convention, for example, a dealer's room and other programming. But even if this event is dismissed as a convention, it cannot be dismissed as a public cosplay event. Any argument that the 1891 Albert Hall event was not an SFF convention as well as a public cosplay event requires evidence to counter the existing documentation.

Personally, I accept both events as SFF conventions and therefore accept that Amiens 1877 was the site of the first documented SFF convention, SFF cosplay and media character cosplay, and that London 1891 is the second in all three categories. But even if we differ on whether or not Amiens 1877 was an SFF convention, in the absence of earlier documentary evidence, it was definitely the world's first SFF cosplay event, and its costumes the world's first SFF and media cosplays.

After this there was a lengthy hiatus in British fan costuming, possibly occasioned by a number of wars. The next documented event where British fans wore costume was the national SFF convention, CORONCON, in 1953, as part of a play staged at the event. It was 1955 before UK fans held a costume party at that year's national convention, CYTRICON, and there was a formal masquerade at the 1957 London Worldcon.¹⁵

First Documented US Cosplay Milestones

The first documented US media cosplay was seen in 1908 when Mr. and

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<https://memories.royalalberthall.com/content/coming-race-and-vril-ya-bazaar-and-fete-joint-aid-west-end-hospital-and-school-massage-and-1>

¹⁵ Rob Hansen, "Early Cosplay: 1930s to 1950s," *THEN: The Archive*, <http://www.fiawol.org.uk/fanstuff/then%20archive/cosplay/cos01.htm>

Mrs. William Fell attended a skating rink masquerade party in Cincinnati as Mr. Skygack of Mars and Miss Diana Dillpickles, popular newspaper comic strip characters. Mr. Skygack was an alien visiting Earth from Mars. This makes Mr. Fell's portrayal of Mr. Skygack the third worldwide example and first American example of a documented SFF and media cosplay, and Mrs. Fell's portrayal of Miss Dillpickles the fourth example of a documented media cosplay – although it would be extremely interesting to know what other characters were portrayed on the ice at that event.

The third documented SFF convention cosplay, which was also the fourth documented SFF cosplay and fifth documented media cosplay, was designed, made, and worn by Morojo, the chosen Esperanto name of Myrtle Rebecca Douglas, and her then-boyfriend Forrest J. Ackerman to wear at the First World Science Fiction Convention in New York in 1939. Held in conjunction with the New York World's Fair, it was subtitled "The World of Tomorrow," and later labelled NyCon 1 by Forrest J. Ackerman.

Morojo's costumes were based on pulp artwork and the 1936 film *Things to Come*, based on H. G. Wells' 1933 novel *The Shape of Things to Come*. Overall, the reaction of other attendees to the costumes was not entirely favourable. SF author Frederik Pohl, writing about the impact that Douglas and Ackerman made almost 40 years later, described them as "stylishly dressed in the fashions of the twenty-fifth century," but also wrote that he feared they had set an ominous precedent.¹⁶

¹⁶ Frederik Pohl, *The Way the Future Was* (Ballantine: New York, 1978).

He was right: The next US national convention had 12 costumed attendees. But although some costumes were worn privately or for commercial purposes at subsequent Worldcons, a formal masquerade was not added to the Worldcon programme until sometime between 1949 and 1952.¹⁷ Visitors from Japan reported on costuming activities at Worldcons from at least 1967.¹⁸

This negative reaction to costuming at SFF events picked up on a much earlier trend: America wasn't always cosplay positive. To find what early Americans thought of masquerade balls or costume parties, one has only to read some of the press comments from the late 1700s and early 1800s. These writers were, of course, the hidebound old moralists of their day, the people who nowadays would complain about long hair on guys and short skirts on girls, but they reflect a very strong strand of American colonist culture that looked down on any trace of non-white, non-Christian, or cross-cultural influence. It's a further reminder that we cannot properly understand cosplay outside its context.

But gradually this changed, and by the mid-1800s the American press began to take a less censorious view. Cadets from the US Military Academy at West Point were invited to regular "hops" given by local young ladies at Cozzens' Hotel, some of which were "fancy dress hops" – the New York Times described such a hop in some detail in 1865. Newspapers began to report favourably on costume balls and to compliment young ladies on their outfits. The Anglo-Saxon Protestant American culture was softening towards the idea of

¹⁷ Hansen.

¹⁸ Frenchy Lunning, *Cosplay: The Fictional Mode of Existence* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022).

masquerade, guising or costuming – among the idolatrous practices they left England to avoid.

Native Origins of American Cosplay

The costuming tradition of 1850s America was influenced by a hundred and fifty years of underground cross-cultural collaboration that began with French settlers, Native Americans, and Black slaves.¹⁹ It developed by transforming a public display of high spirits into a form of radical protest through costume and performance. Today we call it Carnival in London and you call it Mardi Gras in New Orleans.

The first Mardi Gras was held in 1699 by the original French settlers near what would become New Orleans, though some sources site the first “true” Mardi Gras in Mobile, Alabama. The French authorities gave slaves time off to celebrate festivals or earn money to buy their freedom, so Black people were almost certainly active in costuming, possibly as tailors or designers, from the beginning. Today’s New Orleans Mardi Gras Indian krewes are a distant tribute to the days when Native Americans would hide and assist escaping slaves.

So far, I have been unable to locate any documentary evidence of early costume balls in the Black American community. However, balls and social dances specifically for that community are known to have taken place from 1778.²⁰ From

around the 1760s until the Civil War, public masked balls were held in New Orleans with the participation of both free and unfree Black people alongside white people.²¹

So, we enter the twentieth century in Europe and North America with a rich mix of community, spiritual, and historical tradition distilled down to the idea of putting on a costume and assuming another identity – to express yourself, to connect with something within your psyche, to escape from reality for a short while, to have fun, to show off your craft and performance skills, to come together as a community. This is the basis of cosplay.

The European-originated masquerade traditions are the ones I know best, and I won’t presume to go into the influences behind cosplay in the many African, Asian, and Pacific traditions because I have no expertise in these areas. That is work for scholars from those traditions. But I can say a little about the Japanese tradition because I’ve spent some time on researching it and have been guided by many kind friends and mentors who know it better than I do. Japanese Shinto and Buddhist ritual involves elaborate and beautiful costumes, music, and dance. Classical Japanese theatre – Noh, kabuki, and bunraku puppetry – have a deep and rich tradition of masks that signal the character, and costumes that send many subtle cues to an audience versed in their lore, while still being enjoyable to less educated audiences. We see similar design clues in anime and manga, if we are well versed in their visual languages.

¹⁹ Mardi Gras timeline from 1699
http://www.mardigrasdigest.com/html/mardi_gras_history_timeline.htm

²⁰ Shannon Rodgers, “Black Debutante Balls: Curtseying with Pride since 1778,” *Messy Nessy Chic*,
<https://www.messynessychic.com/2021/09/09/black-debutante-balls-curtseying-with-pride-since-1778/>

²¹ R. Randall Couch, “The Public Masked Balls of Antebellum New Orleans: A Custom of Masque Outside the Mardi Gras Tradition,” *Louisiana History*, 35, no. 4 (Autumn 1994): 403-431.

Prehistory of Cosplay in Japan

There were extensive foreign influences on Japanese fashion, both from China and Korea in Japan's mediaeval history, and from Europe in sixteenth-century and nineteenth-century Japan. Japanese people echoed mainland Asian dress, and for a brief period before the country was isolated western dress was also a major fashion influence. At the same time, Japanese cloth and ceramic exports to the West began to influence Western clothes. The Victoria and Albert Museum in London had a wonderful exhibition devoted to kimono in 2020, and the book of the show is packed with history on how Japan and the West influenced each other from the 1600s on.²² All this fed into Japan's fashions and its ideas on dress, encouraging those Japanese who could afford it to start, in modern terms, cosplaying foreigners – assuming thereby the aura of sophistication and technological advance that foreigners possessed.

Japan's long isolation from the West ended in 1855 and led to a huge influx of Western manners, customs and dress. Once again, the influence went both ways. Europe and America went crazy for Japanese fashion and art, and a huge number of affluent Japanese began cosplaying as Westerners. This affected all kinds of people and occupations although the very poor stayed with the kimono because it was what they could afford, and most women continued to wear traditional clothes for formal occasions until the end of the Pacific War. Only young and rebellious girls adopted the moga –

²² Anna Jackson (ed.), *Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk* (London: V&A, 2020).

modern girl – look: Short hair, short skirts, makeup and cigarettes. Mobo (modern boys) were also in evidence.

The first cosplay in Japan, in the sense of the adoption of the role and costume of a character from popular culture, seems to have been informal, emerging from children's play. Leiji Matsumoto talks in several interviews about cosplaying popular manga characters with schoolfriends soon after World War II, seeing people dressing up as movie stars, or running around with a cape made from a piece of cloth, cosplaying the characters from a popular movie.²³ This anecdotal evidence requires further research in surviving Japanese archives. Such research might, despite the depredations of war, earthquake, and fire, yield dated documentary evidence for non-theatrical, non-ritual costuming activity in Japan before the Pacific War.

But unlike the USA, Japan after the Pacific War was not somewhere many people could afford to dress up for fun. There was hunger and desperate poverty. It wasn't until the 1970s, as Japan's economy grew more stable, that we see the first reports of cosplay both at formal public events and at student parties and gatherings.

First Documented Japanese Convention Cosplay

The earliest documentary evidence of a formal convention costume event I've found so far was at Miyacon, the 13th

²³ Darren-Jon Ashmore, "Interview with Leiji Matsumoto," in D.-J. Ashmore and H. McCarthy (Eds.) *Leiji Matsumoto: Essays on the Manga and Anime Legend* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, Inc., 2021); Leiji Matsumoto, interview by Tim Eldred, *OUT Magazine*, archived at *Our Star Blazers*, <https://ourstarblazers.com/vault/622/>

Japan SF Convention, held in Kyoto in 1974. A fan recorded at the time that “Yoshio Aramaki’s Costume Show” was the first time he’d seen a costume show at a convention and he had high hopes for it. Costumes, ranging from highly improvised to more considered works, were worn in skits featuring both Japanese and American characters and included Hoshizuru, Captain Future, Planet of the Apes vs. the Japan Apaches, Captain America, and Superman. In March 2020, film from Miyacon appeared on YouTube: A 37-minute digitised version of 8mm documentary footage, with hand-drawn title cards, and no audio. It features luminaries of Japanese fandom and pop culture, a giant monster battle, and the costume show. This is the earliest footage I’ve seen so far of Japanese convention cosplay.²⁴

Yamato fan club members and staff cosplayed at events from 1976.²⁵ Nov Takahashi, who was part of the group who coined the word “cosplay,” talks about the “Manga Grand March Parade,” a parade held by students of the Big Five universities in Tokyo, starting from a

²⁴ Takahashi Yasshi Miyacon 74. Takashi-san has also kindly provided an English translation of his notes on the Costume show in the comments at the following link. It appears that there was an influence from foreign conventions on the addition of a costume show to the Japan National SF Convention programme, but this occurred in 1974 and was much less specific than sometimes described—certainly not amounting to the invention of cosplay.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZMFdhzPvy>

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²⁵ Hideaki Ito, interview by Tim Eldred and Sword Takeda, *Our Star Blazers*, 2 Dec. 2010, <https://ourstarblazers.com/vault/552/>; Masaru Komaki, Asami Kushino, Hideaki Ito, and Tatsuya Nakatani, “The Early Days of Yamato Fan Clubs: A Round Table Discussion,” trans. Earnest Migaki, *Animec*, archived on *Our Star Blazers*, 22 June 2013, <https://ourstarblazers.com/vault/264/>

shopping centre in Mito City in Ibaraki Prefecture in 1977.²⁶ Takahashi names two Seikoshu monthly review magazines at the time that covered fan costuming: *Manpa* from 1976-77 and *Dax* from 1977-78. *Wasedaman* also ran cosplay coverage.

In 1978 at Ashinocon, critic and novelist Mari Kotani appeared as part of a group cosplaying Edgar Rice Burroughs’ *Fighting Men of Mars*, although her costume was later mistaken for a very similar one worn by the hero of Osamu Tezuka’s manga and anime *Triton of the Sea*.²⁷ Mangaka Ippongi Bang cosplayed Lum from *Urusei Yatsura*, beginning as a teenager around 1980.

Cosplay Culture in Japan

The early coverage of cosplay in *Manpa* and *Dax* was picked up by new anime magazines. *Gekkan OUT!* magazine had a cosplay special issue in 1979 and *Fanroad* magazine ran a feature on cosplay in its first issue in August 1980. Cosplay scholar Edmund W. Hoff discusses these magazines in his essay in *Leiji Matsumoto: Essays on the Anime and Manga Legend*, which I co-edited with Dr. Darren-Jon Ashmore. There is a solid body of evidence that by the mid to late 1970s, cosplay in Japan at SFF conventions and other events was well established. Public events like Comiket, although not always welcoming to cosplayers, had become regular places for them to gather, and there

²⁶ Nov (Nobuyuki) Takahashi, “30th Anniversary of COSPLAY,” *Hard*,

http://www.hard.co.jp/cosplay_02.html

²⁷ Helen McCarthy, “A Brief History of Cosplay,” *The Phoenix Papers*, 3, no. 1 (2017): 130-139 et seq. <https://fansconference.org/dRuZ33A/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/15-A-Brief-History-of-Cosplay1.pdf>

were many local events where they could wear costume.²⁸

There is American media influence on costumes, in that American-originated characters were cosplayed alongside Japanese ones, but I have not yet found documentary evidence that American influence started cosplay in Japan. Rather, in my opinion, the specifics of SFF conventions from other parts of the world were taken up by a youth culture that was already interested in costuming.

In the 1970s and '80s an enduring trend developed: A wildly popular show or game would be cosplayed at every event until replaced by the next big thing, but devoted fans carried on cosplaying their favourite characters for years. Based on the evidence we have, *Triton of the Sea* was the first big craze among young female fans, and *Triton* cosplay outfits could still be bought online in the late 2010s. *Space Battleship Yamato* followed, and Hoff points to a 1979 article where *Yamato* cosplayers are already described as “living fossils.” *Gundam* (1979) and *Macross* (1982) both had big cosplay followings in Japan.

Similarly, in the 1990s in Britain every convention had one or two Lum cosplayers, one of them probably a male crossplaying – dressing as a character out of their gender – and two or three *Ranma Nibbunoichi* characters. In France, the

giant robot shows were hugely popular from 1978 onwards, with commercial costumes and masks available for children, some photographed in an article in *Paris Match* magazine of 19 January 1979 on “le generation *Goldorak*” as the first wave of French anime fans was dubbed.²⁹

Of course, in Japan, a wider range of characters were cosplayed, as Western fans saw much less anime. Japanese fans also cosplayed characters from other nations with great enthusiasm – an article in *Fanroad* magazine in 1980 showed Japanese fans cosplaying Batman and Robin alongside others playing Japanese characters. Both fan-made and commercial costumes were around, the commercial ones often used for events and promotions by companies keen to monetise this growing trend.

Cosplay: Genesis of the Term

In 1983 Nov Takahashi was one of a group of three young writers commissioned to provide an article on costuming fandom for *My Anime* magazine. Until recently, this article was thought to be the first use of the word “cosplay” in print, but Hoff’s research now indicates it was in use in Japanese magazine reports on costume events for at least a year or two prior to this. The confidence and skill on display in all the photos in these articles make it obvious that this is not a new fandom. These Japanese cosplayers are skilled and full of inventiveness, not derivative of any other nation’s traditions but cosplaying their favourite characters, both Japanese and

²⁸ “Comic Market Nenpyo (Comic Market Chronology),” *Comiket*, <https://www.comiket.co.jp/archives/Chronology.html>, accessed 15 Dec. 2016. By 1980, the entry for Comiket 15 notes that costume players have increased “dramatically.” In 1983 the police asked the organisers to stop costume players going outside the venue as it was causing a disturbance; Yoshihiro Yonezawa, “What is Comiket, Manga/Anime Liberation District?” interview, *Separate Volume Treasure Island* 358 (Takarajima, 1998), 20.

²⁹ Fabienne Darling-Wolf, *Imagining the Global: Transnational Media and Culture Beyond East and West* (Lansing: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 107-110.

foreign, with technical skill and enthusiasm. There's even a boxout at the bottom of page 110 of the *Animec* issue on "How to Build Mecha Suits" – hardly a beginner's topic.

Cosplay in the Twenty-First Century

Since 1983, cosplay in Japan has gone from strength to strength while becoming a major global cultural phenomenon. Cosplay has literally changed lives, and in some cases, saved them. It has enabled many people to start creative businesses, to express their inner selves, to build new skills, and make friends. The first World Cosplay Summit was held in Nagoya in 2003, with cosplayers from Germany, Italy, and France in attendance, and a TV documentary was broadcast in Japan. The USA joined the competition the following year. By 2006 nine countries were represented and another documentary appeared on Japanese TV.

Every year more nations joined the contestants and in 2019, the last year a physical competition was held, 40 countries were represented. In 2020, a 24-hour global broadcast of past competitions took place and in 2021 the contest was on video only. Alongside its castles, classical arts, and natural beauty, cosplay is now part of Japan's contribution to world cultural heritage. From its beginnings in a small country recovering after an economically and socially devastating war, it's gone on to become a source of joy for the whole world. It accesses deep human cultural needs and links us all to our histories.

The twice-yearly Comiket is still a major cosplay venue, and many of the manga, doujinshi, and anime events all over Japan also provide cosplay

opportunities. But cosplay's spread throughout the world, building on existing costuming cultures and applying the Japanese word to their own practices, has been accelerated massively by the spread of broadband.

Malaysia has had cosplay events since Comic Fiesta in 2002.³⁰ Singapore has held a number of cosplay events.³¹ In China cosplayers are known as "cosers" and some have been active for well over a decade. They get together at a number of events all over the vast country, the biggest of which is the annual ChinaJoy Expo in Shanghai, with about 200,000 visitors.³²

The Arab world has a growing number of cosplayers, with the Middle East Film and Comic Con in Dubai,³³ TGXPO in Riyadh and a number of other events. Hijabi cosplay in which Muslim women and girls design costumes incorporating the hijab, is a growing subculture in cosplay.

In the United Kingdom, the twice-yearly London MCM Expo has become the largest cosplay venue, with over 70,000 attendees in 2019, thousands of whom attend in cosplay or take part in cosplay events. SFF conventions, media conventions, and anime conventions all have cosplay events.

Germany has many conventions aimed at anime and manga fans, including some fan-run events. Nearly all conventions have at least one cosplay competition. The finale of the German Cosplay Championship has been held at the world-

³⁰ <https://www.comicfiesta.org/>

³¹ <https://thesmartlocal.com/read/cosplay-events-2019/>

³² <https://chinafilm insider.com/chinajoy-2020-cute-cosplayers-high-tech-gadgets-lots-of-face-masks/>

³³ <http://thearabedition.com/blog/cosplayers-of-the-arab-world/>

renowned Frankfurt Book Fair. In France, where commercial robot masks and children's costumes have been sold since the TV anime boom started in 1978, Japan Expo is the major cosplay event and hosts the finals of the European Cosplay Gathering.³⁴ Over 250,000 people attended Japan Expo 2019. There are also a number of regional events across the country. In Italy the principal event is Lucca Comics and Games with over 300,000 attendees and many cosplayers.

In Belgium the FACTS convention is the major venue for cosplay, with its own cosplay contest as well as a preselection contest for the C4 competition in the Netherlands. A cosplay catwalk and mini-parades allow novices to gain experience and confidence. In the Netherlands, Animecon hosts the Euro Cosplay preliminaries and its own event, the C4 Cup. Heroes Dutch Comic Con also has a cosplay contest and welcomes cosplayers in competition or informally.

Cosplay in Japan is an individual and locally-developed part of the world costuming movement. It builds on humanity's ancient ritual urge to emulate powerful spirits whose qualities we admire, and embeds that urge in current popular culture. It has positively influenced and been influenced by other fannish and media traditions from all over the world. Its unique energy is something to celebrate.

³⁴ https://www.japan-expo-paris.com/en/menu/cosplay-info_86.htm