

# Traditional womanhood norms in garry winogrand photography centennial balls

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## **Norms of Femininity in Winogrand's Centennial Ball**

At first glance, Garry Winogrand's photograph Centennial Ball, Metropolitan Museum, New York (1969) is a study in organized chaos. The top-heavy composition, with its high-contrast lighting, captures the drama and excitement of the gala. A woman in a white dress visually dominates the image as she fords through a crowd of black-suited men. The flash illuminates her conventionally feminine characteristics: her coiffed beehive, jewel-encrusted dress, and impeccable makeup. She is chic, alluring, and noteworthy; yet, even as she conforms to the standards of attractiveness of the 1960s and 70s, her portrayal imparts a sense of looseness and abandon. In contrast with the glamorous ambience, she appears inebriated, her hips are angled brazenly, and her dress is ripped, hinting at a lack of undergarments. The ironic tension between these elements and the elite setting brands her as an uninhibited and dynamic personality, captured at the center of what should be a dignified party.

Centennial Ball hints at an incongruity between traditional femininity and the uncertainty of women's emerging freedom of expression. The ripped bodice of the woman's dress hangs from her collar, implying both a physical and social lack of restraint. In contrast to the suited men, captured with tight-lipped smiles and open-mouthed self-assurance, that surround her, she seems exposed and vulnerable. Yet her body language does not suggest vulnerability; it announces boldness. Her body is angled, her hips shifting one direction and her shoulders tilting another. Her sinuous form conveys a directional movement, a sense of dynamism. All the men lean or move

towards the right, but the white-clad woman leans and moves toward the left. She directs herself in opposition to a male-dominated area (both visually and socially) with confidence and purpose.

The image simultaneously exhibits a constraint on that freedom. As brilliantly lit and prominent as the woman appears, the black suits that circle around her constrain every visual plane. One man's arm frames the lower left of the image, cutting off the woman's legs and ending at her hips. From the viewer's perspective, his body restrains her movement visually, if not physically. Glimpses of various hands, backs of heads, glittering shoulders, and sides of faces of the women emerge in the spaces left between the men. It is impossible to tell who is who, or what belongs to whom. Every woman, in fact, becomes an assemblage of interchangeable parts because their physical forms are indistinguishable and dismembered. The collar of the center woman's dress echoes both sides of this tension. While the barely contained bodice evinces a loss of control, the collar that holds her outfit together tightly encompasses her neck. She appears, paradoxically, both free and unfree. Her freedom of physical expression is tightly bounded by the society, presented as mostly male, around her. The photograph exposes the tension between two opposing forces during this era: a newfound freedom of dress and confidence (both social and sexual) gaining momentum alongside traditional norms of femininity.