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Dress codes for Mardi Gras balls: What to wear when invited to these formal affairs

Sue Strachan JAN 13, 2018 - 12:00 PM



Opera-length, kid-leather gloves (Photo by Dinah Rogers, NOLA.com / The Times-Picayune)(DINAH ROGERS)

Among the mysteries of Carnival is what to wear when invited to a krewe ball. Because I cover many of these balls for NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune, I often receive emails or

phone calls from women (and some men) about what the rules are, no doubt confused by "costume de rigueur" written on the invitation.

So let's start with that: What is costume de rigueur? It is a French term that essentially means a strict dress code must be adhered to. You may also see "Strictly formal" on an invitation, and that is the equivalent of costume de rigueur.

Do:

* Wear white tie and tails.

Do Not:

* Do not wear a tuxedo. If you wear a tuxedo, you will not be let into the ball. If you get an invitation that says "Black tie or costume de rigueur," err on the side of costume de rigueur.

* Hair in shades of pink, purple, blue, etc. Like tattoos (see below), this is a formal event where it would look out of place.

Do:

* Wear a floor-length gown - the length should skim the floor.

* Wear the appropriate evening shoes. These are not the shoes you wear every day or to the office. Generally these types of shoes are made of cloth (mainly satin) and are sometimes embellished with rhinestones, pearls or crystals. (And make sure they are comfortable!)

* Bring a wrap or bolero jacket, as some venues can be cold.

* If you are in reserved seating (you will get an extra card in the invitation indicating this), particularly in the front row, you must have a pair of white kid-glove leather gloves. Most women wear opera-length, but other options, depending on where your sleeve length falls, are elbow and wrist gloves.

* Cover up tattoos (if possible). I know this sounds old-fashioned (I joked to a friend that I sound like my mom), but as this is a formal event, tattoos look out of place.

Do Not:

* Wear a dress or long skirt with a "mullet" hem (high-low hems). You will not be let into the ball.

* Wear a dress with a sheer skirt with a shorter skirt underneath. You will not be let into the ball.

* Basically, no sheer if your body shows underneath. Probably not let into the ball.

* Wear a white dress (that's for debutantes)

* Wear a dress with cut-outs in the bodice (showing your stomach); crop top and skirt, especially if your stomach shows. Probably not let into the ball.

* Wear gloves that are not white.

* Wear cloth gloves.

* Wear platform shoes or flip flops under your dress.

* If going to the Rex or Comus balls, it is preferred that you don't wear a gold (Rex) or silver (Comus) dress - that is reserved for the monarchs' attire.

* Hair in shades of pink, purple, blue, etc. Like tattoos, this is a formal event where it would look out of place.

If the invitation says black tie or formal:

Some Carnival balls (Orpheuscapade, Bacchus, Endymion Extravaganza, Zulu Coronation Ball, for example) have black tie or formal on the invitation.

Dos

* Wear a tuxedo, preferably black (for example, the Zulu Coronation ball specifies black tuxedos only)

* If an invitation says "Black tie or costume de rigueur," err on the side of costume de rigueur.

Dos

* Wear a floor-length gown - the length should skim the floor.

* That said, check the ball web site: While Zulu Coronation Ball says floor-length only, some other ones may be ok with variations, i.e. "mullet" hems.

* Bring a wrap or bolero jacket, as some venues can be cold.

* Cover up tattoos (if possible). As stated above, I know this sounds old fashioned, but as this is a formal event, tattoos look out of place.

Do Not

* Wear white, but in this case, there is a more practical reason: when the floats arrive to the Orpheus, Endymion and Bacchus balls, they are still throwing beads and items from the float. Most people know to put their food and drink under the table when this happens, but I have also seen drinks and food flying off a table and into a woman wearing a cream colored dress. The result wasn't pretty, and ruined her night.

* Generally, hair in shades of pink, purple, blue, etc. But the rules are often looser at these balls, so check the krewe web site.

One last word of wisdom for women: If you are seated in the front row of a ball that presents a court, do not cross your legs (at the knees). You can keep both of your feet on the floor, or cross at the ankles.

Am I missing anything? Have a specific question? Please ask in comments below or email me at: socialscene@nola.com

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