



BY TESS ADAMAKOS
NOVEMBER 30TH, 2018

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UNSEEN PHOTOS SHOW A SENSITIVE SIDE TO EARLY PROSTITUTION IN AMERICA

Dita Von Teese's foreword to Robert Flynn Johnson's "Working Girls: An American Brothel, Circa 1892," offers insight to the photographs behind these early working girls.

Sex workers have always been distinguished from the "everyday woman." Fearless, empowered, and completely owning their sexual identity, women in sexual professions allow liberation and female freedom to extend to that "everyday woman." These women, pointed out in Robert Flynn Johnson's *Working Girls: An American Brothel, Circa 1892*, also push the boundaries of style. The great dames of burlesque are highlighted, like Sally Rand and Gypsy Rose Lee, whose signature style, on and off stage, reflect the complexity of the personalities behind those in the sex industry, as well as the institution as a whole.



Dita Von Teese, burlesque performer, model, and author, gives insight to this through her foreword to Johnson's text.

The "working girls" posed for William Goldman in the 1890s at a Reading, Pennsylvania brothel. Society tends to compartmentalize those that work in their industry. This is why the "working girls" collection is important.



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The women featured in Goldman's collection obviously are eye-catching subjects. But they offer something more. Not only for themselves, but for women in their line of work: there is a beauty in even the most mundane moments.

Dita Von Teese expands on this idea, noting that "These ladies of Reading, Pennsylvania, might not have had the wealth of Madame du Barry, celebrated mistress of Louis XV of France, or the fame and freedom of a silver-screen sex goddess such as Mae West. But they sought to elevate their circumstances, to feel lovelier and more fashionable, with a daring pair of knickers."



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She goes on to say that to feel “special” is a crucial value for the human experience. “Few opportunities outshine a sense of specialness than when an artist asks to record your looks, your beauty. Under the right circumstances, to be the object of admiration—of desire—to be what is essentially objectified is not only flattering. It can also provide a shot of confidence and a sense of strength and power and even liberation, however lasting or fleeting.”

These working girls, who were sashaying through the patriarchal world by their “wits and sexuality,” not beauty. The beauty is a perk for the onlooker.



Most special of all, especially for me, these photos suggest a shift in power dynamic, and show a balance of power between artist and muse.

As these lost photographs come to light more than a century later, it shows that one period's "social problem" is another's cultural epiphany.

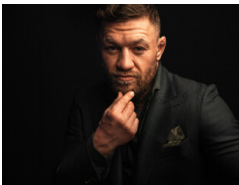
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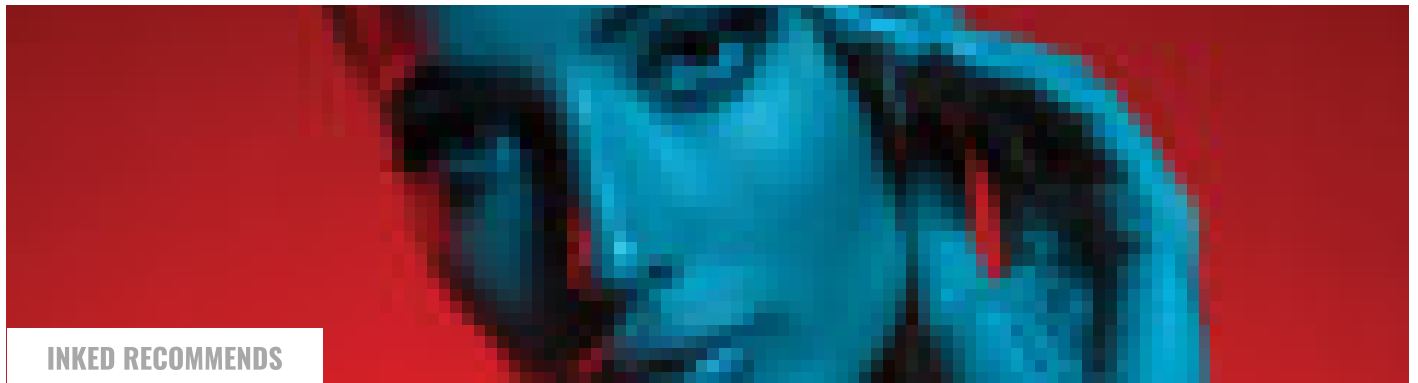
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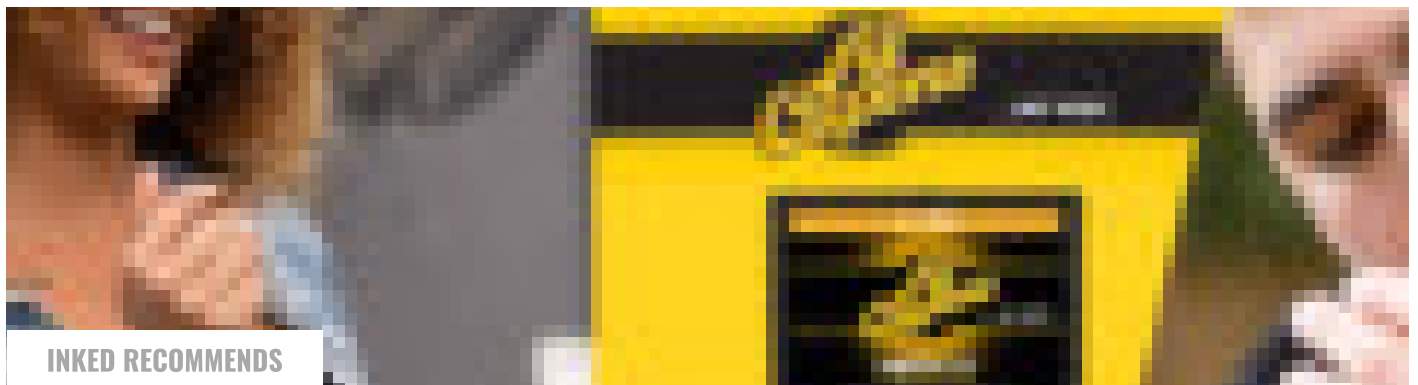
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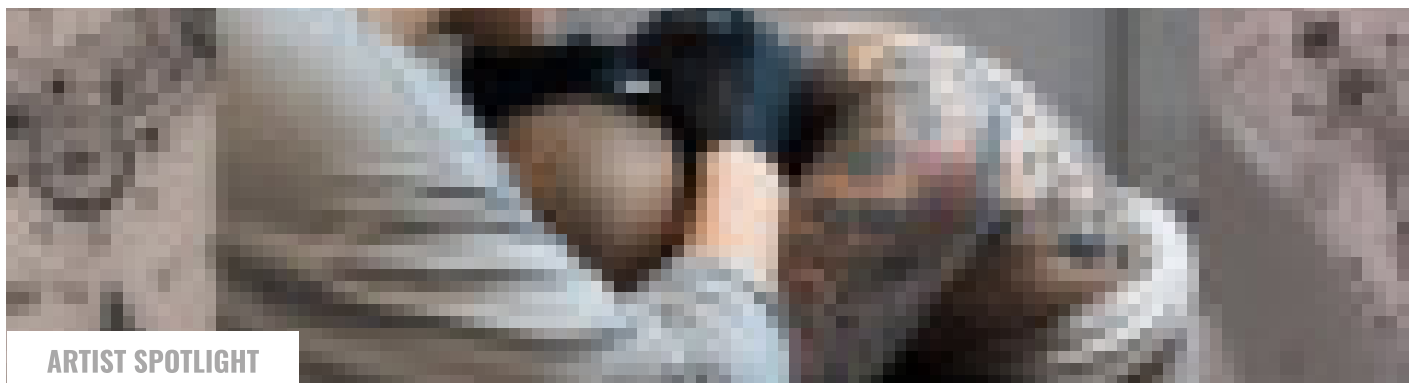
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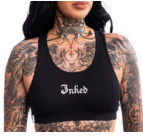


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