New April Ashley exhibition

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The Museum of Liverpool is to host a new major exhibition this September looking at the history of transgendered people in Britain over the past 70 years, focusing on the experiences of one exceptional individual.

Opening from 27 September 2013 to 21 September 2014, April Ashley: Portrait of a lady will - for the first time - explore the story of April Ashley MBE, one of the first people in the world to undergo pioneering gender reassignment surgery.

The year-long exhibition has been funded with a £78,000 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and curated by Homotopia in partnership with National Museums Liverpool. It will draw on April Ashley's previously unseen photographic archive and personal documents to investigate the wider impact of changing social and legal conditions for all transgender, lesbian, gay and bisexual people from 1935 to today.

Born George Jamieson in Liverpool in 1935, George grew up praying that each morning he would wake up a girl. He joined the Merchant Navy aged 14 to escape his unhappy home life and the confusion around his gender. He attempted suicide, and tried a second time on returning home leading to his admission to a mental institution for electric shock treatment.

George later moved to Jersey and then Paris where he began living as April, working at Le Carrousel nightclub in Paris to earn the money he needed for pioneering gender reassignment surgery. April was Dr Georges Burou's ninth patient when she had the surgery at his clinic in Casablanca, Morocco in 1960.

Gary Everett, Exhibition Curator and Director of Homotopia, said: "After such an unhappy start in life, it was remarkable that April returned to Britain and became a successful model and actress, photographed by David Bailey and appearing in Vogue. It was all the more shocking then, when her story became a public scandal when she was 'outed' as transsexual by the Sunday People in 1961."

From that point onwards, April's life was often headline news, including the story of her divorce from The Honourable Arthur Corbett – later 3rd Baron Rowallan - in 1970, when the judge ruled that April remained a biological man and therefore the marriage was invalid and annulled. This very public divorce set a legal precedent for all transsexuals that remained until 2004 when the Gender Recognition Act was passed to legally allow people to change gender, Gary, continues: "April has had an astonishing life but throughout it all she has fought for her rights, and provided advice and support for those suffering similar discrimination. The impact April's life has had on law and legal definitions of gender and identity has been enormous, and her strength and determination is admired by many, which led her to receiving the MBE in 2012."

The exhibition has been part of an ongoing project by Homotopia and funded by HLF to record and reflect shifting social attitudes and representations of gender and sexuality. The exhibition will feature personal histories captured by the project, telling individual experiences and of the impact April has had on the movement from marginalisation and prejudice towards inclusion and equality.

Janet Dugdale, Director of the Museum of Liverpool, said: "This exhibition is highly significant in telling the story of an iconic figure in Liverpool's history, and we are really pleased to be hosting it at the Museum of Liverpool. The museum is dedicated to highlighting the many landmark events and people associated with Liverpool. As one of Britain's first

transsexuals, April Ashley’s story - which began in this, her home city - has had a tremendous impact on the trans community and people across the globe.

“The exhibition is internationally important and will share April’s story along with experiences of transgender people during the last 70 years. As a social history museum it was essential for us to be involved, supporting Homotopia to co-produce the exhibition in order to share with our visitors how April’s life has influenced the social, political and legal aspects of transgendered people’s histories.”