PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE 1980s

A MATERIAL WORLD

VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF HISTORY & CULTURE

From hair to defense budgets, shoulder pads to tax cuts, the 1980s were BIG.

The 1980s are often remembered as a time of excess and extremes. The decade's conservative social, political, and economic policies led to renewed prosperity and optimism among the wealthy and middle class. Many Americans became status seekers and shopaholics. Madonna's "Material Girl" was their anthem. This materialism was not embraced or experienced by all. The gap between the wealthiest and poorest Americans widened, social services were curtailed, and the "War on Drugs" filled American prisons.

These photographs were important as visual evidence of news when they appeared in the 1980s. Today, they make real what has become legend to a generation who know the events of the decade were important without knowing why. They also help us understand today's culture, which is being shaped by '80s kids who are bringing back that decade's values, worldviews, and attitudes.

This exhibition was produced by the Virginia Museum of History & Culture in partnership with the Richmond Times-Dispatch

Support provided by the John Stewart Bryan III Endowment Fund and the Lettie Pate Evans Changing Exhibition Fund

EXHIBIT SPECIFICATIONS

1 Main text panel
6 Subtext panels
42 framed photo graphics

1700 square feet

Rental period: 4 months

Display period: 3 months

FOR RENTAL PRICING AND AVAILABILITY PLEASE CONTACT

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POP CULTURE

Today's personal computers fit in our pockets and "cutting the cable cord" is all the rage, but Apple gave us our first personal computers in the 1980s, and for the first time a majority of American households had cable television. Sports lovers could watch ESPN, CNN offered endless news, and MTV "killed the radio star" and rocked the record industry. Pop artists like Prince and Madonna became cultural and fashion icons, rap artists, such as Public Enemy, channeled the frustration of urban African Americans, and heavy metal bands like Metallica captured a growing sense of malaise among young people. The home gaming industry saw Atari give way to Nintendo, and in film we witnessed the maturation of the summer blockbuster and the teen movie.

FASHION

The 1980s was the decade of "if you've got it, flaunt it." Television shows like *Dynasty* and *Miami Vice* along with the emergence of MTV (Music Television) marked a time of individuality, particularly in fashion. Preppies, punks, metal-heads, and yuppies all found their style in the 1980s.

Fashions in the first half of the decade were relatively tame in comparison to the second half, when the iconic neon color scheme became popular. Starting in 1984, women's fashion was dominated by what had earlier been reserved for men—including cutting hair short. With more women entering the workforce, this allowed them to wear the same clothes in their professional and personal lives. Many of the decade's greatest trends—"Members Only" jackets, parachute pants, Converse All-Stars, Wayfarers, shoulder pads, and big hair were worn by both men and women.

POLITICS

The 1980s inaugurated not only "the Reagan years" but an increased diversity in politics. Sandra Day O'Connor became the first female Supreme Court Justice. Geraldine Ferraro became the first woman nominated by a major party to be its candidate for vice president. Colin Powell was appointed chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the highest army post ever to be held by an African American. Virginia's Douglas Wilder was elected governor, becoming the first African American elected to the governorship of any state. The '80s also was a decade of Republican electoral landslide victories. The Reagan dynasty continued when George H. W. Bush defeated Michael Dukakis as soundly as Reagan had defeated Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale.

SOCIAL
ISSUES

Throughout the decade, the foreign–born population increased and major manufacturing industries carried jobs abroad, causing dramatic shifts in the nation's work force. Women entered the workforce in both an increasing number of professions and in larger numbers. The prosperity of the Reagan years was not shared by all. Crime and drug abuse spiked in urban areas and the "War on Drugs" was fought not only in foreign countries but also on our streets leading to a massive growth in incarceration rates—particularly among African Americans. The surprisingly fast spread of a new disease, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), reached epidemic proportions, brought discussion of gay rights into our national conversation, and rocked the sexual revolution that began in the previous decades.

CONSUMERISM

When Ronald Reagan became president, he inherited the worst American economy since the Great Depression of the 1930s. By 1983, interest rates and inflation were low and Americans were ready to take advantage. The song "Material Girl" by Madonna offered a message for the Eighties: choose a rich and affluent life over romance and relationships. This was a decade of self-fulfillment: "Don't worry, be happy," sang Bobby McFerren. It was a time to enjoy blockbuster films (follow-ups to the "Star Wars" phenomenon), expanded television offerings (MTV and Turner Classic Movies), personal computers and computer games. So strong was the tide of materialism that neither the Savings and Loan scandal of 1986 nor the stock market crash of 1987 would turn it.

WORLD EVENTS

With increased media coverage, headlines crowded one another. Leading the media charge was CNN, the first all-news network. The Olympics brought political as well as sports headlines when the United States and the Soviets boycotted one another's games. The space shuttles *Columbia* and *Challenger* were launched; the *Challenger* exploded. John Lennon and Indira Gandhi were assassinated; attempts were made on the lives of Pope John Paul II and Ronald Reagan. Upheaval reached around the world: events unfolded in Nicaragua, Iran, and Grenada, while Russians interfered in Berlin and Afghanistan and downed a South Korean airliner, and Chinese massacred dissidents in Beijing. Terrorism emerged with the Islamic kidnapping of John McCarthy, the Lockerbie plane bombing, and the Iranian condemnation of Salmon Rushdie.