Katharine Hepburn
Dressed for Stage and Screen
Katharine Hepburn (1907–2003) is the most honored actress in the history of American film, with twelve Academy Award nominations and four Academy Awards for Best Actress, as well as many other honors both national and international. In a 1967 interview, George Stevens, who directed *Alice Adams*, *Quality Street*, and *Woman of the Year*, called Katharine Hepburn "the most inspiring person I ever met in my life . . . I never knew anyone in any way related to Kate in intelligence, dignity, beauty of spirit, generosity and lack of criticism . . . she was always for accomplishment of some kind." During her sixty-six year career Hepburn consistently performed on both stage and screen. She took her career in hand early in her professional life, learned from each failure, and continually sought meaningful and challenging projects. Katharine Hepburn knew the importance of costume in defining character and drawing the audience into the story, and how her personal style could be best interpreted in a role. Hepburn was very conscious of the tools of the costumer's craft and had a sure sense of what would work for her. Edith Head, quoted in the Spring 1976 issue of *Liberty*, said, "One does not design for Miss Hepburn, one designs with her . . . She's a real professional, and she has very definite feeling about what things are right for her, whether it has to do with costumes, scripts, or her entire lifestyle.

Fortunately both Broadway producers and Hollywood studios assigned the finest costume designers to her productions. Woodman Thompson, Howard Greer, Valentina, Cecil Beaton, and Jane Greenwood, among others, costumed Hepburn for the stage, while Walter Plunkett, Adrian, Irene, Muriel King, Margaret Furse, Pat Zipprodt and Noel Taylor were among those who worked with her in film and television. For her private wardrobe Hepburn patronized cutting edge fashion designers such as Elizabeth Hawes, Claire McCardell, and Valentina in New York. If she were particularly fond of a costume, she might have had it replicated for her personal wardrobe and, perhaps, change the color, fabric or detailing. It was no accident that many of the costume designers also worked in high fashion since many of the productions starring Katharine Hepburn were set in contemporary times, and many in the audience expected to see the very latest fashions on stage and in the movies. That she chose to wear slacks instead of dresses and skirts in many of her publicity images, established her first as a fashion rebel, and then as an icon. "I realized long ago that skirts are hopeless," she said in the Turner Pictures 1959 documentary *All About Me*, "anytime I hear a man say he prefers a woman in a skirt, I say, 'Try one. Try a skirt.'" It was this personal sense of style that transcended the decades of her career to influence the fashion choices available to women today. In presenting Hepburn with the 1985 Council of Fashion Designers of America’s Lifetime Achievement Award, Calvin Klein said, "she has truly epitomized the ultimate American woman. She’s vibrant, she’s outspoken, she’s hardworking and she’s independent and, fortunately for all of us, she’s never been afraid to be comfortable.”

Katharine Hepburn did not set out to collect her costumes. She told Louis Boto in a mid-1970s recorded interview that she didn’t know why she had not kept more, that “It would have been interesting,” but she immediately followed that comment by noting that costumes took special care. Upstairs in her New York City home was a closet reserved for costumes she had worn on stage and screen. The contents of this closet were separated from her other wardrobe, and when the townhouse was closed, these special garments were inventoried, carefully packed and placed in a Connecticut warehouse. In accordance with her wishes, the collection was to be given at the discretion of her estate executors to an educational institution, and is now housed at the Kent State University Museum in Ohio. Katharine Hepburn: Dressed for Stage and Screen includes costumes for the stage, for film and television, and for publicity or private life selected from the actress’s personal collection. The costumes are augmented by film stills, posters, playbills and related objects also from the Kent State University Museum Collection with important additions for this venue from the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
The earliest example in the Hepburn Collection from the theater is the wedding gown from The Lake. Howard Greer designed this costume, of duchess lace and satin, that Katherine Hepburn wore as “Stella Surrege” for the ill-fated 1933 production at the Martin Beck Theatre. It was after seeing Hepburn’s performance in the Broadway opening that Dorothy Parker was quoted saying, “she ran the gamut of emotion from A to B.” Tormented by the producer/director, Jed Harris, Hepburn had lost her confidence during rehearsals and regained it only slowly during the run of the play. She later said that The Lake was the most important lesson of her life, and that it had taught her “what it takes to be an actor, what it takes to be a star. You are the person responsible for what happens to you and to the play.”

Having made a series of box office flops, and with her career at its nadir, Katherine Hepburn was delighted when Philip Barry presented her with the outline of a play that suited her perfectly, The Philadelphia Story. During the summer of 1938 they worked together on the script and asked the Theatre Guild to produce the play. Both Hepburn and her then beau Howard Hughes invested in the production. The Philadelphia Story was a great theatrical success. Knowing that any number of actresses would want to play “Tracy Lord” in a film version, and suspecting that no one would want to cast Hepburn, since she had been labeled “box office poison,” Howard Hughes purchased the movie rights and gave them to her. This gift enabled Hepburn to negotiate the terms for the MGM film with Louis B. Mayer. Valentina designed the costumes for the 1939 stage production of The Philadelphia Story including the wedding dress for “Tracy Lord” of pink silk organza, chiffon and crepe de chine. Hepburn saved the dress in her personal collection, and thirty-four years later she asked Patricia Zipprodt to use the dress in the 1973 film of The Glass Menagerie for the scene where “Amanda” entertains the “Gentleman Caller.” Although Hepburn remarked that the dress had to be “considerably let out,” in fact the alteration added only about 2 ½” to the bodice of the undress.
Valentina did only one other Broadway play for Katharine Hepburn, Without Love, which opened at the St. James Theatre on November 10, 1942. Inside her copy of the souvenir program, Hepburn placed a sketch of one of the Valentina gowns in the Hepburn Collection. The bodice and sleeves are draped to enhance Hepburn’s slender figure, and the skirt is made of multicolored panels of silk organza. The gown has an ingenious tie belt that begins at an angle at the side fronts, wraps around and ties in front. The sketch is in the Hepburn papers in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Katharine Hepburn did a number of watercolor sketches of herself in various roles. This sketch of herself as “Coco Chanel” captures the essence of her approach to the role in the 1969 production of Coco. The late Ray Diffin said that she was “quite willful” and initially uncomfortable because she had never done a musical. To make her more at ease with the part, the producers took her to Paris to meet Chanel. She wasn’t getting along with Cecil Beaton, who she felt would never achieve Chanel’s simple elegance, so she bought two complete couture ensembles, one white and one black. She wore the black wool ensemble, a sleeveless dress and coat, in performance. It must have been challenging to wear, because Chanel made no allowance for the needs of a performer singing and dancing under stage lights. There were, however, multiple sets of detachable white collars and cuffs to keep the look fresh through eight performances a week. Ray Diffin made many of Hepburn’s costumes for Coco in his New York costume studio, while Beaton supervised the tailored suits being made in London.


Far left


Left

The majority of Hepburn's movie costumes were returned to studio wardrobe stock after filming, and she didn't purchase any until those made for her late television films designed by Noel Taylor. She told Louis Botto in the mid-1970s that she didn't purchase any until those made for her late television films designed by Noel Taylor.

Collier and Katharine Hepburn were good friends, and Collier did coach Hepburn as she prepared the role of “Rosalind” in the 1950 Theatre Guild production of *As You Like It*.

“A star practically always asks for a designer, if she has any sense,” said Katharine Hepburn when asked if she had a say in the designers with whom she worked. For MGM’s 1935 production *Adams Rib*, she told Louis Botto that Mainbocher had been scheduled to do the costumes. When the studio received his cost estimate, it was so expensive that both the studio and Hepburn thought it was too much, so she suggested Walter Plunkett. He had already done costumes for nine Hepburn films plus the dramatic “Moth” costume for Christopher Strong. Plunkett later wrote to Hepburn that he had done more films for her than for anyone else. Although she thought that period costumes were “very much his dish,” she said that he had made her “marvelous dresses,” for Adams Rib, “quite unlike anything I had worn before.” Plunkett knew how to emphasize the star’s 20” waist and thus accent the curves of her athletic body as he did for a black silk evening gown that had made her “marvelous dresses,” for *As You Like It*.

Margaret Furse designed three productions for Katharine Hepburn: *The Lion in Winter* (1986), *Love Among the Ruins* (1986), and *A Delicate Balance* (1989). She also kept a costume from the 1937 RKO Stage Door designed by Marcel Kurland, whom she patronized as a private costumier. That costume was worn in a melodramatic scene where Hepburn inserted a line from *The Lake*, “The calls lines are in Moon again …” Geneviève Walter described it in *Photoplay* writing that, “layers of rounded petals trim an even row of gray marquisees . . . Petal layers surround the armholes, start at the shoulder on the bodice and taper to the belt . . . a wide belt of magenta antique satin over ecru silk, Kent State University Museum, Gift of Margaret Furse, 2010.12.18a-f.”

Hepburn, “I’m so glad you are coming back and that we are going to be involved again in the costume lark! They tell me you are doing all the work for me. I’m so glad because I don’t think I know now how to do them and will gladly share a screen credit with you!” Her untimely death prevented Furse from completing the costumes for *Love Among the Ruins*, and her cost for the costumes is shared with Germaine Range.

Noel Taylor (1913 – 2010), the last costume designer with whom she worked, costumed Katharine Hepburn beginning with *Mrs. Dulsifeld Wants to Marry* in 1956. This made for television movie was the beginning of a friendship that Taylor described as “perfection, she knew what she liked and I know what she liked . . . she became my best friend.” One of her wardrobe attendants from Vancouver, where The Miss Upstairs was filmed in 1952, sent a note to Hepburn writing, “I thoroughly enjoyed my time with you. Your tenacity, your great integrity, and your sense of humor . . . were and will remain, for me, an inspiration . . . Your total professionalism, and the great care you took with the costumes, made my job a pleasure.”
More than thirty pair of slacks from Hepburn’s wardrobe, most in shades of beige and brown, are now in the Kent State University Museum Collection. In addition, there is enough yardage of beige wool cavalry twill for another pair. Those in the exhibition were custom made either in theatre shops such as Brooks Van Horne or Ray Diffin’s, or in department stores such as Saks Fifth Avenue. Although the look is casual, Katharine Hepburn knew precisely what would work for her public image and her private life. There is no doubt that she used these garments, for many are patched and worn. A publicity still of Hepburn wearing blue jeans with a mink coat, taken on the RKO lot in 1932, captures the look that so irritated the studio magnates trying to mold their new and expensive star into the studio ideal. When they took her dungarees away during filming, she simply walked around the lot in her underpants until they gave her back her denim jeans. As George Stevens remembered, “She was never personally much on ornamentation, off the camera. She Jimmy Deaned before Jimmy Dean ever thought of it, with slacks. Kate was the first blue jeans woman. How she anticipated this era today (1967) I don’t know, but she wore blue jeans and it was unheard of, and a sweater, and she’s a grand dame of a studio.” Hepburn’s taste for the unornamented but elegant is evident in the costumes she kept in her personal collection. There is an emphasis on fluid line, on exquisite fabrics and quality workmanship. There is the sure knowledge of what a costume should do for a dramatic character, for a professional image and for Katharine Hepburn’s personal use.
Credits & Acknowledgements

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Public Program

THURSDAY
October 18 at 6:00 p.m.

LIFE UPON THE WICKED STAGE: NEW BOOKS IN THE PERFORMING ARTS

KATHARINE HEPBURN: REBEL CHIC

A panel discussion on Katharine Hepburn and her dual roles as hard-working actress and fashion icon with the book’s contributors: Barbara Cohen-Stratyner, Nancy McDonell, Judy Samelson, and Kohle Yohannan. Moderated by: Jean Druesedow.

Presented in conjunction with the exhibition Katharine Hepburn: Dressed for Stage and Screen and the publication of Katharine Hepburn: Rebel Chic by Skira/Rizzoli.

Programs take place in the Bruno Walter Auditorium. Admission is free and on a first come, first served basis.

For further information about the programs at the Performing Arts Library, call 212.870.1630.

All programs are subject to last minute change or cancellation.