

Fashion

MOVIE CLOTHES

More real than life

By Anne Hollander

"What you don' with Miss Ellen's portières?" squealed Hattie McDaniel as Vivien Leigh with desperate, work-roughened hands tore down yards of green velvet. "They're my portières now!" she cried. "Fetch me those old dress patterns from the attic, Mammy!"

And a few minutes later, there she was, pale, sexy and determined, sleek in perfectly fitting green velvet, from head to foot, ready to sell herself to save her home. She was a dressmaker's dream of triumph—made possible by the potent magic of David O. Selznick—as the heavy, useless curtains became in the blink of an eye a fabulous outfit, a perfectly wrought weapon of seduction.

The dress now stands among several others from "Gone With the Wind" in the show of movie clothes, "Romantic and Glamorous Hollywood Design," made possible by a grant from SCM Corporation, that opened Nov. 21 at the Costume Institute in the Metropolitan Museum; and Scarlett O'Hara's fierce will and resourcefulness still breathe from its heavy creases.

The romantic drama of unforgettable screen moments still rises like a cloud around all these now motionless clothes; their breathtaking immediacy

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teaches how potent a charm the original screen images had. These dresses were made to fit into an intense and amplified vision of life. Seeing them up close is almost too much to bear.

The point that emerges from the display at the Costume Institute is that the essential Hollywood vision centered around the female image mightily enhanced by dress. Whatever different brands of masculine glamour Hollywood has instituted over the years, they did not require more than a fraction of the sartorial effort expended on the changing feminine ideal. A few slight bows to current fashions in length of hair and amount of shoulder padding and all truly magnetic Hollywood men could wear anything, including really grubby work clothes and authentic period costume. Not so the women. The glamorous female image demanded the transformation into movie style of every detail, including gesture and posture. Stills of movie couples from 1922, for example, show the lady with headband and frizzled curls, slouching torso and trailing velvet, looking ready for a contemporary dinner party. The man, however, will have on a stock, a ruffled shirt and knee breeches so we can tell that the time is the late 18th century. Another still will show the lady with much the same torso, same velvet and same 1922 hair, but the man will have a pageboy bob and wear tights, so we know it is the Middle Ages.

For everyday clothes, the cinema modes of the silent years had a fuzziness of outline and bunchiness of shape, which also marred the most sumptuous period efforts. Some of the simple dresses worn by Mary Pickford (with all those curls) have survived. They have an unrealized, intimate look, obviously much more appealing face-to-face than they were on the screen, where the camera made them look crumpled and Pickford look fat. The translation of living style into screen chic had not yet become possible—let alone automatic. It was in the invention of a cinema mode of super elegance that Hollywood made its earliest great strides in es-

tablishing a unique flavor for movie clothes. Cecil B. De Mille's way of dressing Gloria Swanson, even before 1920, became the pattern for all subsequent star-styling, a way of giving the provincial public a glimpse of fantasy-elegance rather than a look at real elegance. Top-ranking Paris designers were employed by De Mille and instructed to exaggerate the mode. Feathers, fur, spangles and extravagant drapery never seen on the backs of the rich were worn by Swanson and eventually by hundreds of others in dozens of films about pseudo high life. And they were still being worn in the fifties and sixties (with suitable revisions according to fashion change) by Elizabeth Taylor, Grace Kelly and Lana Turner, although by then they were being created, quite independently of Paris or Seventh Avenue, by a stable of Hollywood specialists. Clothes like these are never supposed to be copied by the public, except very generally. Their essence is unreality; their very exaggerations and perfections signal the unreality of screen life.

Besides feeding the public's treasured fantasies of elegance, Hollywood very early began to feed its more privately treasured fantasies of wickedness—and of course they often went together, as the true spirit of democracy requires. One-inspired and enduring invention from Hollywood's earliest days was a kind of Basic Exotic Vamp Suit, a costume probably first perfected in 1917, when Theda Bara wore several versions to play Cleopatra. This outfit, which has hardly changed for 50 years, consists essentially of a jeweled brassière, more or less revealing, and a jeweled, beltlike arrangement with a centrally placed flap, patch or medallion on the stomach, gathering some tight drapery around the hips. This drapery may be transparent or metallic or whatever, and it may fall over the legs in panels or with a slit. The whole thing is usually embellished by festoons of pearls, chains or jewels over the arms, hips or midriff, and it is worn either with a fantastic headdress or long, sexy hair. This vaguely belly-dancerish costume, although it resembles nothing specific in history, is an all-purpose Hollywood device, used over and over, decade after decade, to signal unscrupulous sex in a barbaric setting. It will do for ancient Egypt, Babylon, Greece or Rome, for all Eastern nations old and new, for other planets,



Period romance at its unforgettable best: Scarlett O'Hara's green velvet (once Miss Ellen's portières) in GWTW.

and for The Future. It has often been accompanied by feathers or fur, depending on whether it was worn on the Tartar steppes or in a desert oasis; and it has always significantly overlapped the standard synthetic Hollywood look of ultrafashionable and slightly sinful extravagance. The two merged; the elements were fused and re-formed, and after 1930 any star could wear a hip-draped lamé sheath or clinging sequins with feathers, and, according to how much skin was exposed, could be a society heiress, Mata Hari, a successful career woman, Cleopatra, or any variety of the Other Woman. The glamorous Hollywood female had achieved her basic uniform.

Whereas in the very early twenties a sharply exaggerated style had been established for luxury and fantasy-sex clothes, by the thirties the same slick visual style had come to be used for everything—"stark" realism, historical periods, bourgeois life or outer space. The whole concept of human looks especially tailored for movie-viewing had actually crystallized in the twenties.

The new Hollywood grooming had an enormous effect on the looks of the average woman. By that time, cosmetics were not only used by most women, but publicly applied. Hair, recently bobbed, was being publicly combed, and the whole ancient institution of artificial beauty aid stopped being a "secret of the boudoir." Make-up, after a lot of bad press in the 19th century, was no longer shameful, nor intended as a form of deception, nor supposed to be confined to whores—and one compelling reason for all this was undoubtedly the new nationwide

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Essence of worldly: The Dietrich allure was partly gauze, partly gloves and partly feathers. Marlene as she appeared in "Shanghai Express" (1932).

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desire to look like a movie star. On the screen, of course, glossy dark lips, penciled brows, powdered skin and a dashing hairdo were worn by the virtuous as well as the frail. The standard for applying all this also had to be as high as movies made it, since vision in the dream world was obviously clearer than the eyesight of real life. "Every hair in place" was a constant reality on the screen, as Hollywood sharpened up the star image—



Bette Davis, more "Elizabethan" than the Queen herself, in "Elizabeth and Essex." Vintage 1939.



The Basic Exotic Vamp Suit as worn by Hedy Lamarr (1949), Lana Turner (1955), Theda Bara (1917), Claudette Colbert (1934). At right, the BEVS on a higher plane worn by Carole Lombard (1934).

and the feminine world tried to measure up.

Movies hastened another revolution already under way. Female underwear, already increasingly less bulky since World War I, became a naughty cinematic institution under the guidance of De Mille. The skimpy and frothy details of film lingerie became deliciously familiar, engendering lewd thoughts in the public imagination according to definite movie conventions. As late as the sixties, wearing a slip on screen in questionable circum-

stances signaled nakedness, before nakedness was permitted. (The one famous effect of male screen underwear was Clark Gable's failure to wear an undershirt in "It Happened One Night.")

It was in the realm of significant accessory details, as well as gesture and posture, that movies could most profoundly affect not so much the behavior of the public as its whole awareness of the meanings expressed by the clothed body. A few of the clichés generally accepted ever since

the twenties are with us yet: the heroine in floating white, particularly in horror movies, in the middle of the night; black net worn by the worldly (Marlene Dietrich and Mae West). A lace collar held together at the neck with an oval brooch is worn by virtuous old ladies along with hair in a bun. Bad old ladies wear ratty feather boas; rich old ladies wear long black dresses with diamond dog collars. In the thirties, berets were worn by lively, independent working girls (including whores); a ribbon in the hair, by innocent sheltered girls—and never the other way around. Fur might occasionally be worn by virgins, usually only for period effect—feathers never. Meanwhile, all over the country, cigarettes were smoked, shoulders shrugged, hair tossed, and drinks sipped in direct imitation of those beings moving enviously through their intense screen lives.

In the thirties, movie clothing became easy to read and fairly simple-minded. The basic message had to come through clearly to the 12-year-old intelligence at which, we are told, the movies were aimed. Perfect fit and finish became equally necessary to Greek drapery, rustic overalls and society frills. In period costume, this resulted in the subtle kind of inauthenticity still acceptable to the public eye, the artful glamorization of history in such films, for instance, as "The Great Gatsby." The method was originally invented by the history painters of the romantic era—in panoramic stills, of course. Everything looks immediately plausible and natural, but gestures and clothes all have a perpetually inflated dramatic overemphasis, at odds with the events being shown.

Glamorous modern dress carried the extravagant-vamp tradition into the forties and fifties. A new generation of designers saw to it that the clothes worn by the screen rich should continue to be one of the greatest satisfactions of movie-going. And the essence of romantic unreality characterized tailored suits as well as the drape and glitter. Sometimes in the course of film history, certain stars have possessed this very quality themselves, and lent a timeless appeal to everything they wore. They often had specific designers to lend their individual brand of glamour—Garbo is the prime example. On screen, her quality always transcended her circumstances, including historical ones; and Adrian, the designer who expressed her uniqueness in clothes, kept it recognizable in all epochs. Not only were her modern-dress clothes quite similar in flavor, her period costumes also had the same look of tremulous, yielding mystery, even if minimal authenticity would have required a ramrod spine and iron-clad torso. In defiance of historical truth, soft, crushable velvet in slightly blurry folds covers the uncorseted Garbo body in the 17th century ("Queen Christina"), and in the 19th ("Romance") and ("Anna Karenina"); and her shoulders hunched just



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as characteristically and sensually out of Camille's 1840 crinolines as out of a modern draped sheath. Travis Banton did the same thing for Marlene Dietrich, using the same elements over and over—feathers, gauze, black gloves—to transmit her essential seductive power, whether she was Catherine the Great or Shanghai Lily or Angel.

In daylight, the public could never copy elegant Hollywood clothes, which needed camera magic for their "reality", but they could copy accessories, as well as make-up, underwear and ways of kissing. Hats, handbags and how to carry them, gloves and how to remove them were all easy to imitate.

Modern movies (dating from the mid-sixties) have shifted into a new phase of realism, even more subtly false than the romantic decades before. The elegance looks more real, but it is no more accessible; the naturalism looks more authentic, but it is no less glamorized. Although she was meant to be a rather harassed (if successful) urban working woman, Glenda Jackson's clothes and hair in "A Touch of Class" had the same, emphatic brand-new perfection, the same vivid dash and lack of muss that have so long been the hallmarks of cinema dress.



Fur and satin: On Rita Hayworth in "Gilda" (1946), this sinful coupling had a corn-fed glow.



Sophisticated: On European Marlene fur and satin were synonymous with sinful enticement in "Desire" (1936).

The head scarf can be copied, however, even if the creaseless perfect fold cannot. One cannot imitate Ali MacGraw in "Love Story," discussing her impending death in a svelte robe and perfectly combed hairdo—who would want to?—but copies of her close-fitting wool hat and mittens (along with her gruff and solemn manner) were successfully marketed all over the nation.

The great contradiction—and perhaps the real significance—of movie fashion is its conservatism. Hollywood always tended to confirm rather than lead fashion. It sensed that audiences got greater satisfaction

from seeing in glorified form what was already established as chic and currently attractive. When very short hair came into style for women in the early fifties, Hollywood stars still wore soft, luxuriant hair, until popular taste caught up with high fashion. The movie rich and very fashionable—if you go by Vogue—actually look about two years out of date, but with an ultraglamorous polish. Rather than setting styles, movies tend to spread established fashions over a wider range of social groups in a shorter time than ever was possible before the ascendancy of Hollywood.

Television drama and advertising now perpetuate a great many of the old Hollywood fashion conventions, while movies have gone on to develop new ones. Chief among them, of course, is nudity, which has its own cinematic styles as if it were a form of costume like the old Basic Exotic Vamp outfit.

Movie audiences today are sophisticated. They know all about sex, sociology and history—as well as about the history of movies. And films themselves suffer from the grip of self-consciousness. The old naive



Period passion: Garbo's shoulders tremble as they emerge—contrary to true period style—in "Camille" (1936).

conviction is missing from the studied realism and clever historicism of current movie clothes and costumes, but the new increased scope and complexity of cinematography make them still a treat for the gluttonous movie-loving eye and still an important strand in the stuff dreams are



Serious passion: Garbo, all