



SAFETY-PIN GOWN

Gianni Versace • 1994

Quick, name five Elizabeth Hurley movies. All right, then, can you name three? The truth is not a single screen performance is responsible for branding Elizabeth Hurley into our collective memory. And yet, she is emblazoned there, thanks to her having stepped out one night in the sartorial equivalent of the shot heard 'round the world. All it took was one dress—"That Dress"—as it was tagged by the media the morning after Hurley's appearance at the world premiere of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* in London. Upending her usual tabloid-captioned capacity as Hugh Grant's girlfriend, Hurley stepped out of a limo and into the paparazzi's viewfinders. Suddenly, Grant, his soon-to-be-hit romantic comedy, his costars—in fact, every other rival—suddenly fell out of favor and focus. Instead, the twenty-nine-year-old sassy beauty and Gianni Versace's devilishly engineered safety-pin gown were instantly rendered inseparable, incredible, combustible, derisible, and ultimately, globally inescapable.

Hurley didn't pick the dress from endless racks of stylists' options herself, nor was it deliberately chosen for maximum shock effect (though there was no doubt she savored the outcome, and the lack of fallout, so to speak). Gianni Versace, whom Hurley knew through their mutual friend Elton John, had selected and shipped it off to Hurley fresh from his Milan Fashion Week runway. The premiere was just weeks after Versace had presented his spring 1994 collection, in which Hurley's chosen gown was but one in a series of similarly brilliantly precarious looks climaxing a deliciously, progressively taunting runway parade in which Medusa-headed safety pins (the Versace logo is a representation of Medusa) dominated. The show had started

simply enough, with tailored daytime suits: the skirts closed with a single pin, invoking the innocence commonly associated with pleated plaid parochial-school uniforms. But as the show proceeded, the pins grew larger and more numerous, less designed to preserve virtue than to hold together the increasingly risqué slits and slashes strategically set into Versace's dresses and gowns.

At this point in his career, any devoted buyer or knowing critic was hardly surprised and, in fact, often relished the designer's sexual bravado. Nevertheless, virtually everyone at the show, from front row to the last, was either wide-eyed or drop-jawed, if only in admiration for the collection's brilliant engineering. But Versace had repeatedly insisted that there was nothing inherently sexy about his clothes. "On a hanger, no dress is sexy," he said. "It's just fabric on a hanger. My clothes only come alive on the woman who knows how to be sexy in them." In a post-premiere-frenzy interview, where he went so far as to deny that there'd even been a fitting, Versace claimed he "knew Elizabeth would look simply *bellissima, perfetto* in that dress. Liz has this intelligent face attached to that very naughty body. So seeing a woman like in her in this gown was a guarantee that everyone would go *pozzo* [nuts]."

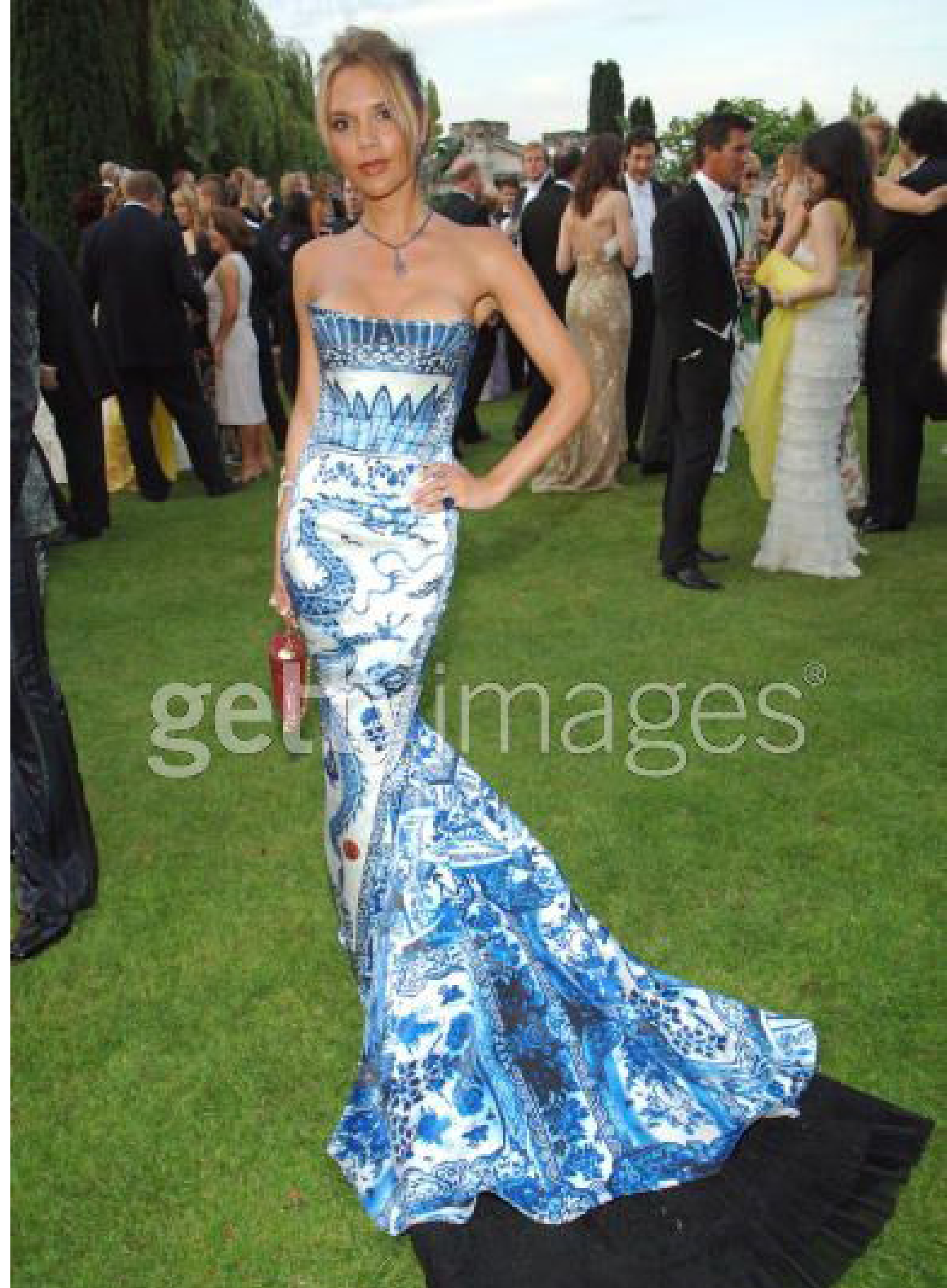
As for the secret as to how the silk crepe gown's ravine-deep neckline, thigh-high slit, double-fastened straps, and open rib cage, secured by a half dozen pronged Medusas, managed to stay in place long enough for Hurley to become legendary overnight instead of arrested for indecent exposure, Versace insisted, "there was never any danger." Brushing aside all doubt with a wave of his hand and a coy smile, he added, "That's why you call them safety pins, my dear."

MING-VASE GOWN

Roberto Cavalli • 2005

In 2010 Roberto Cavalli celebrated his fortieth anniversary in fashion by presenting a collection of over forty looks, every one of them the equivalent of a finale gown, and for Cavalli, there is no finale without laser-cut pony skin, crystals cross-stitched into leather, gold leafing on python, feathers woven into chiffon, hand-painted floral lace, and brilliants trapped in a silk-net overlay—sometimes all in the same dress. The only thing Roberto Cavalli loves more than extravagance is women.

Robert Cavalli is fashion's Guido Contini, Fellini's alter ego in 8½, but with a thimble instead of a camera and none of the tormented angst. A show-off with a smile, Cavalli sees no point in making a gesture unless it's grand. He spent two million dollars on the anniversary party that followed his show; he owns both a yacht and a vintage Mercedes with iridescent paint jobs so intense they change from light pink at sunrise to teal at high noon to royal purple at sunset and to navy in moonlight. He got tired of waiting for a table at a favorite industry restaurant in Milan, so he designed and opened his own place in the middle of a Milanese park, with soaring glass walls and a bar stocked with rows of premium Roberto Cavalli Vodka. He still seeks technological innovation in fabric painting, leather tanning, and weaving techniques and has a weakness for exotic skins, but all of the above is on track with a man who started his career in 1971 by being the first designer to patchwork glove-soft leather into full-length jackets, now a common practice. "When you come from Florence," he says, "you can't help but breathe in art as if it's air. It affects your brain and makes you want to do incredible things." By the way, he made the jacket in a fit of inspiration, "to impress a woman I was seeing that night."



I really don't understand minimalism. It's so polite and boring. If you don't want anyone to notice you, you should stay home and grow your own vegetables.
—Roberto Cavalli

Given all that, it's easy to imagine the designer fixating on a rare Ming vase that he had bought at an auction for one of his homes. "I kept staring at it, thinking, this is too beautiful to keep to myself." He took pictures of the vase and sent them to several textile factories, finally finding one willing to silk-screen the delicate intricacy of its multiblue-hued floral- and dragon-framed landscape. (Cavalli loves serpents and things that slither. An embossed-glass snake encircles his eponymous frosted-bottled vodka.) The result is a gown that nearly approximates the shape and asymmetrical balance of his prized antique. "The only problem," says Cavalli, "is that it took so long to weave the manufacturer would only give me enough material to make one dress." To his own surprise, Cavalli resisted adding beading, embroidery, or crystals. "I wanted it pure. For me, this was restraint." The gown was the standout of his spring 2005 collection.

Not one for understatement either, Victoria Beckham begged Cavalli to let her wear it to her friend Elton John's annual White Tie & Tiara Ball in London. Cavalli was tickled with the idea of someone whom people perceive as hard wearing a version of something so fragile. "The truth is, Victoria is funny and very sweet, and if anyone is ever going to have the last laugh, it's going to be her. She knows exactly what she is doing." Happily, she's also sample size. Cavalli credits Beckham with making the dress even better than when it was first shown on the runway. After trying on the dress, "Victoria insisted on one change. In order to make it really appear like the shape of a vase, she insisted I take the dress in at the bottom so tightly that she wouldn't be able to sit down. She wouldn't wear the dress otherwise. I did exactly what she asked me to do, and she stood the whole night."



YELLOW CHIFFON GOWN

Jean Dessès • c. 1955

There was a time when the term vintage was never applied to any garment less than fifty years old. Then it was fudged to twenty-five. Now the word is meaningless, used to cite anything that isn't current, a euphemism for turning something old and something borrowed into something special. A true vintage dress on a red carpet is as rare as a film about middle-aged romance. So when a rare sighting of authentic vintage does come along, it really is a treat.

Egyptian-born, Paris-based clothing designer Jean Dessès first made his name in jersey, then became famous for his work in chiffon in the 1950s. His canary-yellow gown, worn by Renée Zellweger to the Oscars in 2001, dates back to about 1955 (which may be four years shy of an official vintage "diploma," but in light of other pieces passed off as vintage, it's downright ancestral) and represents both one of the actress's most winning trips down the red carpet and one of the designer's most successful experiments in finding ways to ways to drape and gather chiffon without adding volume or weight to a gown.

What is striking about the dress is not only how contemporary it looks but the way the bust is so perfectly fitted and that the silhouette of the dress is so lean despite the fact that, from the sternum, two arcs of curtain-draped chiffon sweep down the front of the dress, then around to the back at the base to form a modest train—all without adding any bulk to its shape.

But in addition to that elegantly innovative engineering, what made the dress look so fresh on Zellweger is that she offset the vintage by wearing her hair down and loose, making the dress seem sexy, carefree, and modern. By contrast, whoever got zipped into this dress first, most likely wore her hair in a French twist or in a prim Grace Kelly-esque pageboy for a more temple-goddess effect. Wearing the Dessès was one of the few times Zellweger broke from her unofficial public appearance alliance with Carolina Herrera, but even Herrera would have to forgive her having strayed, since Renée looked as smashing at thirty-two as the dress did at nearly fifty.



BLACK GOWN WITH WHITE STRIPES

Valentino • 1982



Julia Roberts has never been one to run to a stylist every time she has to go outside. She happily admits to not being a clotheshorse, for not fretting over what she is going to wear to events. One of the reasons why she has favored tuxedos for big nights out is because they are “easier.” Yet, to accept her Best Actress Academy Award in 2001 for *Erin Brockovich*, she chose one of the most starkly sophisticated and enduringly populist gowns of all time. And in typical throwaway fashion, Roberts took no credit for the idea; she says her niece, actress Emma Roberts, chose it for her.

Pulled from the Valentino archives for his fall 1982 couture collection, stripped of ornamentation, the strapless black velvet is basic. But the gown is divided in half by a white satin stripe that goes straight up the torso, splitting into a V at the neckline to form a thin-shouldered halter. However, once over the shoulder, the two straps join four other straps to form multiple chevrons that go down the back like a trellis. At the waist, the stripes multiply yet again, into over a dozen paths down the back of the full skirt with train. The stark geometry of the dress was made even more dramatic by Roberts’s choice to wear her hair in an uncharacteristically formal series of knots atop her head.

Even prior to Roberts’s appearance, the gown was always was one of Valentino’s best sellers, so much so that variations of it appeared in his collections for several seasons after its initial presentation. In fact, the reason publications have often pegged Roberts’s gown incorrectly to 1992 is that Valentino presented an almost line-for-line copy of it that year. However, seeing the Oscar winner looking so elegant ensured that Valentino would let those lines go on and on, at least for a few years more.

BALL GOWN FOR *THE KING AND I*

Irene Sharaff • 1956

Naturally, credit must go to Rodgers and Hammerstein for the glorious score, as well as to the citizens of nineteenth-century Bohemia who thought it might be fun to dance a hop-step-close-step in 2/4 time. But if you love *The King and I*, each time the brass section slows to swell as Yul Brynner finally takes Deborah Kerr firmly by the hand to lead her around the highly polished vast floor of his epically large palace, you hold your breath in anticipation, knowing at the first downbeat on the kettle drum you are about to witness one of the most exuberant yet unaffected dance numbers in the history of film.

There is nothing amazing about the choreography in “Shall We Dance?” The dance is a basic polka, devoid of the dexterity with which it would be manically performed almost weekly on *The Lawrence Welk Show*, too banal a routine to be atop the leaderboard on *Dancing with the Stars*. Neither of the film’s stars was a trained dancer. (Kerr didn’t even do her own singing. Mami Nixon warbled for her.) And yet, “Shall We Dance?” is pure rapture. To begin with, Brynner is hot: those intense, unblinking eyes; the shaved, bare chest; that sonorous voice—not to mention the fact that

he was the first bald movie star to make women go flush. But rampant testosterone aside, it’s Kerr’s voluminous gown that gives the scene its sweep and grandeur. Made from pale lavender Oriental silk, the dress was similar to the one Sharaff created for Gertrude Lawrence for the stage version of the show. Yet, minus the confines of a Broadway stage and afforded the added bonus of a film being shot in CinemaScope, Sharaff increased the Victorian crinolines and added yards of imported Thai silk to the skirt, which necessitated replacing the cane hooping, authentic for the period, with a metal underskirt cage. However, because the large film set allowed the actors to dance the polka faster and more aggressively than onstage, the voluminous off-the-shoulder puffed sleeves of the original Broadway costume had to be reduced so as not to inflate. The dress weighed close to forty pounds, and Kerr had to wear foam rubber pads on her hips to prevent bruising. With the rest of her wardrobe of similar scale and weight, Kerr came away twelve pounds lighter from *The King and I*. Irene Sharaff wound up eight-and-a-half pounds heavier, thanks to the weight of her second Academy Award for Best Costume Design for the film.



WEDDING GOWN FOR HER ROYAL HIGHNESS DIANA, PRINCESS OF WALES

David and Elizabeth Emanuel • 1981



Let's be honest. The gown is hideous, with mutton sleeves so high and wide you could hide a Smithfield ham in each; a flouncy "Poor little Pierrette, where's your Pierrot?" neckline; an inexplicably bloated bosom; that fire-retardant, theater-curtain-weight skirt—and to top it off, a head-flattening veil that goes yard for yard with a train that could supply half the infant population in Lancashire with communion dresses.

True, Princess Diana's bridal lollapalooza initially knocked us all out. Partially, it was the sheer volume of all that ivory silk, taffeta, and lace; the tens of thousands of hand-sewn seed pearls and sequins; plus the unexpected choice of the attractive young married designers, David and Elizabeth Emanuel, who had become a favorite source for the young betrothed Lady Diana Spencer soon after they had graduated from the Royal College of Art. Then there was also the relentless torrent of images that proved that, no matter how far Diana walked, there was always more of that gown pulling up the rear. But above all, almost a billion people watching the televised marriage ceremony were taken in by the vivid framing of the shrewdly marketed fairy tale. The royal wedding was a live-action version of a Disneyfied fable, complete with beribboned, dashing (if not particularly handsome) prince,

horse-drawn gilded carriage, and requisite princess clad in a big, poufy, never-to-fall soufflé of a gown.

Had the fairy tale continued, perhaps there would have been no reassessment. But as the union unraveled into an overwrought embarrassment, anyone who returned for a nostalgic reviewing of Charles and Diana wedding photographs couldn't help but envision the dress as a prescient marker. Unfortunately, that second glance came too late to save the bridal industry from more than a decade of fabric overkill. The Emanuel's gown became one of the most copied Big Day gowns in history. "It set wedding couture back at least ten years," bemoans a very successful bridal designer who is too well mannered to allow attribution, though not too shy to voice an opinion: "The amount of business those of us who couldn't come up with our version of that top-of-the-wedding-cake look was devastating. Every time a future bride pulled out a picture of Di drowning in that dress I had to physically stop my finger from going down my throat." Another equally famous, slightly more philosophical bridal designer adds, "For all that fabric, there wasn't one square inch of sex appeal in that dress. You know why? Neither the dress nor the wedding ever focused on the bride. You know, maybe that was the problem all along."



Audrey Hepburn

**EVENING GOWN
FOR *SABRINA***
Edith Head and
Hubert de Givenchy • 1954

**LITTLE BLACK DRESS
FOR *SABRINA***
Edith Head and
Hubert de Givenchy • 1954

**EVENING GOWN
FOR *BREAKFAST AT TIFFANY'S***
Hubert de Givenchy • 1961

**ASCOT GOWN FOR
*MY FAIR LADY***
Cecil Beaton • 1964

**EMBASSY BALL FOR
*MY FAIR LADY***
Cecil Beaton • 1964

**SILVER PAILLETTE DRESS
FOR *TWO FOR THE ROAD***
Hubert de Givenchy • 1967

Whenever I'm asked about red carpet glamour on one of those morning-after awards segments on television, the same question always comes up. "You have the inside scoop. So tell us, who has great style now? Who's the next Audrey Hepburn?"

Well, you don't have to scoop very deeply. The answer's easy.

No one.

The list of actresses who wear or wore clothes beautifully, have been highly influential, or established a distinctive profile is easy to compile: from Marlene Dietrich to Grace Kelly, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis to Ali McGraw, Cate Blanchett to Nicole Kidman, and many women in between.

But notable as all these women may be, Audrey Hepburn had something extra. Her unique screen persona—part tomboy, part princess, sometimes plucky, sometimes brittle, but always vulnerable—has already been chronicled in countless tomes. So while she always looked different in her screen roles, she always looked right.

It's not uncommon for stars to consult with costumers on wardrobe for their roles, just as Garbo did with Adrian, and Dietrich with Travis Banton. For forty years, Hepburn consulted with Hubert de Givenchy. Givenchy not only regarded Hepburn as his friend and muse, but as his collaborator, so that she was part of the actual design process, which could explain why she always appeared so natural and comfortable on screen—she never seemed to be in costume. It was as if she had gone through her own closet, pulled out what was right for the role, and brought it to the set in a tote. She also possessed



an agility that kept her from appearing frozen in an inimitable but sometimes physically limiting silhouette. Off-screen, she never looked as if someone had styled her.

In addition, though indisputably a style legend, Hepburn lacked that layer of fixed iconography that Davis, Crawford, or the other Hepburn possessed that allowed them to rise above mediocre projects, although it often kept audiences from forgetting who they were off-screen. The younger Hepburn never could climb out of a clunker because her stardom wasn't built on establishing a presence that was bigger than any role. But when a film of hers did click, her self-effacement made us fall in love with Holly, Eliza, Rina, Sabrina, and Jo with the *Funny Face*. Sure, they were all Hepburn, but her magic was that each time we fell for her, she made us believe it was for the first time. The way she looked as she stole our hearts only hastened our infatuation.

While Coco Chanel is credited with making the little black dress a wardrobe staple,

it was Hepburn who made the LBD popular again in the 1950s. In *Breakfast at Tiffany's* she wears a fitted, stunning black number to visit her ex-mobster friend Mr. Sally Tomato in jail, but her most fetching onscreen example, the dress that set off the unabated rage for the LBD, is the one—with its high bateau neckline, straight fitted bodice, and umbrella skirt—she wears to meet Humphrey Bogart at the end of *Sabrina*. With a *This* dress was designed for her by Hubert de Givenchy, whom Hepburn contacted to assist in creating Sabrina's post-Paris wardrobe after Cristóbal Balenciaga had turned her down.

Though she'd won the Academy Award for Best Actress for her first film, *Roman Holiday*, *Sabrina* was Hepburn's second film, so when the 24-year-old actress told her producers at Paramount Pictures that she wanted to work with the 26-year-French designer with whom she felt an immediate kinship, the executive reminded her that the film already had a costume designer, Edith



Head, who at 36 had already won five Oscars for Costume Design (including one for *Roman Holiday*.) If she was compelled to work with Givenchy, that was fine by them, but he would get no credit, and she'd have to pay for the clothes of her own pocket. Hepburn agreed. Head, now limited to designing to Sabrina's wardrobe at the beginning of the film, chauffeur's sparrowlike daughter living over the multicar garage, seethed.

Another unforgettable dress that appeared in the film was Givenchy's strapless white organdy gown with embroidered black flowers on its tiered hem. Not only did it render the two brothers played by Humphrey Bogart and William Holden smitten for Sabrina, but it became the dress the press always ran photographs of when citing Hepburn, and retailers were deluged with requests for copies of it, practically insuring the film an Oscar nomination for Best Costume Design. But Head refused to share the nomination with Givenchy, justifying her demand that the studio submit only her name for award consideration because although Givenchy had designed most of Sabrina's wardrobe, all of the costumes were sewn and finished on the Paramount lot under Head's supervision. Head won her sixth Oscar for *Sabrina*—she would win two more over the course of her career—and did not acknowledge Givenchy in her acceptance speech.

Hepburn became Givenchy's muse, and the two embarked upon a devoted lifelong friendship. With one notable exception, Givenchy designed Hepburn's full wardrobes for all her major roles after *Sabrina*, among them these showstoppers: the gorgeous ballerina-inspired wedding dress she wears to marry Fred Astaire at the end of *Funny Face* (although Head claimed to have designed it); the infamous black gown she wears in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* opening sequence on Fifth Avenue (Givenchy finally got screen recognition, and since Pauline Trigère designed Patricia Neal's wardrobe, Head only received credit as "costume supervisor." Oddly, the film didn't earn a nomination.); and the sensational silver Mylar paillette minidress she wore in *Two for the Road* case of grand larceny in that hardly varies from Paco Rabanne's signature metallic

COLD SHOULDER DRESS

Donna Karan • 1992

She's hardly the first woman to call attention to bare shoulders. Bacall whistled over her left one to lure Bogie. Rita Hayworth worked both into a slow shimmy while peeling off a single glove and Mae West merely had to roll either of hers to get someone to come up and see her sometime. But Donna Karan was the first to design an entire line around a bare pair.

Karan's black jersey cold shoulder dress is a canny and insinuating act of illusion. Worn under a jacket, the dress can make a woman appear almost monkish, as if she's wearing a floor-length turtleneck. Doff the jacket and just one body part—a barely risqué one at that—becomes starkly exposed. But Karan's sly genius is in taking advantage of the fact that “every woman I know dislikes at least one area of her body, but I've never met one who hates her shoulders. It's the only place where you don't gain any weight. That's why women are never self-conscious about showing them off.”

And yet, the manifestation of this fail-safe revelation almost never made it on or off the runway. Originally created as a top, a cold shoulder pullover was a 1992 fall collection design discard, an extra separate consigned to a secondary rack, until Karan, short on

something neutral to put under a highlighted jacket on Linda Evangelista, gave the top to the supermodel to wear as a base. Today, anyone with one webisode of fame is classified as a super-something, but in the 1990s, only a handful of models could lay claim to the “super” prefix because they were blessed with more than mere beauty. Designers saved their bests in show for these special creatures to wear because each possessed several notable characteristics: a singular runway personality, a come closer even-though-I-might-hurt-you allure, and a voyeuristic self-satisfaction that radiated brilliantly whenever they were “working a look” for the crowd—all of which combined to form a force field of spotlight-grabbing power.

Evangelista took a fancy to the top, so much so that at the end of the runway she slipped out of the jacket, revealing her never-to-be-fat glenoids. Women's Wear Daily took special note of Evangelista's ad lib and “and knocked the piece to death,” recalls Karan. “They hated it.” A few days later, however, when Karan was helping Liza Minnelli, who had come to the designer's studio looking for clothes for a European tour, the singer “went mad for the top. She wore it everywhere



“It’s the one place that is perfect on every woman’s body. No one ever says, ‘I have fat shoulders!’”
—Donna Karan



abroad, then came back demanding that I turn it into a gown. I obliged. She wore it to the Academy Awards. That did it.” Karan’s subtle game of peek-a-delt sold out. Hundreds of thousands of knockoffs soon followed.

Yet, for Karan, a dyed-in-black-cashmere Democrat and one of Seventh Avenue’s staunchest advocates of female empowerment (her groundbreaking 1992 ad campaign featured a female president), having Hillary Clinton choose the cold shoulder dress for President Clinton’s first state dinner “was a highlight in [her] career.” (Karan sent the dress unsolicited, but the garment was paid for by Hillary’s press secretary). Wearing the dress marked one of the rare appearances when Mrs. Clinton garnered high marks for style. But for Karan “it was the ultimate vindication. I mean, come on. Who would you rather wear your clothes, a fashion critic or one of the greatest women in America? I don’t have to answer that, do I?”



THE WHITE DRESS COLLECTION

Tom Ford • 1996

When Tom Ford stopped designing womenswear in 2004, legions of fashion editors, retailers, stylists, and photographers reacted as if they had lost the love of their life—and not all of the mourners were women. Even had his talent been minor, Tom Ford would be recognized as one of fashion’s great seducers. Yet, as shrewdly aware of the power to activate pheromones as he is gleefully confident of his aesthetic, Ford revitalized the nearly stagnant and financially troubled century-old Gucci brand into a fashion powerhouse of the 1990s by assuming a Dionysian-like position as arbiter of the urbane yet overt come-on. Each season at Gucci he would take at least one of the house’s classic signatures—horse bits, stirrups, the interlocking GGs, the inimitable red and green banding—and transform them into totems of seduction. The response was equal to Gucci offering free guzzles from Ford’s Fountain of Youth in his backyard.

But for his spring 1996 collection, Ford chose to look outside Gucci’s archives in order to make a revolutionary leap forward.



Unhitching himself from the house's sartorial safety nets and symbolism, with a gracious nod to both Halston and Rudi Gernreich, Ford ventured as close towards minimalism as he ever had before, sending out body-caressing white silk jersey gowns, each with baring unique strategic cut outs: a keyhole at the breast, the absence of side panels along the torso, or a hole at the hip just large enough to hold a thin gold sculptural variation on the trademark GGs. The reaction to the collection was immediate and rapturous, because Ford, as seductive as he was arrogant, was making two declarations. From now on, Gucci would be recognized first and foremost for its fashion, instead of as a venerated brand with an iconic logo and go-to reputation for leather goods and loafers. Additionally, the Gucci brand would be synonymous with sex. In fact, starting with these white dresses, every subsequent collection and ad campaign was built around an overt sexuality far more in your face than playful, with one campaign even featuring pubic hair shaved into the double G logo. This new positioning redefined the brand and redefined Ford. Until his departure from Gucci, any designer creating a collection steeped in sensuality followed his lead.

A man so on target in exposing a woman's erogenous zones with such accuracy is worthy of homage. For a gay man to pinpoint them implies near spectral power. No wonder women adore him.

