

# MARILYN

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IN FASHION



THE ENDURING  
INFLUENCE OF  
MARILYN  
MONROE

CHRISTOPHER NICKENS AND GEORGE ZENO

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FOR JAMES GALEANO

C. N.

AND FOR

ALEJANDRINA, VILMA, AND PETER,

WITH LOVE AND AFFECTION

G. Z.

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# SEXUAL --- ELEGANCE





ANYONE WHO EXAMINES MARILYN MONROE'S LEGENDARY LIFE, EVEN A BIT, SOON KNOWS THAT SHE WAS A COMPELLING TANGLE OF CONTRADICTIONS. A UNIQUE blend of qualities made her an unforgettable talent and a captivating public personality. They also, of course, shaped her fashion profile.

She was very much of the 1950s zeitgeist yet simultaneously years ahead of her time. She possessed a reassuring ultra-feminine, girl-next-door sweetness that coexisted with an almost supernatural sexual magnetism. This contrary blend made Monroe perfect for a period that still cherished tradition, while slowly moving into more openness about sex. In a time of prim Peter Pan collars, voluminous skirts worn over mountains of petticoats, and rubberized foundation garments, Monroe was a style visionary whose fashion-forward choices have transcended any specific era. More than any other public figure of her time, she brought body-conscious designs to the forefront in a way that inspired countless designers, including Yves St. Laurent, Alexander McQueen, Thierry Mugler, and Jean Paul Gaultier.

Marilyn often anticipated the future. She went sans undergarments years before the braless look became acceptable. Thirty years prior to the fitness craze, she was training with weights to maintain her stunning figure. "It helps me keep what I've got where it belongs," she quipped. Decades before "morning after" hair was considered stylish, Monroe preferred a tousled mane that contrasted dramatically with the severe bobs favored by many of her peers. When she had to don underwear for a see-through design, she took the exotic step of wearing a stripper's G-string—long before the invention of the thong.





She also inspired trends. A bare-midriff cocktail dress she wore for a press reception in London was copied and rushed into stores, and the style lines of the iconic white dress she wore over the subway grating in *The Seven Year Itch* have been mimicked every spring since 1955.

Still, relatively little has been written about the powerful and lasting imprint Monroe has made on the world of fashion. Unlike Audrey Hepburn and Grace Kelly, commonly praised as the most influential style queens of mid-century Hollywood, Marilyn's standing took a while to be recognized. For years her built-in sensuality, voluptuous figure, and provocative taste worked against her being taken seriously by most fashion critics. Moreover, even when she appeared admirably chic, almost no one paid attention to the designer names responsible.

This was many years before anyone was shouting, "Who are you wearing?" on the red carpet. It was also a time when on-scene reporters and photographers were nearly all male. They were too busy jockeying for position to ask La Monroe about her style choices, even if they had been inclined to do so. Marilyn seldom revealed the identity of her fashion collaborators. She didn't want to hear, "What a gorgeous gown.

Who designed it?” She much preferred “You look gorgeous!” Thus, it usually surprises fashionistas to learn that she wore the designs of Oleg Cassini, Hattie Carnegie, Ceil Chapman, Christian Dior, James Galanos, Lanvin, Don Loper, Norman Norell, and Emilio Pucci. She carried Louis Vuitton bags and wore Ferragamo pumps. She also shared America’s top hairstylist with Jacqueline Kennedy.

On film, Marilyn was dressed exquisitely by Oscar-winning designers Jean Louis, William Travilla, Orry-Kelly, Charles LeMaire, and Dorothy Jeakins, among others. These artisans also had tremendous influence on Marilyn’s off-screen image. She frequently took advantage of these designers as her personal couturiers, wearing their costumes off the studio lot for highly publicized events, or having them whip something up for her personal use. She was sheathed in a daring Jean Louis gown when she famously crooned “Happy Birthday” to President Kennedy.

Before style trends became as sexualized as they did later, fashion pundits tended to criticize Marilyn’s “obvious” taste rather than salute her boldness—though sometimes they had a point. She did err occasionally on the side of vulgarity early in her career (when she had to stand out from the rest of the starlet pack), but she almost always managed to blend elegance with her ripe sexuality. The exhibitionist in her relished showing off as much of her magnificent body as the law allowed, but her need for respect led her to pair shocking décolleté with ladylike, opera-length gloves.

In a 1953 article entitled “I Dress for Men,” Monroe shared her fashion philosophy. “I believe your body should make your clothes look good—instead of using clothes to make the body conform to what is considered fashionable at the moment, distorted or not. That’s why I don’t care for ‘un-organic clothes’—clothes that have no relation to the body. Clothes, it seems to me, should have a relationship to the body, not be something distinct from it.”

As she transitioned from a wholesome clean-scrubbed model to a sizzling Hollywood sexpot to an elegantly sexy living legend, Monroe refined her persona and set beauty standards that still resonate fifty years after her untimely death.





“Decades before stars would not make a public appearance without the services of platoons of stylists and designers,” wrote British journalist Meredith Etherington-Smith, “Marilyn was a truly great stylist. She knew exactly how to get the effect she wanted with black jersey, fine silk-crepe, or a solid nimbus of skin-tight sequins.”

In 1992 *The New York Times* called Monroe “Timeless Marilyn, the Movies’ Mona Lisa.” This characterization is stronger than ever twenty years later. Coinciding with the release of *My Week with Marilyn* in 2011, *The New York Post* headlined “Dress Like Marilyn,” a two-page photo layout featuring updates on familiar Monroe outfits.

Of course, Marilyn’s hair and makeup styles have proved irresistible for decades, showing up on everyone from Jayne Mansfield to Kelly Osbourne, from Madonna to Christina Aguilera, from Anna Nicole Smith to Gwen Stefani. Nearly every year magazine tutorials appear on how to replicate Marilyn’s perfectly arched brows, glistening lips, or one of her signature hairdos—styles from sixty years in the past! Featured in advertising promotions for Sunsilk hair products in 2008, Marilyn was pictured alongside Madonna and

Shakira as if she were their contemporary. “She never seems to really die,” marveled Liz Smith in 2010.

Why Marilyn Monroe continues unabated to hold generation after generation in thrall, why auctions of her personal effects fetch upwards of seven figures, why she continues to inspire designers, stylists, and some of the world’s most exciting women is a subject that could fill a book all its own. In terms of fashion it can be summed up easily: She was a stylish girl ahead of her time that became a style icon for all time.

