

“What is shown in Paris today is a dead duck tomorrow.”

— Costume designer EDITH HEAD, whose 57-year career owed much of its longevity to avoiding trends.

EDITH HEAD'S LEGACY

In her day, the famed costume designer ruled at Paramount, dressing everyone from Grace Kelly to Elizabeth Taylor — all the while savvily getting her way *By* SAM WASSON

Kim Novak's wardrobe for *Vertigo*, including this white coat with black scarf, was designed to look mysterious. “This girl must look as if she's just drifted out of the San Francisco fog,” said Head.

COSTUME DESIGNER EDITH HEAD — whose most unforgettable designs included Grace Kelly's airy chiffon skirt in Hitchcock's *To Catch a Thief*, Gloria Swanson's darkly elegant dresses in *Sunset Boulevard*, Dorothy Lamour's sarongs, and Elizabeth Taylor's white satin gown in *A Place in the Sun* — survived 40 years of changing Hollywood styles by skillfully eschewing fads of the moment and, for the most part, grandeur and ornamentation, too. Boldness, she believed, was a vice.

Thirty years after her death, Head is getting a new dose of attention. A gorgeous coffee table book, *Edith Head: The Fifty-Year Career of Hollywood's Greatest Costume Designer*, was recently published. And in late March, an A to Z adaptation of Head's seminal 1959 book, *The Dress Doctor*, is being released as well. The breezy volume spotlights her trademark style prescriptions, such as "Even a perfect figure looks better if it doesn't resemble a sausage," and "Don't dress too different. You don't want to dress like the herd, but you don't want to look like a peacock in a yard full of ducks."

What one senses, though, is that Head's stunning record — costumes for 1,000 films capped off with 35 Academy Award nominations and eight wins, more than any woman in Oscar history — stands as tall, if not taller, than the designs themselves. But that's the way Ms. Head wanted it. Trends change; power, she knew, would always be in fashion.

She is still correct. Few people could tell you what she designed, but they know her name — proof that Head was good with a hemline, but better with the public.

But it didn't begin that way. Head had a lonely childhood

with a stepfather who moved the family from one desolate mining town to the next and eventually to Mexico. In 1914, Head's mother took her to Los Angeles, where she attended college and afterward found work teaching art. It was in 1924 that Head responded to a classified ad in the *Los Angeles Times* looking for a sketch artist at Famous Players-Lasky (which later became Paramount). In a stroke of deception, Head, who was taking art classes at night, filled her portfolio with drawings done by fellow classmates. She won the job.

Head quickly rose to success. With her tiny frame, pinched face and perpetual scowl, she was that rare presence on a



✂ THE STYLE SETTER OF THE SCREEN

Clockwise from above: 1. The designer was the only woman included in a 1947 *Look* magazine article about executives at Paramount Pictures. "I'm always Edith in a little beige suit. That's how I've survived," she once said. 2. One of Head's sketches for 1950's *All About Eve* starring Bette Davis. 3. Wearing one of Head's most famous dresses, an off-the-shoulder design in chiffon tulle, Grace Kelly posed in a publicity shot for Alfred Hitchcock's 1954 suspense film *Rear Window*. According to biographer Jay Jorgensen, Hitchcock told Head "that Grace was to look like a piece of Dresden china, nearly untouchable."





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“Clothes not only can make the woman — they can make her several different women. There’s no one style, there’s a style for a mood.”

— EDITH HEAD

lot populated with the world’s most alluring women: commanding in her sexlessness.

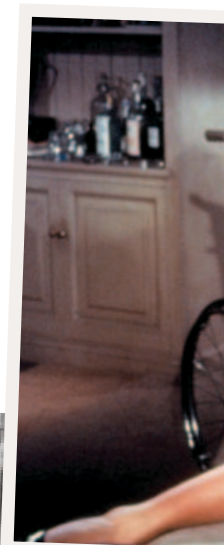
Her own anti-glamour made her self-conscious, an outsider, and she learned how to watch and how to listen. Those dark blue-tinted glasses, which became a Head trademark, were originally worn because they let her understand how clothes would look in black-and-white. But even after the advent of color films, she adhered to the look because they kept her thoughts a secret, and those hours she spent fitting the most glamorous, most powerful stars in Hollywood earned her the role of confessor-therapist. Too fat? Too thin? The stars told her everything.

“Ms. Head was very diplomatic,” says designer Rita Riggs, a former assistant. “That’s how she survived so long.” After years of this, Edith Head knew more than celebrities’ measurements — she knew their insecurities. Bonds formed.

Head read faces. She read beneath the faces. When the likes of Joan Crawford, Barbara Stanwyck and Grace Kelly (Head’s favorite), were loaned out of Paramount, they

might ask for Ms. Head personally, or — as was the case for Bette Davis on *All About Eve* — insist on her. The clothes were good, but what drew them to Ms. Head, film after film, was her no-nonsense efficiency and respect for the bottom line: She dressed her actors appropriately, in accordance to the dictates of story and character. Sure, there were jaw-dropping costumes — such as Ginger Rogers’ mink and faux-ruby-and-emerald gown in *Lady in The Dark*, which, at an estimated \$35,000, is considered one of the most expensive dresses ever made for a movie — but in countless films, Head’s designs fly under the radar.

Dorothy Jeakins referred to her as “the little dressmaker.” While costumer Irene and set/costume designer Cecil Beaton fussed with style, Head — whose tenure at Paramount lasted 43 years — designed for longevity. She avoided prints, for example, because she worried they would be out of style at the time of the film’s release.



“Ms. Head appreciated it when we dressed conservatively,” Riggs says. Head’s assistants were mandated to come dressed in white gloves, beige tailored suits, tie their hair up in little chignons, and blend into the studio walls, which were painted in a shade of pale silver gray, a color so unassuming, it was practically invisible. Actors like Audrey Hepburn, who

There were a couple of distinguished touches chez Head — a decorative assemblage of miniature sewing machines and a couple of lamps shaped like female torsos — but they were there out of necessity; the room would have been conspicuously barren without them.

But Head, for all her success, missed her calling. In another era, the designer, who died in 1981 at age 83, would have run the studio. **THR**

STYLESPECIAL

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1. GINGER ROGERS For 1944's *Lady in the Dark*, Head designed a gown covered in faux rubies and emeralds and linked in mink for Ginger Rogers' fashion editor character.

2. **TIPPI HEDREN** The actress, one of the cool blondes favored by Alfred Hitchcock, wore six copies of the same green suit in the director's 1963 film *The Birds*. "Most would need to be distressed as the birds continued their attack," writes Jay Jorgensen in *Edith Head: The Fifty-Year Career of Hollywood's Greatest Costume Designer*.

3. EDITH HEAD IN THE STUDIO Head — seen here surrounded by sketches, many of which were done by her staff — was an “incredible self-promoter,” says Paramount Pictures archivist Randall Thropp, who has preserved many of her designs. “She had reproductions done of her costumes and would tour and do fashion shows with them.”

4. HEDY LAMARR To obtain peacock feathers for Lamarr's fantastical costume in 1949's *Samson and Delilah*, Head dispatched her staff to pluck feathers from director Cecil B. DeMille's ranch in Tujunga, Calif.

5. **SOPHIA LOREN** The Italian actress breezed down the street in a dress designed by Head for the 1959 film *That Kind of Woman*.

6. **GRACE KELLY** One of Head's most famous designs is the pale green suit she created for Kelly, seen here opposite Jimmy Stewart, in 1954's *Rear Window*.

7. **SWEET CHARITY** Head garnered an Oscar nomination for her work on the 1969 Bob Fosse film, starring Shirley MaLaïne. Seen here is a wardrobe test for the film.

8. HEAD AND HER STATUETTES The designer won eight Oscars during her career, the most by any woman in Oscar history.

9. ELIZABETH TAYLOR The actress' iconic gown for 1951's *A Place in The Sun* — a confection of taffeta below a bodice covered in white velvet violets — was the inspiration for countless prom dresses during the 1950s.

