

Katharine Hepburn

A local heroine knew how to wear a costume with style.

On screen and stage, Katharine Hepburn appeared in many places: as socialite heart-breaker Tracy Lord in *The Philadelphia Story*, as the middle-aged spinster vacationing in Venice in *Summertime* and careening down river rapids in *The African Queen* and in medieval England in *The Lion in Winter*, to name a few. But home was always Hartford.

The actress was born there in 1907, the daughter of Dr. Thomas and Katharine Houghton Hepburn. At the time, her father was a young intern at the Hartford Hospital and the family lived just across the street from the hospital at 22 Hudson Street. According to Hepburn's autobiography, *Me*: "The street no longer exists, the hospital grew over it."

The family's second home was at 133 Hawthorne Street, next to the Arrow Electric Factory. It was from this residence that Katharine's social-activist mother campaigned to improve the status of women. Women's right to vote and access to birth control were two of the feminist causes closest to her heart. Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood, often came to tea there.

In this Hartford home, the younger Katharine developed her independent streak and love for life—on her terms, of course. Her tomboyish nature was nurtured here: as noted in the biography, *Kate Remembered*, by A. Scott Berg, "She said there was not a single tree in town she could not climb, not even an especially dangerous one on Hawthorne Street." She called herself "Jimmie" and liked to dress and act like her older brother Tom, who died in an apparent suicide at the age of 15.

After graduating Bryn Mawr College and experiencing a not-so-successful start in acting on December 12, 1928, Katharine Hepburn married Ludlow Ogden Smith. The ceremony, for which she wore a feminine white crushed velvet dress, took place at the family's final residence at 201 Bloomfield Street,

just opposite The University of Hartford. This home, which was donated to the school after her father's death in 1962, was linked by the Connecticut River to Fenwick, the family's home in Old Saybrook, a popular retreat from Hartford's hot summers. At Fenwick, Katharine honed her love of sailing, swimming, diving, golf, tennis, having fun, and living life on her own terms. She continued to swim in Long Island



A still from *Adam's Rib*, a gift to the Kent State University Museum from Christopher P. Sullivan, M.D. Left to right: David Wayne, Katharine Hepburn, Spencer Tracy, Jean Hagen



A photographer's proof showing Hepburn in *Without Love*, from the Theresa Helbrun Theatre Guild Photography Collection Bryn Mawr College Library Special Collections, Vandamm Studio

YAKRAM
NEW YORK



The gown Hepburn wore in *Adam's Rib*, courtesy of Kent State University Museum, gift of the Estate of Katharine Hepburn.



Sound year-round, “in snow or shine,” until she was well into her 80s.

Traits of self-expression and fearlessness pushed the ambitious actress to attain and keep star status for more than 70 years, often performing her own stunts. An exhibit, “Katharine Hepburn: Dressed for Stage and Screen,” which is currently touring the nation, is ample testament to her individuality and style. It features many of Hepburn’s most glamorous outfits, created by renowned costume designers, including Walter Plunkett, Edith Head, and Cecil Beaton. The exhibit was at Lincoln Center, in New York City, from October 2012 through January 2013.

Center stage, greeting visitors with a big Katharine Hepburn welcome at its entrance, was a glass enclosure showcasing eight of the 31 pairs of slacks in shades of beige and brown that were owned and worn by the star. They were part of what she often called her “uniform”: a pair of khaki pants and a white open-collar shirt. Displayed on half mannequins in active poses, they evoke the image of the slender brunette riding

a bike through Hartford or golfing at Fenwick. No matter how glamorous she was for the stage and screen, when she came home to Connecticut, Hepburn donned pants or “slacks,” as she and her generation preferred to call them. She was once quoted as saying, “Skirts are hopeless.” In the 1993 Turner Pictures television documentary, *All About Me*,

she says, “Anytime I hear a man say he prefers a woman in a skirt, I say, ‘Try one on.’”

Hepburn also had her own style of hairdressing. She washed and set her hair every night in rollers made of

newspapers. One can only wonder if they were made from old editions of *The Hartford Courant*.

“Katharine Hepburn: Dressed for Stage and Screen” features the many costumes designed for the star to tell a story or define a character. Though her personal style may have been casual, many of her costumes were anything but.

The earliest example in the collection is the wedding gown she wore in *The Lake*. Designed by Howard Greer in satin and duchess lace, it features a

**“Anytime I hear a man say he prefers a woman in a skirt, I say, ‘Try one on.’”
-Katharine Hepburn**



strikingly slim silhouette. The dress was a big success, though the 1933 Broadway production was a flop.

The pink silk organza dress Hepburn wore in *The Philadelphia Story* emphasized the star's 20-and-a-half-inch waist and willowy five-foot, seven-inch stature.

The multicolored Valentina-designed gown Hepburn wore as Jamie Coe Rowan in *Without Love* is as stunning today as it was in 1942, while the sportier outfits she wore in such films as *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, co-starring her longtime consort Spencer Tracy and her niece, Katharine Houghton, are more expressive of Hepburn's casual day-to-day style.

In the end, stunning is a word that sums up this exhibit, which originated at the Kent State University Museum in Ohio and is now traveling throughout the United States. Curated by Jean L. Drusedow, it showcases costumes donated by the estate of Katharine Hepburn. When Hepburn passed away in 2003 and her New York City townhouse was sold, these were inventoried and shipped to a warehouse in Connecticut. It was the actress's wish that they be donated to an educational institution. According to Drusedow, "We were contacted by the estate of Ms. Hepburn

and asked if we would be interested in having some of her costumes in our collection." When the curator went to the warehouse to choose which pieces to take back to the museum, she was offered the entire collection, which spanned the career of the four-time Academy Award winner.

Wherever her life took her, Hepburn always came back to her homes in Hartford and finally to Fenwick. After bombing in *The Lake*, her first major Broadway role, she used her time in Connecticut to re-group and re-invent herself. When she retired, she chose to spend her final days at Fenwick. She died there in April of 2003 and is buried in the family plot in Hartford Cemetery.

In her autobiography she said, "Isn't it funny, Hartford is two places to me, what it was then and what it is now." Like Hartford, she had two sides: the private person who loved home and hearth and the other, "Katharine Hepburn: On Stage and Screen." ❏

Sharon Hazard is freelance writer specializing in historic and non-fiction subjects. She is currently editing the diary of President Theodore Roosevelt's cousin, Kate Shippen Roosevelt and is sharing her daily entries in The Gang from West End: www.sharonhazardauthor.com.

The gown Hepburn wore in *Without Love*, photo courtesy of Kent State University Museum, gift of the Estate of Katharine Hepburn

