

Feature



Nearly “Naked” Dressing in Films of the 1930s

Kathe Gust*

Hollywood fashions for women in 1930s faced the challenge of appearing “naked” without actually showing too much skin in the era of the Hays code.

With the onset of the Great Depression style underwent a dramatic change for the fashion conscious. The extravagant lifestyle of the 1920s became less reachable for many and the boyish tubular look of the “flapper” shifted to an emphasis on the upper body and natural waistline as a more serious, conservative and nostalgic attitude swept the U.S. and Europe. The contrast between the little print housedress of the typical woman vs. the Hollywood glamour of the pre-Hays code movies is extreme. Even after the code, the escapist film fare popular at the time continued to depict extreme exaggerations of the glamorous socialite life, but cut back on massive historical blockbusters.

Film costuming during the 1920s was often very daring. Everyone seems to be familiar with Theda Bara’s barely there Cleopatra, but such costuming was not that exceptional. Here’s Betty Blythe (right) in one of several risqué costumes from *Queen*

of Sheba, another of the many lost films of the 1920s. Betty joked that all 28 of her “costumes” for the film could fit in a single shoe box.



Betty Blythe as the *Queen of Sheba*. Fox Studios, 1921.

Such costumes, or lack thereof, and many additional Hollywood scandals brought down condemnation from religious, civic, and political organizations on film makers. “Right thinking” leaders had always suspected the movies were immoral and called for broader controls than could be exercised by state censorship boards. Thus the Hays Code was born to help govern what could be said and portrayed in films.

Nudity in any form was definitely out, as were a number of other things. Movies were told they had to change or go and by 1934, when certificates began to be required for each film, changes had occurred. They would pretty much remain in place until the end of the 1950s.

Films of the 1930s became a major fashion influencer in America. The designs coming out of Paris were no longer viewed as new and exciting. Even a Chanel gown was considered too tame, too much the same, to be worth the extreme cost of acquiring one. When Sam Goldwyn went to the expense of securing Chanel’s couture line for three films in 1931 with the expectation that the designer’s name would be a draw to audiences it was basically a million dollars down the drain. Coco’s understated designs just weren’t different enough from “normal” American designs for audiences to care, particularly when they were paired with mediocre scripts.

Before the 1930's there was a separation between star wardrobe – which was not suitable for regular wear – and practical, street worthy designs worn and modeled for fan magazines by “extra girls”. In the 1930's anything worn on the screen became acceptable in real life, provided you could afford it – or afford to buy or sew a copy of it. Greta Garbo was a top fashion icon, but Carole Lombard, the young Joan Crawford, Jean Harlow and others also had many fans.

Basic 1930s dresses had returned to designs that celebrated the modest female figure. At the top of the decade, women wore dresses that included butterfly sleeves, puffed sleeves, and angular shoulders which gave the illusion of a smaller waist. Fabric was expensive and eventually rationed, so skirts were slim though the hips, though some had a subtle high-low hemline to add motion and volume, or had pleats in the lower part for similar reasons. This basic esthetic held until near the end of the decade when undergarments began to dramatically change shape after the introduction of bra cup sizes in 1935.

Most daywear at this time was designed to fall at calf length, with floor length only for formalwear. The bias cut which started to revive at the end of the 1920s was heavily used, and for the cost conscious, panels of fabric would be pieced together to convey a similar flowing bias cut while using less fabric than the traditional method. This was also the time when

zippers, finally cheaper than using buttons, became a staple in women's garments, allowing a new way to get a closer fit.

Boleros and coats were another notable trend. They offered a way to add shoulder detailing to an ensemble and provide stylish warmth on a night out. Since they tended to have few or no closures they were easy to put on and take off.

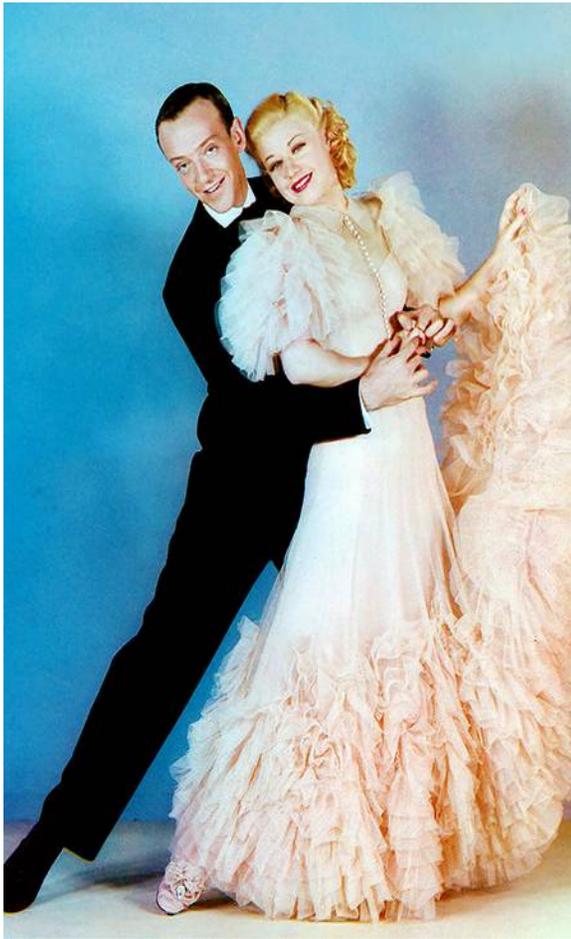
One of the most unusual trends to come out of Hollywood at this time was

what I have sometimes heard called “naked” dressing. Part of the appearance of nudity was due to the use of the popular bias cut for fabric. Another reason was that frugality was apparently set aside when it came to evening dress. Silk-satin, sateen and silk-rayon blends were thicker, shinier fabrics than the lighter, floating silks of the 20s. Solid colors were extremely popular and when cut on the bias draped beautifully, wrinkled little, and clung to the body like paint.



Photoplay Magazine, January 1932

Another contributor to the “naked” look was the prevailing skin-toned color palette. Beige, peach, pastel yellow, shades of rose and pink, as well as tan were popular and basic white and ivory were everywhere as a year round color in garments. The movies, of course, were only in black and white at this time though the costumes were made in various colors. You couldn’t show skin, but there were no rules in the Hays Code about revealing shapes.



Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers. *Swing Time*. RKO, 1936.

Let’s start at the top of the decade with the famous “Letty Lynton” dress designed by Adrian. Worn by Joan Crawford, it was from the now embargoed 1932 movie of the same name. You can see in the photo below that it is far from “naked, but it *was* the first dress in American movies that everyone wanted to wear. It was also a rare influential design that was decidedly different from the usual 1930s slim silhouette.



Joan Crawford. *Letty Lynton*. MGM publicity photo, 1932.

Unfortunately the actual gown no longer seems to exist. Many researchers have tried to locate the original costume but none have been able to. Christine Gledhill mentions in her book *Stardom: Industry of Desire* that the Smithsonian had a copy that traveled in their 1986 ‘Hollywood: Legend and Reality’ show, but it’s also possible that what was exhibited there were just the George Hurrell photos of the gown.

It difficult to locate *any* documented “ruffle dress” copies today and the reported numbers sold are usually considered studio hype. Costumers may want to consider whether to replicate it for 2025 when the movie should finally come out of copyright limbo and become legally available again.

Macy’s department store reportedly copied the dress for their *Cinema Shop*. By late summer of 1932 they claimed to have sold in excess of 15,000 copies of their \$10.00 version. Whether they actually sold the entire half million copies sometimes supposed to have been made is not known, but the dress did start a fad, and you will see other stars wearing similar gowns in later films all through the decade (far left).

Remember, this is the depression, and not everyone can afford to buy this dress from Macy’s. In fact, advertisements of copies in most cases show illustrations of various dresses that took inspiration from the film, but do not actually conform to the original Adrian design. In fact, Adrian was known to purposely design so as to make it difficult to make ready-to-wear copies.

I was unable to locate a Macy's ad for the dress, but the one below from Sears shows what it looked like in several less exclusive versions. Those are all much more body conscious than the original even in the silk and organdy \$5.98 option.



Sears catalog 1933-1934.



Patterns from the time have something like Letty sleeves.

For the home sewer, there were patterns for a version of the dress and for just the top. They all have something like those sleeves, but not much else to match the original.

While the Letty dress did set a style for poofy sleeves that lasted in one form or another for much of the decade, the normal evening gown did not have either the poof or the wide skirt. A much more usual selection can be seen in this set of 1932 photos of some of Carole Lombard's new summer outfits - note the ratio of evening gowns to daywear. The second from the right was described as having been made from "flesh satin". The third is matte white crepe embroidered with diamante circles.

All in all, Carole's choices are rather conservative for Hollywood at the time, but these are for her private wardrobe. What was she wearing in films? At right is a

promotional portrait from 1934 of Carole in a Travis Banton silk charmeuse creation. It still gives the impression of modesty, but reveals quite a lot for the interested viewer.



Carole Lombard. Paramount publicity photo, 1934.



Modern Screen Magazine, June 1932.

Lombard is actually showing a lot less skin during the 1930s than she did in the 20s before she became a star. Let's take a look at someone who is a bit less conservative – the marvelous Jean Harlow.



Jean Harlow from *Dinner at Eight*. MGM Studios, 1933.



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Jean was usually cast as the “naughty” girl so her gowns tend to reflect that image by pushing the envelope. This ivory satin Adrian gown from the 1933 production *Dinner at Eight* not only unmistakably demonstrates her figure, but also documents the scandalous beginnings of backless gowns to come. Take a look at nice matron Billie Burke's reaction to the news that Jean's character doesn't dare “expose” her delicate skin.

While this may be one of the best known of Jean's daring gowns, you can see others in



Reckless. MGM promotional photo, 1935.

Reckless (1935), *Saratoga* (1937) and many other films. Edith Head always claimed she was the one to put Jean Harlow in bias-cut satin for the first time in 1929 and that set the tone ever afterward. A Harlow film always had at least one clingy bias cut dress. And according to Jean – no undies ever!

But even “nice” girls could be expected to dress revealingly in the movies during the 1930's. Ginger Rogers played across both sides of the line in her career but most of the girls she played when working with Fred Astaire were nice ones. Here she is as entertainer Sherry Martin in 1936's *Follow the Fleet*.



Saratoga. MGM promotional photo, 1937.

This is a dress from Sherry's personal wardrobe (below). She will use it to wreak revenge on Fred. He's obviously doomed! Notice how Bernard Newman keeps the top half of the gown slim, but not too snug and uses pleats across the thighs to create room for her to dance. The lobby cards show it as rose pink in color. This dress could have been worn by any nice girl at the time, or even today.



Follow the Fleet. Promotional photo. RKO, 1936.



Follow the Fleet. Promotional photos. RKO, 1936

Compare it with another dress from Sherry's performance wardrobe (above). This one seems much more demure, until you realize you can see right through it and it clings like Velcro. The dress was beaded in ice blue, but it photographs to match her skin tone in black and white.

To discover which of these is closer to the authentic Rogers style, look at the number used in the "I Won't Dance" sequence from *Roberta*. In her memoir *Ginger: My Story* she said, "The gold lamé dress I wore for the "I Won't Dance" number was a dress I had bought while in New York as part of my trousseau. That was the first time I ever wore a personal dress in a motion picture, and it was probably because Bernard Newman had designed it." A clinging, v-necked gold lame gown and matching scarf with floor length bugle-beaded streamers is the authentic Ginger.



Roberta. Promotional photo. RKO, 1936.



Envelopes. Hollywood Pattern Co. Late 1930s.



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No Man of Her Own. Fitting photo.. Paramount, 1932.

Styles at home and available in stores are still much tamer than these. The popular Hollywood Pattern line offered some “Ginger Rogers” styles, but I only found a single evening gown (top, left) and it had little in common with the dresses she wears in the movies. It appears to be a pattern representing the transition from modest coverage to something more daring by offering an optional bolero – a popular evening wrap of the time – to cover the daring and baring halter top.



Lot 25. Debbie Reynolds Auction. Profiles in History.

Carole Lombard, on the other hand, seems to have a better alignment between her Hollywood Pattern releases and her image. Above is another of Carole’s gowns from her role as a librarian in *No Man of Her Own* (1932). The film is all fantasy. I’d really hate to shelve books in that dress.

The existing Travis Banton gown from the film accords pretty well with the elegant pattern offered in her name (left). They share the same batwing sleeve. The bias cut skirt is similar, but the pattern skirt is pieced to make more economical use of fabric.

Marlene Dietrich, who would become famous for her use of designer Jean Louis' transparent soufflé dresses in the 1950s, had her own version of escapist dressing. Very few people would have tried to copy Marlene. She was unique and her styles, influenced by German Expressionist film, were usually much too theatrical for anyone else to carry off.

Here she is in a 1932 promotional portrait for *Blonde Venus*. The photographer cleverly posed her to mimic the armless Venus de Milo statue, an idea that appeared in the film's posters. The costume designer, an uncredited Travis Banton, also used color differences to suggest a non-existent nudity above the draped skirt in the black and white photo which echoes the sculpture.

The austerity of WW II with its system of clothing rationing put an end to the escapism of 1930s cinema. When everyone was wearing shirtwaist dresses for all occasions, except the rare ones that were extremely formal, no one was interested in exaggerated art deco dreams. Body hugging slimness was gradually replaced by shorter, fuller skirts with a tightly belted waist. The favored colors became jewel tones.

Fun Fact

Aside from looking beautiful on screen, with the advent of the "talkies," soft, flowing fabrics like chiffon, lamé and satin were often used because they didn't make a distracting noise that microphone might pick up.

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, Hollywood film production rebounded but films took on a more realistic rather than escapist tone. Popular films in the new mode had no place for the old 1930's glamour; instead it was replaced by war propaganda, adventure films, mystery and horror films, and the beginnings of film noir. For



Blonde Venus. Promotional portrait. Paramount, 1932.

comedies you had Abbott & Costello, Hepburn & Tracy and the Hope/Crosby road pictures, but Kate Hepburn and Dorothy Lamour were no longer working with the same type of leading roles and costume designs as the sleek and sexy sirens of the 1930s.

Further reading

“When Hollywood Glamour Was Sold at the Local Department Store” by Celia Reyer smithsonian.com, February 23, 2017.

Hollywood Before Glamour: Fashion in American Silent Film by M. Tolini Finamore, Palgrave, 2013.

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Hollywood and History: Costume Design in Film by Edward Maeder, Alicia Annas, Satch Lavalley, Elois Jenssen and Earl A. Powell, Thames and Hudson, 1990.

Possessing & Preserving Iconic Film Culture: How Fashion, Fans, and Money Keep Costumes Alive by Sarah Suzanne Bellet, Thesis, New York University, 2016.

Stardom: Industry of Desire edited by Christine Gledhill, Routledge, 1991.

Kathe Gust enjoys creating clothing for many historical periods, and for various sci-fi and fantasy genres. Visit her [website](#) to read articles and see photos for some of her costuming projects.