

Garbo: Portraits from Her Private Collection

Robert Dance

Scott Reisfield

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A coffee table-sized shrine dedicated to the memory and glamour of actress Greta Garbo, this splendid collection of her portraits re-introduces a strikingly beautiful woman on the centennial of her birth in 1905.

Garbo had two leading roles in European films before coming to America in 1925, having signed a contract with Louis B. Mayer of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. During the next sixteen years, she starred in twenty-four films, becoming “the world’s most famous (and highest paid) actress.” Unlike her co-star and lover, John Gilbert, she readily made the transition from silent to talking movies. Garbo was famous for her “supercharged eroticism bathed in a languid sensuality.” This image was cultivated by MGM’s publicity department, which arranged for a continuing stream of portraits and photos that helped her to enter Hollywood’s pantheon. She posed for a number of photographers, including Edward Steichen and Cecil Beaton. The pictures appeared in many magazines, often on the cover.

From the beginning of her spectacularly successful career in the United States, Garbo understood the contribution the photographs made to keeping her in the public eye. Accordingly, she insisted on receiving a copy of each one, thus accumulating an unusual record of her development. Garbo willed the pictures to the family of author Reisfield, her great-nephew, who now shares them with readers of this superb volume. Reisfield has also written an essay in which he lovingly describes his relationship with his great-aunt, known to him as “Kata.” He was born long after Garbo made her last film in 1941, and it wasn’t until he was a teenager that he learned who she was. After she died in 1990, he systematically sought information about her, using the fruits of his research to present here detailed material about her early studies and acting in Sweden, prior to her arrival in Hollywood.

The book also includes a second essay by Dance, an art dealer who is interested in the history of silent films. He is the co-author of a book about Ruth Harriet Louise, a skilled portrait photographer who took pictures of Garbo during her early years in Hollywood. Dance focuses on Garbo’s movies and on the photographers who used their portrait cameras to make the shots that sustained her fame. Dance also discusses Garbo’s reclusive life after she stopped making films in 1941.

As interesting as the narratives by Reisfield and Dance are, the major importance of this book is the remarkable collection of photos that grace its pages and recall an era when the beauty and talent of a star like Greta Garbo commanded the highest recognition—deservedly so!

MORTON I. TEICHER (August 18, 2009)

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