I have noticed when people come to know the National Portrait Gallery and its mission of representing remarkable men and women in our nation’s history, they are often surprised by the range of lives we present to our many publics. The fact that we as a people have set aside a place to remember and encounter Americans of unmistakable impact on our history suggests to many a pantheon of what I might call obvious greatness: the roll call of Presidents, generals, artists, and scientists who have done so much to shape who we are. And may we always be a place where generations of Americans can get to know Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King and General John J. Pershing and Jane Addams and Ernest Hemingway.

But may we also be a place to reveal that greatness of spirit and accomplishment exists in all fields of human effort and aspiration. In fact, this issue of Profile will remind our readers of some of those wonderful other ways in which Americans have excelled. If we have one theme this time representing that larger diversity of achievement, it is that of the world of costume. Meet, for example, a woman known for her repeated trips to the podium at countless Oscar ceremonies, the determined and creative queen of Hollywood glamour fashion, Edith Head. And meet as well another self-invented dictator of fashion—the formidable Diana Vreeland—who made the transformation of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art the culmination of her career. And although it was not a career in fashion that puts Clyde Beatty, our “curator’s choice” in this issue, in the company of Head and Vreeland, we might at least say that he shared with them a talent for taming lions, literally, in his case.

So I hope you’re now convinced of the diversity and liveliness found in the company we keep at the National Portrait Gallery. And I hope as well that you will see how invaluable words—as well as images—are in portraying a life. When historian Amy Henderson tells us that “perhaps the key reason Edith Head succeeded was a supreme ability to make herself essential,” we “get” her temperament, her will to succeed. She is present in our minds. And the same happens when Frank Goodyear begins his article on Clyde Beatty with the animal trainer’s telling comment, “Our civilization places too high a valuation on the cute and cunning.” This is true portraiture. And it’s on display, along with wonderful images, in this stylish issue.

Marc Pachter
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Amy Henderson

Historian

She referred to her eight Oscars as “my children.” Nominated thirty-five times for the Academy Award for best costume design, Edith Head (1897–1981) was one of the most prolific and certainly one of the most celebrated movie designers from the 1930s to the 1970s. A pioneering woman in decades that encompassed both the heyday and the demise of Hollywood’s highly competitive studio system, Head flourished in that fluctuating atmosphere, proving herself perfectly capable of the kind of ruthlessness, arrogance, and self-promotion necessary for success.

But perhaps the key reason Edith Head succeeded was a supreme ability to make herself essential. Born in modest circumstances in San Bernardino, California, she once said of her childhood, “I didn’t have what you would call an artistic or cultural background. We lived in the desert and we had burros and jackrabbits and things like that.” Her initial career was as a Spanish teacher, but she also expressed a strong interest in design and studied at the Chouinard Art School in Los Angeles. In 1923 she answered an ad for “sketch artists” and was hired by Paramount Pictures’ head of costume design, Howard Greer. At the time, Paramount was one of the leading Hollywood studios, with a roster that included such silent-screen stars as Gloria Swanson and Clara Bow. Although Head only viewed these icons from the middle distance, she learned from Greer—and from his successor, Travis Banton—how crucial it was to establish a rapport between star and designer. “You have to have the patience of Job,” she once said.

In the studio, surrounded by starlight, she downplayed herself as “little Edith in dark glasses and the beige suit. That’s how I’ve survived.” In 1938 she became chief costume designer at Paramount—the first woman to hold such a lofty position—and always remembered the thirties as her favorite decade, when “the star was a star . . . [and] she wore real fur, real jewels.” Her job was to create fantasy, “to change people into something they weren’t—it was a cross between camouflage and magic.” Matinee audiences during the Depression and World War II were full of women who stood in line to see the latest fashions of their screen idols: “Then, a designer was as important as a star,” Head recalled. “Dress was part of the selling of a picture.”

Over the years, she worked her magic on such stars as Clara Bow, Mae West, Joan Crawford, Barbara Stanwyck, Ann Sheridan, Veronica Lake, Olivia de Haviland, Marlene Dietrich, Grace Kelly, and Elizabeth Taylor. She had a keen knack for visually transforming these actresses into whatever screen guise was required, whether in a period drama such as The Heiress, for which she won her first Academy Award, or an adventure film such as To Catch a Thief. “There isn’t anyone I can’t make over,” she pronounced. And her loyal clientele also knew, as Lucille Ball once put it, that “Edith doesn’t tell.”

She takes credit for two particular designs that became fashion crazes: the figure-loving sarong she invented for a slightly zaftig Dorothy Lamour in The
Jungle Princess (1936), and the toreador pants she designed to emphasize Audrey Hepburn’s gamine grace in both Sabrina (1954) and Funny Face (1957). But Head’s larger historical contribution was as part of the group of Hollywood designers, including Adrian at MGM and her Paramount predecessors Howard Greer and Travis Banton, who gave an American “look” to movies from the 1930s on. Until then, fashion had radiated from Paris to New York. But with the coming of war and after, the Paris–New York axis was disrupted, and because of the ubiquitous influence movies exercised in these years, Hollywood found itself in the vanguard of fashion’s Americanization.

New York runways, followed by department stores around the country, became dominated not by the formal chic of Chanel and Balenciaga but by clothes that reflected Southern California’s casual elegance—clothes first suggested by Hollywood designs for the silver screen in such films as All About Eve (1950) and A Place in the Sun (1951), both of which earned Head Oscars for best costume design. Her scrapbooks of the period are glued to the margins with newspaper and magazine stories trumpeting the ascension of American fashion: “Paris Style Headquarters Moves to America/ America Now Sets the Style Pace!”

A catalyst for fashioning an American identity that strolled across movie screens and down Main Street, Head also proved herself a maven of market mastery. She built on her Hollywood celebrity to purvey her ideas about practical and simple design through a network of other commercial channels, writing articles for Photoplay magazine about how the average girl could dress like a star, licensing her name for Vogue pattern designs, and, beginning in 1948, appearing as a regular guest on Art Linkletter’s House Party, where she gave women in the audience practical advice about how to dress and generally improve their looks.

In 1967 Head moved from Paramount to Universal. She knew one of the reasons she was hired at that stage of her life—she was seventy that year—was that her high profile would bring the studio publicity. And it was a role she relished. An assistant remembered, “She’d hear the tour tram coming down the street, stick some pencils in her bun, and run to the doorway of her office so she could just ‘happen’ to be coming out when the tram went by. Heaven help you if you got in her way.” By the time she won her last Oscar, for The Sting in 1976, Edith Head had fashioned herself into as much of a celebrity icon as the stars she costumed. True, part of her achievement resulted from her willingness to ring her own bell. But most of all, her success came because she was a realist about life in the Hollywood dream factory: “You gotta give ’em what they want, kid. If you don’t, they’ll find somebody who will.”

Who’s Wearing the Pants?
The Transition from Knee-Breeches to Trousers

Linda Thrift
Administrator, Center for Electronic Research and Outreach Services

When Gilbert Stuart painted George Washington in the famous “Lansdowne” portrait (after the Marquis of Lansdowne, to whom it was given), he depicted Washington in the appropriate dress for the first President of the new republic. His black velvet suit, black silk stockings, and black shoes with silver buckles expressed a simple, somber elegance, in stark contrast to the colorful rococo embroidered silks and fur-trimmed cloaks of European monarchs. Yet the basic fashion elements—the coat, waistcoat, and knee-breeches—were the same for kings and Presidents alike. Breeches, known as “small-clothes” in the late 1700s, had reigned, with slight variation, as proper men’s attire for two centuries. However, even as Washington sat for his portrait in 1796, a revolution in men’s fashion was under way in Europe, with versions of long pants appearing that would eventually replace breeches in men’s suit clothes.

Trousers were not new to the late eighteenth century. In fact, various forms of tailored pants were worn throughout Western history. Draped clothes, however, were the mark of civilization to the ancient Egyptians, Assyrians, Greeks, and Romans. Trousers were regarded as barbarian, and the Romans at one time decreed the death penalty for wearing them. Throughout the middle ages, men of the ruling classes generally adopted classically inspired robes, cloaks, and tunics, while many of their laboring subjects wore loose trousers. Knee-breeches eventually replaced the short doublet and hose of the Tudor period, and before long, most men had at least one pair of breeches for church and special occasions. Forms of trousers, however, were still worn by sailors, artisans, and field laborers. “A frock and trousers, spade and hoe, will do for my remaining days,” wrote John Adams in 1774.

A number of influences converged in the transition from breeches to trousers. The Enlightenment teachings of John Locke and the tenets of Neoclassicism replaced rococo taste in the second half of the eighteenth century, making gaudy clothes inappropriate for serious men. The sobriety and simplicity of Protestantism influenced men’s dress, especially for the rising merchant and professional classes. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s romanticized emphasis on nature popularized hunting and sporting clothes for men and loose trousers for little boys. New fabrics, available through trade and industrialization, gave clothes more flexibility, and advances in the art of tailoring allowed for a better cut and more precise fit. Wool and broadcloth, which gave greater ease of movement, replaced heavy silk and velvet.

Politics and war also played a role in fashion trends. The baggy trousers of the French peasants, sans-culottes, were promoted during the French Revolution but soon gave way to a more elegant form of long pants called pantaloons. These were close-fitting tights shaped to the leg and ending at or just above the ankles. Both the English and French military adopted these stretchable tight pants to wear tucked inside boots, and the American military
followed suit in the first years of the nineteenth century.

From the 1790s to about 1815, pantaloons were the rage among the English dandies, led by George “Beau” Brummell, the arbiter of London fashion. The dandies’ clothes were plain and snug, restrained in color, and impeccably cut. Their style gave men’s costume a severity and simplicity still sought today.

Unlike pantaloons, trousers did not require a perfect body, but could still be tailored well enough to provide a classic line. Trousers of yellow nankeen (a type of cotton), cut to the ankles, became extremely popular daywear, but eventually dark trousers reaching to the shoe and held in place by instep straps became the mode. Ready-made suits appeared in the United States in the 1820s to meet the demands of the burgeoning middle class. By the time of the Marquis de Lafayette’s final American tour in 1824, trousers had generally replaced breeches except for very formal assemblies. Ary Scheffer’s famous portrait shows Lafayette in his dress of choice, including long trousers with instep straps.

As for the Presidents, political preferences may well have influenced their choice of pants. Republicans were often associated with pantaloons or trousers and Federalists with knee-breeches and buckled shoes. The Republican Thomas Jefferson reportedly wore trousers and adamantly refused to wear shoe buckles, replacing them with leather shoelaces instead. James Monroe, on the other hand, wore small-clothes until his death. Monroe’s wife enforced dress etiquette at presidential receptions, refusing admission to anyone not in breeches and silk hose.

Although the early Presidents may have worn the more modern pantaloons or trousers, they were not painted wearing them while in office. Even Jefferson was never painted in anything but breeches. Portraits of the early Presidents and the engravings from them, which were published for the general population, represented the presidency in the most proper attire for that high position. Republicans and Federalists were represented alike with minor differences—Monroe’s silver buckles for his breeches and shoes versus Jefferson’s plain breeches and leather shoelaces.

Andrew Jackson, who took office in 1829, was the first President to be portrayed in trousers while in office. As a military leader in the War of 1812, his uniform would have included pantaloons and Hessian boots. There is no known likeness of Jackson wearing breeches and no portrayal of a President in breeches since Jackson’s tenure. Breeches were eventually relegated to sportswear, developing into the knickerbockers of the 1870s. The trousers that developed in the early nineteenth century, with variations of fastenings, cuts, and fabrics, remain firmly entrenched in today’s fashion, some two centuries later.

Frederick S. Voss  
**SENIOR HISTORIAN**

What do actress Tallulah Bankhead and former President Jimmy Carter have in common? One plausible answer is that they were both southern-born. But another answer might stem from a shared maverick streak in matters of proper dress when posing for one’s portrait, and the evidence lies in likenesses of them found in the National Portrait Gallery’s own collections. The inimitable Tallulah Bankhead, with her husky drawl and insouciant wit, was the first of this convention-defying duo to chart an independent path. The year was 1930, and Bankhead’s appearances in a string of racy plays that often required her to appear on stage in a state of semi-undress had been scandalizing the more prudish segment of London’s theatergoers for some time. But outcries from would-be censors did nothing to chasten her behavior, and when it came to picking the garb for her portrait by the British painter Augustus John, it was no conventional streetwear for her. Instead, she opted for bedroom garb, posing for John in the short pink slip and transparent negligee that she had sported in her most recent stage hit, *He’s Mine.*

Carter’s break with the sartorial norms of portraiture was nothing so drastic as posing in one’s underwear. But he did lay claim to a fashion first in the annals of *Time* magazine cover portraits. Prior to Carter’s election to the presidency in November 1976, no President had ever appeared on the magazine’s cover in anything but traditional business dress, with the exception of a handful of cartoon caricatures. Soon after Carter’s victory, however, the wheels began turning to breach that pinstriped stuffiness. When artist Jamie Wyeth arrived at Carter’s home in Plains, Georgia, to paint his portrait for *Time*’s forthcoming Man of the Year cover, Carter’s populist distaste for pomp and pretension was already setting the tone for the projected likeness, and at its completion, the tieless, opened-collar likeness represented a groundbreaking departure in *Time*’s cover treatment of the nation’s Presidents.

So the question is: Did Bankhead in her slip and negligee and Carter in his denim jacket represent an unrepeated aberration in the world of fashion, or did they set off a trend? In Bankhead’s case, the answer is both yes and no. After her portrait appeared in an exhibition at London’s Royal Academy, there was admittedly no sudden race by women to pose for their likenesses in a state of semi-undress. On the other hand, maybe this is just an extreme instance of delayed reaction, for among the prized acquisitions in recent years at our sister museum, the National Portrait Gallery in London, is a portrait of another noted actress, Fiona Shaw, confronting the viewer in her underwear. The choice of garb may not be to everyone’s taste, and the more propriety-minded might even find it a bit offensive. Of one thing you can be sure, however: Bankhead would have heartily approved. As for Jimmy Carter, his tieless informality proved to have bipartisan appeal. Shortly after Ronald Reagan defeated Carter in 1980, it was soon clear that despite their political differences, Reagan was not above taking his fashion cues from Carter. When *Time* featured Reagan on its cover as 1980’s Man of the Year, he became the second President to appear in that featured spot sporting the opened-collar, denim look.
“Awake from the lethargy in which you lie bound . . . and once more march to Battle. . . . Pick your Whig flints and try your rifles again.” With those words, Kentucky’s Henry Clay rallied fellow Whigs to his presidential candidacy in June 1842. The actual election was not due to take place until 1844. But for Clay, who had been a force in American politics for three decades, the contest represented his last best chance to gain the presidency, and he was not about to squander the opportunity by being slow off the mark.

One of the early preparations for his campaign was the commissioning of a full-length portrait for the National Whig Club, suitable for translation into campaign prints and showing Clay amid symbolic evocations of his nationalistic Whig principles. The artist enlisted to make the likeness was Philadelphia painter John Neagle, who by mid-fall had arrived at Clay’s Lexington, Kentucky, home to start the sittings.

Among the National Portrait Gallery’s most exciting acquisitions this year is a pair of sketches offering a glimpse into the formative stages of the Whigs’ effort to sell their “Gallant Harry” to the electorate. Purchased with funds donated by members of the Gallery’s Director’s Circle, the images—one in oil, the other in pencil—occupy two sides of the same paper. The pencil drawing, dated “Friday/Nov. 4th 1842,” represents one of the artist’s first efforts to capture Clay’s facial features. Then, further into the sittings, Neagle used the other side of the paper to begin working out the final portrait’s overall composition.

By themselves, the two studies are intriguing evidence of portrait-making in its germinal phases, but they are also an enriching complement to two other pieces in the Gallery’s collection: Neagle’s bust portrait of Clay, completed not long after the pencil sketch, which was the prototype for the final full-length, and an engraving of the full-length showing Clay in all his rangy Whig glory. Unfortunately, this exercise in image packaging went for naught, and in 1844 Clay went down in defeat to James K. Polk.
Our civilization places too high a valuation on the cute and cunning,” observed animal trainer Clyde Beatty (1903–1965) in *The Big Cage*, his 1933 exposé about the art of working with lions, tigers, and other big animals. In explaining his preference for jungle-bred cats, Beatty described how an animal raised in captivity was simply a “spoiled child.” “Their cuteness is their undoing,” he philosophized. “Man puts his mark on them and they are ruined.”

This photograph features Beatty at New York’s Madison Square Garden during one of his first seasons with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus. In front of twenty-two lions and tigers, he poses for the photographer Edward J. Kelty inside the steel cage where he performed his eighteen-minute act twice a day. In one hand he holds a whip, in the other a chair and a blank-cartridge pistol. These items were used as much to enhance the theatricality of his performance as they were to keep the big cats at a distance. Beatty’s safety, in fact, rested more on his understanding of the behavior of these animals and his appreciation of their instinctive enmity.

Despite the precautions Beatty took, animal training remained a dangerous business. Throughout the years he estimated that he had been mauled more than a hundred times. Perhaps the most serious incident occurred during winter training in Peru, Indiana, in 1932 when a lion named Nero bit him on the leg and dragged him around the cage until he passed out. He remained in the hospital for ten weeks but recovered in time for the opening of the spring season. Beatty took a certain pride in the fact that he was the only member of his troupe who could not get life insurance.

Fascinated by the circus as a young child in rural Ohio, Beatty dropped out of high school during his freshman year to join a small regional outfit, where he performed as an acrobat. His aspiration, though, was to work with the big animals. Ever cognizant of the competitiveness of this business, he later wrote: “Early in my career as a trainer, I realized that if I wanted to make a real impression, I should have to do something that had never been done before. . . . I wanted to evolve an act so dangerous that I should not have to worry about being supplanted by some other trainer who was willing to work for a few dollars a week less. . . . [As such,] I set out to develop the riskiest act possible—an act so dangerous that no one would want to fill in for me if offered twice my salary.”

Beatty’s success brought him great popularity during the 1930s. He coauthored three books and starred in several Hollywood movies, including one with his old nemesis, Nero. Capitalizing on his drawing power, he established the first of several “Clyde Beatty” circuses in 1935 and traveled around the nation performing to enthusiastic audiences. In the spring of 1937 he was even featured on the cover of *Time* magazine, holding a lion cub in his arms. During an era marked by America’s most prolonged economic depression and the rise of new enemies abroad, Beatty was a charismatic figure whose sense of daring and showmanship both entertained the nation and reminded it of its citizens’ capacity for bold acts.

Diana Vreeland's (1903–1989) ability to predict and promote fashion trends made her one of the fashion leaders of the twentieth century. Eleanor Dwight's biography presents Vreeland as a psychologically complex, hard-working, attention-grabbing professional woman who dedicated her life to fitting in by standing out.

Born in Paris, Vreeland enjoyed a privileged upbringing. But she remembered, “All I knew was that my mother wasn’t proud of me. I was her ugly little monster.” This sense of rejection would plague Vreeland throughout her life. She took dance lessons, made a great effort to dress well, and was rewarded with popularity within her social set, including the attentions of Thomas Reed Vreeland, a dashing Yale graduate. They were married in 1924 and had two children. The couple embraced an extravagant lifestyle that included traveling abroad and living in London and Paris. This glamorous existence, driven in part by her lifelong need to “transform the ordinary and the flawed into the mesmerizingly beautiful,” eventually earned her mentions in Vogue, Harper’s Bazaar, and Town and Country. It also exhausted Vreeland’s various inheritances, making it necessary for her to find employment.

In 1936, Vreeland began working at Harper’s Bazaar in New York, writing a satirical fashion advice column entitled “Why Don’t You?” with such outlandish suggestions as, “Why don’t you rinse your blond child’s hair in dead champagne, as they do in France?” By 1939 she was a full-time fashion editor for Harper’s. After twenty-five years at Harper’s, Vogue recruited her as its editor-in-chief. Vreeland had a gift for recognizing changes in fashion as they were occurring and capturing them for her readers: “I know what they’re going to wear before they wear it.” She revolutionized magazine shoots by moving them to such exotic locales as Jordan and Thailand. After a trip to Morocco, Vreeland began wearing caftans, which were described in Vogue’s July 1966 issue as “the most becoming fashions ever invented.” Guided by her innovative ideas and great fashion sense, Vogue experienced a boom in circulation. Over time, however, Vreeland’s “living the moment” attitude resulted in budget overruns, a drop in advertising, and a 38 percent decrease in readership. By 1971 she had lost touch with the magazine’s readership and was fired from Vogue.

In 1972 Vreeland joined the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Costume Institute as a special consultant to help redefine the institute’s scholarly exhibitions as a “place for theatrical presentations to attract people and entertain them.” Always a fashionista rather than a historian, she blithely mixed objects from different time periods to make them look fashionable and current to the viewer. She continued to work, socialize, and travel well into her eighties.

Dwight is better at giving the reader a taste of Vreeland’s personality than at analyzing her great career successes. For instance, she details Vreeland’s landing of highly sought-after positions at Harper’s Bazaar and Vogue but does not explain how she does this. Dwight’s book is peppered with richly colored photographs of Vreeland and her family and friends, as well as of fashion shots. Although the range of illustrations is impressive, at times, images discussed at length are not illustrated.

Vreeland revolutionized the role of the editor at fashion magazines, changing it from reporting the fashions popular at the time to predicting trends for upcoming seasons. She also turned the Met’s Costume Institute into a highly visited and well-respected center known throughout the world. Yet Dwight’s book, filled with anecdotes, never fully explains Vreeland’s great impact on the fashion industry. Still, the book is an enjoyable read, filled with lively prose and appealing illustrations. It offers a reasonably well balanced, basic overview of Diana Vreeland’s life and career.

John Daniel Reaves

Terry Teachout’s The Skeptic—A Life of H. L. Mencken presents Mencken (1880–1956) as the liberating force in early twentieth-century American culture. It also displays the man’s ugly blemishes. The voice in Skeptic is one of devotion (Teachout, like Mencken, is a working journalist) and detachment. The result is a scholarly, balanced, and—because Teachout has a mind for concocting a good sentence—a very readable portrait.

Conformity, censorship, and Puritanism characterized the early twentieth century; the nation’s literature was sopped with the genteel tradition; and the country—before and between the great wars—produced a bunch of mountebanks. Such was the United States according to H. L. Mencken.

He found his calling early in life. It was the business of a debunker. As a journalist, columnist, and critic, Mencken inveighed against the shackles of conformity and censorship in American society.

Mencken was regarded also as the foremost critical advocate of the “lost generation,” who, in the words of F. Scott Fitzgerald, found after World War I “all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken.” Mencken also wrote The American Language, now recognized as the seminal linguistic work on English spoken and written in the United States.

Teachout argues that Mencken created an acceptance of a new American writing style and content. He notes that Mencken discovered Fitzgerald and introduced Theodore Dreiser, Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis (who became the first American to win the Nobel Prize in literature), Jack London, and Sherwood Anderson to American readers. In addition, he was the first editor to publish James Joyce in the United States. Mencken’s style was also a legacy to the next generation of writers. Teachout quotes Richard Wright as saying that Mencken’s use of “words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club” influenced him greatly as a youth of nineteen.

That said, Teachout points out that Mencken’s characterizations of Appalachian whites, southerners, blacks, his friends, his colleagues—including his longtime publisher, Alfred Knopf—and especially Jews are tainted with hurtful, caustic descriptions. Mencken’s diaries and private papers were released from their time seals in the latter part of the twentieth century and caused an uproar.

Although Teachout provides a good summary of views of both detractors and defenders, Skeptic is tentative about the context for appraising Mencken’s words. Does one judge him by the standards of his own contemporaries or by the rather flashpoint standards of today, whenever that “today” may be?

H. L. Mencken by Al Hirschfeld, 1949

We live now in the era of the Holocaust horror. Words that resonate with a quick, profound sting today registered less starkly in Mencken’s time. As Teachout points out, the Ivy League schools had Jewish admission quotas, and the Metropolitan Opera would not sell box seats to Jews. Even its board chairman could buy only an orchestra seat during his entire tenure because “he was a Jew,” even though he was baptized an Episcopalian.

One must add that it was a time also when words that would be regarded today as condemning were tossed about, presumably, as “sophisticated” humor without guile. Presumably. Lillian Ross’s The Fun of It reprints New Yorker “Talk of the Town” columns of the period. One introduced readers to the new musical sensation and prodigy of the 1930s, Marian Anderson, with the comment that she had made her debut in South Philadelphia “with another pickaninny.”

Teachout was perhaps too enmeshed in the materials to see and acknowledge fully the contribution that H. L. Mencken made to the researcher: a cache of accessible candor. He made public by the terms of his will correspondence with his wife, Sara Haardt; letters of a former lover, Marion Bloom; his diaries; and multivolume typescripts that were receptacles for “all his fears and hatreds and prejudices.” One must wonder—in our image-crazed, reputation-obsessed culture—if anyone of Mencken’s stature will have the guts to do the same?

John Daniel Reaves is a Washington, D.C., attorney, author, and performer of the one-man show “H. L. Mencken: Reveries of an Iconoclast.”
Margaret Christman

Isaac M. Singer (1811–1875), the inventor of the first practical sewing machine—a key component in the development of the ready-made clothing industry—helped set the stage for bringing fashion, by the early twentieth century, within the reach of all classes. Americans would become so well dressed that socialist Michael Harrington found an explanation for the invisibility of the poor in the clothes they were able to buy. “Even people with terribly depressed incomes can look prosperous,” he wrote in his 1962 polemic, *The Other America*. “There are tens of thousands of Americans who are wearing perhaps even a stylishly cut suit or dress, and yet are hungry.”

Robust capitalist Isaac M. Singer had been one of the visible poor in mid-nineteenth-century America. Manager of a failed acting troupe and in search of an invention that would make him rich, Singer was described as “wretchedly poor, out at the elbows, without money or credit with a large family to support.” He scrambled to buy food, and “his children ran about the streets in patched garments.”

For nineteen years, Singer had pursued a theatrical career, performing in Shakespearean tragedies and temperance plays. Richard III was one of his favorite roles, and even after he had become a rich and famous inventor and manufacturer, he spoke wistfully of having been “a good Richard, one of the best of his age.” His innate genius—and he was a man of almost no education or training—was not as an actor but as a mechanic, a line of work he turned to when he was in need of money. He invented a rock-drilling machine in 1839 and in 1849 patented a machine for carving metal or wood type, for which he found no buyers. When it was suggested he turn his attention toward perfecting a machine that could sew (Elias Howe had patented one in 1846, but it never could be made to work very well), Singer’s initial response was, “You want to do away with the only thing that keeps women quiet, their sewing.” But he made a sketch of the “devilish machine” and, according to his own account, worked nearly round the clock to build a model in just eleven days. “The perfect machine,” Singer advertised, “will be constructed and adapted to perform any kind of work from the stitching of a fine shirt-bosom to a ship’s sail, as well as some descriptions of leather.” He received his patent in 1851.

Singer took as a partner lawyer Edward Clark, who successfully ended the “Sewing Machine War”—the constant litigation over conflicting patent claims brought by Elias Howe and a half-dozen others—by winning agreement for a patent pool. Clark’s marketing talents nicely complemented Singer’s mechanical talents, and by 1867 the staid Clark, in tandem with the flamboyant Singer, brought the Singer Manufacturing Company to worldwide dominance.

Singer’s colorful personal life encompassed a wife, a common-law wife, and several mistresses (simultaneously), a second wife, and two dozen children, of whom he was very fond. Suffice it to say that in search of social acceptance and for the good of his company, which prided itself on “an aura of solidity and respectability,” Singer spent his retirement years in Europe. He was painted in Paris in 1869, dressed not in the look-alike black suits of the business world, but in one of his custom-made party coats, a resplendent garment of velvet lined with satin. “When dressed in his party attire, he was to us children magnificent,” one of his neighbors recalled. “It had a striking effect but it seemed to suit him and looked quite in order.” And so we see the man, who as much as any other, made possible the democratization of clothing, dressing to suit himself.

NATIONAL

Lansdowne Tour
Minneapolis, Minnesota
The Minneapolis Institute of Arts
Featuring the famous “Lansdowne” full-length portrait of George Washington by Gilbert Stuart, “George Washington: A National Treasure” is currently on view at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts through November 30. The National Portrait Gallery was able to purchase this major icon of the nation’s first President through the generosity of the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation, which also provided funding for its tour to museums across the country.

Santa Fe, New Mexico
Museum of Fine Arts
To commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of ARTnews magazine, the Gallery has organized the traveling exhibition “Portraits of the Art World: A Century of ARTnews Photographs.” Included are portraits by a broad cross-section of photographers, ranging from Zaida Ben-Yusuf and Alice Boughton to contemporary masters Cindy Sherman, Arnold Newman, and Robert Mapplethorpe. Among the individuals pictured are John Singer Sargent, Pablo Picasso, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Louise Nevelson. The four-city tour is nationally sponsored by AXA Art Insurance Corporation. The exhibition is on view in Santa Fe through January 4, 2004; this is its final venue.

See other exhibition-related web pages at www.npg.si.edu.

A Brush with History

After three years of touring the nation, the National Portrait Gallery’s exhibition “A Brush with History” returns to Washington for its final viewing. Highlighting seventy paintings from the Gallery’s permanent collection, the exhibition will be shown at the Smithsonian’s International Gallery at the S. Dillon Ripley Center from November 14, 2003, through February 8, 2004. The exhibition will be accompanied by a new wireless audiovisual tour and a video on the art of portraiture. Sponsored in part by A&E Network. Navip@ss tour equipment and software provided courtesy of Soundtrack Productions, Inc., Miami, Florida.

Frederick Douglass by an unidentified artist, c. 1844
Sequoyah by Henry Inman after Charles Bird King, c. 1830
T. S. Eliot by Sir Gerald Kelly, 1962, gift of the National Portrait Gallery Commission and senior staff in memory of Donald P. Klopfner and Gallery purchase
Martha Graham by Paul Meltsner, c. 1940
NPG Information

Portrait of a Nation
Tour Itinerary

For information on available bookings, contact the Department of Exhibitions and Collections Management at (202) 275-1777; fax: (202) 275-1897, or e-mail NPGEExhibitions@si.edu

A Brush with History
Final venue: International Gallery, S. Dillon Ripley Center, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
November 14, 2003–February 8, 2004

Eye Contact:
Modern American Portrait Drawings
Final venue: International Gallery, S. Dillon Ripley Center, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
April 9–July 25, 2004

Portraits of the Presidents
Final venue: International Gallery, S. Dillon Ripley Center, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
September 24, 2004–January 23, 2005

Women of Our Time:
Twentieth-Century Photographs
Mobile Museum of Art, Alabama
August 8–October 5, 2003
Blackhawk Museum, Danville, California
November 14–January 11, 2004

Additional venues include:
Long Beach Museum of Art, California;
North Carolina Museum of History, Raleigh;
George Bush Presidential Library & Museum, College Station, Texas

Useful Contacts

The Gallery’s mailing address is P.O. Box 37012, MRC 973, Washington, DC 20013–7012.
The main telephone number is (202) 275-1738.

Catalog of American Portraits
Phone: (202) 275-1840
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Conservation consultations are available for the public on Thursdays from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. by appointment only.
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“Oomph Girl” Ann Sheridan was one of the many screen actresses whose image Hollywood costume designer Edith Head helped to shape. For more about Head’s place in filmdom’s “glamour mill,” see the article on page 4.
Portrait Puzzlers: You Are What You Wear

Instead of faces, the visual clues in this installment of Portrait Puzzlers are sartorial.

1. This Spanish-American War officer had his uniform tailor-made at Brooks Brothers and then charged it.

2. This entertainer took Paris by storm in the 1920s, sporting a skirt consisting of a string of bananas.

3. When Lyndon Johnson complained that her trademark brood-brimmed hat made it hard for him to kiss her, this Washington wit and presidential daughter said, “That’s why I wear it.”

4. He may have worn number three on his back, but for many a baseball fan he was number one.

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