

Givenchy's Red Carpet Legacy

A historian notes how Hollywood style stems from the designer's 'marriage' to Audrey Hepburn By Bronwyn Cosgrave

On March 10, French master of the little black dress **Hubert de Givenchy** died at the age of 91. But his partnership with **Audrey Hepburn** throughout the 1950s and '60s forged a bond between Hollywood and haute couture that lives on.

That legacy was front and center this awards season. Long black dresses — evocative of the dark, languorous Givenchy gown that Hepburn, as Holly Golightly, wears in the opening scene of her best-known film, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* — dominated the run-up to the Oscars as the formal garb of Time's Up. The protest movement's sartorial ethos also resonates with Hepburn's decision to exclusively wear Givenchy onscreen and at the Oscars through much of her career. After she visited Givenchy's Paris atelier in 1953 — to secure him as her designer for *Sabrina* — she considered his designs to be her uniform. "I felt so good in his clothes," she once said.

Before Hepburn and Givenchy worked together, Hollywood's relationship with the French fashion industry had proved fractious. For three of his 1930s productions, **Samuel Goldwyn** paid **Coco Chanel** \$1 million to create costumes. After working with **Gloria Swanson** on 1931's *Tonight or Never*, she severed her relationship with the studio. Swanson became pregnant during her fittings, although she never let on. "Lose 5 pounds!" Chanel demanded. That never happened. As for the expansive atelier Goldwyn set up for Chanel on his studio lot, she visited it once.

Hepburn's breakthrough in Hollywood was partly due to her fresh image. Her unusually slight frame was a contrast to pinups like **Betty Grable** and **Marilyn Monroe** who dominated the box office at the time. She humanized couture, which was an elevated

level of fashion the average woman had never aspired to wear until she came along. And as she proved the ideal muse for Givenchy, he shook up the traditions of his craft by conceiving

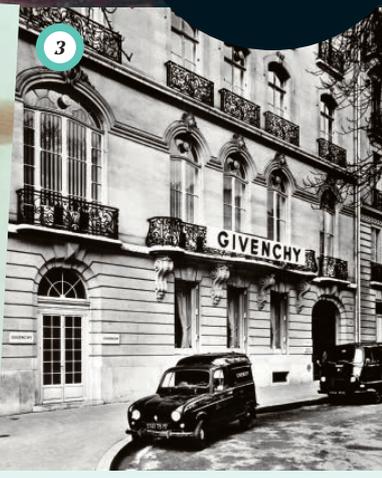


1 Hepburn in a 1958 fitting with designer Givenchy at his Paris atelier. 2 The designer and his muse in 1983. 3 The 1970 facade of the French fashion house, which was founded in 1952.

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a more youthful mode, interpreting the free-spirited creativity enveloping his artsy, Left Bank Paris domain.

Unlike some of his fashion forerunners who had worked on costume pictures, Givenchy also put up with the petty frustrations of working with some egotistical costume



Head

designers. He never commented publicly on **Edith Head** accepting the best costume design Oscar for what was much of his work on *Sabrina*. (Truth be told, Head was capable of making gowns for

Hepburn, and dressed her when she won the best actress Oscar for 1954's *Roman Holiday*.)

Above all, a wide range of women looked to Hepburn's Givenchy gowns for fashion direction. Growing up in L.A., an adolescent **Cher** studied Hepburn and Givenchy's partnership. When she hit it big in the late 1960s, she found her Givenchy in **Bob Mackie**. Looking back on winning her Oscar for *Moonstruck*, Cher said:

"The biggest thing in my life was winning that award. The second biggest thing was shaking hands with **Audrey Hepburn** and having her say, 'I'm so happy you won.'"

It was 1988 and by then, **Giorgio Armani** was scouting Hollywood for muses, which he first found in **Michelle Pfeiffer**. Ultimately, Armani modeled his business of celebrity for red carpet dressing on the old studio system, enlisting a stable of talent, rather than just one star, to represent his work. Today, most luxury brands do the same, contractually enlisting celebrities to advertise their designs.

There was never a contract between Givenchy and Hepburn. Hepburn also paid for the Givenchy couture she wore offscreen. From 1956, a clause in her film contracts stipulated that Givenchy produce costumes for all of her contemporary movies. Givenchy once referred to their relationship as a "marriage" and also reflected, "She remained absolutely, unbelievably loyal to me."



↓ Hepburn in Givenchy in 1954's *Sabrina*, for which Head won the Oscar.