

How Imelda Marcos, the Wife of a Filipino Dictator, Became an Icon of '80s Excess

A new documentary makes it clear: It was more than just the shoes.

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It was the 1980s and Imelda Marcos, wife of Philippines' dictator Ferdinand Marcos, was in New York City to do some holiday shopping. "One day, Madame Marcos said to me, 'I want you to go with me to Cartier, I want to pick out some Christmas presents,'" her friend, Nikki Haskell, recalls to *T&C*. "She said, 'Please come to the hotel.'"

Although the Marcoses owned a lavishly-appointed townhouse on East 66th Street, Imelda used that mansion only for parties. When visiting the city, she preferred to stay at the Waldorf Astoria.

"I got to the hotel, and she has one of these big, huge suites," Haskell says. Wrapped around the carved wooden headboard of Imelda's king size bed, "there were 100 strands of 30-millimeter pearls that went from black to white, in every shade. I said, 'Madame Marcos, why do you have all those pearls on the bed?' And she said, 'It brings me good luck.'"

Those pearls seems to have worked—at least in part. Marcos—who was famous for her high-flying lifestyle, endless socializing, and taste for designer clothes—spent more than two decades as the First Lady of the Philippines, during which time she and her husband **are said** to have illegally amassed a fortune of close to \$10 billion. Her luck changed in 1986, when a revolution in the Philippines forced the Marcoses into exile in Hawaii.

Ferdinand died in 1989, and Imelda was allowed back into the country—where she proceeded to win four elections to the House of Representatives, though the years since have also been marked by a series of lawsuits and convictions on corruption charges. The recent political resurgence of her family in the Philippines (her son Bong Bong Marcos is currently contesting a loss in the country's 2016 vice presidential election) suggests her fortunes may once again be on the upswing.



Imelda Marcos locking eyes with Prince Charles at the 1972 ceremony marking the Coronation of the King of Nepal. NIK WHEELERGETTY IMAGES

Now 90, Imelda is the subject of *The Kingmaker*, a new documentary which traces her journey from beauty pageant winner to first lady and now matriarch of a powerful political dynasty. The film, which opens November 8, it is the work of filmmaker Lauren Greenfield, whose previous explorations of over-privilege include *The Queen of Versailles* and *Generation Wealth*.

For many, Imelda will forever be known as the ostentatious dictator's wife whose dressing room—when it was overrun by revolutionaries in 1986—was found to contain 1,200 pairs of shoes. Her fall at home came at the peak of her fame overseas, where she liked to portray herself as an intimate of movie stars, heads of state, and even the Pope. One of the most fascinating parts of the documentary is how, despite the political turmoil the Marcos regime brought about, Imelda became a regular on the international party circuit, spending time with royals, titans of industry, movie stars, and more. Something about the dictator's wife seemed to make her an irresistible companion for some of the world's most visible personalities.

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Haskell met Imelda around 1981 at a party to promote the nascent Manila Film Festival at the Carlton Hotel in Cannes. The event was organized by Ira von Furstenberg, a glittering international socialite with the jet-set connections that Imelda so desperately craved.



Imelda Marcos, Nancy Reagan, Ferdinand Marcos, and President Ronald Reagan in Washington, D.C. in 1982. HISTORICALGETTY IMAGES

Not only was Ira daughter to a German noble and, on her mother's side, the niece of Fiat chairman Gianni Agnelli, but she was also a sister-in-law of New York designer Diane von Furstenberg through her brother, Prince Egon. She was also close to the Italian designer Valentino Gravani, whom she advised on public relations, and a rumored paramour of Monaco's widowed Prince Rainier III.

Imelda's appearance at Ira's party was emblematic of her evolving social status. Until then, Imelda suffered from a reputation on the international circuit as an unwelcome arriviste. U.S. diplomatic cables published by Wikileaks note how she "invited herself" to the inauguration of President Richard Nixon, as well as the dedication of the Sydney Opera House in Australia, where she "made an effort to upstage" Queen Elizabeth II.

Imelda may have grown up the sixth child of an obscure Manila lawyer, but through well-funded social climbing exercises like the party in Cannes, she was soon rubbing her signature butterfly sleeves with the Western elite.



Andy Warhol and Imelda Marcos in 1976. RON GALELLAGETTY IMAGES

In New York, Gloria Vanderbilt visited Imelda's townhouse to look at her jewels. At the Waldorf, she attended parties with the Queen of Thailand, Paloma Picasso, and Clare Boothe Luce. Malcolm Forbes threw her a bash

on his yacht, where guests included Lee Radziwill and Andy Warhol, who recorded in his diary that she sang 12 songs after dinner.

“Everybody said that once Imelda gets started partying, you can’t stop her, that she’s always the last to leave,” Warhol wrote. “And it’s true.”

Warhol also attended the state dinner President and Nancy Reagan threw the Marcoses in the White House garden. There, guests included Oscar de la Renta, Arlene Dahl, the count and countess de Romanones of Spain, Margot Fonteyn, John and Patricia Kluge, Diane Sawyer, and Jerry Zipkin. That night, Warhol told a *Washington Post* party reporter it was the “best thing I have ever been to in my life.”

Imelda’s jet-setting didn’t impress everyone, however. Critics likened her to the late Argentine first lady, Eva Peron, who had been the international face of her husband’s fascist regime. “She didn’t like being compared to Eva Peron at all,” says Haskell. “And she wasn’t too thrilled about the ‘Iron Butterfly’ nickname, either.”

Imelda felt that Jacqueline Kennedy was a more apt comparison. Her biographer, Katherine Ellison, tells *T&C*: “When Marcos was elected in 1965, they consciously styled themselves after the Kennedys. They were going to be the Philippines’ Camelot, and she was going to be Jackie.”

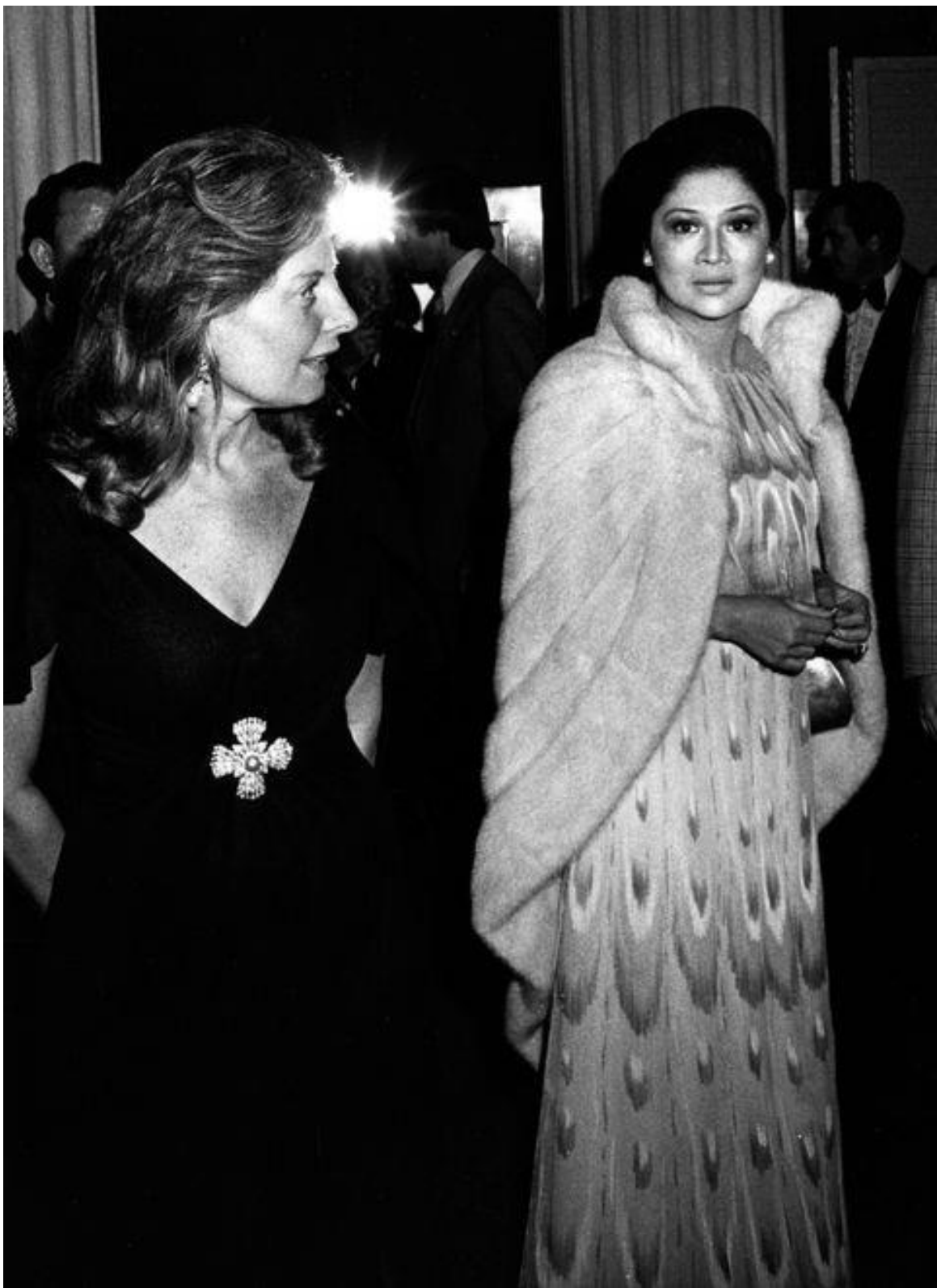


Marla Maples, Joey Adams, Donald Trump, and Imelda Marcos in 1991. TIME & LIFE PICTURESGETTY IMAGES

In addition to writing *Imelda: Steel Butterfly of the Philippines*, Ellison shared a 1986 Pulitzer Prize for her work tracing billions of dollars the Marcoses are accused of looting from their country. That money allegedly went to fund multiple New York real estate purchases, as well as lavish parties thrown at their townhouse.

“She was a really free spender, so any time you were in her orbit, there was a lot of fun to be had,” Ellison says.

The *New York Times* reported the mansion contained “Persian carpets, a 1763 harpsichord [and] gold bathroom fixtures,” as well as “works by Picasso, van Gogh, and Brueghel the Younger.” Haskell, who attended several parties there, says the top floor was a dance space complete with disco ball, where guests often included Franco Rossellini, the Italian filmmaker; Adnan Khashoggi, the Saudi billionaire; and Van Cliburn, the pianist.



Imelda Marcos at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1976. RON GALELLA GETTY IMAGES

But even that luxury paled in comparison to what Imelda could stage on her home turf. The Manila Film Festival was the perfect pretext to entice movie stars like Tony Curtis, Brooke Shields, Jeremy Irons, and Michael York to her kingdom.

Haskell covered the event two years in a row for her '80s celebrity interview program, *The Nikki Haskell Show*, which now streams on Amazon. She remembers accompanying the actor George Hamilton to a party aboard the Marcos' presidential yacht, circa 1982.



Imelda Marcos and Doris Duke at a Hawaiian dance festival in 1989. BETTMANNGETTY IMAGES

“It was decorated like a French chateau, and against the wall there were two gigantic Limoges urns, six or seven feet high. There were two guys on step ladders with oil drums, filled with caviar, pouring it into the urns,” she says. “It was the coolest thing I ever saw.”

Four years later, the Marcoses were chased out of the Philippines, setting off decades of court action which continue to this day. Cindy Adams, the longtime *New York Post* columnist, recalled visiting Imelda at the Waldorf in 1988 during her trial on federal racketeering charges.

“I was hiding in the bathroom when Doris Duke came over to give her the five million dollars she needed to make bail,” Adams tells *T&C*. “She didn’t know I was listening on the other side of the door.”



Marcos in an image from *The Kingmaker*. LAUREN GREENFIELD

Imelda has always denied wrongdoing, and continues to do so in Greenfield's documentary. Her latest arrest warrant was issued in November last year, after the film wrapped, on charges of failing to appear in a Philippine court for yet another corruption trial.

Ellison, the biographer and investigative reporter, even had a chance to ask her about the missing money directly, during a two-hour interview at the presidential palace in 1985. "My conscience is clear," Imelda told her calmly. "If I were corrupt, it would show on my face."