



# Greta Garbo

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**Greta Garbo** (born **Greta Lovisa Gustafsson**; Swedish: [ˈɡrɛːˈta lʊˈviːˈsa ˈɡʊstafˈsɔn]; 18 September 1905 – 15 April 1990), was a Swedish-born American film actress during the 1920s and 1930s. Garbo was nominated three times for the Academy Award for Best Actress and received an Academy Honorary Award in 1954 for her "luminous and unforgettable screen performances." In 1999, the American Film Institute ranked Garbo fifth on their list of the greatest female stars of classic Hollywood cinema, after Katharine Hepburn, Bette Davis, Audrey Hepburn, and Ingrid Bergman.

Garbo launched her career with a secondary role in the 1924 Swedish film *The Saga of Gosta Berling*. Her performance caught the attention of Louis B. Mayer, chief executive of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), who brought her to Hollywood in 1925. She immediately stirred interest with her first silent film, *Torrent*, released in 1926; a year later, her performance in *Flesh and the Devil*, her third movie, made her an international star.<sup>[1]</sup>

Garbo's first talking film was *Anna Christie* (1930). MGM marketers enticed the public with the catch-phrase "Garbo talks!" That same year she starred in *Romance*. For her performances in these films she received the first of three Academy Award nominations for Best Actress. (Academy rules at the time allowed for a performer to receive a single nomination for their work in more than one film.)<sup>[2]</sup> In 1932, her popularity allowed her to dictate the terms of her contract and she became increasingly selective about her roles. Her success continued in films such as *Mata Hari* (1931) and *Grand Hotel* (1932). Many critics and film historians consider her performance as the doomed courtesan Marguerite Gautier in *Camille* (1936) to be her finest. The role gained her a second Academy Award nomination. Garbo's career soon declined, however, and she was one of the many stars labeled "Box Office Poison" in 1938. Her career revived upon her turn to comedy in *Ninotchka*

## Greta Garbo



Garbo in *Anna Karenina* (1935)

<b>Born</b>	<div>Greta Lovisa Gustafsson</div> 18 September 1905 <div>Stockholm, Sweden</div>
<b>Died</b>	<div>15 April 1990 (aged 84)</div> New York, New York, U.S
<b>Resting place</b>	Skogskyrkogården Cemetery, Stockholm, Sweden
<b>Occupation</b>	Actress
<b>Years active</b>	1920–1941
<b>Website</b>	<div><span>www.gretagarbo.com</span></div> ( <span>http://www.gretagarbo.com</span> )

(1939), which earned her a third Academy Award nomination, but after the failure of *Two-Faced Woman* (1941), she retired from the screen, at the age of 35, after acting in twenty-eight films.

Signature

File:Garbo signature.jpg

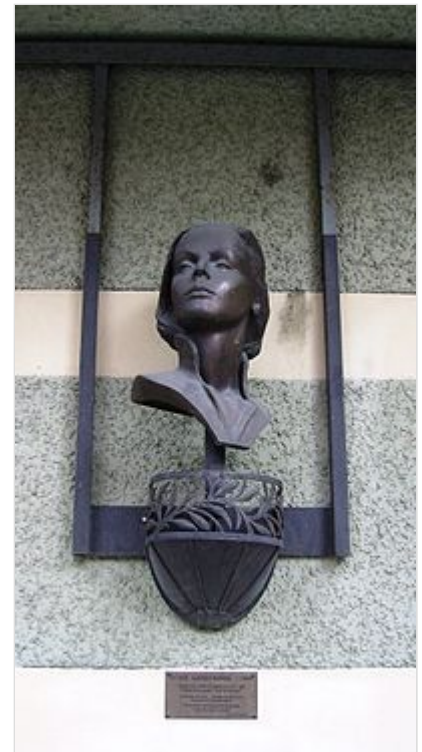
From then on, Garbo declined all opportunities to return to the screen. Shunning publicity, she began a private life. Garbo also became an art collector in her later life; her collection, including works from painters such as Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Pierre Bonnard, and Kees van Dongen,<sup>[3]</sup> was worth millions of dollars when she died.

## Childhood and youth

Greta Lovisa Gustafsson was born in Södermalm, Stockholm, Sweden. She was the third and youngest child of Anna Lovisa (née Karlsson, 1872–1944)—a housewife who later worked at a jam factory—and Karl Alfred Gustafsson (1871–1920), a laborer.<sup>[4][5]</sup> Garbo had an older brother, Sven Alfred (1898–1967), and an older sister, Alva Maria (1903–1926).<sup>[6]</sup>

Her parents met in Stockholm where her father visited from Frinnaryd. He moved to Stockholm to become independent and worked in various odd jobs—street cleaner, grocer, factory worker and butcher's assistant.<sup>[7]</sup> He married Anna, who had recently moved from Högsby.<sup>[8][9]</sup> The Gustafssons were impoverished and lived in a three-bedroom cold-water flat at Blekingegatan No. 32. They brought up their three children in a working class district regarded as the city's slum.<sup>[10]</sup> Garbo would later recall:

It was eternally grey—those long winter's nights. My father would be sitting in a corner, scribbling figures on a newspaper. On the other side of the room my mother is repairing ragged old clothes, sighing. We children would be talking in very low voices, or just sitting silently. We were filled with anxiety, as if there were danger in the air. Such evenings are unforgettable for a sensitive girl. Where we lived, all the houses and apartments looked alike, their ugliness matched by everything surrounding us.<sup>[11]</sup>



Monument on the building which now stands where Greta Garbo was born on Södermalm.

Garbo was a shy daydreamer as a child.<sup>[12]</sup> She hated school<sup>[13][14]</sup> and preferred to play alone.<sup>[15]</sup> Yet she was an imaginative child and a natural leader<sup>[16]</sup> who became interested in theatre at an early age.<sup>[17]</sup> She directed her friends in make-believe games and performances<sup>[18]</sup> and dreamed of becoming an actress.<sup>[17][19]</sup> Later, she would participate in amateur theatre with her friends and frequent the Mosebacke Theatre.<sup>[20]</sup> At the age of 13, Garbo graduated from school,<sup>[21]</sup> and, typical of a Swedish working class girl at that time, she did not attend high school. She would later confess she had an inferiority complex about this.<sup>[22]</sup>

In the winter of 1919, the Spanish flu spread throughout Stockholm, and Garbo's father, to whom she was very close, became ill. He began missing work and eventually lost his job.<sup>[23]</sup> Garbo stayed at home looking after him and taking him to the hospital for weekly treatments. He died in 1920 when she was 14 years old.<sup>[9][24]</sup>

## Career

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### Beginnings (1920–1924)

Garbo first worked as a soap-lather girl in a barber's shop but eventually, on the advice of her friends, applied for, and accepted, a position in the PUB department store, running errands and working in the millinery department. Before long, she began modeling hats for the store's catalogues, which led to a more lucrative job as a fashion model.<sup>[25]</sup> In late 1920, a director of film commercials for the store began casting Garbo in roles advertising women's clothing. Her first commercial premiered on 12 December 1920 and was followed by others the following year.<sup>[26]</sup> Thus began Garbo's cinematic career. In 1922, Garbo caught the attention of director Erik Arthur Petschler who gave her a part in his short comedy, *Peter the Tramp*.<sup>[27]</sup>



Garbo in her first leading role in the Swedish film *The Saga of Gösta Berling* (1924) with Lars Hanson

From 1922 to 1924, she studied at the Royal Dramatic Theatre's Acting School in Stockholm. She was recruited in 1924 by the prominent Swedish director Mauritz Stiller to play a principal part in his classic film *The Saga of Gösta Berling*, a dramatization of the famous novel by Nobel Prize winner Selma Lagerlöf. She played opposite Lars Hanson, a well-known Swedish actor. Stiller became her mentor, training her as a film actress and managing all aspects of her nascent career.<sup>[28]</sup> She followed her role in *Gösta Berling* with a starring role in the 1925 German film *Die freudlose Gasse* (*Joyless Street* or *The Street of Sorrow*), directed by G. W. Pabst and co-starring Asta Nielsen.<sup>[29]</sup>

Accounts differ on the circumstances of her first contract with Louis B. Mayer, at that time vice president and general manager of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Victor Seastrom, a respected Swedish director at MGM, was a good friend of Stiller and encouraged Mayer to meet him on a trip to Berlin. There are two recent versions of what happened next. In one,<sup>[30]</sup> Mayer, always looking for new talent, had done his research and was interested in Stiller. He made an offer but Stiller demanded that Garbo be part of any contract, convinced that she would be an asset to his career. Mayer balked, but eventually agreed to a private viewing of *Gösta Berling*. He was immediately struck by Garbo's magnetism and became more interested in her than in Stiller. "It was her eyes," his daughter recalled him saying, "I can make a star out of her." In the second version,<sup>[31]</sup> Mayer had already seen *Gösta Berling* before his Berlin trip, and Garbo, not Stiller, was his primary interest. On the way to the screening, Mayer said to his daughter "This director is wonderful, but what we really ought to look at is the girl.... The girl, look at the girl!" After the screening, his daughter reported, he was unwavering: "I'll take her without him. I'll take her *with* him. Number one is the girl."<sup>[32]</sup>

### Silent film stardom (1925–1929)

In 1925, Garbo, then 20 and unable to speak English, was brought over from Sweden at the request of Mayer. Both Garbo and Stiller arrived in New York in July 1925 after a 10-day trip on the SS Drottningholm.<sup>[33]</sup> But they remained in New York for more than six months without any word from MGM. They decided to travel to

Los Angeles on their own, but another five weeks passed with no contact from the studio.<sup>[34][35]</sup> On the verge of returning to Sweden, she wrote to her boyfriend back home: "You're quite right when you think I don't feel at home here.... Oh you lovely little Sweden, I promise that when I return to you my sad face will smile as never before."<sup>[36]</sup>

A Swedish friend in Los Angeles helped out by contacting MGM producer Irving Thalberg, who agreed to give Garbo a screen test. According to author Frederick Sands, "the result of the test was electrifying. Thalberg was impressed and began grooming the young actress the following day, arranging to fix her teeth, making sure she lost weight, and giving her English lessons."<sup>[36]</sup>

During her rise to stardom, film historian Mark Vieira notes, "Thalberg decreed that henceforth Garbo would play a young but worldly wise woman . . . "<sup>[37]</sup> However, according to Thalberg's actress wife, Norma Shearer, Garbo did not necessarily agree with his ideas:

Miss Garbo at first didn't like playing the exotic, the sophisticated, the woman of the world. She used to complain, "Mr. Thalberg, I am just a young gur-rl!" Irving tossed it off with a laugh. With those elegant pictures he was creating the Garbo image.<sup>[37]</sup>

Although she expected to work with Stiller on her first film,<sup>[38]</sup> she was cast in *Torrent* (1926), an adaptation of a novel by Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, with director Monta Bell. She replaced Aileen Pringle, 10 years her senior, and played a peasant girl turned singer opposite Ricardo Cortez.<sup>[39][40]</sup> *Torrent* was a hit and despite its cool reception by the trade press,<sup>[41]</sup> Garbo's performance was critically acclaimed.<sup>[42][43]</sup>



Garbo in *Flesh and the Devil* (1926) with John Gilbert

The success led Irving Thalberg, head of production at MGM,<sup>[44]</sup> to cast her in a similar role in *The Temptress* (1926), based on another Ibáñez novel. After only one film, she was given top billing, playing opposite Antonio Moreno.<sup>[45]</sup> Her mentor Stiller, who had persuaded her to take the part, was assigned to direct.<sup>[46]</sup> For both Garbo (who did not want to play another vamp and did not like the script any more than she did the first one)<sup>[47]</sup> and Stiller, *The Temptress* was a harrowing experience. Stiller, who spoke little English, had difficulty adapting to the studio system<sup>[48]</sup> and did not get on with Moreno,<sup>[49]</sup> was fired by Thalberg and replaced by Fred Niblo. Reshooting *The Temptress* was expensive and even though it became one of the top-grossing films of the 1926–27 season,<sup>[50]</sup> it was the only Garbo film of the period to lose money.<sup>[51]</sup> However, Garbo received rave reviews<sup>[52][53][54][55]</sup> and MGM had a new star.<sup>[50][56]</sup>

After her lightning ascent, Garbo went on to make eight more silent films and all were hits.<sup>[57]</sup> She starred in three of them with popular leading man John Gilbert.<sup>[58]</sup> About their first movie, *Flesh and the Devil* (1926), silent film expert Kevin Brownlow states that "she gave a more erotic performance than Hollywood had ever seen."<sup>[59]</sup> Their on-screen chemistry soon translated into an off-camera romance and by the end of the



Portrait photograph of Greta Garbo, 1925

production, they began living together.<sup>[60]</sup> The film also marked a turning point in Garbo's career. Vieira wrote: "Audiences were mesmerized by her beauty and titillated by her love scenes with Gilbert. She was a sensation."<sup>[61]</sup> Profits from her third movie with Gilbert, *A Woman of Affairs* (1928), catapulted her to top Metro star of the 1928–29 box office season, usurping the long-reigned silent queen Lillian Gish.<sup>[62]</sup> In 1929, reviewer Pierre de Rohan wrote in the *New York Telegraph*: "She has a glamour and fascination for both sexes which have never been equaled on the screen."<sup>[63]</sup>

The impact of Garbo's acting and screen presence quickly established her reputation as one of Hollywood's greatest actresses. Film historian and critic David Denby argues that Garbo introduced a subtlety of expression to the art of silent acting and that its effect on audiences cannot be exaggerated. She "lowers her head to look calculating or flutters her lips," he says. "Her face darkens with a slight tightening around the eyes and mouth; she registers a passing idea with a contraction of her brows or a drooping of her lids. Worlds turned on her movements."<sup>[64]</sup>

During this period, Garbo began to require unusual conditions during the shooting of her scenes. She prohibited visitors—including the studio brass—from her sets and demanded that black flats or screens surround her to prevent extras and technicians from watching her. When asked about these eccentric requirements, she said "If I am by myself, my face will do things I cannot do with it otherwise."<sup>[65]</sup>

Despite her popularity as a silent star,<sup>[66]</sup> the studio feared that her Swedish accent might impair her work in sound and delayed the shift for as long as possible.<sup>[67][68]</sup> MGM itself was the last Hollywood studio to convert to sound<sup>[69]</sup> and her last silent film, *The Kiss* (1929), was also the studio's.<sup>[70]</sup> Garbo would go on to become one of the biggest box office draws of the next decade.

## Transition to sound and continued success (1930–1939)

In late 1929, MGM cast Garbo in *Anna Christie* (1930), a film adaptation of the 1922 play by Eugene O'Neill, her first speaking role. The screenplay was adapted by Frances Marion and the film was produced by Irving Thalberg and Paul Bern. Sixteen minutes into the film, she famously utters her first line, "Gimme a whiskey, ginger ale on the side, and don't be stingy, baby." The film premiered in New York City on 21 February 1930 publicized with the catchphrase "Garbo talks!", and was the highest-grossing film of the year.<sup>[71]</sup> Garbo received her first Academy Award for Best Actress nomination for her performance, although she lost to MGM colleague Norma Shearer. Her nomination that year included her performance in *Romance* (1930). After filming ended, Garbo—along with a different director and cast—filmed a German-language version of *Anna Christie* that was released in December 1930.<sup>[72]</sup> The film's success certified Garbo's successful transition to talkies. In her follow-up film, *Romance* (1930), she portrayed an Italian opera star opposite Lewis Stone. She was paired opposite Robert Montgomery in



Garbo with John Gilbert in *A Woman of Affairs* (1928).



"Garbo talks!" in *Anna Christie* (1930).

*Inspiration* (1931), and her popularity was used to boost the career of the relatively unknown Clark Gable in *Susan Lenox (Her Fall and Rise)* (1931). Although the films did not match Garbo's success with her sound debut, she was ranked as the most-popular female star in the United States in 1930 and 1931.

Garbo followed with two of her most famous roles. In 1931, she played the World War I German spy in the lavish production of *Mata Hari*, opposite Ramón Novarro. When the film was released, it "caused panic with police reserves required to keep the waiting mob in order."<sup>[73]</sup> The following year, she played a Russian ballerina in *Grand Hotel* (1932), opposite an ensemble cast, including John Barrymore, Joan Crawford, and Wallace Beery among others. The film won that year's Academy Award for Best Picture. Both films had been MGM's highest-earning films of 1931 and 1932, respectively, and Garbo was dubbed "the greatest money-making machine ever put on screen."<sup>[24][74][75][76]</sup> Garbo's close friend Mercedes de Acosta then penned a screenplay for her to portray Joan of Arc<sup>[77]</sup> but producers rebuffed the idea and the film was shelved. After appearing in *As You Desire Me* (1932), the first of three Garbo films which co-starred Melvyn Douglas, Garbo's MGM contract expired and she returned to Sweden.

After nearly a year of negotiations, Garbo agreed to renew her contract with MGM on the condition she would star in *Queen Christina* and her salary would be increased to \$300,000 per film. The film's screenplay had been written by Viertel, and although MGM had been reluctant to make the movie, they relented at Garbo's insistence. For her leading man, MGM suggested Charles Boyer or Laurence Olivier, but Garbo rejected both, preferring her former co-star and lover, John Gilbert. The studio balked at the idea of casting Gilbert, fearing his declining popularity would hurt the film's profits, but Garbo prevailed.<sup>[78][79]</sup> *Queen Christina* was a lavish production, becoming one of the studio's biggest productions at the time. Publicized as "Garbo returns", the film premiered in December 1933 to critical acclaim and box office triumph and became the highest-grossing film of the year. The movie, however, met with controversy upon its release; censors objected to the scenes in which Garbo disguised herself as a man and kissed a female co-star.<sup>[80][81]</sup>

Although her domestic popularity was undiminished in the early 1930s, high profits for Garbo's films after *Queen Christina* in 1933 depended on the foreign market for their success.<sup>[80][81]</sup> The type of historical and melodramatic films she began to make on the advice of Viertel were highly successful abroad but considerably less so in the United States. In the midst of the Great Depression, American screen audiences seemed to favor "home-grown" screen couples, such as Clark Gable and Jean Harlow.

In 1935, David O. Selznick wanted to cast her as the dying heiress in *Dark Victory*, but Garbo chose Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina (1935) in which she played another of her renowned roles.<sup>[82]</sup> Her critically acclaimed performance won her the New York Film Critics Circle Award for Best Actress. The film was internationally successful and did better than MGM expected domestically.<sup>[83]</sup> Still, its profit was significantly diminished because of her exorbitant salary.<sup>[84]</sup> Garbo selected George Cukor's romantic drama *Camille* (1936) as her next project. Thalberg cast her opposite talents Robert Taylor and former co-star, Lionel Barrymore. Cukor carefully crafted Garbo's portrayal of Marguerite Gautier, a lower-class woman, who becomes the world-renowned mistress Camille. Production was marred, however, by the sudden death of Thalberg, then only thirty-seven, which plunged the Hollywood studios into a "state of profound shock," writes David Bret.<sup>[85]:272</sup> Garbo had grown close to Thalberg and his wife, Norma Shearer, and had often dropped by their house unannounced. Her grief for Thalberg, some believe, was more profound than for John Gilbert, who died earlier that same year.<sup>[85]:272</sup> His death also added to the sombre mood required for the closing scenes of *Camille*. When the film



Garbo and Fredric March in *Anna Karenina* (1935).



Garbo and Robert Taylor in *Camille* (1936).

premiered in New York on 12 December 1936, it became an international success, Garbo's first major success in three years. She won a New York Film Critics Circle Award for Best Actress award for her performance, and she was again nominated for an Academy Award.

Garbo's follow-up project was Clarence Brown's lavish production of *Conquest* (1937) opposite Charles Boyer. The plot was the dramatized romance between Napoleon and Marie Walewska. It was MGM's biggest and most-publicized movie of 1937, but upon its release, it lost more than \$1 million at the box office, becoming one of the studio's biggest failures of the decade.<sup>[81]</sup> Garbo's popularity had considerably dropped, and when her contract expired soon thereafter, she returned briefly to Sweden. On 3 May 1938, Garbo was among the many stars—including Joan Crawford, Norma Shearer, Luise Rainer, Katharine Hepburn, Mae West, Marlene Dietrich, Fred Astaire, Dolores del Río and others—dubbed to be "Box Office Poison" in an article published by Harry Brandt on behalf of the Independent Theatre Owners of America.

After the box office failure of *Conquest*, MGM decided a change of pace was needed to resurrect her declining popularity. For her next movie, the studio teamed her with producer-director Ernst Lubitsch to film *Ninotchka*, her first

comedy. The film was one of the first Hollywood movies which, under the cover of a satirical, light romance, depicted the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin as being rigid and gray when compared to its prewar years. *Ninotchka* premiered in October 1939, publicized with the catchphrase "Garbo laughs!", commenting on the departure of Garbo's serious and melancholy image as she transferred to comedy. Despite the film's critical favoritism and box office success in the United States and abroad, it was banned in the Soviet Union and its satellites.



Garbo and Melvyn Douglas in a scene from *Ninotchka* (1939).

## Last work and early retirement (1941–1948)

With George Cukor's *Two-Faced Woman* (1941), MGM attempted to capitalize on Garbo's success in *Ninotchka* by casting her in a romantic comedy which sought to portray her as a chic, modern woman. She played a "double" role that featured her dancing the rumba, swimming, and skiing. The film was a critical failure, but, contrary to popular belief, performed reasonably well at the box office.<sup>[86]</sup> Garbo referred to the film as "my grave."<sup>[87]</sup> *Two-Faced Woman* was her last film; she was thirty-six and had made twenty-eight feature films in sixteen years.

Although Garbo was humiliated by the negative reviews of *Two-Faced Woman*, she did not at first intend to retire.<sup>[88][89]</sup> But her films depended on the European market and when it fell through with the war, finding a vehicle was problematic for MGM.<sup>[90][91]</sup> She signed a one-picture deal in 1942 to make *The Girl from Leningrad* but the project quickly dissolved.<sup>[90]</sup> She still thought she would continue when the war was



over<sup>[90][92]</sup> though she was ambivalent and indecisive about returning to the screen. Salka Viertel, Garbo's close friend and collaborator, said in 1945 "Greta is impatient to work. But on the other side, she's afraid of it."<sup>[93]</sup> Garbo also worried about her age. "Time leaves traces on our small faces and bodies. It's not the same anymore, being able to pull it off."<sup>[93]</sup> George Cukor, director of *Two-Faced Woman*, and often blamed for its failure, said "People often glibly say that the failure of *Two-Faced Woman* finished Garbo's career. That's a grotesque oversimplification. It certainly threw her, but I think that what really happened was that she just gave up. She didn't want to go on."<sup>[92]</sup>

Still, Garbo signed a contract in 1948 with producer Walter Wanger, who had produced *Queen Christina*, to shoot a picture based on Balzac's *La Duchesse de Langeais*. Max Ophüls was slated to adapt and direct.<sup>[94][95][96]</sup> She made several screen tests, learned the script, and arrived in Rome in the summer of 1949 to shoot the picture. However, the financing failed to materialize and the project was abandoned.<sup>[97]</sup> The screen tests—the last time Garbo stepped in front of a movie camera—were thought to have been lost for forty-one years until they were rediscovered in 1990 by film historians Leonard Maltin and Jeanine Basinger.<sup>[98]</sup> Parts of the footage were included in the 2005 TCM documentary *Garbo*.<sup>[99]</sup>

In 1949, she was offered the role of fictional silent film star Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*. However, after a meeting with film producer Charles Brackett, she insisted that she had no interest in the part whatsoever.

She was offered many roles in the 1940s and throughout her retirement years but she rejected all but a few of them. In the few instances when she accepted, the slightest problem led her to drop out.<sup>[100]</sup> Although she refused to talk to friends throughout her life about her reasons for retiring, she told Swedish biographer Sven Broman four years before her death "I was tired of Hollywood. I did not like my work. There were many days when I had to force myself to go to the studio... I really wanted to live another life."<sup>[101]</sup>

## Public persona

From the early days of her career, Garbo avoided industry social functions, preferring to spend her time alone or with friends. She never signed autographs or answered fan mail, and rarely gave interviews.<sup>[102][103]</sup> Nor did she ever appear at Oscar ceremonies, even when she was nominated.<sup>[104]</sup> Her aversion to publicity and the press was undeniably genuine,<sup>[105][106]</sup> and exasperating to the studio at first. In an interview in 1928, she explained that her desire for privacy began when she was a child, stating "as early as I can remember, I have wanted to be alone. I detest crowds, don't like many people."<sup>[107]</sup>

Because Garbo was suspicious and mistrustful of the media, and often at odds with MGM executives, she spurned Hollywood's publicity rules. She was routinely referred to by the press as the "Swedish Sphinx." Her reticence and fear of strangers perpetuated the mystery and mystique that she projected both on screen and in real life. MGM eventually capitalized on it, for it bolstered the image of the silent and reclusive woman of mystery.<sup>[108][104][109]</sup> In spite of her strenuous efforts to avoid publicity, Garbo paradoxically became one of the twentieth century's most publicized women in the world.<sup>[24][110]</sup> She is closely associated with a line from



*Grand Hotel*, one which the American Film Institute in 2005 voted the 30th most memorable movie quote of all time,<sup>[111]</sup> "I want to be alone; I just want to be alone." The theme was a running gag that began during the period of her silent movies.<sup>[112]</sup><sup>[note 1]</sup>

## Personal life

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### Retirement

In retirement, Garbo generally led a private life of simplicity and leisure. She made no public appearances and assiduously tried to avoid the publicity she loathed.<sup>[114]</sup> As she had been during her Hollywood years, Garbo, with her innate need for solitude, was often reclusive. But, contrary to myth, she had, from the beginning, many friends and acquaintances with whom she socialized, and, later, traveled.<sup>[115]</sup><sup>[116]</sup> Occasionally, she jet-setted with well-known and wealthy personalities, striving to guard her privacy as she had during her career.

Still, she often floundered about what to do and how to spend her time ("drifting" was the word she frequently used),<sup>[117]</sup> always struggling with her many eccentricities,<sup>[116]</sup><sup>[118]</sup> and her lifelong melancholy and moodiness.<sup>[119]</sup><sup>[120]</sup> As she approached her sixtieth birthday, she told a frequent walking companion "In a few days, it will be the anniversary of the sorrow that never leaves me, that will never leave me for the rest of my life."<sup>[121]</sup> To another friend, she said, in 1971, "I suppose I suffer from very deep depression."<sup>[122]</sup> It is also arguable, says one biographer, that she was bipolar. "I am very happy one moment, the next there is nothing left for me," she said in 1933.<sup>[122]</sup>



Garbo signing her US citizenship papers in 1950

Beginning in the 1940s, she became something of an art collector. Many of the paintings she purchased were of negligible value, but she did buy paintings by Renoir, Rouault, Kandinsky, Bonnard,<sup>[123]</sup> and Jawlensky.<sup>[124]</sup> Her art collection was worth millions when she died in 1990.<sup>[125]</sup>

On 9 February 1951, she became a naturalized citizen of the United States<sup>[126]</sup> and, in 1953, bought a seven-room apartment at 450 East 52nd Street in Manhattan, New York City,<sup>[127]</sup> where she lived for the rest of her life.<sup>[126]</sup>

On 13 November 1963, just nine days before the assassination of President Kennedy, Garbo was a dinner guest at the White House.<sup>[128]</sup> She spent the night at the Washington, D.C. home of philanthropist Florence Mahoney.<sup>[129]</sup><sup>[130]</sup> Garbo's niece Gray Reisfield told museum specialist James Wagner at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, quoted in a 2000 press release: "[Garbo] always spoke of it as a magical evening."<sup>[131]</sup>

Italian motion picture director Luchino Visconti allegedly attempted to bring Garbo back to the screen in 1969 with a small part, Maria Sophia, Queen of Naples, in his adaptation of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. He exclaimed: "I am very pleased at the idea that this woman, with her severe and authoritarian presence, should figure in the decadent and rarefied climate of the world described by Proust."<sup>[132]</sup> Claims that Garbo was interested in the part cannot be substantiated.<sup>[133]</sup><sup>[132]</sup>

In 1971, Garbo vacationed with her close friend Baroness Cécile de Rothschild at her summer home in Southern France.<sup>[134]</sup> De Rothschild introduced her to Samuel Adams Green, a well-known art collector and curator in New York, and the two formed an immediate bond.<sup>[135]</sup> Green, who became an important friend and walking companion, was in the habit of tape-recording all of his telephone calls and, with Garbo's permission, recorded many of his conversations with her. In 1985, Garbo ended the friendship when she was falsely informed that Green had played the tapes to friends.<sup>[136]</sup> In his last will and testament, Green bequeathed in 2011 all of the tapes, which reveal Garbo's personality in later life, sense of humor, and various eccentricities, to the film archives at Wesleyan University.<sup>[137]</sup>

Although she became increasingly withdrawn in her final years,<sup>[138]</sup> she had become close over time to her cook and house-keeper, Claire Koger, who worked for her for thirty-one years. "We were very close—like sisters," the reticent Koger said.<sup>[139]</sup>

Throughout her life, Garbo was known for taking long, daily walks with companions or by herself. In retirement, she walked the streets of New York City dressed casually and wearing large sunglasses. "Garbo-watching" became a sport for photographers, the media, admirers, and curious New Yorkers,<sup>[140]</sup> but she maintained her elusive mystique to the end.

## Relationships

Garbo never married, had no children, and lived alone as an adult. Her most famous romance was with her frequent co-star, John Gilbert, with whom she lived intermittently in 1926 and 1927.<sup>[141]</sup> Soon after their romance began, Gilbert began helping her acting on the set, teaching her how to behave like a star, how to socialize at parties, and how to deal with studio bosses.<sup>[142]</sup> They costarred again in three more hits, *Love* (1927), *A Woman of Affairs* (1928), and *Queen Christina* (1933). Gilbert allegedly proposed to her numerous times, with Garbo agreeing but backing out at the last minute.<sup>[142][1][143]</sup> "I was in love with him," she said. "But I froze. I was afraid he would tell me what to do and boss me. I always wanted to be the boss."<sup>[142]</sup>

In 1937, she met conductor Leopold Stokowski, with whom she had a highly publicized friendship or romance while traveling throughout Europe the following year.<sup>[144][145]</sup> In his diary, Erich Maria Remarque discusses a liaison with Garbo in 1941,<sup>[146]</sup> and in his memoir, Cecil Beaton described an affair with her in 1947 and 1948.<sup>[147][148]</sup> In 1941 she met the Russian-born millionaire, George Schlee, who was introduced to her by his wife, fashion designer Valentina. Nicholas Turner, Garbo's close friend for 33 years, said that, after she bought an apartment in the same building, "Garbo moved in and took Schlee right away from Valentina."<sup>[142]</sup> Schlee would split his time between the two, becoming Garbo's close companion and advisor until his death in 1964.<sup>[149][150]</sup>

Recent biographers and others believe that Garbo was bisexual or lesbian, that she had intimate relationships with women as well as with men.<sup>[151][152][153][154][155]</sup> In 1927, Garbo was introduced to stage and screen actress Lilyan Tashman and they may have had an affair, according to some writers.<sup>[156][157]</sup> Silent film star Louise Brooks stated that she and Garbo had a brief liaison the following year.<sup>[158]</sup>

In 1931, Garbo befriended the writer and acknowledged lesbian Mercedes de Acosta,<sup>[159]</sup> introduced to her by her close friend, Salka Viertel, and, according to Garbo's and de Acosta's biographers, began a sporadic and volatile romance. The two remained friends—with ups and downs—for almost 30 years, during which time

Garbo wrote de Acosta 181 letters, cards, and telegrams, now at the Rosenbach Museum & Library in Philadelphia.<sup>[160][161]</sup> Garbo's family, which controls her estate,<sup>[162]</sup> has made only 87 of these items publicly available.<sup>[163]</sup>

In 2005, Mimi Pollak's estate released 60 letters Garbo had written her in their long correspondence. Several letters suggest she may have had romantic feelings for Pollak for many years. After learning of Pollak's pregnancy in 1930, for example, Garbo wrote "We cannot help our nature, as God has created it. But I have always thought you and I belonged together".<sup>[164]</sup> In 1975, she wrote a poem about not being able to touch the hand of her friend with whom she might have been walking through life.<sup>[165]</sup>



Gravestone of Greta Garbo

## Death

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Garbo was successfully treated for breast cancer in 1984.<sup>[166][167]</sup> Towards the end of her life, only Garbo's closest friends knew she was receiving dialysis treatments for six hours three times a week at The Rogosin Institute in New York Hospital. A photograph appeared in the media in early 1990, showing Koger assisting Garbo, who was walking with a cane, into the hospital.

Greta Garbo died on 15 April 1990, aged 84, in the hospital, as a result of pneumonia and renal failure.<sup>[168]</sup> Daum later claimed that towards the end, she also suffered from gastrointestinal and periodontal ailments.

Garbo was cremated in Manhattan, and her ashes were interred in 1999 at Skogskyrkogården Cemetery just south of her native Stockholm.<sup>[169]</sup>

Garbo had invested wisely, primarily in stocks and bonds, and left her entire estate, \$32,042,429—\$57,000,000 by 2013 rates—to her niece, Gray Reisfield.<sup>[170]</sup>

## Legacy

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Garbo was an international superstar during the late silent era and the "Golden Age" of Hollywood and is widely regarded as a cinematic legend.<sup>[171]</sup> Almost immediately, with the sudden popularity of her first pictures, she became a screen icon.<sup>[172]</sup> For most of her career, she was the highest paid actor or actress at MGM, making her for many years its "premier prestige star."<sup>[173][174]</sup> The April 1990 Washington Post obituary said that "at the peak of her popularity she was a virtual cult figure".<sup>[110]</sup>

Garbo possessed a subtlety and naturalism in her acting that set her apart from other actors and actresses of the period.<sup>[175]</sup> About her work in silents, film critic Ty Burr said "This was a new kind of actor—not the stage actor who had to play to the far seats but someone who could just look and with her eyes literally go from rage to sorrow in just a close-up."<sup>[176]</sup>

Film historian Jeffrey Vance said that Garbo communicated her characters' innermost feelings through her movement, gestures, and most importantly, her eyes. With the slightest movement of them, he argues, she subtly conveyed complex attitudes and feelings toward other characters and the truth of the situation. "She doesn't act," said *Camille* co-star Rex O'Malley; "she lives her roles."<sup>[177]</sup> Director Clarence Brown, who made seven of Garbo's pictures, told an interviewer "Garbo has something behind the eyes that you couldn't see until you photographed it in close-up. You could see thought. If she had to look at one person with jealousy, and another

with love, she didn't have to change her expression. You could see it in her eyes as she looked from one to the other. And nobody else has been able to do that on screen."<sup>[178]</sup> Director George Sidney adds "You could call it underplaying but in underplaying she overplayed everyone else."<sup>[179]</sup>

Many critics have said that few of Garbo's twenty-four Hollywood films are artistically exceptional, and that many are simply bad.<sup>[180]</sup> It has been said, however, that her commanding and magnetic performances usually overcome the weaknesses of plot and dialogue.<sup>[180][110]</sup> As one biographer put it, "All moviegoers demanded of a Garbo production was Greta Garbo."<sup>[181]</sup>

She was portrayed by Betty Comden in the 1984 film *Garbo Talks*. The film concerns a dying Garbo fan (Anne Bancroft) whose last wish is to meet her idol. Her son (played by Ron Silver) sets about trying to get Garbo to visit his mother at the hospital.

Garbo is the subject of several documentaries, including four made in the United States between 1990 and 2005:

- *The Divine Garbo* (1990), TNT, produced by Ellen M. Krass and Susan F. Walker, narrated by Glenn Close<sup>[182]</sup>
- *Greta Garbo: The Mysterious Lady* (1998), Biography Channel, narrated by Peter Graves<sup>[183]</sup>
- *Greta Garbo: A Lone Star* (2001), AMC<sup>[184]</sup>
- *Garbo* (2005), TCM, directed by Kevin Brownlow, narrated by Julie Christie<sup>[185]</sup>

She has been praised in the media and by personalities in cinema and culture, including:

Ephraim Katz (*The Film Encyclopedia: The Complete Guide to Film and the Film Industry*):<sup>[186]</sup>

Of all the stars who have ever fired the imaginations of audiences, none has quite projected a magnetism and a mystique equal to Garbo's. "The Divine," the "dream princess of eternity," the "Sarah Bernhardt of films," are only a few of the superlatives writers used in describing her over the years.... She played heroines that were at once sensual and pure, superficial and profound, suffering and hopeful, world-weary and life-inspiring.

Bette Davis:<sup>[187]</sup>



Garbo in *Inspiration* (1931) publicity still



In *Camille* (1936)

Her instinct, her mastery over the machine, was pure witchcraft. I cannot analyze this woman's acting. I only know that no one else so effectively worked in front of a camera.

Dolores del Río:<sup>[188]</sup>

The most extraordinary woman (in art) that I have encountered in my life. It was as if she had diamonds in her bones and in her interior light struggled to come out through the pores of her skin.

George Cukor:<sup>[189]</sup>

She had a talent that few actresses or actors possess. In close-ups she gave the impression, the illusion of great movement. She would move her head just a little bit and the whole screen would come alive, like a strong breeze that made itself felt.

## Awards and honors

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Garbo was nominated three times for the Academy Award for Best Actress. In 1930, a performer could receive a single nomination for their work in more than one film. Garbo received her nomination for her work in both *Anna Christie* and *Romance*.<sup>[190][191]</sup> She lost out to Irving Thalberg's wife, Norma Shearer, who won for *The Divorcee*. In 1937, Garbo was nominated for *Camille*, but Luise Rainer won for *The Good Earth*. Finally, in 1939, Garbo was nominated for *Ninotchka*, but again came away empty-handed. *Gone With the Wind* swept the major awards, including Best Actress, which went to Vivien Leigh.<sup>[192][193]</sup> She was awarded an Academy Honorary Award "for her luminous and unforgettable screen performances" in 1954.<sup>[194]</sup> She did not show up at the ceremony, and the statuette was mailed to her home address.<sup>[192]</sup>

She twice received the New York Film Critics Circle Award for Best Actress for *Anna Karenina*, 1935, and *Camille*, 1936. She won the National Board of Review Best Acting Award for *Camille*, 1936, *Ninotchka*, 1939, and *Two-Faced Woman*, 1941. The Swedish royal medal, Litteris et Artibus, awarded to people who have made important contributions to culture, especially music, dramatic art or literature, was presented to Garbo in January 1937.<sup>[195]</sup> In a 1950 *Daily Variety* opinion poll, Garbo was voted Best Actress of the Half Century,<sup>[196]</sup> In 1957, she was awarded The George Eastman Award, given by George Eastman House for distinguished contribution to the art of film.<sup>[197]</sup>

In November 1983, she was made a Commander of the Swedish Order of the Polar Star by order of King Carl XVI Gustaf, the King of Sweden.<sup>[198]</sup> For her contributions to cinema, in 1960 she was honored with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame at 6901 Hollywood Boulevard.

She was once designated the most beautiful woman who ever lived by the *Guinness Book of World Records*.<sup>[199][200][201]</sup> Garbo appears on a number of postage stamps, and in September 2005, the United States Postal Service and Swedish Posten jointly issued two commemorative stamps bearing her image.<sup>[202][203][204]</sup> On 6 April 2011, Sveriges Riksbank announced that Garbo's portrait will be featured on the 100 krona banknote, beginning in 2014–15.<sup>[205]</sup>

## Filmography

Silent films

Year	Title	Role	Director	Co-star	Notes
1920	<i>Mr. and Mrs. Stockholm Go Shopping</i>	Elder sister			Swedish: <i>Herrskapet Stockholm ute på inköp</i> ; An advertisement. Garbo's segment <sup>[206]</sup> is often known as <i>How Not to Dress</i> . The commercial premiered 12 December 1920. <sup>[26][207]</sup>
1921	<i>The Gay Cavalier</i> <sup>[208]</sup>	Garbo played an extra.			Swedish: <i>En lyckoriddare</i> ; Uncredited. The film is lost.
1921	<i>Our Daily Bread</i>	Companion			Swedish: <i>Konsum Stockholm Promo</i> ; <sup>[207]</sup> An advertisement
1922	<i>Peter the Tramp</i>	Greta			Swedish: <i>Luffar-Petter</i> ; <sup>[207]</sup> A two-reel comedy; Garbo's first part in a commercial film
1924	<i>The Saga of Gosta Berling</i>	Elizabeth Dohna	Mauritz Stiller	Lars Hanson	Swedish: <i>Gösta Berling's Saga</i> ; Garbo's first leading part in a feature-length film, directed by her mentor, the celebrated Mauritz Stiller.
1925	<i>The Joyless Street</i>	Greta Rumfort	G. W. Pabst	Asta Nielsen	German: <i>Die freudlose Gasse</i> ; Garbo plays the principal role in this German film made by renowned director G.W. Pabst
1926	<i>Torrent</i>	Leonora Moreno aka La Brunna	Monta Bell	Ricardo Cortez	First American movie. All of Garbo's subsequent movies were made in Hollywood and produced by MGM.
1926	<i>The Temptress</i>	Elena	Fred Niblo	Antonio Moreno	Stiller was originally assigned to direct; his directing methods and personality led to conflicts with MGM producer <u>Irving Thalberg</u> who fired him.
1926	<i>Flesh and the Devil</i>	Felicitas	Clarence Brown	John Gilbert	First of seven Garbo movies directed by Clarence Brown and first of four with co-star John Gilbert
1927	<i>Love</i>	Anna Karenina	Edmund Goulding	John Gilbert	Adapted from the novel <i>Anna Karenina</i> by Tolstoy
1928	<i>The Divine Woman</i>	Marianne	Victor Seastrom	Lars Hanson	The film is lost; only a 9-minute reel exists.
1928	<i>The Mysterious Lady</i>	Tania Fedorova	Fred Niblo	Conrad Nagel	

Year	Title	Role	Director	Co-star	Notes
1928	<u><i>A Woman of Affairs</i></u>	Diana Merrick Furness	<u>Clarence Brown</u>	<u>John Gilbert</u>	The first of seven Garbo films with actor <u>Lewis Stone</u> who, with the exception of <i>Wild Orchids</i> , played secondary roles.
1929	<u><i>Wild Orchids</i></u>	Lillie Sterling	<u>Sidney Franklin</u>	<u>Nils Asther</u>	
1929	<u><i>A Man's Man</i></u>	Herself	<u>James Cruze</u>	<u>William Haines</u>	Garbo and John Gilbert make cameo appearances; this film is lost.
1929	<u><i>The Single Standard</i></u>	Arden Stuart Hewlett	<u>John S. Robertson</u>	<u>Nils Asther, John Mack Brown</u>	
1929	<u><i>The Kiss</i></u>	Irene Guarry	<u>Jacques Feyder</u>	<u>Conrad Nagel</u>	Garbo's, and MGM's, last silent picture



Sound films

Year	Title	Role	Director	Co-star	Notes
1930	<u><i>Anna Christie</i></u>	Anna Christie	<u>Clarence Brown</u>	Charles Bickford, Marie Dressler	Garbo's first talkie and first Academy Award nomination for Best Actress
1930	<u><i>Romance</i></u>	Madame Rita Cavallini	<u>Clarence Brown</u>	Gavin Gordon	Nominated – Academy Award for Best Actress
1930	<u><i>Anna Christie</i></u>	Anna Christie	Jacques Feyder	Hans Junkermann, Salka Viertel	MGM's German version of <i>Anna Christie</i> was also released in 1930; Salka Viertel, Garbo's close friend, later co-wrote several of her screenplays.
1931	<u><i>Inspiration</i></u>	Yvonne Valbret	<u>Clarence Brown</u>	Robert Montgomery	
1931	<u><i>Susan Lenox (Her Fall and Rise)</i></u>	Susan Lenox	Robert Z. Leonard	Clark Gable	
1931	<u><i>Mata Hari</i></u>	<u>Mata Hari</u>	George Fitzmaurice	Ramon Novarro	After the multi-star <i>Grand Hotel</i> , Garbo's highest-grossing film
1932	<u><i>Grand Hotel</i></u>	Grusinskaya	Edmund Goulding	John Barrymore, Lionel Barrymore, Joan Crawford, Wallace Beery	Academy Award for Best Picture
1932	<u><i>As You Desire Me</i></u>	Zara aka Marie	George Fitzmaurice	Melvyn Douglas, Erich von Stroheim	First of three movies with Douglas
1933	<u><i>Queen Christina</i></u>	Queen Christina	Rouben Mamoulian	John Gilbert	
1934	<u><i>The Painted Veil</i></u>	Katrin Koerber Fane	Richard Boleslavski	George Brent	
1935	<u><i>Anna Karenina</i></u>	Anna Karenina	Clarence Brown	Fredric March	New York Film Critics Circle Award for Best Actress
1936	<u><i>Camille</i></u>	Marguerite Gautier	George Cukor	Robert Taylor	New York Film Critics Circle Award for Best Actress National Board of Review Best Acting Award Nominated – Academy Award for Best Actress
1937	<u><i>Conquest</i></u>	Countess Marie Walewska	Clarence Brown	Charles Boyer	Because the final cost for this extravagant production vastly exceeded its budget, coupled with its poor box office receipts, the film lost \$1,397,000.
1939	<u><i>Ninotchka</i></u>	Nina Ivanovna "Ninotchka" Yakushova	Ernst Lubitsch	Melvyn Douglas	National Board of Review Best Acting Award Nominated – Academy Award for Best Actress

Year	Title	Role	Director	Co-star	Notes
					Nominated – New York Film Critics Circle Award for Best Actress
1941	<i>Two-Faced Woman</i>	Karin Borg Blake	George Cukor	Melvyn Douglas	National Board of Review of Motion Pictures Best Acting Award

## Public collections

- [Rijksmuseum Amsterdam](#)<sup>[209]</sup>

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### Informational notes

1. For example, in *Love* (1927) a title card reads "I like to be alone"; in *The Single Standard* (1929) her character says "I am walking alone because I *want* to be alone"; in the same film, she sails to the South Seas with her lover on a boat called the All Alone; in *Susan Lenox (Her Fall and Rise)* (1931) she says to a suitor "This time I rise ... and fall ... alone"; in *Inspiration* (1931) she tells a fickle lover "I just want to be alone for a little while"; in *Mata Hari* (1931) she says to her new amour "I never look ahead. By next spring I shall probably be ... quite alone." By the early 1930s, the motif had become indelibly linked to Garbo's public and private personae.<sup>[112][113]</sup> It is lampooned in *Ninotchka* (1939) when emissaries from Russia ask her "Do you want to be alone, comrade?" "No," she says bluntly. But about her private life, she later remarked "I never said, 'I want to be alone'; I only said, 'I want to be *let* alone.' There is a world of difference."<sup>[112][113]</sup>

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## External links

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- Greta Garbo (<https://www.allmovie.com/artist/p25821>) at AllMovie
  - Greta Garbo (<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001256/>) at IMDb
  - Greta Garbo ([https://web.archive.org/web/\\*/https://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/person/68274%7C\\*](https://web.archive.org/web/*/https://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/person/68274%7C*)) at the TCM Movie Database
  - Greta Garbo Biography – Yahoo! Movies (<https://movies.yahoo.com/movie/contributor/1800027779/bio>)
  - Reklamfilmer PUB Greta Garbo (<http://www.filmarkivet.se/sv/Film/?movieid=165>), commercials done in 1920 and 1922, Filmarkivet.se, Swedish Film Institute
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