

‘Audrey is the most intriguingly childish, adult, feminine tomboy I’ve ever photographed,’ said Mark Shaw, who photographed Audrey Hepburn for *Life* magazine in December 1953. It was this matrix of contradictions, this rare gift of holding so many different qualities in one elusive whole, that was the key to her appeal. With the help of Hubert de Givenchy, she developed a style, a seemingly impossible mix of simplicity and sophistication, that endures. ‘She achieved a “look”, the knockout gamine who inspired a generation of thin, flat-chested, upper-class girls,’ wrote David Thomson in his *New Biographical Dictionary of Film*. Today, she remains a fashion icon, an archetype of elegance. ‘It is interesting how little she changed her look,’ says Terence Pepper, co-curator of a new exhibition, *Audrey Hepburn: Portraits of an Icon*, at the National Portrait Gallery (2 July –18 October). ‘It seems she only had two or three different hairstyles in her whole life. She had a timeless quality that fascinated and intrigued a wide range of photographers.’

The exhibition includes a number of rare and unpublished photographs of Hepburn, including pictures taken in London while she was working as a chorus girl in shows such as *Sauce Tartare* at the Cambridge Theatre. Photographer Antony Beauchamp, who saw Hepburn on stage in that production in 1949, recalled: ‘All I was conscious of were the dancing eyes of that sprite in the chorus and for the rest of the evening I could scarcely take my eyes away from her face.’ Beauchamp, who had photographed actresses such as Greta

The fairest of them all...

Why we’ll never get bored of looking at Audrey Hepburn. By Andrew Wilson

Garbo and Vivien Leigh, later added that he saw in her a certain ‘freshness’, a ‘spiritual beauty’ that he knew would make her a star. Some of the other girls in the production, however, were mystified by her ethereal qualities. ‘I have the biggest tits on stage,’ said one dancer, ‘but everyone looks at the girl who has none at all!’

Hepburn arrived in London in 1948 from the Netherlands, where she had studied ballet, a training that instilled discipline and grace in equal measure. Born in May 1929 in Belgium, she was the daughter of Ella – a Dutch baroness – and Joseph Ruston, a British subject. In 1935, when Audrey was just six years old, her father left the family home, an abandonment that had a lasting effect on her. ‘I worshipped my father,’ she said later. ‘Having him cut off from me was terribly awful... Leaving us, my father left us insecure – perhaps for life.’ In another interview she added: ‘When I fell in love and got married, I lived in constant fear of being left.’ (Both of Hepburn’s marriages – first to actor Mel Ferrer, then to Italian psychiatrist Andrea Dotti – ended unhappily.)

She also had to endure the horrors of the Second World War. When war was declared in 1939, Ella took her daughter out of a small independent school in Kent and, believing she would be safer in the Netherlands, sent her to Arnhem. When the Nazis occupied Holland in 1940, her mother enrolled Audrey at school under the name Edda van Heemstra, rather than her real name (Audrey Kathleen ▷

1
Photograph by Antony
Beauchamp, 1955. Hepburn, 26,
during the filming of *War and Peace*
in Rome, opposite Mel Ferrer,
her new husband





2

Photograph by George Daniell, 1955. Hepburn, 26, as Natasha Rostova, in *War and Peace*

3

Photograph by Bert Hardy, 1950. Hardy shot Hepburn, 21, in Kew Gardens and Richmond Park for his photo essay 'We Take a Girl to Look for Spring', published in *Picture Post*.

The actress was on a rare break from performing in the West End revue *Sauce Piquante*

4

Photograph by Manon van Suchtelen, 1942. A 13-year-old Hepburn dances in a recital at the Arnhem School of Music

5

Photograph by Angus McBean, 1950. McBean spotted Hepburn, 21, in the revue *Sauce Tartare* and cast her in this campaign for Crookes Lacto-Calamine sun lotion







◁ Ruston), and for eight years Audrey spoke Dutch, not English, in public. 'It's because I have no mother tongue that the critics accuse me of curious speech,' she said later, attempting to explain her accent. 'No other voice could be mistaken for hers,' says her biographer Donald Spoto.

Although Hepburn could never understand her allure – 'My career is a complete mystery to me,' she once said – there was something almost chimerical about her. 'It took the rubble of Belgium, an English accent and an American success to launch the striking personality that best exemplifies our new zeitgeist,' declared Cecil Beaton, who took her portrait many times and also designed the costumes for her 1964 film *My Fair Lady*. In his diary he wrote: 'Her stance is a combination of an ultra-fashion plate and a ballet dancer. Her features show character rather than prettiness.'

The public adored her and the films she starred in, many of which, such as *Funny Face* (in which she played a plain-looking, intellectual bookshop assistant who is transformed into a top model) and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, served as reworkings of the Cinderella story. Indeed, her own narrative was that of an insecure young woman who reinvented herself as an unlikely movie goddess. In 1991, during a tribute to her, she stood in front of a New York audience and said, 'I think it's wonderful that this skinny broad could be turned into a marketable commodity... I never thought of myself as beautiful.' But there was so much more to Hepburn than surface beauty. There was poise, there was purity, and also a personal mystique. She always remained tantalisingly out of reach.

'I am, and forever will be, devastated by the gift of Audrey Hepburn before my camera,' said Richard Avedon, who worked as a consultant on *Funny Face*. 'I love her but I have always found her impossible to photograph. I cannot lift her to greater heights. She is already there. I can only record, I cannot interpret her. There is no going further than who she was. She has achieved in herself her ultimate portrait.' □



6

Photograph by Larry Fried, 1951. Hepburn, 22, in her dressing room during her appearance in *Gigi*, adapted from the novel by Colette, at the Fulton Theatre in New York. Colette herself championed Hepburn for the title role

7

Photograph by Philippe Halsman, 1954. Hepburn, 25, in the title role of a Broadway production of *Ondine*, in which she played opposite her husband Mel Ferrer

8

Photograph by Mark Shaw, 1953. Hepburn, 24, outside her Beverly Hills apartment during the filming of *Sabrina*. For several key scenes, she selected costumes by Hubert de Givenchy, marking the start of what became a lifelong collaboration and friendship