

Helen Rose's high fashion and stylist life



Racquet Club fashion show early 1960s. (Photo: Palm Springs Historical Society/Special to *The Desert Sun*)

“A beautiful Helen Rose chiffon dress, a little Dom Perignon, some caviar, and dammit, you’re married again!” The many-married Zsa Zsa Gabor knew what she was talking about. Helen Rose dressed the most glamorous and beautiful women in the world in a career spanning some four decades. And she was the most important designer of wedding dresses in the middle of the twentieth century.

The chiffon might get you engaged, but for the wedding, well, Helen Rose invented the long-sleeved, bedazzled lace number that Grace Kelly wore to marry Prince Rainier of Monaco – a design that reverberated in the royal

wedding dress of Kate Middleton. Rose also designed the wedding dress for the movie “Royal Wedding” that was eventually worn by Jane Powell when Judy Garland dropped out of the film. And Rose created the wedding gown for Elizabeth Taylor, Hollywood royalty, when she married Conrad “Nicky” Hilton.



Charlie Farrell and Nelda Linsk. (Photo: Palm Springs Historical Society/Special to The Desert Sun)

But forget wedding dresses. For a sultry affair, Helen Rose designed the now iconic “Cat Dress” for Elizabeth Taylor in “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.” Taylor wore the white cocktail dress, with plunging neckline, for the majority of the movie. Emblazoned in the minds of countless men, the dress sold hundreds of couture copies for Rose’s clothing line to movie-going women.

Helen Rose was always good at sketching. She beseeched her father to let her go to art school instead of high school. He thought artists were “all drunks and derelicts.” But he relented as long as she would also go to night school in stenography so she might have a practical career. She took class at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts and by the age of 14 was offered a job designing costumes. When her family moved to Los Angeles in 1929 it wasn’t long before she was working at major movie studios. She went on to win two Oscars and was nominated another eight times.



Helen Rose's Trousdale Estate house, designed by Buff, Straub & Hensman. *(Photo: Courtesy of Steven Price)*

Helen Rose made clothes for Lena Horne, Lana Turner, Esther Williams, Barbara Stanwyck, Doris Day, Judy Garland, Elizabeth Taylor and Grace Kelly and costumes for scores of movies.

Ever stylish and on the cutting edge, Rose had a home in the very swanky Trousdale Estates section of Beverly Hills. In 1963, she commissioned Buff, Straub & Hensman to build her a house in the fancy subdivision made from the estate of Edward Doheny, Jr. Designed explicitly to function as a place where she could stage fashion shows of her designs, mostly around the pool using the glassed-in entry gallery for drama, the pavilion house was renovated in 1999 by Marmol-Radziner and it remains one of Trousdale Estate's highest-regarded, oft-referenced and most iconic homes.

Interestingly, there are many connections of her house to Palm Springs. Developer Paul Trousdale had a home in the desert at Smoke Tree Ranch. The architectural firm Marmol-Radziner's first important project was the

restoration of Richard Neutra's Kaufmann House here. And the Helen Rose house is featured beautifully in the gorgeous new tome on Trousdale Estates written by historian, and now desert-dweller Steven Price.

Naturally, Helen Rose eventually moved to Palm Springs. She was a fixture around town and made many friends, notably with the incomparably beautiful Nelda Linsk. Nelda modeled many a Helen Rose gown and bought them for her own closet. And in another interesting coincidence, Nelda is pictured in the famous Slim Aarons image of the Kaufmann House, "Poolside Gossip" that made the desert even more famous and fashionable.



Helen Rose's Trousdale Estate house, designed by Buff, Straub & Hensman. *(Photo: Courtesy of Steven Price)*

Through the years, Nelda loaned many Helen Rose dresses for charity desert fashion shows. Such gatherings for a lovely luncheon while gorgeous gowns were paraded down a runway or twirled between tables were regular affairs. Often including celebrities, fashion shows were held at the Racquet Club, the Desert Inn and Thunderbird. On February 25th, the Palm Springs Historical

Society is resurrecting the practice at Thunderbird with a show of original Helen Rose gowns (tickets are available at pshistoricalsociety.org).

The “Cat Dress” is among them. As is a diaphanous light gray and pink floor-length gown worn by Grace Kelly in “High Society.” Kelly dances in the gown with Frank Sinatra after escaping her stuffy bachelorette party and her stiffer fiancé before plunging in the pool for a swim with Sinatra. “High Society” was the last film Grace Kelly made before jetting off to marry a real-life prince in Monaco in a Helen Rose dress. Surely there was also champagne and caviar.

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Helen Rose's Trousdale Estate house, designed by Buff, Straub & Hensman. *(Photo: Courtesy of Steven Price)*