

EDWARD STEICHEN

American, born Bivange, Luxembourg, 1879, died Redding, CT, 1973

Greta Garbo, Hollywood, 1928

Gelatin silver print, 9 5/8 × 7 5/8 inches

Gift of Richard and Jackie Hollander in memory of Ellyn Lee Hollander, 2019.29.22

At the height of her popularity in the 1920s, actress Greta Garbo (1905–1990) was dubbed “La Divine,” “the Swedish sphinx,” the woman with “perfect” features. Her frequently photographed face became her defining trademark and remains more famous than her movies. The emerging star system by which Hollywood studios created and managed movie performers in the 1910s and 20s relied on still photography and fan magazines to turn their contract actors into icons. At the same time, photographers Edward Steichen, Alfred Stieglitz, and others advocated for photography’s recognition as an independent art form.

This image is from a series of photographs Steichen took of Garbo for *Vanity Fair* to promote her film *A Woman of Affairs* (Dir. Clarence Brown, 1928). Her face is positioned in the center of the image, surrounded by diffuse light and shadows. The thick material of her dark dress creates an arc around her face and spills beyond the lower edges of the frame. Her posture creates a sense of disconnect between her well-lit face and the dark fabric cloaking her body. In an almost child-like gesture, and reportedly at Steichen’s request, she covers her hair and her ears with her hands in a manner that both accentuates and shelters her features. Garbo looks straight into the camera with a pensive, withdrawn expression that appears counterintuitive to the staged image’s composition and to the conventions of Hollywood’s star iconography. This ambiguity speaks to the lingering fascination that surrounds Garbo, the actress, the star, the myth. Roland Barthes summed it up most pointedly in *Mythologies*: “Garbo still belongs to that moment in cinema when capturing the human face still plunged audiences into the deepest ecstasy, when one literally lost oneself in a human image.”

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- 1 Nationalmuseum, “New Acquisition: Greta Garbo by Edward Steichen,” press release, March 16, 2018, <https://www.nationalmuseum.se/en/nyf%C3%B6rv%C3%A4rv-greta-garbo-av-edward-steichen>.
- 2 Roland Barthes, “The Face of Garbo,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 56–57.