

FIT FOR A PRINCESS!

The Magnificent Wardrobe and Jewels of the late HRH Princess Lilian of Belgium to be sold at Sotheby's, Olympia



BEAUTY, elegance and style are three words that epitomised HRH Princess Lilian of Belgium. Her fashion collection, which included some of the greatest names in haute couture from Christian Dior, Yves Saint Laurent, Jacques Fath to Givenchy and Balenciaga, will now be offered in a sale appropriately entitled 'Fit For A Princess' on Monday, May 19, 2003 at Sotheby's, Olympia in West London.

The collection, which was maintained to perfection and stored in more than 20 wardrobes, features exquisite items capturing the distinctive styles of the early 50s, groovy 60s and classic 70s. With more than 200 pairs of shoes, 100 hats, 400 pairs of gloves, riding habits and boots in every colour and fabric, handbags by Hermès, pairs of silk stockings in original wrappers and delicate handkerchiefs, no detail was considered too small.

Kerry Taylor, specialist in charge of the sale, said: "Princess Lilian had close relationships with all of her couturiers and their vendeuses, and was one of Dior's first clients. This combination resulted in a splendid wardrobe and I doubt I will ever see another collection which is so diverse, stylish and in such pristine condition. The quality of the gowns is astonishing and reflects an age of elegance when a woman's primary interest was simply to look good and to go shopping. As Consort to King Leopold III of Belgium, it was important that she dressed to befit her status and wore lavish gowns for official occasions. Once worn, these gowns were set aside and carefully maintained by her maid, Madame Jeanine.

"Although the collection includes dozens of museum-quality pieces such as an Yves Saint Laurent for Christian Dior silver satin gown dating from 1958 (est: £5,000-6,000), there are many affordable and understated clothes by Givenchy and Balenciaga with estimates starting at just £200. An example of a very wearable ensemble is a delightful lemon wool suit by Chanel, with ikat silk contrasts, dating from the late 1950s (est: £600-800)."

The collection, which is estimated to realise in excess of £200,000 is being offered for sale by Princess Lilian's family. Her three children came into contact with the world of couture at an early age as illustrated by Princess Maria Esmerelda's be-ribboned satin christening jacket by the celebrated French couturier, Jacques Fath, in 1956 (est: £200-300).



Princess Maria-Esmeralda said: "I have wonderful memories of visiting Paris several times a year with my mother. We would leave Brussels in the car and my mother would spend the morning at Christian Dior in Avenue de Montaigne. This was the beginning of the 60s and I was six or seven years old, it was a magical environment for a young girl. I clearly remember my amazement as the Dior staff attended her, their arms heavy with precious embroidered cloths. After trying the clothes on, we would lunch together at Piazza. Amusingly, the same ritual would happen at Chanel, Givenchy and Balenciaga."

Princess Lilian's collection of jewels provided the perfect accompaniment to her stunning evening wear and some 60 lots will be offered in Sotheby's sale. Highlights include a gold and enamel bracelet by Schlumberger, in its original box, estimated at £6,000-12,000; a gold chain, also in its original box, by Cartier (est: £2,500-3,500) and a pair of gold and diamond earclips, by Cartier, which is estimated at £2,000-3,000.

Princess Lilian of Belgium died on June 7, 2002, aged 85. She was the second wife of King Leopold III of Belgium and stepmother of the present King, Albert II. She married Leopold on September 11, 1941, and bore him three children. She was later created Princess de Rethy, but never became Queen herself. Public controversy over the marriage was one of the reasons why Leopold was forced to abdicate in 1950.



She was born Mary Lilian Baels in Highbury, North London, on November 28, 1916, and was one of eight children of Hendrik Baels, a prosperous attorney and fish merchant from Ostend, and his wife Anna-Maria Devisscher, who were living in England during the First World War. In 1926, Hendrik Baels became Belgian Minister of Agriculture and was subsequently appointed Governor (royal representative) of the province of West Flanders. Mary Lilian Baels was educated at the College of the Sacred Heart at Ostend, but returned to London to attend a finishing school in Cavendish Square, where she was presented at court to King George V and Queen Mary. She

was an excellent pupil and was fluent in English, French, German and Dutch (the language of her native Flanders) as well as excelling in sport – particularly swimming, golf and country pursuits.

She was a regular visitor to the Knokke-le-Zoute golf course and in 1938 the young and beautiful Lilian attracted the attention of King Leopold and they became frequent golf partners. His first wife, Queen Astrid, died in a car accident in 1935 and he was left to raise their three children: Joséphine Charlotte (who became Grand Duchess of Luxembourg), Baudouin (who in

1951 became King of Belgium) and Albert (the present King).

Leopold was immediately attracted to Lilian who was described by the author Charles d'Ydewalle as being "as beautiful as a Greek night". Leopold and Lilian married in secret in September 1941 and it was not until the following December that the marriage became public knowledge. Shortly before the liberation of Belgium by the Allies in September 1944, the Germans deported Leopold, his wife and four children (Alexander – son to Leopold and Lilian - was born in 1942) to Germany. They were liberated after the German surrender in May 1945.



With the war over, Leopold and his family moved to Switzerland, spending summer holidays in the South of France, where they are said to have played golf with the Duke of Windsor. Meanwhile Belgium was left in the care of King Leopold's brother, Prince Charles, who served as Regent. Political problems prevented King Leopold from returning to Belgium until July 1950 and,

though he was endorsed by a referendum, left-wing inspired rioting persuaded him to abdicate as soon as his son Baudouin came of age in July 1951. Princess Lilian gave birth to her two daughters in the 1950s - Marie-Christine was born in 1951, and her sister Maria-Esmeralda was born five years later [pictured above].

When King Baudouin married Dona Fabiola Mora y Aragon, the present Queen Fabiola in 1960, Leopold, Lilian and their three children moved out of Laeken to Argenteuil, near the forest of Soignes at Waterloo.

In later years, King Leopold and his wife were rarely seen in public. Princess Lilian's last official appearance was at the funeral of King Leopold III in 1983.

In September, Sotheby's Amsterdam will offer paintings, fine silver, furniture and works of art from Château d'Argenteuil – the home of Princess Lilian for many years.

Sotheby's 'Fit for a Princess' sale will include clothing and jewels by Pucci, Cardin, Cartier and van Cleef & Arpels from other vendors.

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