



Two new exhibitions on **MARILYN MONROE** shed new light on a Hollywood legend whose star burns as brightly as ever

Marilyn UNCOVERED

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HATS OFF TO HER
A 1958 publicity shot and (below) her wedding to Arthur Miller two years earlier



Beautiful, breathtaking, talented and tragic, Marilyn Monroe was – and remains – one of the most famous faces of all time. She’s an enduring sex symbol, her image so synonymous with Hollywood’s golden era.

Now, more than half a century after her death, in what would’ve been her 90th birthday year, two exhibitions have landed in rural Victoria and NSW. Combined, it’s the largest collection of Marilyn memorabilia ever assembled.

“The fascination with her just doesn’t seem to end,” says Tansy Curtin, curator of the *Marilyn Monroe* exhibition at Bendigo Art Gallery.

“She would’ve been 90 this year, so it’s a long time since she died but she continues to grow in our estimation.

“We’re at the point where a lot of her contemporaries are gone and we no longer have that direct connection with her, so it’s really important that we record the collective memories of this icon.”

Born Norma Jeane Mortenson in Los Angeles on June 1, 1926, her mother was emotionally unstable and frequently confined to an asylum, so a young Norma Jeane was raised by a succession of foster parents and in an orphanage.

At the age of 16, she married a fellow worker in an aircraft factory, but they were divorced a few years later.

Taking up modelling in 1944, she signed a contract for \$125 per week at 20th Century Fox two years later. It was at this time Norma Jeane transformed herself from ordinary girl next door into



HITS AND MYTHS
Images such as these – promoting her 1953 film *Niagara* (left) and preparing for her role in *How to Marry a Millionaire* (right) – were integral to Marilyn’s mystique



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TEXT: PAUL LEWART; PICTURES: 1. THE HAT SITTING 1958 BY CARL PERUTZ; COURTESY PETE LIVINGSTON/WWW.PERUTZ.NET; 2. WARDROBE TEST FOR HOW TO MARRY A MILLIONAIRE © 1953 AND 2016 TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX; 3. PUBLICITY IMAGE FOR NIAGARA © 1953 AND 2016 TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX; ALAMY; GETTY IMAGES

the most glamorous screen goddess. Marilyn Monroe was born, and the rest, as they say, is history.

“She had a difficult childhood,” Tansy says. “But at the same time she managed to transcend that – becoming a model and then an actor, despite being told by Hollywood execs that she wasn’t photogenic and had no charisma, which is crazy considering we see her now as being one of the most photogenic people of all time!”

Despite a wobbly start in Hollywood, her acting career skyrocketed her to mega-stardom in the 1950s, thanks to her sex-symbol roles in the likes of 1953’s *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *How to Marry a Millionaire*.

One year later she did just that, marrying baseball great Joe DiMaggio, but – as with all of Marilyn’s marriages – it was short-lived and they divorced just nine months later.

In 1955, Marilyn showcased her talent for comedy in *The Seven Year Itch*, a film that produced one of the most memorable movie scenes of all time – her white dress billowing over the subway grate.

Bendigo Art Gallery’s partnership for the exhibition with 20th Century Fox means access to the film studio’s archives is unparalleled.

Twenty of Marilyn’s film costumes will be on display – including that white dress from *The Seven Year Itch* and the shimmering gold gown from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* – in addition to studio portraits,



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‘Marilyn was far from being a one-trick pony’

wardrobe test photographs and rare film posters.

There’s another side to the collection – a side that contrasts starkly with Marilyn’s public persona.

Amid the lavish costumes and glamour shots are a raft of items from the star’s personal wardrobe alongside day-to-day objects, such as letters, make-up boxes and, of course, her signature red lipstick – items never seen before in Australia.

“I made a point of including lots of personal items from her private life,”

Tansy says. “Visitors will get to see the movie costumes – which she was told to wear by film execs – alongside her personal wardrobe.

“You get a real insight into who Norma Jeane was, versus Marilyn Monroe, the Hollywood construct. Her personal clothes are much more modest and simple.”

The exhibition does a lot to dispel the generalised perception of Marilyn as the “ditz blonde”. In reality, the screen star was an avid reader (the exhibition also contains books from her library) and knew how to play the Hollywood “game” – even establishing her own production company, which was an amazing feat for a woman of that time.

“I think it’s really interesting,” Tansy says. “She’s so often described as this superficial blonde bombshell, but the fact that she actually worked really hard to increase her knowledge reveals a completely different side to her.”

A prized item in the collection is Marilyn’s script for *The Seven Year Itch*, which is filled with her personal annotations – notes on how to finish a scene and insights into the character she was playing.

“You see through the notes in her script the amount of time and effort she spent trying to hone her acting



HEAVEN SCENT
Marilyn on the set of *The Seven Year Itch* in 1954, and promoting Chanel No.5 in 1960



skills,” Tansy says. “She was far from being a one-trick pony.”

While sorting the reality from the public myth is a work in progress, the sad end to Marilyn’s life is undeniable.

By 1961, she was beset by depression and living as a virtual recluse. However, on May 19, 1962, she attended an early birthday celebration for John F. Kennedy at New York’s Madison Square Garden, where her *Happy Birthday* rendition for “Mr President” became legendary.

Then – less than three months later – on August 5, 1962, she was found dead at her LA home, lying naked on her bed, face down, with the phone in one hand. After

a brief investigation, during which an autopsy found a fatal level of sedatives in her system, police concluded that her death was “probable suicide”. The actress was just 36.

But in death, Marilyn would become even more famous than she was in life. Her allure soared and her image was immortalised time and again in every possible medium. From Andy Warhol’s pop-art prints to her pouting face

adorning everything from T-shirts to mugs and shower curtains, the global appetite for Marilyn is still insatiable. For decades, artists have used her as inspiration and her story has continued to provide fodder for producers, including the most recent big-screen biopic, *My Week With Marilyn*, starring Michelle Williams in the title role.

It’s this continued fascination that is the subject of the second Marilyn Monroe exhibition in Australia,

Marilyn: Celebrating an American Icon, at the Murray Art Museum Albury (MAMA) in Albury, NSW.

“The larger part of our exhibition contains artworks that have been produced after her death,” MAMA curator Bianca Acimovic says. “We’re looking at Marilyn the muse.”

The collection features photos and videos of the star which capture both her public and private persona, alongside more than 100 paintings from artists including Warhol and Australian Richard Larter, in addition to various other Marilyn-inspired prints and

‘We’re interested in the darker side of Marilyn’

statement fashion pieces, including one by designer Jenny Kee.

A large part of the Marilyn mystique relates to conspiracy theories surrounding her death. While officially ruled a suicide, it has oft been disputed and the finger pointed repeatedly at John and Robert Kennedy, the brothers at the very heart of the US political establishment, with whom she allegedly had affairs. It’s the unknown details of her final hours that add to the mythology, and it’s a subject covered in this exhibition.

“We’re interested in the darker side of Marilyn,” Bianca says. “The tragic personal life and the mystery surrounding her death – we all want to solve it, but it’s likely no-one will ever really know.”

Conspiracy theories aside, what is it about her that still grips the world half a century after her death? And would we still be as interested if her life hadn’t been cut so short? Bianca doesn’t think so.

“We have a natural interest in the lives of celebrities who have died young – Princess Diana, Audrey Hepburn, James Dean... and, of course, Marilyn,” she says. “But would we be as enthralled if she’d survived into old age? I don’t think so.”

While her legend is a mix of fact and fiction, the fascination with the eternal leading lady shows no signs of waning.

Happy birthday, Marilyn. ●

Where they’re on

● *Marilyn Monroe* will be on display at Bendigo Art Gallery until July 10. For more details, visit www.bendigoartgallery.com.au

● *Marilyn: Celebrating an American Icon* is at the

Murray Art Museum Albury until May 8. For more details, visit mamalbury.com.au

