

From Exile to Avant-Garde: The Life of Princess Natalie Paley

Exhibition Information for Volunteers

On View: June 7, 2025-January 4, 2026

To better equip volunteers to answer questions and promote the exhibition, this document is provided in advance of the exhibition opening. It includes the interpretive label text that visitors will encounter, along with additional information related to the exhibition displays. Please note that minor edits may still be made to the text prior to opening. Thumbnail images included here are for reference only and do not appear on exhibition labels unless otherwise noted.

The exhibition *From Exile to Avant-Garde: The Life of Princess Natalie Paley* opens to the public in the Adirondack Building on Saturday, June 7, 2025.

Donor Panel

FROM EXILE TO AVANT-GARDE: THE LIFE OF PRINCESS NATALIE PALEY

is supported by

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Introduction Panel

FROM EXILE TO AVANT-GARDE: THE LIFE OF PRINCESS NATALIE PALEY

This exhibition explores the influential life of Princess Natalie Paley (1905–1981), an exiled member of the Russian imperial family and twentieth-century confidante of numerous avant-garde cultural figures, among them Jean Cocteau, Noël Coward, and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Over her lifetime, the princess was known by many names, including those she acquired when she married twice, but she was forever “Natasha” (diminutive of the Russian Natalia) to her family and close friends. Unfolding here in these galleries are the complicated experiences—cinematically brimming with tragedies, intrigue, and elegance—of a woman often footnoted in the histories we know, but seldom the lead.

In 2022, Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens acquired a collection containing more than three hundred objects and mementos from Paley’s family. The acquisition complements the museum’s collection established by Marjorie Merriweather Post (1887–1973), who obtained pieces from many branches of the Russian imperial family. Beyond

Post's keen interest and her dedication to collect and preserve the lost artisanship and culture of imperial Russia, we can imagine that she would have admired Natalie's tenacity and her ability to adapt and reinvent herself. The princess emerged from her tumultuous, even traumatic, beginnings to engage in careers in fashion, the arts, and business while cultivating and treasuring connections to numerous friends and family.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the contributions and guidance shared by French researcher Béatrice Cotte, and the special objects lent by the family of John C. Wilson. Other important loans, acquisitions, and gifts augment the stories of Natalie and her family.

Unless otherwise noted, objects on display were bequeathed to Hillwood by Marjorie Post in 1973. All images and archival documents are from Hillwood's Archives and Special Collections unless otherwise cited.



Photography without flash is welcome

Section Panel



(Image on label)

PRINCESS NATALIE'S PARENTS: A FORBIDDEN LOVE STORY

Born in 1905 in Paris, Princess Natalie Paley was the daughter of Grand Duke Paul, an uncle of the last emperor of Russia, and his second wife, Olga, both featured in the nearby photographs. Born Olga Karnovich, she was married to Erich von Pistohlkors, an officer in the grand duke's regiment, and a mother of three when she met Paul, who was still grieving following the death of his first wife in 1891. Paul and Olga fell in love and began an affair in 1893; four years later, their first child, Vladimir, was born.

Despite the strong opposition of the imperial family, the couple managed to marry abroad in 1902 after Olga's divorce. Emperor Nicholas II exiled the couple and their son from Russia. Olga's lower social status meant that despite the legal status of their union, Grand Duke Paul's titles and privileges did not transfer to her or any of their issue—a morganatic marriage. Luckily, Paul had the foresight to transfer some of his fortune to the west in advance. In 1904, thanks to Paul's efforts, the prince regent of Bavaria granted Olga the title of Countess Olga von Hohenfelsen; this also allowed her son to be known as Count Vladimir von Hohenfelsen. (More than a decade later, she became Princess Paley, and her children with Paul were also called prince and Princess.

Wall Panel

"When his beloved companion was beside him, looking at him with tenderness, he needed nothing else: for him, the cherished eyes contained the universe."

—A friend of the couple observed about Paul and Olga.



(Image on label)

Private Collection

Grand Duke Paul Alexandrovich, before 1893. Photographed by W. Jasvoin Studio, St. Petersburg.



(Image on label)

Private Collection

Olga von Pistohlkors, ca. 1893. Photographed by A. Pasetti Studio, St. Petersburg.

Paul and Olga may have given these photos to each other as tokens of their early affection. This assumption is even more likely given that the photograph of Olga bears these handwritten words taken from a fashionable song of the era: "My thoughts, my feelings and my songs and my strengths. All are for you!"

Case Panel



Regimental desk clock

Fabergé (Russian, 1842–1918)

Julius Rappoport, workmaster (Lithuanian, 1851–1917, active in Russia)

St. Petersburg, ca. 1896

Silver gilt, enamel, copper, gilt metal, glass, white onyx, marble

(12.153)

Grand Duke Paul received this Empire-style desk clock and inkwell adorned with his monogram from the Officers of the Horse Guards Regiment in 1896 to mark the end of his command. Erich von Pistohlkors, a cavalry captain, is among the presenting officers listed on the back of the clock. His wife, Olga, had been the grand duke's lover for some three years at the time of this clock's Presentation.



(Image on label)

© Georges de Pistohlkors Papers, Holy Trinity Orthodox Seminary / Russian History Museum, Jordanville, NY

Erich A. von Pistohlkors, ca. 1900.

Timeline Panel

PRINCESS NATALIE'S FAMILY TREE AND TIMELINE



(Image on label)

Emperor Alexander II of Russia (r. 1855–81) married Empress Maria Alexandrovna (1824–1880) in 1841. Their son, Grand Duke Paul (1860–1919) married Grand Duchess Alexandra (1870–1891) in 1889 and Olga Karnovich (von Hohenfelsen) (1865–1929) in 1902. Olga Karnovich (von Hohenfelsen) had previously been married to Erich von Pistohlkors (1853–1935) in 1884, but they divorced in 1902. With Grand Duchess Alexandra, Grand Duke Paul had two children: Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna (1890–1958) and Grand Duke Dimitri Pavlovich (1891–1942). With his second wife, Olga Karnovich, Grand Duke Paul had three children: Prince Vladimir (1897–1918), Princess Irina (1903–1990) and Princess Natalie (1905–1981). Princess Irina married Prince Feodor of Russia (1898–1968) in 1923, and they were divorced in 1936. She later married Count Hubert de Monbrison (1892–1981) in 1950. Princess Natalie married Lucien Lelong (1889–1958) in 1927 and they divorced in 1937. She married John C. Wilson (1899–1961) in 1937.

Timeline Panel: 1850



(Image on label)

1855–81

Reign of Emperor Alexander II and Empress Maria Alexandrovna, Princess Natalie's grandparents, in Russia.



(Image on label)

Photographed by Alex Braun



(Image on label)

Photographed by Edward Owen

ST. PETERSBURG



(Image on label)

Private Collection

1860

Birth of Grand Duke Paul, Princess Natalie's father.

1865

Birth of Olga Karnovich, Princess Natalie's mother.

1881

Assassination of Emperor Alexander II.



(Image on label)

Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens, photographed by Mark Finkenstaedt

1884

Marriage of Olga Karnovich to Erich von Pistohlkors. They have three surviving children, later Princess Natalie's half-siblings.

1881-94

Reign of Emperor Alexander III and Empress Maria Feodorovna, Princess Natalie's uncle and aunt, in Russia.



(Image on label)

Private Collection

1889-1891

Marriage of Grand Duke Paul to his first wife, Grand Duchess Alexandra. They have two children. She dies shortly after childbirth.



(Image on label)

Private Collection

1893

Olga von Pistohlkors (née Karnovich) and Grand Duke Paul fall in love while Olga is married to her first husband.



(Image on label)

Private Collection

1897

Birth of Vladimir, the first child of Grand Duke Paul and the still-married Olga von Pistohlkors. He is Princess Natalie's brother.

LIVORNO, ITALY

1902

Olga von Pistohlkors is granted a divorce. But Grand Duke Paul breaks his promise not to marry her. They do so in a church in Italy. It is a morganatic marriage; she is of much lower social rank. Emperor Nicholas II condemns them to exile. They each lose custody of their children from their previous spouse.

Timeline Panel: 1900

1894-1917



(Image on label)

Photographed by Edward Owen.

Reign of Emperor Nicholas II and Empress Alexandra Feodorovna, Princess Natalie's cousins, in Russia.

1903–1914

PARIS



(Image on label)

Private collection

1903-1914

Grand Duke Paul, Olga, and their son Vladimir live in exile in Paris. They entertain Parisian society in their mansion, support the local luxury goods industry, and build a significant art collection.

1903:

Birth of Irina, Princess Natalie's sister.



(Image on label)

Private Collection

1904:

The prince regent of Bavaria grants Olga the title of Countess von Hohenfelsen. Her son becomes Count Vladimir von Hohenfelsen.

1905:

Birth of Princess Natalie.

ST. PETERSBURG/PETROGRAD

1905:

Emperor Nicholas II authorizes Grand Duke Paul's travel to Russia for the funeral of his brother Grand Duke Sergei, who was assassinated in February.

1907:

Emperor Nicholas II allows Olga to return to Russia- but for only a short visit; he does not end her exile until the following year.

1914:

A few weeks before the outbreak of the First World War, the family moves back to Russia and settles in Tsarskoye Selo, on the outskirts of St. Petersburg (soon renamed the more Russian-sounding Petrograd), in a new home completely designed in the Parisian taste. Grand Duke Paul and Vladimir serve in the army.



(Image on label)

Private Collection

1915:

Emperor Nicholas II grants Olga the title of Princess Paley, and her children are named prince or princess. The name came from one of Olga's mother's side ancestors.

1917:

The Russian Revolution brings the empire to an end.

1918:

The Bolsheviks arrest Grand Duke Paul and his son Prince Vladimir.

The new authorities confiscate the family home known as the Paley Palace in Tsarskoye Selo and transform it into a museum.

Later that year, the Bolsheviks execute Prince Vladimir and other members of the imperial family in Siberia

1919:

The Bolsheviks execute Grand Duke Paul and other grand dukes in the Peter and Paul Fortress prison in Petrograd.

Olga joins her two daughters in Finland, where she learns that her son had also been murdered in Russia.

1921:

Olga and her two daughters eventually settle in France.



(Image on label)

1923-1928:

The museum established in the family home (the Paley Palace) is closed, its contents deaccessioned and sold to an agent by the Soviet authorities.

Timeline Panel: 1925



(Image on label)

1927:

At age twenty-one, Princess Natalie marries French couturier Lucien Lelong (1889–1958). Natalie begins her career in the Parisian fashion and artistic world and develops a close relationship with dancer and choreographer Serge Lifar, author Paul Morand, and multifaceted artist Jean Cocteau. Natalie and Lelong divorce in 1937.



(Image on label)

Bibliothèque nationale de France

1928:

Princess Natalie makes her Vogue Paris debut as a model. She is regularly featured in fashion magazines from now on.



(Image on label)

1929:

The Paley collection is auctioned in London by the agent who bought it from the Soviet government. Princess Olga Paley loses her trial for restitution. She manages to buy a few pieces back. Olga dies in Paris.



(Image on label)

Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY

1931:

Princess Natalie sits in France for painter, friend, and fellow Russian émigré Pavel Tchelitchew. Several Tchelitchew portraits and studies of Paley are recorded, one of which is on view in this exhibition. Meanwhile, Marjorie Post hosts a reception in her New York apartment for Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna, Natalie's half sister.



(Image on label)

L'Épervier by Marcel L'Herbier ©Les Documents cinématographiques, Paris

1933:

Natalie premieres in the French film L'Épervier, directed by Marcel L'Herbier. She is featured in six movies. Her costars include Charles Boyer, Maurice Chevalier, Katharine Hepburn, and Cary Grant. Her short career in the movie industry brings her to the United States but ends in 1936.



(Image on label)

The Estate of Oliver Messel, CBE. © National Trust / Charles Thomas

1934:

Princess Natalie sits for painter and designer Oliver Messel. The portrait is on view in this exhibition.

NEW YORK



(Image on label)

Source: John C. Wilson Archive



(Image on label)



(Image on label)

1936-1938

Marjorie Post travels to Russia with her husband Joseph E. Davies, the US ambassador to the Soviet Union (1936–38) and to Belgium (1938–39). She acquires the nucleus of her Russian imperial art collection in Russia (mainly Moscow and St. Petersburg), Ukraine (Kyiv), Poland, Latvia, Estonia, and Finland, including many objects directly related to the Romanovs, the former rulers of the Russian Empire.

1935-1937:

Princess Natalie is recorded as a guest at Pebbles, the Fairfield, Connecticut, country house of American theater director and producer John C. Wilson (1899–1961). They marry in 1937. The couple entertain American and international society in their Connecticut country home (until 1957) and New York apartment. The long list of guests includes friend and playwright Noël Coward; photographers George Hoyningen-Huene, Horst P. Horst, and Cecil Beaton; fashion designers Elsa Schiaparelli and Christian Dior; jewelry designers Jean Schlumberger and Fulco di Verdura; actors Vivien Leigh and Tallulah Bankhead; and many others. In the 1940s, Natalie nurtures close relationships with authors Antoine de Saint-Exupéry and Erich Maria Remarque.

Timeline Panel: 1940



(Image on label)

Source: Jerome Zerbe Photographs and Papers. General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

1940-1941:

Princess Natalie establishes a short-lived New York fashion atelier with costume designer and fellow Russian émigré Barbara Karinska and friend and fashion editor Niki de Gunzburg. American couturier Mainbocher relocates to New York from France in 1940. Princess Natalie gets a managerial position and becomes essential to the business.

WASHINGTON, DC

1940:

Princess Natalie visits Washington, DC, during the cherry blossom season.



(Image on label)

Photographed by Edward Owen.

1949:

In London, Marjori Post acquires several pieces of Sèvres porcelain from the collection of Princess Olga Paley.



(Image on label)

Photographed by Edward Owen.

1957:

In New York, Marjorie Post acquires the Fabergé regimental desk clock from the collection of Grand Duke Paul.

1961:

Princess Natalie gives a decorative mirror to the White House, and it is still in that collection today.



(Image on label)

Photographed by Mark Finkenzaed

1970:

In Paris, Marjorie Post acquires the Alexandre and Berthe Popoff glass collection, including several pieces from Grand Duke Paul's collection.

NEW YORK

1981:

Death of Princess Natalie.

PARIS

1996:

French author and translator Jean-Noël Liaut publishes the first biography entirely dedicated to Princess Natalie.

WASHINGTON, DC



(Image on label)

1998:

Hillwood acquires a piece of Russian porcelain from the collection of Princess Olga Paley.

2018:

The first book dedicated to the history of the Paley collection is published in France.



(Image on label)

2022-2025:

Hillwood acquires the Paley collection. Since this major acquisition of more than three hundred items, the museum has obtained additional documents and artworks related to the Paley family, which for the most part are on view in the exhibition and the mansion. Some are featured in the museum's publication dedicated to the Paley collection, the family history, and Princess Natalie Paley. This exhibition is the first devoted to her.



Image on label

BELLE ÉPOQUE PARIS

After their elopement and wedding in Livorno, Italy, in 1902, Grand Duke Paul and Olga von Pistohlkors traveled to Florence for an extended honeymoon. "The weather is mild and calm, and so is my soul. . . . We leave tonight. . . . I adore my Paul," wrote Olga in her diary. After spending time in France and Germany, the couple chose France as their new home in 1903. A French diplomat wrote of her, "She soon made friends, for themorganatic marriage heated people's imaginations, and the grand duke was pitied for his exile, but [the French] admired the woman who had chained him. The mystery of their love was revealed to Parisians."

Olga embraced the Parisian lifestyle, loved fashion and jewelry, collected art, and mingled with the local high society. Under her title as Countess Olga von Hohenfelsen, she appears in French author Marcel Proust's *Le Temps retrouvé*, the final book in his multivolume novel now known as *In Search of Lost Time*, as a close friend of Madame de Guermantes. Indeed, Proust used most of Olga's acquaintances, though calling only a few by their real names or titles, in shaping the characters for his monumental work



Portrait of Olga von Pistohlkors

Konstantin Makovsky, painter (Russian, 1839–1915)

St. Petersburg, 1886

Oil paint, linen, wood, gesso, gilding

Museum purchase, 2022 (2022.2.1)

PRINCESS NATALIE'S STYLISH MOTHER AND FATHER

Described as a "jewelry fanatic," Olga supported the most fashionable Parisian creators, following trends with style. Among her suppliers were the jeweler Cartier and fashion designers Worth and Paquin.

Growing up, Princess Natalie absorbed her mother's style in fashion and Parisian elegance as well as her father's charm and sophistication. They both nurtured her taste and might have inspired her future path in the fashion industry. While the extraordinary wardrobe and jewelry collection of Natalie's mother has been dispersed, it is well-documented and is illustrated here through archival documents, heirlooms from Natalie's relatives, and pieces from the period.

These photographs from the Cartier archives showcase Olga's exceptional jewelry collection. Most of them were confiscated during the Russian Revolution, dismantled, melted down, and sold. Natalie's childhood memories of Olga's elegantly worn, elaborate jewelry most likely inspired her own taste for this art. Decades later, Natalie wore jewels designed by her friends and forward-thinking jewelers Jean Schlumberger and Fulco di Verdura, on view in this exhibition



(Image on label)

Cartier Archives, Paris © Cartier.

Tiara by Cartier, Paris, 1911. Made of platinum and diamonds, it was sold to Countess Olga von Hohenfelsen in 1911. Photograph from the original gelatin silver bromide negative on glass.

Pearl and diamond devant de corsage (or stomacher) by Cartier, 1908. Commissioned by Countess Olga von Hohenfelsen. Photograph from the original gelatin silver bromide negative on glass.

Countess Olga von Hohenfelsen is wearing these two jewels in the nearby photo. She paired them with an elegant dress by Worth for a costumed ball in Paris in 1912.

Pendant by Cartier, Paris, 1909. Made of platinum, turquoise, and diamonds, it was sold to Grand Duke Paul in 1909. Photograph from the original gelatin silver bromide negative on glass.



Evening dress

House of Worth (French, 1858–1956)

Paris, 1888

Silk brocade, silk satin, silk chiffon, linen lace

Loan from the DAR Museum, Washington, DC, gift of A. Newbold Richardson

This lavish dress echoes the ones that Princess Natalie's mother, Olga, wore in the late 1800s and early 1900s and the style that made the fashion house of Worth famous worldwide. Established in Paris in 1858 by British-born couturier Charles Frederick Worth, the house quickly embodied French high fashion and style. The success of the firm continued with his sons, Jean-Philippe and Gaston-Lucien, the former in charge of design and the latter of financial management. Jean-Philippe became close to Olga and recommended her to artists and designers. His daughter and nephew were married to Cartier family members. Cartier, on rue de la Paix like Worth and other luxury goods creators, became one of Olga's favorite suppliers. She visited the famous jeweler regularly during outings for shopping, fittings, and antiquing. "After a shopping expedition, she'd come home laden with neatly tied packages and cardboard boxes, which she'd throw on a chair by the windows," recalled Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna in 1937. The nearby photos of Olga feature her in elegant outfits most likely designed by Worth or Paquin, another successful French fashion house of the period and, interestingly, one of Marjorie Post's suppliers as well.

This wall:



(framed replica)

Countess Olga von Hohenfelsen, sitting elegantly in the conservatory of her Parisian mansion, ca. 1911. Photograph. Private collection.

Adjoining wall, left to right:



(framed replica)

Countess Olga von Hohenfelsen is dressed in her costume by Worth and covered in her jewels by Cartier for a masquerade ball at the Yturbes' home in Paris in 1912. Studio Boissonnas & Taponier. Photograph. Cartier, Paris, Documentation.



(framed replica)

Countess Olga von Hohenfelsen wears her diamond jewelry and pearls, ca. 1905. Photograph. Private collection.



(framed replica)

Countess Olga von Hohenfelsen in 1904. *Les Modes*, 1905. Private collection.

The jewels in this rare selection date from the late 1800s to early 1900s, when Princess Natalie's family lived in France and Russia. Some jewels were saved from confiscation after the Russian Revolution, while Natalie acquired others after she, her mother, and her sister were able to escape to safety.



Brooch

Fabergé (Russian, 1842–1918)

St. Petersburg, 1899–1908

Chrysoprase, diamonds, silver-topped gold

John C. Wilson Archive

According to family tradition, Grand Duke Paul presented this beautiful brooch to Olga on the birth of their daughter Natalie in 1905. Chrysoprase is prized for its hardness and green hue. In Russia, the stone is associated with December, the birth month of both Olga and Natalie.



Bar brooch

Vladimir Finikov, jeweler (Russian, active 1880–1908)

St. Petersburg, early 1900s

Diamonds, pearls, gold

Loan from Ilya Brown, goddaughter of Natalie Paley



Brooch, bracelet, earrings from a set

France, 1880s

Gold, enamel, diamonds

Loan from private family collection



Starburst hat pin

France or Russia, 1860s–1900s

Gold, sapphires

John C. Wilson Archive



Flower ring

Sweden, 1947

Diamonds, pearls, platinum

Loan from Iya Brown, goddaughter of Natalie Paley



Easter egg

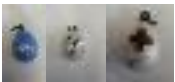
Fabergé (Russian, 1842–1918)

August Hollming, workmaster (Finnish, 1854–1913, active in Russia)

St. Petersburg, early 1900s

Gold, enamel

Loan from Iya Brown, goddaughter of Natalie Paley



Three Easter eggs

Fabergé (Russian, 1842–1918)

Feodor Afanasiev, workmaster (Russian, 1870–1927)

St. Petersburg, early 1900s

Gold, enamel

Loans from Iya Brown, goddaughter of Natalie Paley



Easter egg

Attributed to Ivan Butuzov (Russian, active 1895–1917)

Moscow, early 1900s

Gold, enamel

Loan from Iya Brown, goddaughter of Natalie Paley



Easter egg

Russia, early 1900s

Gold, enamel, diamond

Loan from Iya Brown, goddaughter of Natalie Paley



Two Easter eggs

Russia, early 1900s

Gold, enamel

Loans from Iya Brown, goddaughter of Natalie Paley



Easter egg

Russia, early 1900s

Silver, sapphire

Loan from Iya Brown, goddaughter of Natalie Paley



Easter egg

Russia, 1900s

Glass (?), metal

Loan from Iya Brown, goddaughter of Natalie Paley



Two Easter eggs

Russia, 1900s

Painted wood, metal

Loans from Iya Brown, goddaughter of Natalie Paley



Crescent brooch

France or Russia, 1860s–1900s

Diamonds, sapphires, gold

John C. Wilson Archive



Ring and brooch

France or Russia, 1860s–1900s

Enamel, diamonds, pearls, gold

John C. Wilson Archive

Princess Natalie gifted these eggs, nearby bar brooch, and ring to Iya Brown, her goddaughter, whose grandmother was the princess's close friend Lady Iya Abdy (1897–1993), another Russian émigré, actor, and fashion icon.

THE FAMILY HOME IN PARIS

After Princess Natalie's parents were married in 1902, Emperor Nicholas II banished them from Russia, as they had expected. Grand Duke Paul and Olga lived for about a year in Italy, France, and Germany before deciding to settle in Paris in late 1903 and leasing an apartment for themselves and their growing family. Following the birth of two daughters, Irina in 1903 and Natalie in 1905, the couple bought an elegant mansion in Boulogne, on the outskirts of Paris. Originally built in 1860–61 for the widow of a prominent Russian aristocrat in the Yusupov family, the house stood empty for years. Then, in early 1907, it was completely renovated for Paul and Olga by French architect and designer Georges Hoentschel. As a child, Natalie grew up in the beautifully furnished rooms filled with rare porcelain and paintings as the backdrop for elegant receptions, teas, dinners, and evenings. These events were frequented by noted people in the arts including art, music, and ballet impresario Sergei Diaghilev, opera singer Feodor Chaliapin, novelist and poet Paul Bourget, and composer Reynaldo Hahn.

Princess Natalie's Childhood

Life in Paris for Princess Natalie and her siblings Irina and Vladimir was punctuated by lessons, reading, walks, meals, and evening prayer. According to Irina, the grand duke "loved family life." Every morning, he would go for a walk with his daughters. "We had a wonderful childhood, because our parents were an exceptionally close couple," recalled Irina. When the children's half siblings visited from Russia, they spent time together as a blended family.

The children were rarely involved with their parents' social life, which they witnessed from afar. In the evenings, the children ate separately. When Paul and Olga were not involved with social activities including receptions and outings to restaurants, theaters, and operas, they spent time with their children after dinner, reading or—under Vladimir's direction—staging a play in the large drawing room. When guests were not expected, the whole family shared lunch served precisely at half past noon. The grand duke had no patience for tardiness and sometimes ate alone without waiting for his belated family members.



(Image is on label)

Private collection.

Natalie and her siblings Irina and Vladimir in the family mansion's gardens, Boulogne, ca. 1910.



(Image is on label)

Private collection.

Irina and Natalie, ca. 1911.



(Image is on label)

Private collection.

Natalie holding a doll in the family mansion's gardens, Boulogne, ca. 1911.



(Image is on label)

Private collection.

Residence of Grand Duke Paul and Countess Olga von Hohenfelsen in Boulogne-Billancourt, ca. 1905. Postcard.



(Image is on label)

Private collection.

Grand Duke Paul and his daughters Natalie and Irina in their mansion's conservatory, ca. 1911.



(Image is on label)

Private collection.

Irina, Natalie, and Vladimir, Paris, 1907. Photographed by Eugène Pirou (1841–1909).

Natalie's brother Vladimir described the family garden in Paris in about 1910: "Our garden is not big; you can walk around it in five minutes. But for me it represents a great beauty. Everything in it is nice and attractive. . . . I love our garden!". Vladimir mentioned his favorite corner with a swing "made for us by the gardener using two ropes and a simple piece of wood... . Often I sit here with a book and think, 'What a blessing! Is it even possible to believe that the noisy capital of France is that close by? What a heavenly little place!'"



(Image is on label)

Private collection.

Family photograph, 1911. From left to right, Countess Olga von Hohenfelsen, her son and daughter Alexander and Marianne von Pistohlkors, Grand Duke Paul and daughters Irina and Natalie, their brother Vladimir, and Olga von Kreutz (née von Pistohlkors).



(Image is on label)

Private collection.

Portrait of Natalie's brother Vladimir, ca. 1910.

At age thirteen, Prince Vladimir was fascinated by airplanes and reported with excitement in his notebook, "Papa bought me an airplane—a toy. . . . How I like it. . . . I constantly play with my airplane."



(Image on label)

Natalie's brother Vladimir announcing to his parents his desire to become an aviator, Prince Vladimir's notebook, ca. 1910.

Vladimir captioned this sketch, "Disturbance caused by my decision," and added next to it, "My parents are completely convinced that I will never go flying, and because of this, when I at the table announced my decision, mother told me, 'If I later tell you that this is unpleasant for me then you will be acting against my will.' I moved quickly to comfort her, and completely engrossed myself in the chocolate crème. The chocolate was pleasant, but the flying thing was much more interesting."



(Image on label)

Irina and Natasha (Natalie) by Vladimir. Prince Vladimir's archives, ca. 1910.

In this note the young and future published poet Vladimir touchingly described his two young sisters, Irina and Natalie:

Between Irina and Natasha there are more differences than similarity. . . . Irina always and everywhere has things in order, Natasha has no order with her things. But here they are different in one thing: Natasha will with delight let a small guest play with her toy, but Irina is afraid, what if somebody breaks it, and rarely gives hers to play. When you ask Natasha for any type of favor she will immediately agree, even if she is playing any game. Irina will first think whether it's better to play or to do some favor? In the end, she will do it. Finally, Irina likes to read but is not curious. On the other side, Natasha likes to enjoy herself and to do so with great delight. . . . The two girls . . . are very nice, gentle, and pretty. And they can always find a kind word for everyone.

Top shelf:



Framed photograph of Grand Duke Paul

Charles Bergamasco (Italian, 1830–1896, active in Russia): photography

A. Krumbugel (Russian, active 1840s–80s): frame

St. Petersburg, ca. 1888: photography

Moscow, ca. 1888: frame

Photograph, gilt metal

Museum purchase, 2024 (2024.12.5.1–2)



Circular dish

Grachev Brothers, silversmith (Russian, 1866–1918)

St. Petersburg, 1888

Silver

Museum purchase, 2022 (2022.2.83)

This dish is engraved in Cyrillic with Grand Duke Paul's crowned name, Pavel (Paul).



Two square dishes and teapot from a set

Risler & Carré (French, 1897–1921)

Paris, 1903–7

Silver

Museum purchase, 2022 (2022.2.8.2–3; 2022.2.8.1)

These pieces are engraved with the crowned doubled monogram “PP” for Grand Duke Paul.



Soap box

Keller (French, 1856–1950s)

Paris, 1904–5

Silver

Museum purchase, 2022 (2022.2.82)

This silver soap box is adorned with the crowned monogram “OH” for Olga von Hohenfelsen. The box was part of a larger dressing table set, a gift from Grand Duke Paul to his wife for Christmas 1905.



Pitcher

Aucoc (French, 1821–1960)
André Aucoc, silversmith (French, 1856–1911)
Paris, 1904–7
Silver
Museum purchase, 2022 (2022.2.84)

Princess Natalie's parents were well-known for their parties in Boulogne. They were as famous for their recitals as for their elegant dinners with beautiful silverware and delicious food that their chef prepared, as demonstrated by the nearby menus. Grand Duke Paul and Olga commissioned some of these silver items in 1903. The last delivery of hundreds of silver pieces was recorded in 1907, in time for the first formal dinner the couple gave to celebrate the end of the mansion's renovation. The lavish set included 168 silver plates and 60 silver gilt dessert plates by Aucoc, tea sets, and other accessories, all complemented by cutlery from Risler & Carré and decorative pieces.



Sugar bowl and creamer from a set

Albert Schiffmacher, silversmith (French, active 1910s)
Paris, ca. 1913
Silver
Museum purchase, 2022 (2022.2.87.1.1–2, 2022.2.87.2)

Bottom shelf:



Menus with the grand ducal coat of arms for dinners given in Boulogne on February 15, 1908, and December 17, 1912

Probably Paris, early 1900s
Paper (replica)
Private collection

These two menus bear the Russian grand ducal coat of arms with double-headed eagle and Order of Saint Andrew.



1908 menu with Grand Duke Paul's monogram

Probably Russia, ca. 1889
Paper (replica)
Private collection

The crowned monogram PA in Cyrillic on this menu refers to Grand Duke Paul and Grand Duchess Alexandra, his first wife, who died in 1891. Most likely commissioned in a large number at the time of their wedding in 1889, they were still used afterward as the letters also match the grand duke's full name of Paul Alexandrovich. The same monogram was used to adorn the porcelain sets made for the grand duke. Some are displayed in this case.



Menu with Grand Duke Paul's monogram for the dinner given in Boulogne on November 13, 1912

Probably Russia, late 1800s–early 1900s

Paper (replica)

Private collection

The monogram formed by four crowned Ps in Cyrillic on this menu refers to Grand Duke Paul. It is the same as the one engraved on the nearby silver pitcher by Aucoc.



Two butter plates from a set

Probably Labesse (French, active 1873–96): porcelain blanks

Imperial Porcelain Manufactory (Russian, 1744–present): decoration

Limoges and St. Petersburg, 1887–89

Hard-paste porcelain

(24.174.3–4)



Sauceboat from a set

Attributed to A. Marcerou, retailer (Russian, active mid-1800s–early 1900s)

St. Petersburg, ca. 1889

Hard-paste porcelain

Loan from Kathy Durdin



Cup and saucer and egg cup from a set

Attributed to Harrach Manufactory, retailer (Bohemian, 1712–present)

Harrachov, Bohemia, now Czech Republic, ca. 1889

Hard-paste porcelain

(24.175); *Museum purchase, 2024 (2024.12.3.1–2)*

These sets were probably ordered for Grand Duke Paul's first marriage, to Grand Duchess Alexandra in 1889, and used in his St. Petersburg main palace on the English Embankment. In her memoirs, Princess Natalie's half sister Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna recalled her first meeting in St. Petersburg with her stepmother, Countess Olga von Hohenfelsen, in 1907. They met in the grand duke's palace, where "the countess did the honors. Her hands, laden with rings, deftly handled the white cups, edged in red." She most likely referred to a piece from one of the sets displayed here. The dining room table in the mansion is set with the same service.



Bell push

Grigory Sbitnev, silversmith (Russian, active 1893–1917)

Moscow, 1908–17

Nephrite, silver gilt, paste stone, cord

Museum purchase, 2022 (2022.2.15.1)

Elegant bell pushes like this one reflect the complex organization of a privileged household during the Belle Époque. One push was enough to call staff. Such precious objects were the visible things that revealed the discreet presence of staff and their behind-the-scenes activities. In her childhood, Princess Natalie lived surrounded by a large staff, including nurses, teachers, maids, footmen, a chef, cooks, gardeners, a butler, a steward, and two chauffeurs.



House linen

France and Russia, late 1800s–early 1900s

Linen

Museum purchase, 2022 (2022.2.31, 2022.2.36, 2022.2.34)

This selection of linen with embroidered monograms speaks to the richness of a fully furnished aristocratic home in the late 1800s to early 1900s like the one Princess Natalie's parents owned. Tablecloths, napkins, bed sheets, handkerchiefs, and other elegant accessories were ordered by the hundreds and often passed on to the next generations despite monograms. Natalie added her own initials to some of her father's linen when she was married to French couturier Lucien Lelong between 1927 and 1937. Her nephew, Prince Michel, did the same. This family linen collection was kept in a large leather trunk when Hillwood acquired it. The trunk and additional pieces of linen are on view in the Adam bedroom suite in the mansion.



(Image on label)

PRINCESS NATALIE'S NEW HOME IN RUSSIA

In 1905, Emperor Nicholas II finally softened toward his uncle, authorizing Grand Duke Paul's return to Russia from exile to attend the funeral of his elder brother Grand Duke Sergei, who had been assassinated in Moscow. It was not until 1908 that Emperor Nicholas II finally pardoned Olga. Fifteen years after her affair with Grand Duke Paul began and six years after their elopement, she was officially part of the imperial family.



(Image on label)

Private Collection.

Princess Natalie Paley in Russia, 1916.

The idea of a partial return to Russia grew in the couple's minds, especially as their son, Vladimir, was sent to St. Petersburg to enter the prestigious Page Corps in 1908. In early 1911, they bought land in Tsarskoye Selo, on the outskirts of St. Petersburg, and built a new palace close to the imperial residence—a sign of their return to grace. Carl Schmidt, the architect of the new Fabergé store in St. Petersburg, was hired to construct the palace. French decorator Marcel Boulanger and his team worked on the furnishings over several years. In the spring of 1914, the family sent their entire collection to their new home—which would be called Paley Palace—and moved to Russia, with the plan of going back to Paris each fall. The outbreak of the First World War changed their plans forever.

In 1915, using a name of Cossack origin that came from one of Olga's maternal side ancestors, Emperor Nicholas II granted Olga the title of Princess Paley and allowed her children with Grand Duke Paul to be known as Prince Vladimir, Princess Irina, and Princess Natalie.



(Image on label)

Private Collection.

The Paley family in Russia, ca. 1915. Photographed by Thalmann Frères.



(Image on label)

Private Collection.

The Paley family's new palace in Tsarskoye Selo, ca. 1918.



(Image on label)

Small study featuring the wall sconces designed by Delisle, Paley Palace, Tsarskoye Selo, ca. 1918.

In 1911, Princess Natalie's parents hired French decorator Marcel Boulanger to design their new home in Tsarskoye Selo, on the outskirts of St. Petersburg. They worked with the most famous French suppliers, including the silk manufactory Tassinari & Chatel and the bronze maker Delisle, which created wall coverings, curtains, and other textile elements as well as all the bronze and lighting fixtures for them. The nearby samples and drawings document the commissions the couple made for their new palace.



Wall sconce based on the drawing made for the Paley Palace

Delisle (French, 1895–present)

Paris, 2024

Bronze, mirror, crystal

Loan from DELISLE



Four drawings of the bronze fixtures made for the Paley Palace

Delisle (French, 1895–present)

Paris, 1910s

Paper (replicas)

© Archives Delisle, Paris



(Image on label)

Large drawing room, with the Tassinari & Chatel wall covering in place, Paley Palace, Tsarskoye Selo, ca. 1918.



Sample 201020 (9063) “Salon Delafosse”

Tassinari & Chatel (French, 1680–present)

Paris/Lyon, 1914

Silk

Loan from the Archive Tassinari & Chatel. Maison Lelièvre Paris



Sample 20647 (5877) “Chambre et cabinet de toilette”

Tassinari & Chatel (French, 1680–present)

Paris/Lyon, 1913

Silk

Loan from the Archive Tassinari & Chatel. Maison Lelièvre Paris



Sample 20649 (8555) "Chambre Comtesse"

Tassinari & Chatel
(French, 1680–present)
Paris/Lyon, 1913
Silk

Loan from the Archive Tassinari & Chatel. Maison Lelièvre Paris

These two samples were used for Olga's bedroom and bathroom in her new home in Russia.

The Family Collection

Grand Duke Paul and Olga were avid collectors. Some pieces in their art collection were heirlooms that came from the grand duke's family, while Olga carefully chose others in Paris, where she amassed rare porcelain, paintings, furniture, and jades. In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks confiscated the Paley Palace and its contents, including its art collection, in 1918. The palace opened as a museum and functioned as such until the mid-1920s. Most of this collection was dispersed and sold abroad by the Soviet government in the late 1920s. Princess Natalie and her family managed to buy back a few items, while Marjorie Post and other collectors later acquired others. The pieces on view here are most likely all presented together for the first time since the Russian Revolution.



Catherine I of Russia

Imperial Tapestry Manufactory (1717–1859)
After Jean-Marc Nattier (French, 1685–1766)
St. Petersburg, after 1717
Wool

Loan from The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland (82.4)

This rare tapestry featuring one of Princess Natalie's ancestors was sold by the Soviet government in 1929 and acquired by Alexander Polovtsov, a diplomat, art collector, museum founder, and friend of the Paley family who became an art dealer in France after the Russian Revolution. He sold the piece to Henry Walters in 1931.



Miniature portrait of Empress Maria Alexandrovna of Russia

Alois Gustav Rockstuhl, miniaturist (Lithuanian, 1798–1877)
St. Petersburg, 1862
Wood, paper, metal, velvet, watercolor
Museum purchase, 2022 (2022.2.9)

The portrait is of Empress Maria Alexandrovna, Princess Natalie's grandmother.



Triptych icon

Russia, late 1600s

Brass, wood, paint

Museum purchase, 2022 (2022.2.11)



Snuffbox

Ivan Kaltykov, silversmith (Russian, active 1820–34)

Moscow, 1824

Silver

Museum purchase, 2022 (2022.2.12)



(Image on label)

Large dining room with a vitrine filled with Grand Duke Paul's collection of Russian glassware, Paley Palace, Tsarskoye Selo, ca. 1918.

Princess Natalie's father, Grand Duke Paul, was a collector of antique Russian glassware. He amassed a large collection that he displayed in a large vitrine in the Paley Palace dining room in Tsarskoye Selo. Parisian dealers and collectors Alexandre and Berthe Popov acquired part of this glassware. They sold it to Marjorie Post in 1970.



Three goblets

St. Petersburg, 1741–61

Glass

(23.217, 23.218, 23.219)



Goblet with lid

Russia, 1762–96

Glass

(23.220.1–2)



Two goblets

Russia, 1762–96

Glass

(23.221, 23.222)



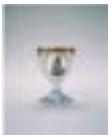
Glass with cipher of Emperor Alexander I

Attributed to Bakhmetev Glassworks (Russian, 1764–present)

Russia, 1814–30

Glass

(23.228)



Goblet with portrait of Count Wittgenstein

Attributed to Imperial Glass Manufactory (Russian, 1777–1917)

St. Petersburg, 1814–30

Glass

(23.232)



Covered mug with portrait of Count Wittgenstein

Attributed to Imperial Glass Manufactory (Russian, 1777–1917)

St. Petersburg, 1814–30

Glass, gilding

(23.236.1–2)



(Image on label)

Gallery with several display cases filled with the family porcelain collection, Paley Palace, Tsarskoye Selo, ca. 1918.

Princess Natalie’s mother loved to collect antique porcelain and had a special interest in French Sèvres porcelain, early Russian imperial porcelain, and German porcelain. She displayed them in her Parisian home and transferred them to Russia during the family move in 1914. Displayed in several rooms of the Paley Palace, in specially designed cases, many of these porcelain pieces were sold abroad by the Soviet government after the Russian Revolution. Some are now in Hillwood’s collection.



Two-handled sauce boat (Saucière à deux becs)
Sèvres Porcelain Manufactory (French, 1740–present)
Sèvres, France, 1785
Soft-paste porcelain
(24.17)



Cup (Gobelet litron) and saucer (Soucoupe)
Sèvres Porcelain Manufactory (French, 1740–present)
Sèvres, France, mid-1700s–mid-1800s
Soft-paste porcelain
(24.96.1–2)



Cream pitcher (Pot à lait)
Sèvres Porcelain Manufactory (French, 1740–present)
Sèvres, France, mid-1700s–mid-1800s
Soft-paste porcelain
(24.111)



Sugar bowl
Popov Porcelain Factory (Russian, 1804–1872)
Gorbunovo, Russia, 1815–40
Hard-paste porcelain
Museum Purchase, 1998 (25.555.1–2)



Easter egg with Grand Duke Paul's monogram
Imperial Porcelain Factory (Russian, 1744–present)
St. Petersburg, late 1800s
Porcelain
Gift of Madame Augusto Rosso, 1968 (25.487)



Portrait of Grand Duke Alexander at age two

George Dawe, painter (British, 1781–1829)

St. Petersburg, 1820

Oil paint, canvas, wood, gesso, gilding

Museum purchase, 2022 (2022.2.2)

This rare portrait is of Grand Duke Paul's father and Princess Natalie's grandfather, who, as the reform-minded Emperor Alexander II, abolished serfdom in Russia in 1861. Painter George Dawe depicted the young boy as a soldier, holding a rifle, on the terrace of the Anichkov Palace in St. Petersburg, suggestive of the child's eventual power as the heir to the imperial throne. In the family since its commission, the portrait was inherited by Grand Duke Paul, Alexander's youngest son. After the Russian Revolution, the Soviet government seized the collection; when it dispersed the objects in several sales, the Paley family reacquired the portrait in 1929. In the 1950s, it was displayed in Princess Natalie's Connecticut home, called Pebbles.



(Image on label)

Grand Duke Paul's study featuring the portrait of his father, Paley Palace, Tsarskoye Selo, ca. 1918.



(Image on label)

John C. Wilson Archive

The portrait hung at Pebbles, Princess Natalie's home in Fairfield, Connecticut, 1950s.

Prince Vladimir

Princess Natalie's brother Vladimir was very close to his sisters and mother. He played piano, read, wrote, drew, and organized plays and sketches with his siblings. His father's passion for the theater most likely nurtured his artistic inclinations. In the 1910s, he published his poems in Russia. Some of his early manuscripts are preserved today in Hillwood's collection.



(Image on label)

Portrait of Vladimir Paley, photograph, 1910s.



(Image on label)

"To My Father," August 1917, in Russian.



(Image on label)

Poem dated February 1918, Tsarskoye Selo, a few months before Vladimir's execution in July.



(Image on label)

"La pièce parisienne" ("The Parisian Play").

"To My Father," August 1917, in Russian.

Translation: "The Parisian Play." It is a play in which one says what one won't do and in which one does what one won't say.



Pocketknife
Probably Paris, 1910s
Gold, steel, metal
Museum purchase, 2025 (2025.1)

The Russian Revolution and the Family's Second Exile

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 changed the family's plans for a peaceful life back in Russia. Grand Duke Paul and his son Vladimir served in the army until the Russian Revolution of 1917. By mid-1918, both men had been arrested. Fearing for her daughters' lives, Olga sent Natalie and Irina to Finland. They would never see their father and brother again. In July, the Bolsheviks murdered the emperor and his family; the next day, twenty-one-year-old Vladimir and other members of the imperial family were also killed. In January 1919, Paul, who was fifty-eight, and other grand dukes were executed at the prison in St. Petersburg. After learning of his death, Olga joined her daughters in Finland ten days later, finding out only then that her son, too, had been killed. Once reunited, the three survivors eventually moved back to Paris, settling there in 1921 in what would be the family's second exile from Russia—but this time, it would be permanent.

In early November 1929, Olga died from a relapse of breast cancer, at age sixty-three.

Princess Irina

In May 1923, Princess Natalie's sister Irina married her cousin Prince Feodor in Paris. They had one child, Prince Michel Romanoff (1924–2008). While working as a translator for Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948), Irina met Count Hubert de Monbrison.

In 1929, Irina founded a school to welcome Russian girls immigrating to Paris; Monbrison assisted her efforts by providing the château of Quincy-sous-Sénart, southeast of Paris, to serve as the school. In 1939, forty Jewish children from Germany were accepted there as well. Some of the children were relocated to safety in 1940, as the German army occupied much of France. While each was still married to someone else, Irina and Monbrison had begun an affair and had a daughter, Irene, in 1934. Irina and Feodor divorced in 1936, and she married Monbrison in 1950, nine years after he painted her in the portrait nearby. They were together for more than thirty years, until his death in 1981. Irina lived on until 1990, dying at age eighty-six.

Documents and objects related to Irina and others in her family are displayed in the mansion's second floor library.



(Image on label)

Séeberger © BnF

Lucien Lelong, Princess Natalie Paley, and Irina's second husband, Hubert de Monbrison, Biarritz, September 1929.



(Image on label)

Princess Irina Paley and Princess Natalie Paley pose after their exile to France, 1921–22.



Portrait of Irina Paley

Hubert de Monbrison (French, 1892–1981)

France, 1941

Oil on canvas, wood, gesso

Museum purchase, 2022 (2022.2.3)



(Image on label)

RETURN TO PARIS

Paris in the 1920s was a friendly sanctuary for émigrés like the three surviving Paley princesses (Olga and her two teenage daughters) who returned to its familiar environs in 1921, following the devastating experience of the Russian Revolution. Soon after arriving, Natalie Paley began an active modeling career. On August 10, 1927, she married a French couturier, Lucien Lelong (1889–1958). Fashion journal coverage of the “Russian Fêtes” organized by Olga and Irina in a charitable effort to support fellow Russian émigrés indicate that Lelong began partnering with the well-connected princesses at least since the summer of 1926, when he hosted a rooftop benefit atop his avenue Matignon atelier and dressed all three Paley women in “sheer frocks and fringe.” The romantic relationship between Natalie’s half brother Grand Duke Dimitri Pavlovich and Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel further linked Natalie to of-the-moment Parisian couturiers. Dimitri and Chanel’s dalliance and longer-lasting friendship allowed Dimitri’s sister, Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna, to establish her own 1920s embroidery firm, Kitmir, which counted Chanel as its first commission.



(Image on label)

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Illustration of the Paley women wearing Lucien Lelong fashion in Women’s Wear, June 15, 1926, for the Fêtes des Trois Cents hosted by Lelong on June 5.



(Image on label)

Source: Natalie Paley Photograph Albums, Photographs, and Correspondence. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

Snapshot of Natalie and Lelong during an early 1930s skiing trip to St. Moritz.

Natalie's marriage in 1927 to the influential Lelong established her as an in-demand model for fashion publications. She worked with prominent photographers such as Edward Steichen, Man Ray, and several who would become long-term collaborators and friends:

George Hoyningen-Huene and his talented young student, Horst P. Horst, and the multifaceted Cecil Beaton. As "Madam Lucien Lelong," she also became a creative consultant for his firm. She continued to work in fashion throughout her life, interacting with a unique set of international artists and other creatives, even enabling her to experiment with a short-lived film career



(Image on label)

Bibliothèque nationale de France

Illustration of Natalie Paley for her August 1927 marriage to couturier Lucien Lelong wearing a design from his label, Vogue Paris, March 1, 1928.



Lelong and Natalie Paley pose for a wedding portrait, Paris, August 1927. She wears a bridal ensemble by Lelong. The boy at their feet is her nephew, Prince Michel Romanoff.



(Replica on wall)

Natalie Paley appears in *Vogue Paris*, August 1931. © George Hoyningen-Huene Estate Archives. Image courtesy of Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Case at left:



(Replica inside the case)

First *Vogue Paris* feature

Edward Steichen (American, born Luxembourg, 1879–1973)

March 1, 1928

Photograph (replica)

Bibliothèque nationale de France

Natalie Paley's first appearance in *Vogue's* January 1928 issue, photographed by Edward Steichen, was the start of three decades of modeling in editorial content and advertisements in print, from the commercial to the avant-garde.



Indiscret perfume

Parfums Lucien Lelong (French, 1924–present)

Paris, 1935

Glass

Museum purchase, 2024 (2024.6.1–2)



Lelong's First World War ID bracelet

France, 1914

Sterling silver, gold

John C. Wilson Archive



N perfume

Parfums Lucien Lelong (French, 1924–present)

Paris, 1938

Glass, printed paper board

Museum purchase, 2024 (2024.5.1–3)

Natalie Paley continued to model for Lucien Lelong through the finalization of their divorce in 1937. When the couple parted ways, the princess disposed of her Lelong wardrobe, but she retained his First World War personal military identification bracelet, nearby, throughout her life. She also continued to wear one of his popular fragrances, Indiscret, as her signature scent. For his part, Lelong released a fragrance titled N shortly before their formal divorce. By all accounts, it was an amicable parting, yet the perfume’s advertisement art by Lila de Nobili nearby suggests a darker affiliation.



(Image on label)

© Lucien Lelong

Indiscret perfume from Parfums Lucien Lelong, Paris, 1935.



(Image on label)

HPrints

N perfume, Paris, 1948. Illustrated by Lila de Nobili (Italian, 1916–2002).



Hillwood thanks Maison Lelièvre for the generous contribution of the wallpaper seen in this gallery and inspired by Jean Cocteau’s original artwork.

MORE THAN A MUSE

Natalie Paley's personal relationships, friendships, and connections aligned her with cultural visionaries from the twentieth century, from avant-garde poet, filmmaker, and artist Jean Cocteau to figures like composer, playwright, and actor Noël Coward and German-born novelist Erich Maria Remarque. Like her collaborations with renowned photographers, discussed nearby, these partnerships produced tangible bodies of work inspired by Paley. Some might have been romantic in nature—and occurred during Paley's two marriages.

A genuine friendship during the 1930s and 1940s between Natalie Paley and Surrealist artist and theatrical designer Pavel Tchelitchew, a fellow Russian émigré, resulted in a prolific series of portraits of the princess. The 1931 painting of Paley on view here represents her during the time of her marriage to Lelong; the two often appeared vacationing and casually sporting berets. Less conventional depictions of Paley include the severe "Portrait of Natalia Paley as Ophelia," the dramatic rendering of Paley in costume that Tchelitchew designed for the George Balanchine–choreographed ballet *L'Errante*, and the 1940 sketch of his friend, perceived "poetically and fantastically" as "the golden wasp of summer." The latter two illustrations appeared in the pages of *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, underscoring the enduring interconnectedness of art and fashion.



(Image on label)

Yale University Art Gallery, Collection of Mary C. and James W. Fosburgh, B.A. 1933, M.A. 1935 (1979.14.100)
Pavel Tchelitchew's 1932 "Portrait of Princess Natalia Paley as Ophelia."



(Image on label)

Source: John C. Wilson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
May 1940 scrapbook page featuring Pavel Tchelitchew, Noël Coward, and others.



Tchelitchew portrait

Pavel Tchelitchew (American, born Russia, 1898–1957)

Harper's Bazaar, July 1940

Paper (replica)

Harper's Bazaar, Hearst Magazine Media, Inc.



Illustration of Natalie Paley inspired by the ballet *L'Errante* performed by the American Ballet Ensemble
 Pavel Tchelitchev (American, born Russia, 1898–1957)
Vogue, July 15, 1935
 Paper (replica)
Vogue © Condé Nast

Center:



Portrait of Natalie Paley

Pavel Tchelitchev (American, born Russia, 1898–1957)
 Paris, 1931
 Oil on canvas

Loan from The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest (by exchange), 1954

The relationships Natalie Paley had with Ballets Russes dancer and choreographer Serge Lifar (1905–1986) and Jean Cocteau drew gossip because Paley was then married to Lelong, and today, both creatives are known to have preferred romantic relations with men. Evidence of Paley's close association with Lifar appears in snapshots of the princess dancing and posing with the Ukrainian-born performer on Lido Beach in Venice, along with other 1930s sophisticates including Lelong, Princess "Baba" de Faucigny-Lucinge, Lady Diana Cooper, and set and costume designer Oliver Messel. Their two-year relationship in the early 1930s culminated with the princess meeting Cocteau and refocusing her affections to him, but not without Lifar memorializing Natalie Paley by naming a character "Natasha" in his 1932 ballet *Sur le Borysthène*.



(Image on label)

Portrait of Serge Lifar, ca. 1930. Photographed by Max Munn Autrey.



(Image on label)



(Framed replica)

This photo and one at right: Source: Natalie Paley Photograph Albums, Photographs, and Correspondence. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. On wall and at left: Lifar and Paley in a dance pose, Lido Beach, Venice, 1931. Photograph (replica)



(Image on label)

Natalie Paley, an unidentified friend, and Lifar relax in rocking chairs, Venice, 1931.

Paley's relationship with Jean Cocteau, the famous French poet, visual artist, playwright, novelist, critic, and film director, lasted only from the winter of 1932 to that autumn and was discouraged by her husband, Lucien Lelong, who disliked the open gossip about his wife and Cocteau. Letters and telegrams the two exchanged, most of which were published later, suggest attempts at discretion; during the summer of 1932, while both traveled, Cocteau concealed his return address. The missives, inspired by the legend of Tristan and Isolde, became passionate and dramatic while the princess convalesced in St. Moritz from anemia. In addition to a published volume of their correspondence, Cocteau commemorated their relationship with the delicate ink profile sketch seen here, and in a multimedia collage featuring a portrait of the princess by Hoyningen-Huene. Tellingly, she is represented as a sphinx, known for riddles and mystery. Paley also inspired a sphinx character in Cocteau's 1934 play, *La Machine infernale*, a fairy-tale princess in his 1940 experimental novel, *La Fin du Potomak*, and a character in his 1943 screenplay, *L'Éternel Retour*.



(Image on label)

Signed portrait of Jean Cocteau, ca. 1935. Photographed by Sacha Masour.



(Image on label)

Natalie Paley at Jean Cocteau's desk in Paris, ca. 1932.



Natalie Paley

Jean Cocteau (French, 1889–1963)

Graphite, colored pencil, ink, photograph, paper (replica)

Digital Image © CNAC/MNAM, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY. © ARS / Comité Cocteau, Paris / ADAGP, Paris 2025



Natalie Paley

Jean Cocteau (French, 1889–1963)

Early 1930s

Ink, paper

Frank Mermoud (2024.9)



La machine infernale

Paris, 1954 reprint



La Fin du Potomak

Jean Cocteau (French, 1889–1963)

Paris, 1940

The circle of fashionable, aristocratic, and creative friends active internationally during the years between the world wars and known in Great Britain as the Bright Young Things was documented by Cecil Beaton, British photographer and designer. Natalie Paley was included through her affiliation with its numerous prominent members, and she was often among Beaton's guests at his leased country home, Ashcombe, in Wiltshire, England. A genius at developing glamorous settings for his fashion photography, Beaton was also the officially appointed royal photographer for the House of Windsor. He was a renowned set and costume designer for theater and the films *Gigi* and *My Fair Lady*. His photos, sketches, and societal observations appeared in *Vogue*, where he held a thirty-year contract.

The intimate 1940s sketches by Beaton of Natalie Paley and her second husband, theater director and producer John C. “Jack” Wilson (1899–1961), whom she married in 1937, are a testament to the artist’s enduring friendship with her. Professionally, their connection yielded many iconic images, especially the early 1930s portrait of Natalie dramatically framed by mattress springs, and the later portrait of Paley festooned with a crown of roses, one of her favorite flowers. A dramatic portrait of Natalie, on view nearby, in a luxurious setting for *Vogue* in 1935 draws inspiration from the Edwardian age.



Selection of sketched portraits of Princess Natalie Paley

Cecil Beaton (British, 1904–1980)

New York, 1940

Pencil, paper

Museum purchase, 2022 (2022.2.4)



(Image on label)

Vogue © Condé Nast

Natalie Paley for The Sketch, February 14, 1940. Photographed by Cecil Beaton.



Princess Natalie Paley

Cecil Beaton (English, 1904–1980)

1935

Bromide print (replica)

Cecil Beaton, Vogue © Condé Nast



(Image on label)

Source: John C. Wilson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
Scrapbook photos featuring Natalie posing in her flower crown during an informal weekend in the English countryside, June 1938.



(Image on label)

Source: John C. Wilson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
Anita Loos, John C. Wilson, a friend, Cecil Beaton, and Natalie Paley at the Silk Stockings Ball, New York, 1954.

Among the Bright Young Things documented in photos by Beaton, another who represented Princess Natalie Paley in his artistic work was British-born artist and designer Oliver Messel. Paley and Messel were also together in 1931 when Messel constructed the elaborate sandcastle sets she and Lifar posed upon in some of the photos taken there. He later painted this portrait of Natalie surrounded by lilies. These snapshots show the princess experimenting with flowers and other vegetation in her poses for the portrait's study in Messel's studio. Messel was also the costume designer for *The Private Life of Don Juan* (1934), a film featuring Natalie in a bit part.



Princess Natalia Pavlovna Paley (1905-1981)

Oliver Messel (English, 1904–1978)

London, ca. 1935

Oil on canvas

National Trust Collections, Nymans (Oliver Messel Collection)



(Image on label)

The Oliver Messel Archive. Courtesy University of Bristol Theatre Collection

Contact sheet of photographs of Princess Natalie Paley, likely a study for the nearby portrait, London, ca. 1935.

This evocative moonstone and silver bib necklace was made by Natalie's fashionable friend Millicent Rogers, a client of the couturier known as Mainbocher. Rogers, whose grandfather made his fortune in the Standard Oil conglomerate from the mid-1870s, was a jewelry designer, an art patron, and an early supporter of Native American rights. She learned the craft of silversmithing in New Mexico for her jewelry designs.



(Image on label)

Horst P. Horst/Conde Nast via Getty Images

Millicent Rogers, ca. 1949. Photographed by Horst P. Horst.



Necklace

Millicent Rogers (American, 1902–1953)

Taos, New Mexico, 1940s

Silver, moonstones

Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Gus N. Davis and Edward J. Sumpter, in memory of Camilla Dietz Bergeron, 2020 (2020.218)

Illustrator Elsa “Jack” von Reppert-Bismarck is remembered for decorating friend Cecil Beaton’s circus-themed bedroom at Ashcombe. Details of her career are scant, but she made these watercolor sketches for Natalie, including one depicting Natalie and her second husband, Jack Wilson, at dinner with a group (the couple at the left). Von Reppert-Bismarck’s cartoon of one of Natalie beloved dachshunds, Pon-Pon, in various historical evening dress is on display elsewhere in the exhibition.



Watercolor sketch of dinner party group

Elsa “Jack” von Reppert-Bismarck (German, 1903–1971)

New York, ca. 1937

Ink and watercolor on paper

John C. Wilson Archive



Watercolor sketch of women frolicking in water

Elsa “Jack” von Reppert-Bismarck (German, 1903–1971)

New York, ca. 1937

Ink and watercolor on paper

John C. Wilson Archive

Natalie Paley was friends with artist and eccentric personality Salvador Dalí from the 1930s onward, and she attended his gallery openings in New York. He dedicated this wild, Shakespearean sketch to Natalie in 1938 and later illustrated her tourmaline dogwood brooch from a mutual friend, jewelry designer Fulco di Verdura (1899–1978), for a 1943 *Vogue* spread. More than ten years later, Dalí and Natalie were photographed at the legendary New York jazz club Birdland with mutual friend Prince Jean de Faucigny-Lucinge.



(Image on label)

Prince Jean de Faucigny-Lucinge, Natalie, and Salvador Dalí in a souvenir snapshot from the Birdland jazz club, New York, ca. 1955.



Horsewoman in dialogue with a skull, dedicated in French to his friend Natalie

Salvador Dalí (Spanish, 1904–1989)

Probably New York, 1938

Paper (replica)

© 2025 Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Artists Rights Society



Accessories illustration spread, “Dalí Paints Accessories”

Vogue, October 1, 1943

Paper (replica)

Christie’s Images/Bridgeman Images © 2025 Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Artists Rights Society.

Vogue © Condé Nast



(Image on label)

Source: John C. Wilson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
Janet Bush, better known as Janet Newbold Stewart, Jack Wilson, and Natalie Paley, who wears her Verdura dogwood brooch, 1949.



Dogwood brooch

Verdura (American, 1939–present)

New York, 1943

Pink tourmaline, yellow sapphire, gold

Courtesy of Verdura



“Heart of Russia”

Richard de Menocal (American, 1919–1995)

1940s–50s

Loan from private family collection

Costume designer and illustrator Richard de Menocal created this Surrealist homage to Princess Natalie Paley's Russian roots. Menocal's sister, Babs Simpson (1913–2019), was a fashion editor at *Vogue*, which commissioned some of his work.

While married to her second husband, Jack Wilson, Natalie Paley corresponded in the 1940s with love interests Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1900–1944) and Erich Maria Remarque, both authors. Her flirtation with Saint-Exupéry occurred in 1942, around the time he completed his most famous work, *Le Petit Prince*. Expressive sketches from the more tumultuous relationship with Remarque are on display here along with his book *Shadows in Paradise*, which features a character, Natasha, modeled on her.



(Image on label)

Portrait of Erich Maria Remarque, New York, 1940s.



Doodle from Erich Marie Remarque to Natalie Paley

New York, 1940s

Paper (replica)



Poem and doodle from Erich Marie Remarque to Natalie Paley

November 21, 1949

Paper



Doodle from Erich Marie Remarque to Natalie Paley

New York, 1940s

Paper



Shadows in Paradise

Erich Maria Remarque
(German, 1898–1970)
1972

During the mid-1930s, Princess Natalie Paley met her second husband, John C. “Jack” Wilson, who produced and managed the theatrical projects of playwright and composer Noël Coward, with whom he once had a romantic relationship. Wilson and Coward remained close, and Paley developed her own friendship with Coward, which endured even after Wilson’s death in 1961. Paley inspired a character in his 1939 play *Present Laughter*, and her relationship with Wilson might have been the basis for one of Coward’s short stories, “Nature Study,” in his collection of that same year, *To Step Aside*.



Natalie Paley and Noël Coward at the Stork Club

New York, 1950s
Photograph (replica)
John C. Wilson Archive



Jack Wilson, Natalie Paley, and Noël Coward

Jamaica, 1950s
Photograph (replica)
John C. Wilson Archive



To Step Aside

Noël Coward (British, 1899–1973)
1939



Present Laughter

Noël Coward (British, 1899–1973)

2017 reprint

A MAINBOCHER MANAGER

The American fashion designer Main Rousseau Bocher (who designed under “Mainbocher”) served in intelligence during the First World War and stayed in Paris after the war, eventually growing a successful couture firm. He fled to New York City in 1939 as the Second World War loomed. Previously connected via the Parisian fashion industry circles of the 1920s and 1930s, Natalie Paley began working for Mainbocher in the fall of 1941, managing his exclusive cadre of clients and wearing his designs, both in the fashion press and at events. Paley’s husband Jack Wilson noted that she was “blissfully happy... Everyone she knows from Hollywood or New York or any place...flock into Mainbocher’s all day long,” and he added that she was a “vital essential.” She accompanied Mainbocher to Paris for a visit after the war, in 1947, and continued to be affiliated with the firm through the 1950s, earning her a spot on the International Best-Dressed List from 1947 to 1954. She kept her wardrobe from this partnership, as seen by her red silk evening gown and bodices, to be worn interchangeably with skirts.



(Image on label)

Source: John C. Wilson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
Mainbocher and Natalie Paley attend the opening of the Théâtre de la Mode, a traveling exhibition of fashion dolls created by Parisian designers in New York, 1946.



Three bodices

Mainbocher (American, 1890–1976)

New York, ca. 1955

Silk

Loan from private family collection



Evening dress

Mainbocher (American, 1890–1976)

New York, ca. 1945

Silk taffeta, metallic wrapped thread

Gift from Jean-Noël Liaut, biographer of Natalie Paley (2024.3)



Signed photographic portrait of Natalie Paley and her dog Fan-Tan, addressed to “dear Uncle Main”

Paper (replica)

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY



(Image on label)

John C. Wilson Archive

Fulco di Verdura and Natalie Paley at Pebbles, 1938.



(Image on label)

Jerome Zerbe Photographs and Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

Mrs. John C. Wilson (Natalie Paley), 1950-51. Photographed by Jerome Zerbe.

She paired Verdura’s diamond-and-platinum “ray” brooch from 1940 with a 1947 Mainbocher gown incorporating Indian textiles.



(Image on label)

© Verdura

Sketch of “wrapped package” brooch, by Fulco di Verdura, Gouache on vellum, 1940.

Verdura was known for his use of sumptuous precious stones in imaginative settings, as seen in this “wrapped package” brooch enclosing aquamarines and emeralds in a delicate gold cage made for Natalie Paley.



“Wrapped package” brooch

Verdura (American, 1939–present)

New York, ca. 1940

Aquamarine, emerald, gold brooch

Private collection courtesy Historical Design, Inc.



“Ray” brooch

Verdura (American, 1939–present)

New York, 1940

Gold, diamond, platinum

Courtesy of Verdura



(Image on label)

ICON OF FASHION AND GLAMOUR

Natalie Paley’s biographer, Jean-Noël Liaut, stated that Paley’s social connections and influences in Europe, coupled with her dazzling presence in fashion magazines, made her a “goddess of the 1930s.” Her marriage to couturier Lucien Lelong from 1927 to 1937 added another interesting credential, beneath her status as a princess and her Romanov connection. Edward Steichen protégé George Hoyningen-Huene photographed Natalie for many projects in the following decades, from her fleeting turn as a 1930s film star to her time as client manager and face of fashion house Mainbocher in New York. Hoyningen-Huene and his young apprentice and romantic partner, Horst P. Horst, were Paley’s close friends and often visited her at her second husband’s Connecticut country home, Pebbles. Horst also took important portraits of the princess; he was contracted with *Vogue*, while Hoyningen-Huene transitioned to *Harper’s Bazaar* in the mid-1930s. Cecil Beaton, another friend, described her as having a “quality of beauty so rare and alluring.” Other notable photographers who captured the princess include Adolph de Meyer (1868–1946), Peter Rose Pulham (1910–1956), George Platt Lynes, Louise Dahl-Wolfe (1895–1989), Man Ray, and Dorothy Wilding, resulting in many of the compelling photographs seen here

Mural on wall:



Natalie Paley

George Hoyningen-Huene (American, born Russia, 1900–1968)
Paris, ca. 1933

© George Hoyningen-Huene Estate Archives



Framed photograph of Princess Natalie Paley

George Hoyningen-Huene (American, born Russia, 1900–1968)
Paris, 1931

Silver gelatin print

Loan from Frank Mermoud and Ned Shannon



Mural:

Portrait series of Natalie Paley

George Hoyningen-Huene (American, born Russia, 1900–1968)
Paris, ca. 1933

© George Hoyningen-Huene Estate Archives



Natalie Paley models an evening cape

Sasha (Alexander Stewart, English, 1892–1953)
Paris, 1929

Photograph (replica)

Photo by Sasha/Hulton Archive/Getty Images



Natalie Paley wearing Lucien Lelong

Edward Steichen (American, born Luxembourg, 1879–1973) for *Vogue Paris*, February 1, 1935

Photograph (replica)

Bibliothèque nationale de France



Natalie Paley wearing Lucien Lelong

George Hoyningen-Huene (American, born Russia, 1900–1968)
for *Vogue Paris*, October 1, 1930

Photograph (replica)

Bibliothèque nationale de France © George Hoyningen-Huene Estate Archives



Natalie Paley wearing Lucien Lelong for *Harper's Bazaar*

George Hoyningen-Huene (American, born Russia, 1900–1968)
Paris, May 1936

Photograph (replica)

Harper's Bazaar, Hearst Magazine Media, Inc. © George Hoyningen-Huene Estate Archives



Natalie Paley wearing Tiffany jewelry for *Harper's Bazaar*

George Hoyningen-Huene American, born Russia, 1900–1968)
November 1940

Photograph (replica)

Harper's Bazaar, Hearst Magazine Media, Inc. © George Hoyningen-Huene Estate Archives



Natalie Paley and Horst P. Horst

Still from an unreleased 1932 film by George Hoyningen-Huene

Photograph (replica)

© George Hoyningen-Huene Estate Archives

This dramatic portrait came from Hoyningen-Huene's lost film project starring Natalie Paley and Horst. Paley's participation might have been a catalyst for her brief 1930s film career.



Natalie Paley wearing a hat by the French milliner Caroline Reboux

Horst P. Horst (American, born Germany, 1906–1999)

Paris, 1934

Probably for *Vogue*

Photograph (replica)

Horst P. Horst, Vogue © Condé Nast



Two portraits of Natalie Paley

Horst P. Horst (American, born Germany, 1906–1999)

Probably Paris, early to mid-1930s

Photograph (replica)

Horst P. Horst/Conde Nast via Getty Images, Horst P. Horst, Vogue © Condé Nast



Princess Natalie Paley balancing a baguette on her head

Horst P. Horst (American, born Germany, 1906–1999)

Late 1930s

Photograph (replica)

Horst P. Horst, Vogue © Condé Nast

Photographers who were Paley's frequent collaborators were often part of her close social circle, which fostered creativity and trust, required for this comical portrait.



(Image on label)

Source: John C. Wilson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
Horst, Paley, and theater manager and producer Hugh "Binkie" Beaumont at Noël Coward's home, Goldenhurst, in Aldington, Kent, England, 1937.



Natalie Paley for Vogue, November 1942

Horst P. Horst (American, born Germany, 1906–1999)

Photograph (replica)

Horst P. Horst, Vogue © Condé Nast



Natalie Paley

George Platt Lynes (American, 1907–1955)

Photograph (replica)

Used with permission of The George Platt Lynes Estate



Natalie Paley wearing Lucien Lelong

Man Ray (American, 1890–1976)

Paris, 1934

Photograph (replica)

Telimage, Paris © Man Ray 2015 Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY / ADAGP, Paris 2025



Princess Natalie Paley

Dorothy Wilding (1893–1976)

London, ca. 1934

Photograph (replica)

© William Hustler and Georgina Hustler / National Portrait Gallery, London



Natalie Paley for “The New Edwardians” photo shoot in *Vogue*, 1935

Cecil Beaton (English, 1904–1980)

Photograph (replica)

Cecil Beaton, *Vogue* © Condé Nast



Signed photographic portrait of Natalie Paley

John Alfred Piver (American, born Portugal, 1907–1950)

Hollywood, ca. 1935

Photograph

John C. Wilson Archive

John Alfred Piver also photographed Marjorie Post and members of her family throughout the 1930s and 1940s, traveling to her homes for portraits and events. Details of his life remain obscure.



(Image on label)

THE POOL AT PEBBLES

The swimming pool at the Fairfield, Connecticut, country estate called Pebbles became the center of Princess Natalie Paley’s American social life when she married Jack Wilson there in September 1937. The couple also maintained a residence in New York but hosted frequent weekend gatherings in the country for the next two decades. The guest book from the property is a who’s who in fashion, design, photography, art, theater, and film from the era. Creative and humorous, Wilson also maintained decades of brilliant scrapbooks, pasting witty

magazine clippings featuring current events and high-profile friends, including his “invaluable wife, Natasha.” Each scrapbook also included candid snapshots of weekend guests by the pool; everyone from Elsa Schiaparelli to Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier reclined in chaise longues, sipped cocktails, and played Ping-Pong and tennis. The setting was relaxed American cool—and the princess embodied it best in breezy dresses, chic sunglasses, and a hat or a brooch, perhaps by Verdura or her other jewelry designer friend, Jean Schlumberger. Some of her garments and accessories are nearby.



Photos on wall:

The always glamorous Natalie relaxes by the pool, ca. 1940. Source: John C. Wilson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript



Photo at left:

The pool at Pebbles, ca. 1950. The John C. Wilson Archive



(Image on label)

John C Wilson Archive

Natalie Paley and her husband John C. Wilson on their wedding day, with Noël Coward and John's family, at Pebbles, Fairfield, Connecticut, 1937.



Jumpsuit

Bonwit Teller (1895–2000)

New York, ca. 1965

Cotton twill

Loan from private family collection



Tote bag (with N.P.W. initials, for “Natalie Paley Wilson”)

New York, ca. 1960s
Wool, silk moiré, leather trim
John C. Wilson Archive



Day dress

Kiki Hart (American, active 1940s–70s)
New York, 1950s–70s
Silk
John C. Wilson Archive



Pebbles guest book

1934–57
Paper, silk, paperboard, leather
John C. Wilson Archive



Page from the Pebbles guest book featuring the signatures of Laurence Olivier, Vivien Leigh, British interior decorator Syrie Maugham, Jean Schlumberger, and Elsa Schiaparelli, 1940.



Thistle brooch

Tiffany & Co. (American, 1853–present)
Probably Jean Schlumberger (French, 1907–1987)
New York, ca. 1950

Chrysoprase, diamond, gold
Loan from private family collection



Ring

Verdura (American, 1939–present)
New York, 1940s
Zircons, diamonds, gold
John C. Wilson Archive



Insurance documentation album of Pebbles

Ca. 1950s
Leather, paper, photos
John C. Wilson Archive



Insurance documentation photo of the sitting room at Pebbles featuring the Konstantin Makovsky portrait of Natalie's mother, Princess Olga Paley, also on view in this exhibition.

THE PRODUCER AND THE PRINCESS

Clever and stylish, Jack Wilson was a notable theater producer who worked with Noël Coward, actor and writer Anita Loos (1889–1981), and Broadway composer and songwriter Cole Porter (1891–1964) on many dazzling productions of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Wilson and Princess Natalie Paley met at a dinner in London in 1934, and they had mutual friends including Cecil Beaton, Oliver Messel, and actor Tallulah Bankhead (1902–1968). In his posthumously published autobiography, Wilson recalls that they “bickered amicably,” and that by 1937, the princess “had enough of acting, washed her hands of the business, and finally settled for marrying me.” Though not a romantic connection, the pair settled into a close, caring bond surrounded by friends. Together, they were a stylish couple, in New York and abroad.



(Image on label)

Natalie and John C. Wilson, 1930s.



(Image on label)

John C. Wilson Archive

John C. Wilson and Princess Natalie Paley, the hosts of Pebbles, perch on the pool's diving board, 1947.

(Video screen)

Pages and images from Wilson's scrapbooks (about 8 minutes, on repeat)

John C. Wilson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

While Wilson's world of theater and film personalities was well represented by the pool, Paley's circle of those from the world of fashion was also ever-present. The world-renowned French fashion designer and Pebbles regular Christian Dior (1905–1957) spent Palm Sunday there in 1950. Diana Vreeland (1903–1989), fashion editor supreme of the twentieth century, sported oversized sunglasses and chatted with Verdura, whose Maltese cross cuffs stacked on each arm became her signature accessory. Pages from Wilson's scrapbooks full of the famous of their time are digitized on the above screen.

A LEGACY OF ELEGANCE

After they sold Pebbles in 1957, Princess Natalie Paley and husband Jack Wilson, who was then suffering from health complications, became full-time New Yorkers, living at their Park Avenue apartment. Wilson passed away there in 1961 at the age of sixty-two. Paley remained an elegant Upper East Sider until her own death twenty years later, in 1981. Until 1970, when Paley slowed down, her name appeared on guest lists for parties at the apartment of her friend Valentina, a fashion designer born in Kyiv. She remained in touch with her surviving friends and family, and she always kept portraits of her lost older brother, Prince Vladimir, and her mother, Princess Olga Paley, on view nearby. Signature elements of the princess's iconic style, such as her pearl and gold jewelry and her fur-trimmed coat, are on view here.

Princess Natalie Paley rapidly transitioned from an early childhood with loving parents to an adolescence marked by the turbulence and trauma of revolution, loss of home and most possessions, flight from Russia, and, most devastating, the violent deaths of her brother and father. Emerging into adulthood, she maintained a full life for decades and created a legacy built to a large extent on long-term friendships and social connections in the worlds of fashion, design, literature, art, and film.



(Image on label)

Scrapbook page and sketches: Source: John C. Wilson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

Natalie was a proud dog owner to several pups. Pictured above, enjoying a January 1940 Sunday in New York.



(Image on label)

Many of Paley's talented friends commemorated her love for her dogs. These sketches include one by Fulco di Verdura, 1948 (left), and one by French illustrator Marcel Vertès (1895–1961), 1945 (center).

In case at right:



Sketches of Pon-Pon

Elsa "Jack" von Reppert-Bismarck (German, 1903–1971)

Loan from private family collection



Photo holder with photos of Princess Olga and Prince Vladimir

Hermès (French, 1837–present)

Paris, 1900s

Leather, photographs (replicas)

Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens Archives and Special Collections



Three-strand necklace

France or America, 1940s–50s

Pearls, gold, diamonds

John C. Wilson Archive



Handkerchief

New York or Paris, mid-20th century

Plain woven cotton with complex woven and embroidered motifs

John C. Wilson Archive



Necklace

Probably France

Gold

John C. Wilson Archive



Earrings

France, 1930–50s

Cultured pearls, gold, pyrite

John C. Wilson Archive



Necklace

France or Russia, 1900–1930s

Natural pearls, diamonds, platinum

John C. Wilson Archive



Four bracelets

France or America, 1930s–60s

Gold, cultured pearls

John C. Wilson Archive



Coat

America, 1940s–60s



(Image on label)

NATALIE PALEY IN FILM

Described as a “goddess of the 1930s,” Princess Natalie Paley inhabited artistic circles intertwined with the blooming movie industry. Before World War I, while living in exile in Gilded Age Paris, Natalie’s parents appeared in early French newsreels and witnessed the rise of film as a new art form. Natalie herself modeled frequently and was featured in a 1934 newsreel showcasing the fashion house of her first husband, Lucien Lelong. A year before, she had performed in her first movie, *L’Épervier*, directed by Marcel L’Herbier. Paley starred in six movies in three years in Paris, London, and Hollywood, often portraying a version of herself. Paley’s role in her last movie, *Les Hommes nouveaux*, also directed by L’Herbier, is considered one of her best. However, the movie industry did not suit her; as Natalie stated in an interview in 1936, “As for Hollywood, it is for me...the most impossible place in all America. When I made *Sylvia Scarlett*, in which Katharine Hepburn starred...I was so utterly miserable. I could not eat. I could not sleep. I could not work. No place in the world has ever affected me like Hollywood. For me it was a nightmare.” The film business better suited another family member, Natalie’s nephew: Irina’s son, Prince Michel Romanoff, had a successful twenty-year career as an assistant director, mostly in France.

Princess Natalie Paley’s filmography

L’Épervier, also known as *Les Amoureux* (1933), directed by Marcel L’Herbier, in the role of Marina.

Le Prince Jean (1934), directed by Jean de Marguenat, in the role of Claire d’Arlong.

The Private Life of Don Juan (1934), directed by Alexander Korda, in the role of the “jealous husband’s poor wife.”

L’Homme des Folies Bergères (1935), directed by Marcel Achard and Roy Del Ruth, in the role of Baroness Cassini.

Sylvia Scarlett (1935), directed by George Cukor, in the role of Lily Levetsky (uncredited).

Les Hommes nouveaux (1936), directed by Marcel L’Herbier, in the role of Christiane de Sainte-Foy.



(Replica on wall)



(Replica on wall)



(Replica on wall)

Princess Natalie Paley wearing Mainbocher with her dog in New York

Town and Country, June 1948 Photographed by Gene Fenn, *Town & Country*, Hearst Magazine Media, Inc.

Excerpts on-screen

(about 20 minutes, on repeat)

Paris. The Grand Duke Paul of Russia, 1912

GP archives–Gaumont collection.

The Fashion at Lelong, November 23, 1934

GP archives–Gaumont collection.

***The Private Life of Don Juan* (1934)**

LOLA CLIPS

***L'Homme des Folies Bergères* (1935)**

Footage From '*L'HOMME DES FOLIES BERGÈRE*' Courtesy of 20th Century Studios, Inc. All rights reserved.

***Sylvia Scarlett* (1935)**

Warner Brothers

***Les Hommes nouveaux* (1936)**

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