

Dressed for spring:
Helen Uffner
at the Easter Parade
in New York



“Without us, the emperor will have no clothes”

Wie viele von uns haben den Mut, ihre Leidenschaft zum Beruf zu machen?
JUDITH GILBERT berichtet über eine Frau, die es gewagt hat.

ADVANCED **US** **AUDIO**

When Helen Uffner started collecting vintage clothing as a child in the 1960s, she couldn't have known what would become of her collection. Today, her company, Helen Uffner Vintage Clothing LLC (HUVCL), is one of the largest of its kind in the US. For 42 years, Uffner has been renting authentic 1860s through 1980s clothing and accessories to the film, television, theater, commercial, and fashion industries. Her clients are costume designers and stylists, and she's clothed such stars as Meryl Streep, Brad Pitt, Renée Zellweger, Leonardo DiCaprio, Angelina Jolie, Tom Hanks, Beyoncé, Kate Winslet, and Robert De Niro — to name just a few.

From a passion to a career

It all began when Helen was 12, when she saw a sign for an auction across the street from her home. She took money she'd saved from babysitting and went to the auction. All she could afford were a few handmade books from the late 1800s, for one dollar each. Today, they're worth a great deal more. It was a moment that launched a lifetime of collecting.

“That's when I started to look for other beautiful old things,” Uffner

told *Spotlight*. “I began going to thrift shops and found amazing 1940s hand-embroidered Austrian blouses for 25 cents. I still have those. I didn't wear them — for me, they were works of art to be studied and admired.”

Her first two important clothing purchases were at flea markets. The first was a 1920s silk dress that cost five dollars, and the second an embroidered Edwardian dress.

“I stood there for an hour because it cost 20 dollars, which to me at the time was an enormous sum of money for an old dress.”

After college, Uffner traveled around the world for a year, sending back boxes of foreign, vintage flea-market finds to her parents.

Back in New York, she went to work in management consulting but continued collecting. When a fashion magazine wrote a story about her Victorian collection, New York's finest department stores, such as Macy's and Bergdorf's, became interested. Her collection grew. Then came Woody Allen.

“Theater friends began buying clothes for productions. In 1982, a vintage shop in New York sent Woody Allen's costume designer to my apartment to buy items for his new movie, *Zelig*. At the time, I had one rolling rack.



BIOGRAPHY

Name: Helen Uffner

Known for: Helen Uffner Vintage Clothing (HUVCL), one of America's largest vintage clothing and accessories rental companies serving the film, television, theater, commercial, and fashion industries

Early life: Born in Brussels, Belgium, Helen came to New York with her parents when she was 12 and at that age began collecting vintage clothing.

Education: Queens College, City University of New York, BA Fine Arts

fine arts

• bildende Künste

hand embroidered

[ˈhænd ɪmˌbrɔɪdəd]
• handbestickt

LLC (Limited Liability Company)

• Unternehmen mit beschränkter Haftung

rolling rack

• Kleiderständer auf Rollen

thrift shop

• Secondhand-Laden

They bought everything.”

That was when Uffner had what she calls her aha moment.

“Instead of having to restock my collection again, I thought: ‘Why not rent to productions instead of selling to them?’”

The business of collecting

Uffner left her consulting job and began developing her creative business full-time. *The Cotton Club*, *The Color Purple*, *Out of Africa*, and *The Purple Rose of Cairo* came soon afterwards — all still supplied from her apartment.

Her collection grew to 600 more cartons in 11 different storage spaces. In 1996, she moved to a loft in Manhattan’s Garment District, and has moved her showroom twice since then. Now, HUV is in an even larger loft space in Long Island City, just across the East River from Manhattan.

When new clients walk in, they’re overwhelmed by the enormity of it all.

“I have thousands of pieces, but my strength is in pre-1970s clothing and accessories,” she says. “I have over 2,000 dresses from the 1950s, over 1,000 each from the 1930s and Edwardian/Victorian periods, and over 4,500 women’s hats.”

The collection also includes eyeglasses, bags, shoes, parasols, watches, and costume jewelry, as well as unusual items such as old pilot and driving goggles.

“It’s a fantasy land being surrounded by amazing pieces from every decade. I specialize in earlier periods, so if I wanted to start a business like mine today, it’d be impossible because it’s more difficult to find these pieces. But

because of that, the value of my collection rises every year,” Uffner explains.

When a costume designer comes to the showroom, Uffner and her staff help them find the right pieces for their production. The designers look through the racks, which are organized by gender, category, decade, season, color, and size.

Accessories are stored in boxes and showcases. Sometimes, actors come for fittings . The clothing is then invoiced and shipped or picked up. And things go quickly — deadlines are often crazy.

With such a wide range of clothing, it’s hard to imagine having favorites, but Uffner does. Her collection includes beautiful evening wear, but she prefers everyday wear and work clothes. “If you’re doing a film about the Great Depression, or post-war Europe, you’ll want quieter, monochromatic, well-worn-looking day wear that looks authentic for the scenes.”

HELEN UFFNER VINTAGE CLOTHING (HUV)

Founded in 1978, HUV has rented clothes to more than 1,000 films, theatrical productions, television shows, commercials, music videos, book and magazine covers, and special events. Early films include *Zelig*, *Out of Africa*, and *The Color Purple*. More recent projects include *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, *The Irishman*, *Joker*, *Death on the Nile*, *Jungle Cruise*, and *Dash & Lily*.

Treasures: Uffner in her warehouse (below); vintage pieces and the films for which they have been used (right and on p. 29)



fitting

► Anprobe

goggles

► Schutzbrille

invoice

► in Rechnung stellen

parasol

► Sonnenschirm

restock

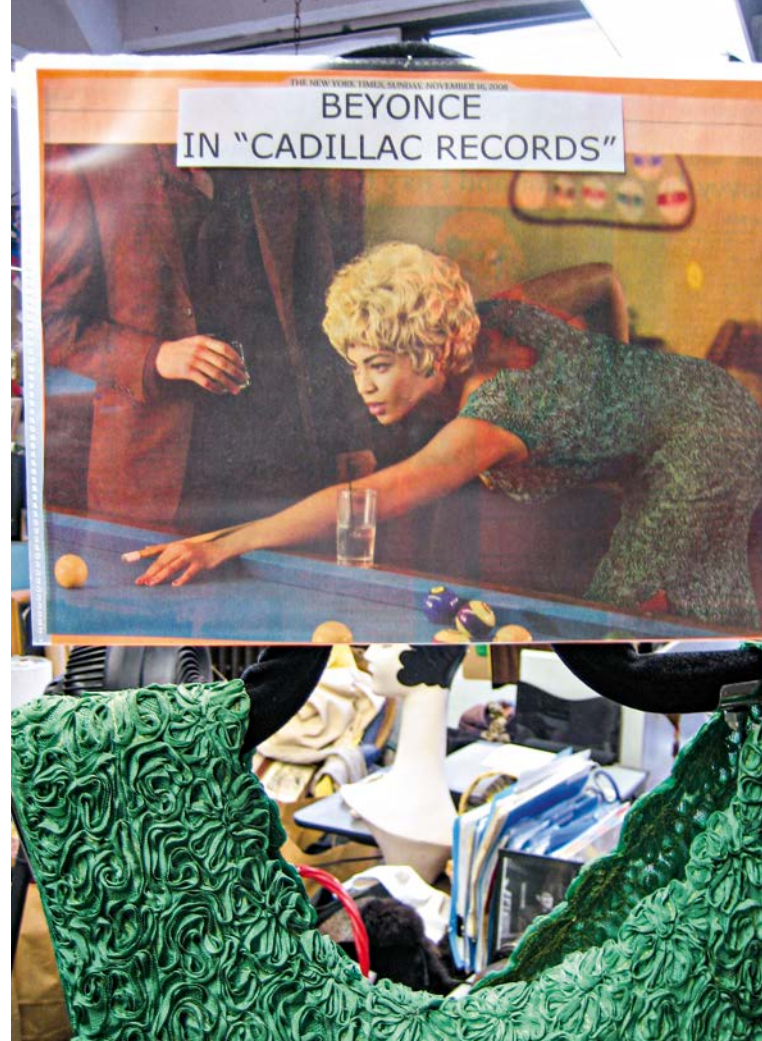
[,rɪˈstɔːk]
► wiederauffüllen

ship

► versenden

showroom

► Ausstellungsraum



Amazing moments and memories

In 42 years, Uffner has worked on over 1,000 films, theatrical productions, television shows, music videos, commercials, and book and magazine covers. She's worked on most of Woody Allen's films, films from the *Batman* and *Indiana Jones* series, *Julie and Julia*, *Moonrise Kingdom*, *Catch Me If You Can*, *Bridge of Spies*, *Joker*, *Fantastic Beasts*, *Death on the Nile*, and countless others. For television, her more recent projects alone include *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, *The Irishman*, *Perry Mason*, and *Dash & Lily* — a scene of which was actually filmed in Uffner's showroom.

Uffner collects a lot more than just clothing. Working all those years with the world's biggest stars on the world's most popular films, she's had some amazing experiences. When asked about them, she doesn't know where to begin.

"Well, Paul Newman came up to me at the opening of *Our Town* to thank me for everything. Not much tops that!" Uffner says, with a smile.

Once, Kim Cattrall, of *Sex and the City* fame, came by. "She was going to play the owner of a costume rental shop and wanted her portrayal to be as authentic as possible. So, she visited and we spoke about what it was like to own such a business."

One of Uffner's craziest moments, though, came early in her career when she did *Out of Africa*. "We got the clothes back from Nairobi that had been delayed for two months in customs. When I opened a box full of 1911 hats, a gigantic live insect jumped out and landed on my arm! I screamed. It survived the overseas trip and a two-month wait — but it wasn't going to survive me!"

The cost of doing business

The biggest problem HUV C has is the cost of doing business in New York. Uffner has to be in New York, the center of theater, film, and television on the East Coast. But it's expensive, and HUV C has to move again this year.

"We have an industrial loft that's double-racked for hanging thousands of clothes and steel shelving for boxes," says Uffner. "Commercial rents are high. We've lost our space three times in 13 years because our buildings are torn down to build high-rises. Moving is expensive. I wish there was more support of the theater-related industry, or programs to finance the arts or offer secure commercial space. We're being priced out of our industry."

Like every other business, HUV C was not prepared for the pandemic. Broadway theaters closed down in March last year through at least May 2021. Films stopped production.

"I sent my staff home before New York officially closed down," explains Uffner, "paying them half salaries for a month, all of us thinking the pandemic would clear by then. We were so wrong."

In May 2020, HUV C and over 50 other independent theater-related businesses in New York formed the Costume Industry Coalition (CIC) to help them survive the crisis. The CIC raises awareness of the importance of these businesses to the entertainment industry and to the economy in general. Glenn Close, Hillary Rodham Clinton and others have made videos to promote the CIC, and money earned from fundraising through their website, social media, and other activities helps these businesses and their employees.

"Most people in our industry have been jobless for a year," says Uffner. "The CIC is a family of businesses who've come together to make our concerns known — because without us, the emperor will definitely have no clothes."

Awards and rewards

Uffner has won four Emmy Award citations for her work in television. Some of the recognition HUV C gets is less official but no less important to her.

In 2005, she worked on a short film called *Torte Bluma*, based on a true story about Franz Stangl, the Austrian-born commandant of the Treblinka

concentration camp (played by Stellan Skarsgård), and the prisoner who cooked his meals. This was the project closest to Uffner's heart.

"I had lost many immediate relatives in Treblinka," she says, "so I offered all the clothing for free, in exchange for a dedication to each of my family members at the end of the film. The film went on to win awards at several film festivals, and I had a lasting memorial."

Over the years, with success came a change in the way HUV C works. Uffner used to buy clothing at antique fairs and estate sales. Now, collections often come to her.

Sometimes, costume designers want to donate their collection to a good home. Other times, someone who lost a parent doesn't want to see their older clothing thrown away. "They're so delighted that we offer a welcoming home for the pieces and that they'll be restored, appreciated, and have a new life on screen. That's a good feeling."

Uffner also enjoys working with students. She gives guest lectures at universities and tours of her showroom to school groups. HUV C also runs an internship program for students interested in costuming — some later become employees or even her clients.

After so many years of being in the business, Uffner is now flirting with the idea of retirement. When asked about her plans for the collection, she sighs: "I have no control over who might buy the business, but it'd be great if it continued in New York. Of ten vintage sources when I started, I'm now the last one here."

antique fair

• Antiquitätenmarkt

dedication

• Widmung

estate sale

• Räumungsverkauf

fundraising

• Spendensammlung

guest lecture

• Gastvorlesung

high-rise

• Hochhaus

industrial loft

• Fabriketage

internship

• Praktikum

lasting

• dauerhaft



Tom Hanks
in
"BRIDGE OF SPIES"

