This month’s essay is about one of the highest-profile European actresses of the post-World War II era, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. During this period, she became an intercontinental sex symbol through her acting in numerous films. At the time of her death at age 95 (January 16, 2023), she was among the last high-profile international actors from the Golden Age of Hollywood cinema. Following the decline of her career as a film star, she established careers for herself as a photojournalist, a sculptor, an artist, and a philanthropist. She even attempted unsuccessful runs for political office, first in the European Parliament (1999) and then years later in the Italian Senate at age 95 (2022).

Luigina “Gina” Lollobrigida was born on July 4, 1927 in Subiaco, Italy, a small mountain town in the Lazio region just outside of Rome. She was the second of four daughters (Giuliana, born 1924; Maria, born 1929; and Fernanda, born 1930) whose parents were a successful furniture manufacturer, Giovanni, and his wife, Giuseppina Mercuri Lollobrigida. As a child during the 1930s growing up in Mussolini’s Italy, Gina took private lessons in singing, dancing, drawing, and languages. During World War II, the family fled to Rome, where Gina contributed to the family income by modeling for the fumetti (comic books) that use photographs instead of cartoons. Following the end of the war, she won a scholarship to the Accademia di Belle Arti di Roma (Academy of Fine Arts of Rome) to continue her studies in painting and sculpture for three years. However, she was often kept from her own artistic work by demands from her fellow students to pose for them.
At the same time as her art studies, she began to develop a modeling career, using the pseudonym “Diana Loris” under which she modeled for magazine picture stories. She also participated in several beauty contests, placing third in the 1947 “Miss Italy” contest and winning the “Miss Rome” contest in 1948.

All of this public focus on Lollobrigida’s beauty helped bring her to the attention of Italian directors, and led to her first motion-picture appearance as an extra, in Riccardo Freda’s *Aquila Nera* (Black Eagle; American title: Return of the Black Eagle, 1946). Two of her other early films were Alberto Lattuada’s *Delitto di Giovanni Episcopo* (The Crime of John the Bishop, American title: Flesh Will Surrender, 1947) and Mario Costa’s *L’Elisir d’Amore* (The Elixir of Love, 1947). In these and other early films, her roles were minor, often with no dialogue. However, this began to change in 1949 with Luigi Zampa’s *Campane a Martello* (Hammer Bells, American title: Alarm Bells, 1949), in which she had a starring role as Agostina. Another starring role came in Duilio Coletti’s 1950 film *Miss Italia* (Miss Italy, American title: My Beautiful Daughter) a role that she could personally relate to with the beauty contests she had appeared in and won.

In 1950, Lollobrigida had her first American screen test under the auspices of Howard Hughes, who signed her to an exclusive seven-year contract to make three pictures a year. She refused the final terms of the contract, since she preferred to remain in Europe, and Hughes suspended her, never using her in a film. Despite selling RKO Pictures in 1955, Hughes retained her contract. This prevented her from working for any other American studio that was filming a movie in the U.S. (until 1959), but allowed her to work for American studios that shot productions in Europe, although Hughes often threatened legal action against the producers of such films.

By the early 1950s her film status in Europe was established. Widely acclaimed throughout the Continent as “La Lollo,” the movie that launched her as a sex symbol was *Altri Tempi* (Other Times, American title: In Olden Days, 1952) an anthology film directed by Alessandro Blasetti, in which Vittorio De Sica played a lawyer who defends the honor of a woman (Lollobrigida) accused of being too sexy.

She first came to international attention in the French comedy/swashbuckler film *Fanfan la Tulipe*, (Fanfan the Tulip, American title: Fearless Little Soldier, 1952) directed by Christian-Jaque. Fanfan (played by Gérard Philipe) is a charming, attractive young man who is trying to escape a shotgun marriage in France during the Seven Years’ War. At this vulnerable point in his life, he is approached by the daughter of a recruiting officer, the gypsy Adeline (played by Lollobrigida), who tells him that if he joins the army, he will find fame, fortune, and he will marry the daughter of King Luis XV (played by Marcel Herrand). Accordingly, he joins the army, only to discover that she made the whole thing up in order for her father to get a recruiting bonus. Nevertheless, encouraged by a series of improbable circumstances, he accepts her prediction of marriage as his destiny. As the film progresses, the audience becomes aware of a
developing attraction between Fanfan and Adeline which conflicts with his perceived “destiny” of marrying a king’s daughter.

Lollobrigida’s performance that immortalized her sultry qualities more than any other was in Luigi Comencini’s romantic comedy Pane, Amore e Fantasia (Bread, Love and Dreams, 1953). Her character La Bersaglieria’s sincere love for a shy but honest young cop in preference to an extrovert sergeant major, played with panache by De Sica, made her popular with audiences everywhere, and she became a pin-up around the world. This led to her receiving a BAFTA nomination for Best Foreign Actress. She won her first Nastro d’Argento (Silver Ribbon) award from the Italian National Syndicate of Film Journalists for her role in the picture. The film contains what many critics regard as Lollobrigida’s best and most naturalistic performance. (Its popularity resulted in two sequels, one with Lollobrigida: Pane, Amore e Gelosia (Bread, Love and Jealousy, American title: Frisky, 1954) and the open-ended titled Pane, Amore e... (Bread, Love, and …, US title: Scandal in Sorrento, 1955) with Sophia Loren replacing Lollobrigida in the female lead role).

Lollobrigida then starred in Mario Soldati’s La Provinciale (The Provincial, American title: The Wayward Wife, 1953), based on an Alberto Moravia story. She won the Best Actress award at the newly established Italian Golden Goblet Awards for this performance. Her next starring role was in Luigi Zampa’s La Romana (Woman of Rome, 1954), which was a film of Moravia’s famous novel about a Roman sex worker who falls in love with an antifascist militant. She was disappointed that her performance in the film did not get her the Best Actress award at the Venice Film Festival that year. These were three of her most renowned Italian films, and when they were introduced into the US in the mid-1950s, her fame and popularity grew immensely. (She was so popular in the US that she appeared on a Time Magazine cover in 1954).

At the same time, she was also working in the French film industry as well. In addition to Fanfan la Tulipe, she also starred in René Clair’s Les Belles de Nuit (Beauties of the Night, 1952), and Robert Siodmak’s Le Grand Jeu (The Great Game, American title: Flesh and the Woman, 1954). Lollobrigida made her English-language movie debut in John Huston’s adventure comedy film Beat the Devil (1953), which was shot in Italy. In this film she played the wife of Humphrey Bogart, with Jennifer Jones, Robert Morley, and Peter Lorre as her other
The film was a disjointed and raucous affair. It often proceeded by spur of the moment scenes and dialogue, with the actors performing as best they could. The film was panned by critics and failed at the box office. However, it has become a popular cult film today among film aficionados. (It can be seen in its entirety on YouTube).

She then took part in a co-production between Italy and US entitled Il Maestro di Don Giovanni (The Teacher of Don Giovanni, American title: Crossed Swords, 1954), which had its premiere in San Francisco on August 26, 1954. It was a rollicking, swashbuckling adventure film directed by Milton Krim and starring Errol Flynn, Lollobrigida, and Nadia Gray. It was shot at the Cinecittà Studios in Rome.

This was followed by her performance in La Donna più Bella del Mondo (The World’s Most Beautiful Woman, American title: Beautiful But Dangerous; French title La Belle des Belles, 1955), a French-Italian comedy/drama, romance film directed by Robert Z. Leonard. It was her first picture for a major American studio, 20th Century Fox. The picture was a biopic about Italian opera soprano Lina Cavalieri. In the movie, Lollobrigida played Cavalieri and sang all the songs in her own voice, including arias from Tosca. For her performance, she received her first David di Donatello (Italy’s equivalent of the Oscar) award for Best Actress. The picture also gave her a sobriquet that was used constantly throughout her career to describe her: The World’s Most Beautiful Woman.

Lollobrigida went on to star in many more movies than the scope of this essay allows. She starred opposite famous leading men throughout her career. In addition to those listed above, they included Burt Lancaster and Tony Curtis in Carol Reed’s Trapeze (1956); Anthony Quinn in Jean Delannoy’s The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1956); Yul Brynner in King Vidor’s final movie Solomon and Sheba (1959); Rock Hudson in Robert Mulligan’s Come September (1961); and Sean Connery in Basil Dearden’s Woman of Straw (1964). She starred with Bob Hope, Phyllis Diller, and Jeffrey Hunter in Frank Tashlin’s final movie, the comedy The Private Navy of Sgt. O’Farrell (1968), after which she also accompanied Hope on his visits to troops in Viet Nam.

She continued to appear in films made in Europe during these years as well. She played Napoleon’s sister, Paolina, opposite Stephen Boyd and Raymond Pellegrin, in Jean Delannoy’s elegant historical epic Venere Imperiale (American title: Imperial Venus, 1963). She received her second Nastro d’Argento (Silver Ribbon) for Best Actress, and her second David di Donatello award for Best Actress for her performance. In Melvin Frank’s Buona Sera, Mrs. Campbell (1968), which was filmed at the Cinecittà Studios in Rome, she played on her early peasant image as an Italian woman, Carla Campbell, who convinces each of three former American GIs (Phil Silvers, Peter Lawford, and Telly Savalas) that he is the father of her daughter. For this role, she won her third David di Donatello award for Best Actress, and also a Golden Globe Award nomination for Best Actress. She also co-starred with David Niven in
Jerzy Skolimowski’s **King, Queen, Knave** (1972), a West German comedy based on the novel of the same name by Vladimir Nabokov.

**New Careers**

By the 1970s, Lollobrigida film career had slowed down quite a bit. Although she appeared in some movies, she turned down several important roles because she felt over-worked and was feeling tired of the demands of movie stardom. She then embarked on what she developed into a successful second career as a photographic journalist. She photographed, among others, Paul Newman, Salvador Dalí, Henry Kissinger, David Cassidy, Audrey Hepburn, Ella Fitzgerald, and the German national football team. Especially significant in this new career, in 1974 she managed to obtain an exclusive interview with Cuban leader Fidel Castro. This led to **Ritratto di Fidel** (Portrait of Fidel, 1975), a documentary she wrote, directed, and produced that was based on her exclusive interview with Castro. It was shown at the 1975 Berlin Film Festival and received glowing critical reviews.

Between 1972 and 1994, she also published six collections of her photographs, including the 1973 titled **Italia Mia** (My Italy) in which she travelled the countryside and cities of Italy photographing ordinary people and important sites as she saw them. In 1994, she published her last photography book, **The Wonder of Innocence**, which contained over 150 photomontages of children and animals from around the world. Distinct from her previous books that were almost all single images, each photograph in this volume was a composite of many individual photos, sometimes incorporating as many as 15 images in one surrealist montage.

“Technically, the composites are virtually seamless,” writes a reviewer for **Popular Photography**, “it’s hard to detect any artifice. Subjects overlap, limbs entwine, and delicate strands of hair glow in the sunlight.” Although Lollobrigida would not reveal her techniques, she claimed that the composites were done entirely in her home darkroom, with no use of computers, using a method that took her over two years to devise.

Lollobrigida also developed into a sculptor, hearkening back to her early post-war days at the **Accademia di Belle Arti di Roma** (Academy of Fine Arts of Rome) where she had studied art and sculpture for three years. An exhibition of 38 of her bronze pieces was presented at the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, among other venues, in 2003.

*A wonderful exploration of her photography by T. Hopper (@THopper) on YouTube:*  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=baEugddLaFc

**Television and Final Theater Movie**

After her film career wound down in the early 1970s, Lollobrigida did do some acting stints appearing on television in Europe and the United States. In 1972 she appeared (with her hair dyed Turquoise!) as the Blue Fairy in **Le Avventure di Pinocchio** (The Adventures of Pinocchio), a 5-part miniseries adapted for Italian television by Luigi Comencini from Carlo
Collodi’s 1883 novel of the same name. She appeared in some **Falcon Crest** episodes as Francesca Gioberti, a role originally written for Sophia Loren, who had turned it down. (She received her third Golden Globe nomination in 1985 for this portrayal). She also had a role, co-starring with Stefanie Powers in the American television miniseries, **Deceptions** (1985), in which she played an excitable duchess entertaining in Venice. In 1986, she appeared as a guest star in the TV series **The Love Boat**.

Her last feature film appearance was in Ariel Zeitoun’s **XXL** (1997), a French comedy that starred Gérard Depardieu, Michel Boujenah, and Elsa Zylberstein. She did not star in the movie, but had a role as Gaby Berrebi. It was about a Jewish family in the garment trade, and mixed the two worlds of French café life and the French garment industry.

**Politics**

In 1999, Lollobrigida unsuccessfully ran for election to the European Parliament from Italy as a candidate for **L’Ulivo** (The Olive Tree) a center-left coalition party led by Romano Prodi. In 2020, she publicly endorsed Pope Francis’ view on LGBTQ rights. In the 2022 Italian general election, at the age of 95, she attempted to win a seat in the Senate of the Republic, by standing for election as a candidate from Latina, Lazio for the **Italia Sovrana e Popolare** (Sovereign and Popular Italy) Party (ISP), a populist, sovereigntist, and Eurosceptic alliance formed in 2022 to oppose Mario Draghi. She was unsuccessful since the party did not win enough of the constituency vote to warrant representation in the Senate.

**Personal Life**

Lollobrigida was courted in the late 1940s by both Prince Rainier of Monaco and Howard Hughes. The latter brought her to the US and for a time kept her in a hotel room in Los Angeles until she would agree to divorce her husband and marry him. She refused and left to return to Italy, and the refusal led to Hughes’ attempt to block her from working on films made in the US. She had married Milko Škofič, a Yugoslavian-born physician, in 1949. He eventually left his medical practice to become her manager. The couple separated in 1966 and finally divorced in 1971. They had one son, Andrea Milko (Milko Škofič, Jr.), who was born on July 28, 1957.

In 2006, at the age of 79, she announced plans to marry Javier Rigau y Rafols, a 45-year-old Spanish businessman. But she canceled the wedding less than two months later, reportedly because of overwhelming negative press attention. There were legal fights for years after this; Rigau saying he had married her in a court ceremony in Barcelona and she accusing him of marrying a stand-in in her place. Finally, in 2019, the Roman Rota, with the consent of Pope Francis, issued a declaration of nullity for her marriage with Rigau after a two-year review of the issue.
After her retirement from movie work, she divided her time between her house on Via Appia Antica in Rome and a villa in Monte Carlo. On October 16, 1999, Lollobrigida was nominated as a Goodwill Ambassador of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization.

Over the years, she continued as an active supporter of Italian and Italian-American causes, particularly the National Italian American Foundation. In 2008, she received the NIAF Lifetime Achievement Award at the Foundation’s Anniversary Gala.

In 2013, she sold her jewelry collection through Sotheby’s, and donated nearly $5 million from the sale to benefit stem-cell therapy research.

On February 1, 2018, she received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

In 2021, the Italian Supreme Court of Cassation, at the request of her son Andrea, ruled that she should have a legal guardian appointed to manage her affairs and to prevent predation. Although the court determined she was mentally capable, medical evidence had indicated that there was “a weakening in her correct perception of reality” and that she was in a state of “vulnerability.”

She broke a thigh bone in a fall in September, 2022, and had surgery to repair it. She said she was able to walk again soon after the operation and physical therapy.

Luigina “Gina” Lollobrigida died at a clinic in Rome on January 16, 2023 at the age of 95, one of the last high-profile international actors from the Golden Age of Hollywood cinema. She is buried in the cemetery of her hometown: Subiaco Cemetery, Subiaco, Metropolitan City of Rome, Lazio.

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from:

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