

## **Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923)**

**Sarah Bernhardt**, who was born in Paris in October 1844 and died on 26 March 1923, was a French actress. She is considered to be one of the most important French actresses of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As the first international “star”, she was the first actress to complete triumphant tours on five continents.

Jean Cocteau came up with the description “sacred monster” for her. Her style and silhouette inspired the fashion, decorative arts and aesthetic of the Art Nouveau period. She was awarded the Legion of Honour in 1914.

### **Early stage career**

In 1859, Sarah Bernhardt enrolled in the Paris Conservatory of Dramatic Art. On leaving in 1862 with a second prize for comedy, she joined the Comédie-Française but was asked to leave in 1866.

After signing a contract with the Odéon Theatre, she made her name with a role in François Coppée’s *Le Passant (The Passer-by)* in 1869. During the Siege of Paris in 1870, she transformed the theatre into a military hospital, where she cared for the future Marshal Foch.

### **A world-renowned theatre actress**

She enjoyed resounding success as the Queen in *Ruy Blas* in 1872, with Victor Hugo nicknaming her the “Golden Voice”. This success earned her a second chance at the Comédie-Française, where she performed in *Phèdre* in 1874 and in *Hernani* in 1877.

In 1880, she founded her own company, with which she travelled to perform and make her fortune abroad until 1917. She performed in London, Copenhagen, the United States, Peru, Chile and Russia, including at the Mikhailovsky Theatre in St Petersburg (in 1881, 1892 and 1908).

She became one of a very few French artists to have a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in Los Angeles.

She was close to Oscar Wilde and commissioned him to write the play *Salomé*, in which she performed the title role, in 1892. From 1893, she directed the Théâtre de la Renaissance and then, in 1899, the Théâtre des Nations, which she renamed the Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt.

### **Cinema and sculpture**

Having performed in more than 120 plays, Sarah Bernhardt then became a film actress. Her first movie was *Le Duel d’Hamlet (Hamlet’s Duel)*, which was made in 1900. She shot other silent films, including two autobiographical works.

Sarah Bernhardt also produced several bronzes, including some busts which are now displayed at the Musée d’Orsay.

### **Links with Monaco**

In 1878, during construction of the new Opera Theatre in Monte-Carlo, Sarah Bernhardt, who was also a sculptor, was commissioned by architect Charles Garnier to create an allegory of Music in marble, which is today located on a corner of the building’s facade. When the Salle Garnier was inaugurated on 25 January 1879, Sarah Bernhardt gave the opening performance, reciting a *Prologue* by Jean Aicard which “brought the entire auditorium to its feet.” In June 1892, Raoul Gunsbourg took over leadership of the theatre. His contract committed him to putting prestigious artists on the stage, and first among these was Sarah Bernhardt. As an actress, Sarah Bernhardt quickly became a regular at the Monte-Carlo theatre, where she often performed with her troupe. Productions included *Fédora* and *La Dame aux Camélias (Camille)*

in 1893; the return of *La Dame aux Camélias*, as well as *La Tosca*, *Phèdre* and *Frou-Frou* in 1898; and *Bohémios*, *Fédora*, *Phèdre* and *Circé* (created on 20 April) in 1903.

Sarah Bernhardt was a friend of Princess Alice, and a close friend of Alice's father.

A supporter of Dreyfus, the actress wrote to Princess Alice in December 1899 to share her admiration of the position taken by the Prince on the affair.

On 23 August 1903, Albert I, who was anchored off the coast of Belle-Île where the actress owned an estate, invited her to have lunch with him on board the *Princesse-Alice*. A popular guest in Monaco, which she loved to visit, Sarah Bernhardt was received at the Palace for dinner. In his memoirs, the journalist Frank Harris recalled that she was also invited to the Château de Marchais, Prince Albert I's residence in Aisne.