

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Hi res images available upon request

Media Contact Only:

Lynn Rossotti (202) 243-3975
lrossotti@HillwoodMuseum.org

Lizzie Axelson (202) 243-3906
eaxelson@HillwoodMuseum.org

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

On view June 7, 2025 through January 11, 2026

Discover one of the twentieth century's most glamorous icons

Washington, D.C.— Explore the captivating story of a princess in exile who played an influential role in European and American arts and culture in the special exhibition [*From Exile to Avant-garde: The Life of Princess Natalie Paley*](#), on view at [Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens](#) from June 7, 2025 through January 11, 2026.

Natalie Paley (1905-1981) was a complex figure of the twentieth century, recognized for her contributions to fashion, film, culture, and society. A descendant of the Romanov dynasty, she rose from her family's fabled and tragic history and left a stylish and indelible mark on the century's culture and design. Her legacy can be seen in twentieth-century innovations from French couture collections and Parisian and Hollywood film roles to characters inspired by her personality and Surrealist portraits capturing her beauty. This special exhibition will be the first to explore the exceptional glamour and enigmatic life of this legendary woman.



"Natalie Paley was a creative figure with a talent for elegant reinvention—muse, model, fashion design collaborator, business director, actor, producer's wife, and confidant to writers and poets, among others," said Kate Markert, Hillwood's executive director. "We are excited to bring this fascinating character to life, highlighting her influence on fashion, the arts, film, and literature, which forms her legacy."

Natalie Paley

Born to Grand Duke Paul Alexandrovich (1860-1919), uncle of Emperor Nicholas II of Russia, and Princess Olga Valerianovna (1865-1929), Princess Natalia Pavlovna Paley enjoyed an idyllic childhood in Boulogne-sur-Seine, France, just outside of Paris. Her parents lived in French exile, due to their forbidden union, and they made the most of their fin de siècle surroundings, entertaining, collecting, and shopping as ultimate tastemakers. When the family's anticipated return to Russia in

1914 led to the tragic execution of her father and brother by the Bolsheviks, Paley escaped back to France with her mother and sister.

Paley reinvented herself and emerged in the 1920s as the wife of French couturier Lucien Lelong (1889-1958), becoming the focus of every fashion photographer in Paris and beyond, from Steichen and Man Ray to Horst and Hoyningen-Huene. As a confidant, visionary, and companion to artists, designers, and writers such as Jean Cocteau, Serge Lifar, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Fulco di Verdura, and Cecil Beaton, Paley was known for her exquisite taste, someone ethereal and glamorous who dictated her own fashion trends. She embodied the cool, discrete Hollywood allure of the 1930s, appearing in several fashionable feature films before moving to America. Her relocation here heralded a new transformation: Paley married the successful New York theater producer John C. "Jack" Wilson (1889-1961) in 1937 and soon began working for the fashion designer Mainbocher. Paley and Wilson built a close community of fashion designers, editors, actors, photographers, writers and other talents from their homes in New York and Connecticut, leading to many important collaborations and cultural connections of the twentieth century.

The Paley-Romanov Collection

Hillwood's 2022 acquisition of pieces that once belonged to Paley and the Romanovs, including imperial portraits, rare linens, and important archival documentation from five generations of the family, inspired this exhibition. Among the 335 new items are photos, letters, drawings, poems, a souvenir album, and news clippings of and relating to Natalie Paley, providing further insight into her life and painting a greater picture of this iconic woman. With these additions, Hillwood maintains the largest assemblage of Romanov and Paley material outside Russia. *From Exile to Avant-garde* will explore her life through key items from this acquisition alongside pieces from Hillwood's collection, including Sèvres porcelain, eighteenth-century glassware, and pieces from Fabergé.

Exhibition Organization and Highlights

From Exile to Avant-garde: The Life of Princess Natalie Paley will present an array of photographs, documents, paintings, decorative art objects, fashion, jewelry, glassware, and more. Organized into seven sections, the exhibition will begin with a focus on Paley and her family in Gilded Age Paris, exploring the artistic environment in which the young princess grew up, before highlighting her influential role in the arts as a muse of fashion creators, photographers, tastemakers, and writers. Hillwood provides the perfect setting as founder Marjorie Merriweather Post collected and preserved treasures from Paley's imperial Russian lineage and patronized many of the same designers and photographers.

The exhibition will open with an introduction and timeline before sharing the background of the Paley family, particularly highlighting the love story of Princess Natalie's parents, Grand Duke



Paul Alexandrovich and Princess Olga Valerianovna. Photos, miniatures, and more will lay the foundation for the rest of the exhibition.

Next will be a look into the Paleys' life in exile, revealing Paris during the Belle Epoque and the social life of Olga Paley. Portraits, photographs, and decorative art objects alongside fashion and incredible jewelry pieces highlight the lifestyle of the Paleys during this time and the world that shaped the development of young Natalie.

The family returned to Russia in 1914, and a selection of family photographs, fabric samples, and decorative arts will showcase the plans the family had for their new life, before a section devoted to the collection of art they amassed. Paintings, glassware, and porcelain pieces represent these holdings. This area will also delve into the revolution and Natalie's siblings, Vladimir, her brother who met his untimely death during his time, and Irina, her sister.

The exhibition will then shift to Natalie, continuing with her escape to Paris with her mother and sister, a period which set the stage for an intriguing and creative life. She transformed herself into a fashion icon, marrying Lucien Lelong, modeling, and establishing relationships with designers and artists, eventually moving to the United States in the 1930s. Photographs, illustrations, perfumes, sketches, jewelry, and more will highlight her indelible mark on creatives and tastemakers from this time, particularly in the United States, with a focus on her time in New York. She sat for an incredible range of photographers, including Horst P. Horst, George Hoyningen-Huene, Cecil Beaton, John Alfred Piver, and others, appearing in magazines from *Harper's Bazaar* to *Vogue*, and replicas of these images will be on view.



Additionally, subsections relating to Paley's involvement with the fashion label Mainbocher and her and second husband Jack Wilson's social scene at their home Pebbles, in Fairfield, Connecticut, will round out the exhibition. *From Exile to Avant-garde* will conclude by underscoring Paley's legacy of elegance, cementing her status as an important icon, tenacious survivor, and fashionable influencer with a knack for reinvention.

Curator

Megan Martinelli is Hillwood's curator of apparel, jewelry, accessories, and textiles. Previously, Megan was a research assistant at The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute, where she contributed to internal object assessment research and assisted with exhibitions including *China: Through the Looking Glass* (2015) and *Manus x Machina: Fashion in an Age of Technology* (2016). Before joining The Met, Megan curated an exhibition titled *The Other White Dress: Non-Wedding Dresses of the Twentieth Century* (2014) at the University of Rhode Island's Historic Textile Gallery and contributed to *Artist, Rebel, Dandy: Men of Fashion* (2013) at The RISD Museum of Art. At Hillwood, she was the curator of *Mid-Century Master: The Photography of Alfred Eisenstaedt* (2019), *Roaring Twenties: The Life and Style of Marjorie Merriweather Post* (2021), *Grace of Monaco: Princess*

in Dior (2022), and Marjorie Merriweather Post's Paris (2024). Megan holds an MS in historic textiles and costumes from the University of Rhode Island and a BA in English literature from Providence College.

Dr. Wilfried Zeisler is Hillwood's deputy director and chief curator. He is a graduate of Sorbonne University and the Ecole du Louvre, Paris. Wilfried has written extensively on French and Russian decorative arts, including several articles and contributions to books. Wilfried's dissertation, *L'Objet d'art et de luxe française en Russie (1881-1917)* [French Objects d'art and Luxury Goods in Russia], was published in Paris in 2014. Since 2009, he has participated in and curated exhibitions in Paris, Monaco, and Washington, D.C. At Hillwood, his most recent exhibitions were *Fabergé Rediscovered* (2018), *Bouke de Vries: War and Pieces* (2019), *Natural Beauties: Exquisite Works of Minerals and Gems* (2020), *The Porcelain Flowers of Vladimir Kanevsky* (2021), *Determined Women: Collectors, Artists, and Designers at Hillwood* (2023), *Glass: Art. Beauty. Design.* (2023), and *Fragile Beauty: Art of the Ocean* (2024). Wilfried co-authored *Konstantin Makovsky: The Tsar's Painter in America and Paris* (2015) and *The Houses and Collections of Marjorie Merriweather Post: The Joy of It* (2022). He is the author of *Fabergé Rediscovered* and *Vivre la Belle Époque à Paris—Paul de Russie et Olga Paley*, both published in 2018, and *Les Youssoupoff—Un Siècle de Collections Françaises* (2023).

Publication

A 296-page book authored by Wilfried Zeisler, *The Belle Époque Life in Paris: Olga Paley and Paul of Russia*, has been re-released in partnership with Mare & Martin in conjunction with the exhibition. Previously published in French in 2018, this is the first edition in English, featuring a new chapter on Princess Natalie Paley by Megan J. Martinelli. Based on previously unpublished documents, this book traces the life in Paris of Countess Olga von Hohenfelsen, later known as Princess Paley, the morganatic wife of Grand Duke Paul of Russia, uncle of the last emperor, Nicholas II. This updated volume explores the couple's day-to-day life, highlighting their relationships with leading suppliers and providing an overview of the Parisian art market, before discussing Natalie Paley's continuation of her family's legacy of contributing to culture and the arts well into the twentieth century.

Events and Programs

From Exile to Avant-garde: The Life of Princess Natalie Paley will inspire an array of programs and events throughout the presentation of the exhibition.

A benefit celebrating the exhibition opening, Hillwood's annual gala, will be held on Tuesday, June 7, 2025. Inspired by Marjorie Post's grand affairs at Hillwood, the evening will include cocktails and a glamorous dinner on the Luna Lawn in honor of Post's signature style and in support of Hillwood's mission to share her cultural treasure with future generations.

In October, a four-part lecture series will feature a rich lineup of speakers and delve deeper into the world of the exhibition.

Exhibition Sponsors

From Exile to Avant-garde: The Life of Natalie Paley is supported by The Marjorie Merriweather Post Foundation, Ellen MacNeille Charles, Martha R. Johnston, Kyra Cheremeteff and Thomas W. Richardson, Dr. Catherine M. Chura, Mary Hale Corkran, Janice H. Brambilla, Phyllis and Glenn Gerstell, Katherine Levine and Daniel Culley, Kate and Bunky Markert, and Diane Zutant. All exhibitions and programs are funded in part by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts through the National Capital Arts and Cultural Affairs Program. This project was supported by the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities.

About Hillwood

When art collector, businesswoman, social figure, and philanthropist Marjorie Merriweather Post left to the public her northwest Washington, D.C. estate, she endowed the country with the most comprehensive collection of [Russian imperial art](#) outside of Russia, an exquisite 18th-century French decorative art collection, and 25 acres of serene landscaped gardens and natural woodlands. Opened as a public institution in 1977, today Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens offers a gracious and immersive experience unlike any other. Highlights of the collection include Fabergé eggs, Russian porcelain, Russian orthodox icons, Beauvais tapestries, and Sèvres porcelain, and Post's personal collection of apparel, accessories, and jewelry. Thirteen acres of enchanting formal gardens include a [Japanese-style garden](#), [rose garden](#), [French parterre](#), and an orchid-filled [greenhouse](#).

General Information

Location:	4155 Linnean Avenue, NW, Washington, DC Metro: Van Ness/UDC, Red Line (20-minute walk)
Information/Tickets:	202-686-5807 for information or www.HillwoodMuseum.org Facebook.com/HillwoodMuseum
Hours:	Tuesday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Closed Mondays, most holidays, and for several weeks in January.
Café:	Merriweather Café is open Tuesday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Merriweather To Go, featuring a quick selection of sandwiches, salads, snacks, and beverages, is available Tuesday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.
Ticketing:	\$18, \$15 seniors, \$10 college students, \$5 for visitors age 6 to 18.

No donation is suggested for children under 6.

Adults and seniors receive \$3 off the suggested donation for weekday visits when reservations are made online.

Members receive free admission during regular operating hours. To join visit <http://www.hillwoodmuseum.org/membership>

For more information visit <https://hillwoodmuseum.org/visit/hours-tickets>

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