

# Underage Fashion

Prada and Chanel are now standard fare for the under-18 Hollywood set.

Illustration by MATT COLLINS

**I**t was every actress's dream: her first Oscar nomination, an occasion that obviously called for clothes and accessories that underscored its importance. And so the newly minted star walked the red carpet leading to the Kodak Theater, her glowing skin offset by Harry Winston diamond loop earrings and a diamond drop pendant, her slender figure encased in a flower-strewn, pink Simin Couture gown and her dainty feet shod in custom-made light pink satin Jimmy Choo mules. As she posed for the camera and smiled for the requisite interviews, she gamely opened her Swarovski clutch to reveal the Clif Bar inside. Not exactly your average black-tie emergency reserve.

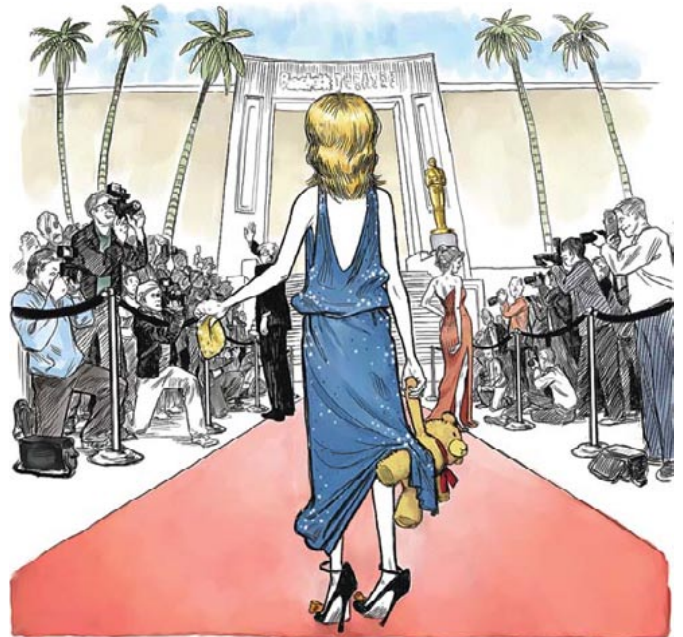
Then again, Abigail Breslin, whose charming performance in *Little Miss Sunshine* earned her this attention earlier this year, wasn't exactly a red-carpet veteran; at the time, she was a mere 10 years old. Like most girls her age, Breslin chose her party outfit with her mother,

Kim, and she looked every inch the tween she is, her dress befitting a princess instead of a queen. Yet the labels she wore are anything but traditional fare for such a pint-size professional. "I didn't know about the designers before, because I had never been to anything as fancy as the Academy Awards before," says Breslin. "But I am so glad I know them now. They all have such great styles."

While Breslin's moment was a sartorial anomaly in her otherwise normal wardrobe, such occurrences are becoming more and more frequent as actresses well below legal voting age are turning up at premieres and awards shows decked out in designer regalia that we're more accustomed to seeing on full-grown women.

Take Emma Watson, the 17-year-old star of the Harry Potter franchise. As the fifth cinematic installment of the beloved book series hit theaters this summer, Watson made the rounds of international publicity dressed

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Above: Abigail Breslin at the Academy Awards, 2007. Below: Actresses Emma Roberts, Camilla Belle and Emma Watson in low-key ensembles and high-fashion looks.

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exclusively in Chanel and wore a couture gown for the Raisa Gorbachev Foundation gala in early June. Ironically the look, a gold-spangled airy confection, accounted for her second appearance in *Us Weekly's* unforgiving "When Bad Clothes Happen to Good People" box. (Watson was 15 at the time of her first.)

In fact, engaging a stylist at so tender an age is no longer a verboten practice. After all, between those premieres and tabloid pictures, a high-schooler can certainly benefit from the designer access such celebrity dressers provide. Last year Emma Roberts, star of this summer's *Nancy Drew*, now 16, hired styling partners Emily Current and Meritt Elliott—who collaborate professionally through their company, Maude—to put her in the likes of Marc Jacobs, Fendi footwear and, of course, Chanel.

"I had worked with stylists before, and then I heard about the Maude girls, and I thought that they seemed really cool," explains the actress. Roberts is no fashion slouch, having obsessively read glossy mags for years, but in today's highly critical climate, she understands the reason for enlisting an extra set of eyes. "Even though I like to pick things out for myself, you kind of want to know what other people think."

Just a few years ago, young actresses weren't troubled by such considerations or pressures.

"It wasn't like this when I was younger and working," says the actress Camilla Belle, who made her first film, *A Little Princess*, at six. "I never used to feel pressure. My mother [Deborah Gould, a former Brazilian fashion designer] would know what looked good and would dress me the way I liked."

In 1996, a 14-year-old Natalie Portman turned up in the campaign for Isaac Mizrahi's lower-priced Isaac line, creating much furor. "I didn't think it would cause the controversy that it did, because I didn't think she came across as 14," says Mizrahi of Portman. "She came across as a

woman. She reminds me of Audrey Hepburn in that girl-woman thing that has no age."

That "girl-woman" idea continues to resonate, but it now occasions much less criticism. This past spring, Marc Jacobs put 13-year-old Dakota Fanning in ads for his namesake collection. Considering that the actress had recently created shock waves with her matter-of-fact take on shooting a rape scene for the forthcoming *Hounddog*, however, a high-fashion gig seemed rather innocuous.

"There was no irony or provocation at all," insists Jacobs of his choice of mannequin. "It really just fits into our approach to advertising, which is that we're not selling anything. This wasn't aspirational. You didn't want to be Dakota Fanning. It was an opportunity to have an intimate moment with somebody I admire."

That may be the case, but girls like Roberts and Watson clearly appear as young as they are, which makes the labels of their outfits all the more jarring. In fact, the actresses are so tiny that the designer looks they borrow often have to be taken in or custom-made.

"Abigail's shoes were specially designed," explains Tamara Mellon, president and founder of Jimmy Choo (Breslin is, at this point, the youngest celebrity ever to receive a pair of custom shoes from the house). "Since she is so young, Abigail didn't wear high heels, but the shoes had a tiny lift to them to give her some extra height and glamour." Height and glamour for a 10-year-old? And let's not forget that the sweet, apparently unremarkable pendant around Breslin's neck was courtesy of Harry Winston. It's one thing to play dress-up in Mommy's closet, but is there something unsettling about putting a tween in baubles from one of the most expensive jewelry *maisons* out there, or in shoes from a label with an overtly sexy aura fueled by its back-when association with *Sex and the City*?

"We thought it was a great opportunity because she was such a young nominee," says Mellon of Breslin.

Indeed, the impetus for fashion and luxury houses of such high caliber to dress stars whose nonfamous counterparts are more likely to frequent American Apparel and Abercrombie & Fitch seems loaded. "What is the right age for Chanel? That's not really my decision as a retailer," states Ken Downing, senior vice president and fashion director of Neiman Marcus. That said, teenage girls waltzing into department stores and

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BRESLIN, BELLE (LEFT), STEVE GRANITZ/WIREIMAGE; ROBERTS (LEFT), LEE CELANO/WIREIMAGE; ROBERTS (RIGHT), BELLE (RIGHT), MARSA LI MCGRAHI/GETTY IMAGES FOR CHANEL; WATSON (LEFT), DAVE HOGAN/GETTY IMAGES; WATSON (RIGHT), BEN STANSALL/GETTY IMAGES

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Below, from left: Dakota Fanning in Marc Jacobs's spring 2007 campaign; Natalie Portman in the 1996 Isaac campaign.

purchasing, say, Dior ready-to-wear without batting an eye is not a common phenomenon. "Certainly there are young girls running around in their adorable Phillip Lim dresses and Alice + Olivia and contemporary things. And I think that she'll splurge for a great Vuitton handbag," says Downing. "I'm not necessarily seeing a girl who's 16 in my Chanel department. And if she is wearing Chanel, it's because she's wearing her mom's jacket, if her mother is open to loaning at that point."

Leslie Fremar, a freelance stylist whose clients include Jennifer Connelly, Julianne Moore and Maggie Gyllenhaal, understands the fashion houses' motivations, particularly since she herself worked in celebrity dressing for Prada for a year and a half before breaking out on her own. "It's in a company's best interest to start on someone who's young and über talented, who they think is going to one day be a huge movie star," she explains. "Then they've got their loyalty from the beginning, and there's kind of that payback."

Of all the houses out there, Chanel seems to have made the most concentrated effort to keep its eyes on the prize, so to speak. Both Roberts and Belle cite Chanel as having been the first to reach out to them early in their careers. This might seem ironic to some, considering that the label is based on an image and price tags that seem notably aspirational—and unreachable—to women. "Chanel has always cultivated relationships with emerging young actresses who have a great sense of style and bring their own personalities to the clothing they wear," says Rebekah McCabe, senior vice president of public relations.

Indeed, as long as the looks are kept young (and sex-free) in cut and fit, few people—designers, stylists or the girls themselves—have any issue with putting high fashion on diminutive celebrities. "I live in a utopia where smart women look their ages and they look great," says Mizrahi.



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But for all the proclamations of ageless beauty and how any designer label can work for a girl if edited properly, one still wonders if viewing Marc Jacobs and Chanel as wardrobe staples can be healthy for an impressionable psyche. Alexandra Barzvi, a clinical psychologist at the New York University Child Study Center, points out that pre-teens' and teens' brains are not developed enough to be able to process such phenomena. "They are only beginning to have the capacity for analytical thinking, for perspective taking, for these higher-level cognitive capacities," she says. "Those actually don't fully develop until the end of the teenage years, even into young adulthood." Thus, a girl who starts regularly partaking of expensive creations, even on a loan basis, might emerge into adulthood with a warped idea of value.

"The more you're exposed to something, the more accustomed you become to it, the more desensitized to it you become," explains Barzvi. "It's almost like what we do with fears. If you're afraid of spiders, if you sat in a room with spiders, eventually you won't be scared of spiders anymore." Put another way, if you're bottle-fed Prada, it's going to be pretty tough to teethe on Banana Republic. "How does she go back to her friends and be a normal kid? And does she wear just jeans and a tank top? And even if she does, the truth is, she has more than her friends, most likely. She's exposed to two different cultures: real life and Hollywood, which is a completely fictional world. The job of the parents is to help their kids sort out the difference between fantasy and reality."

Vera Wang's daughters, 13 and 16, wear items from her lower-priced Lavender line, Marc by Marc Jacobs and some Miu Miu "as a special treat," but otherwise "live in T-shirts like Clu." And the designer admits that, though she is not morally opposed to tweens wearing haute couture, putting a 12- or 13-year-old in her collection campaign has "just never really presented itself to me as something that I would do in fashion."

Fremar, whose youngest client is 25-year-old Anna Paquin, agrees. "I don't think I would ever pick up an 11-year-old," she says. "That's too much responsibility. You become like a mom. You want to nurture this person; you don't want to corrupt her. I mean, I'm sure I could do it and make her look cute, but then you wonder, Am I the devil? Am I ruining this girl's life? I don't want to be that person." —VANESSA LAWRENCE