

Biography of Madame Ganna Walska



The Czar's portrait



XX. Baddha Padmāsana (locked-lotus posture)

Walska's sixth husband, Theos Bernard

Of humble origin, the eccentric and glamorous Madame Ganna Walska became one of the original international celebuitantes, with an eye for the dramatic and a penchant for collecting men. She attracted attention and notoriety for her singular beauty and fascinating life, which included a tumultuous operatic career, six husbands (including a count and a yoga guru), and a quest for spiritual enlightenment. It ended with a horticulture collection at her California estate, Lotusland, that still contains some of the most sought-after, rare and exotic specimen plants in the world.

Ganna Walska was born Hanna Puacz on June 26, 1887 in Brest-Litovsk, Poland. Upon her mother's death, Hanna was sent to St. Petersburg to be brought up by relatives. In her memoirs, she recalls how as a teenager in Russia, the Czar chose her as the most beautiful woman at a royal ball, and had what is now known as the "Czar's Portrait" painted of her. At the tender age of nineteen, she eloped with the Russian count, Arcadie d'Eingorn. While she was a dutiful wife, by 1915 she could no longer stand his drinking and carousing and the marriage was dissolved.

Though raised under the strict Catholic pretense that "nice girls" were not to be stage performers, Hanna eschewed tradition in favor of singing lessons and operatic ambitions, first in Russia, and then in Paris. She adopted the more alluring name of Madame Ganna Walska – Ganna as the exotic Russian version of Hanna and Walska derived from her love of the waltz.

With the threat of World War I, Walska moved her singing endeavors to New York City where, due to a throat problem, she met Dr. Joseph Fraenkel. He was immediately smitten with her, and they married after knowing each other only ten days. It was at this time that Walska met Harold McCormick – heir to the International Harvester fortune and a generous supporter of the Chicago Opera Company – and began what was to become a lifelong relationship. Ganna also took up an interest in mysticism and "the meaning of life," participating in séances, consulting Ouija boards, practicing yoga, and exploring astrology, meditation, and telepathy.

In April 1920, Fraenkel died after a prolonged illness. Exhausted and depressed, Walska decided to holiday in Paris. While on board the *Aquitania*, she met Alexander Cochran, then known as "the richest bachelor in the world." Even this distinction did not make him immune to Walska's

undeniable allure. He proposed to her the day they met – she refused and only relented after several months and four proposals. Alec turned out to be "the most miserable man I [Ganna] have ever met," becoming increasingly jealous of her career and continuing friendship with Harold McCormick.



Young Madame in costume