Lillian Gish has never cared more than a small hoot about fashion, but she's always loved clothes. The result is that the legendary actress is still wearing some of the things she bought three, four and five decades ago, and outshining most of the current crop of fashion strivers whenever she appears at gala events. Whether it's at Radio City Music Hall or the White House, Miss Gish looks so right that there are incredulous glances when she says that she honestly can't remember how many years the dress has been in her closet and, in fact, whether it originally belonged to her or to her late sister, Dorothy.
"I've never been in style, so I can't go out of style," she said during a recent interview in her East Side apartment, her pale gold brocade Chinese pajamas melting into the gold and green decor.

Miss Gish, who is now 83 years old, has no hang-ups about her age, and is, she said, even resigned to the fact that "no one ever gets it right."

"But it doesn't matter because I wouldn't mind if they said I was 100," she said. "It would probably make me more interesting." Her blue eyes twinkled mischievously as she continued. "You know when I was making films, Lionel Barrymore first played my grandfather, later he played my father, and finally he played my husband. If he had lived, I am sure I would have played his mother. That's the way it is in Hollywood. The men get younger and the women get older." Family's Arrival in New York

The years haven't dimmed her memory, but she has never been certain whether she was 3 or 4 years old when she and her sister arrived in New York with their mother, who soon began playing ingenue roles in the theater (the girls' father left the family shortly after their birth in Ohio). However, she does remember the family sharing an apartment with a Mrs. Smith, whom Mrs. Gish had met at a theatrical agency, and Mrs. Smith's daughter, Gladys.

"Mother would give us two nickels to go and see a Biograph film and, some time later on, when we no longer shared an apartment, we saw Gladys Smith in a film," Miss Gish recollected. "We rushed home to tell Mother and her reaction was, 'What terrible misfortune has happened to the Smith family that Gladys has had to go into films?'" Gladys not only went into films; she changed her name to Mary Pickford.

Mrs. Gish's reaction to film acting was not too different from what most people at the time thought of all theatrical folk. Lillian's stage career started at the age of 5, and Dorothy's when she was 4, and both were told by their mother that their profession was considered "a social disgrace." They were cautioned not to tell anyone that they were in the theater because other children wouldn't be allowed to play with them.

It was "little Gladys Smith" who introduced the Gish sisters to D.W. Griffith, the pioneer producer of such silent films as "The Birth of a Nation." (Miss Gish was instrumental in having a commemorative Griffith stamp issued recently.)

"The first time we saw them making a film, we thought we were in a crazy house," Miss Gish said. "But Lionel Barrymore was there and Mother said, 'Well, if there's a Barrymore there, it can't all be bad.'"

She is constantly amused when she is asked about her training and how she made it into films. "It all just happened," she said. "The only acting lesson we ever had was to speak loud and clear. We were told that if we didn't, 'they'll get another little girl,' and they would have." Some Opportunities Turned Down
She occasionally has a few thoughts about the things she could have done and didn't. One was a film on Joan of Arc, which she was asked to do in the 1920's by Abel Gance, the director of the recently rereleased "Napoleon."

"Then Truman Capote wrote his first play for us and we didn't do it," she said. "And Tennessee Williams did his first play for me, and I couldn't do it. It was called 'Portrait of a Madonna' and he later changed it a little, and it became 'Streetcar Named Desire.' I would have had a bigger career doing the things I didn't do, than the things I did do."

With a schedule that has included three round-the-world trips since 1975, a five-year lecture tour that took her to 387 colleges in 36 states, and constant personal appearances, Miss Gish doesn't have too much time to look back. But a query about a portrait of Dorothy, hanging in her living room (Dorothy Gish died in 1968), led to further reminiscences.

"Mother didn't like that picture," she said. "She thought that Dorothy looked like an actress in it. She wanted us to go back to Springfield, Ohio, and get married. She would never come to the studio with us, except when Dorothy was making a film about Nell Gwynne in London, and she went then because Dorothy didn't have too many clothes on and she was worried."

Miss Gish's interest in clothes, not just any clothes but classic designs with meticulous workmanship, stems from her mother who, at one time, made the entire wardrobe worn by both sisters. "We Always Had Real Lace"

"We could be hungry but we always had real lace on our panties," she said. "Mother made everything - our hats, coats, everything but our shoes and stockings." Still preserved are drawers-full of embroidered crepe de chine teddys, camisoles and panties, many trimmed with real Alençon lace.

When Mrs. Gish died in 1948, her daughters discovered that she had a safe-deposit box. "We were intrigued, we thought that maybe it was full of money, but it was full of handmade Alençon lace," she said. "It's going to go to a museum."

After the sisters became stars, many of their clothes carried designer labels. One of Dorothy's coats, now at the Smithsonian Institution, had an even more noteworthy provenance. It was once owned and worn by James Madison although, according to Miss Gish, "everyone thought it was a Dior."

Miss Gish, who now wears clothes from Vera Maxwell and from what she calls "the best shop in the world - MacHugh's in Ridgewood, N.J." - was a Mainbocher customer when his atelier was a "little cubbyhole" in Paris. His evening dresses sold then for $75, and she regrets now that she gave most of them away. Another favorite designer was Valentina and she still has several of her evening dresses that she wears for special occasions.

"They've never been cleaned or changed by so much as a hook, and I get into them easily," she said, looking justifiably pleased with herself. "I'm the same size now as I was then." Wore Dress Again 50 Years Later
One of her favorites is Valentina's black cut velvet over red mousseline de soie, worn with a bolero of pink silk taffeta. She wore the dress to the opening of Radio City Music Hall in 1932 and put it on again earlier this year when the Music Hall celebrated its 50th anniversary. Another favorite is a Grecian design in a stone-colored crepe de chine, made by Valentina between 1925 and 1930.

Also still in use are the scores of evening bags accumulated through the years, shoes that have stood up to time and her Mother's Russian ermine coat. She has, as well, a Blackglama mink coat received as payment for appearing in one of the advertisements headed "What Becomes a Legend Most."

Her jewelry is almost always opals, her birthstone, and many of the pieces were acquired as gifts or as payment for personal appearances.

"When I was in Australia, they asked if I would like to be paid in opals and I said I would," she said, pointing to her opal earrings she got in lieu of salary.

"'Place an opal on her breast and troubles and cares will lie at rest,'" she recited, but then quickly warned that opals were unlucky for anyone not born in October.

In addition to her travels, and the voluminous correspondence set off by personal appearances and the television showing of some of her movies, Miss Gish is busy writing a book on religion.

"Mother's people were Episcopalian," she said. "But Mother always told us that if we weren't working, we should go to our own church on Sunday, and if we couldn't find our own church, to go to any church. I got interested in many religions from that time on."

Although she has never been interested in accumulating possessions ("Honey, the only things I collect are books") Miss Gish has acquired a number of awards, the latest an impressive, beribboned gold-plated brass medallion from the Kennedy Center.

The ceremony, on Dec. 4 in the Benjamin Franklin Room in the State Department, was followed by a gala at the Kennedy Center Opera House and preceded by a White House reception. Miss Gish was thrilled, but it wasn't her first visit.

"I've been going to the White House since Harding's days," she said matter-of-factly. "You know, they showed 'Orphans of the Storm' there."