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## Remembering Onassis: Playboy and jet setter extraordinaire

03 December 2012 | J. Philip Rathgen

*When Greece was synonymous with billionaire ship owners, Aristotle Socrates Onassis reigned supreme. His signature, over-sized tortoiseshell glasses and even the knot of his tie became well known the world over. Classic Driver takes a look at the glamorous lifestyle that was Onassis's.*

His is the ultimate rags-to-riches story. Born in Smyrna (today's Izmir) in 1906, he fled his home after the Turkish invasion with nothing but the clothes on his back. The 16-year-old son of a tobacco merchant sought to make his fortune in Argentina, where he started out as a bellboy and switchboard operator, meanwhile honing his skills in Spanish, English and other languages.



Through various contacts he had in the tobacco trade - thanks to his father - Onassis began to import tobacco leaves from Greece. Due to his keen entrepreneurial acumen and high ambition (even at an early age), his business flourished. These two qualities would later help Onassis create a shipping empire. But even by then he had a well-developed sense of the sartorial: he took his first earnings to a tailor and had a double-breasted suit cut to order, creating the particular 'Ari style'.

He made his debut in the shipping business by buying a tanker fleet from a bankrupt estate. A deal with Saudi Arabia secured the exclusive rights to ship oil to Europe. At the height of his success, the tanker tycoon is reputed to have owned 900 vessels. His favourite ship was the 300-foot-plus yacht (based on a naval cruiser), 'Christina O', which Onassis had refurbished in 1952. Illustrating his special brand of humour, he had the bar stools on board the yacht covered in skin from the more intimate area of a male whale - then pointing out to Greta Garbo as she was about to take her seat that she was sitting on the world's largest penis.



Greek old money raised their eyebrows at the diminutive (barely five feet tall) upstart, but Aristoteles Onassis could not have cared less. "You can't buy class," he once said, "but you can buy tolerance for its absence."

His behaviour towards women was somewhat caddish, using relationships solely to his advantage. He married Tina Livanos in order to benefit from a connection with this most famous of Greek shipping dynasties. It pampered his ego to be the love interest of the great opera singer Maria Callas and the world's most famous widow, Jackie Kennedy.

But the accidental death of his son Alexander changed everything. After the tragic loss, Ari Onassis began to shun publicity. He summed up his bereavement in the words: "A rich man is nothing but a poor man with money." A sentiment richly exploited by 'tycoon' TV shows of the 80s such as 'Dynasty' and 'Dallas'.

*Text: Alexandra Felts/. Philip Rathgen*

*Photos: Getty Images*

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