ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION, F.I.T.

THE ORAL HISTORY OF F.I.T.

ROBERT ABAJIAN

Design Director
Liz Claiborne, Inc.

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Interviewed by
Mildred Finger
Q: ...for the Oral History Collections of the Fashion Institute of Technology, and for the project of the history of F.I.T. itself, this will be an interview with Bob Abajian. The date is January 19, 1985; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

Bob, just for the record, you were graduated in 1952 and your major was design, and that you spell your name A-b-a-j-i-a-n.
A: That is correct, Mildred.

Q: At what age did you know that you wanted to become a designer? Then we'll go back and talk about your early start.
A: My goodness. I guess I must have been seven or eight years old. I know I was taken to see Snow White, and promptly upon coming home I started to sketch clothes. Her costume. I made her whole costume. But that was the first inkling. And by the time I was in my early teens I knew I wanted clothing, but I thought it was theatrical design that I wanted. I loved the magic of theatre. I had built a miniature set, lighted with Christmas lights. I designed hypothetical productions, and would research and design the costumes. I guess the drawing skills were always very easy for me.

Q: Incidentally, before you go any further...Was your family in any way involved in...?
A: Not in any way, shape or form.

Q: Where were you born and when were you born?
A: I'm a native New Yorker. I was born on 16th Street and 8th Avenue, in 1932...

Q: And what did your parents do?
A: My father had a grocery store. And early on in that
neighborhood and later on in the... As a matter of fact, not too far from here, on East 67th Street... It's kind of funny, but after all these years you kind of come back and live in the neighborhood... But I used to go as a child to see him on Saturdays, and I used to work in the grocery store delivering packages, and it was just like four blocks away from here.

Q: Right. He worked on East 65th Street, yes...
A: So, it's kind of funny. But there's no background. Except my mother, who always made her own clothes, and she either used or didn't use a pattern. And she saw styles she liked, and she seemed to have the gift of just coming home and taking a piece of fabric and cutting it this way and that way and making clothes for herself. And it fascinated the hell out of me. And I never knew how she had arrived at that. She had never had any formal training, but she knew how to do it. And there was nothing she couldn't make. When my brother and I were kids.....

Q: Were there just the two of you?
A: Just the two of us... When my brother and I were kids and we wanted costumes—a Superman costume or a Batman costume—today, of course you can go to the store and buy anything. But back then they didn't have things like that. My mother made them for us. And I loved it. My first cape, you know, and that kind of thing, and I was Batman. So the sewing skills were around me, but I didn't necessarily have them. But the creativity and the artistic approach... there was nobody in the family who had been artistic. There was just me. It was very difficult because they never understood what I was all about. But when decision time came to decide what kind of high school I wanted, I wanted design, and at that time it was called The School of Industrial Arts High School;
now it's called the High School of Art & Design. And they had... Part of the curriculum was to have fashion design...

Q: Where is that school located?
A: Today it's located on 57th and Second Avenue. In those days it was at 79th between 3rd and 2nd. That was kind of wonderful because I think I spent all of my afternoons at the Costume Institute, which was a tiny, tiny room at that time, at the Metropolitan. The new wing...Because originally, I believe, it was in the early '50s, it was on 51st or 52nd Street, and there was a lady named Polaire Weissman who kind of put this collection together. And then they kind of moved over there. But I lived at the museum.

I also loved the Fine Arts. I think I must have attended every gallery lecture they ever gave. The school would end at 3:00 and the gallery lectures started at 3:15, so there I was.

And then, of course, you had to make a career decision as to whether it was theatrical design or fashion that I was going to go into...

Q: You had to decide that in high school?
A: Yes. Because you had to decide the kind of training that you would need. Costume design for the theatre required a lot more formal training, and then ultimately you had to become a member of the Scenic Designer's Guild in order to get a job. And I had very good advice from people that I knew who knew about the industry, and they just said it was very tough. I think it is tough even today. There is just a handful of people that are in that part of it. And it takes years before you even get an opportunity to design a production. And even then, it's got to be through the politics of somebody to even get into the Guild.
So I decided, well, I loved fashion as well, yet I really didn't know much about it. You know, we are in an age of rapid media today. But in those days, we really didn't know that much about clothing, except from the newspapers and magazines, and there were no girls in our family so it wasn't as though I went around shopping in the stores to see clothing. So you lived in a rarefied world of French couture, because you saw them in magazines and you saw them in the newspapers...

Q: So you did read the magazines...

A: Oh, yes. Indeed I did. And...So I made the decision that I had to find a school to go to to develop the skills necessary to go into the industry. I knew very little about the industry. And then, in investigating the schools, of course, F.I.T. was one of the schools. And, of course, Parsons. There were some other schools, but none of them seemed of the stature of these two schools. Parsons was quite expensive, I think, at the time. I mean, in retrospect, it's really laughable. I think it was $400 a term. But that was a lot of money in 1950. And F.I.T., of course, you could not pay to go to. They had to decide whether you had the talent and the dedication, and it was only by scholarship that you went there at that time.

Q: Really!

A: Yes. However, they also reviewed you every six months and decided whether you were serious enough to stay, or to ask you to leave so they could make room for somebody else. So you really had to be dedicated to what you did, because it wasn't an easy curriculum.

I was fortunate to get into F.I.T. .....
Q: Was this after you finished at the high school?

A: Yes. And I graduated in June of '50, and in September of 1950 I started at F.I.T. I didn't know the first thing about how you go about making clothing except I was already rather skilled at sketching. So I knew how to sketch an idea but I didn't know if it was makable or not makable and how you would go about it. So I did have to learn from the very foundation of what it's all about. And F.I.T. was terrific in that sense because they really took you back to square one. And they split you up into different priorities. You had...the design priority was sketching, which you had to continue to develop. And, of course, the actual skills of draping a pattern. It wasn't enough to sketch it; now you had to see how you were going to go about making this happen. And you learned it by draping. You also learned how to put it together, and that was machine skills. And of course you had sewing class. And I had never touched a needle in my life. It's rather frightening to sit down at the machine... Well, I guess they were used to it. They knew what they were doing, because they didn't even have thread in the machine. They just made us learn how to feel control of that machine. Because I had never done this in my life and these were power machines. These were not even home sewing machines. So you kind of had to go through all of this and learn new skills. And I had once heard that you will design only to the level of what you know can be made, once you get past making a great, beautiful picture. And in a sense that's true. At least it's true for me. The mechanics of how something must be done always is subconsciously there in the designing. So that you don't design things that are not makable. And I think that's what they were hoping to accomplish. Therefore, they trained you in these diverse ways and it all came back to pure design.
But, the emphasis on the school was schizophrenic, because while they said industry techniques, the stimulus was always French design. We all couldn't wait for the latest copy of what L'Official to lunge at. The pictures. The stars were Balenciaga and Jacques Fath and Dior, and this really wasn't the real world.

But that was really magic. The American designer had a brief flurry I guess during the late '40s...early '40s and Paris was cut off from the rest of the world, and so we developed American designers. But there were still some who were quite legitimate especially in the sportswear area--Claire McCardell, who I think is peerless--and...but once the French designers came back to being here, they were really the stars. So we used them as the guide, constantly. There were no stars in the American market as such.

So the school emphasized that, in terms of looking to the French designer or the French couture for inspiration--which is totally different today.

Q: Tell me...At that time, in 1950, when you started there, how many students do you remember approximately, and what was the ratio between them and men and women.

A: Okay. It was interesting. I don't think they took more than 100 students, total, and that was split between the design class--apparel design--which was the largest segment; millinery design...

Q: Really? Still millinery.

A: Millinery. And management...Oh, textile design was very small, and business management. I guess time and motion study, and all the mechanical aspects. And I would say that the...probably the biggest segment
must have been (and my figures may be wrong; it might not add up right), but I would say that maybe it was 50-55% apparel design; 20% management, and the balance split between textile and millinery, which were very small. Of the men vs. women ratio, management was 99% men; millinery and textile was split more 50-50 (there was a close ratio in the millinery, I think, as well), but in the apparel, because it was the largest block, I would say that maybe there were...Out of 100% I would say that there were 20% men.

Q: Really. So there were far more women than men.
A: Oh, yes. Very definately.

Q: Apparently then, in terms of the whole school population of 100, perhaps 2/3 were women and 1/3 was men...
A: Yes. Yes. Very much so. At that time, when you went to F.I.T., you could come from various backgrounds, in terms of education, and a lot of the women who went to F.I.T. came from the Home Economics/sewing aspect. In fact, F.I.T. was an outgrowth of the High School of needle trades, and there were a lot of students who had needle trades as a background and went on to F.I.T. Whereas people like myself, from a school of industrial art, came from an art background. There were three ways you could go there: art background, academic background or sewing background. And I would say that the majority of women who went there came from the sewing background. Whether they came from needle trades or Julia Richman High School or other schools that had Home Ec classes. They were not necessarily design classes. I think the only school that had design was the school that I had gone to. So I would say, yes, you're right, that there was that percentage.

Q: How many...Well, you were there for two years?
A: It was a two year course. And when I graduated in June of 1952, that was the first year that we kind of became legitimate. That was the year you were given an Associates degree. Up until then, you just graduated. But at that time. . . . And because of the Associates degree program, the school had introduced academic subjects, such as sociology, English, and in English it was slated to, really, learning reporting techniques, or research techniques. I remember I had to pick a subject, do research on it, and put together a book on it. And I picked the history of costumes, which was logical for me, and you had to learn the techniques of how you do foot notes and how you set up your information properly. And also, of course, there was the history of Art. So they gave you some of the academic subjects, in order, I think, to qualify for the Associates degree. It couldn't only be in the vocational end of it. They had to have these.

Q: That makes a lot of sense, because as a designer, a design-director, you have to make presentations, don't you, so you have to know...

A: Yes...Oh, the skills were wonderful. I didn't think they were so wonderful at the time.

Q: It was a lot of hard work, I'll bet.

A: Yes. You put in very long hours. The school developed a work ethic for you which was that you had to get the job done. And it was very important to understand that. If you had to stay up 24 hours, you had to get the job done. And it really rubbed off later on in life. I remember in the early '50s, after I was out working, there were times where friends around me wanted to go out in the evening, and I would say, "Well, I just can't. I have sketches that I must do." It was terrific. It did give you the priorities. And you put in pretty intensive days. Because if you didn't want to sew, for instance, or
didn't like sewing—which I detested—Nevertheless, you had to learn the techniques, and you had garments that you had to make. And whether they were for the fashion show or the class or whatever, these were projects that had to be done.

And looking back on it, I think the teachers were terrific for this reason. They didn't coddle you. I think teachers tend, today, to coddle students, to allow more, to be more permissive. You couldn't... Where was it and why hadn't you done it? And that reflected on how serious you were about your business. So it was a tough day, but it gave you terrific work ethics.

Q: Can you remember...Did your instructors have academic backgrounds, plus industry backgrounds, or how did it seem to you?

A: I knew that they all had industry backgrounds because I think that was a prerequisite for teaching in our area...

Q: So if somebody was teaching sketching, you had. . . .

A: Exactly so. And in draping, the teachers all had industry background. Because in fact some of them used to talk about where they were working in the industry. But I was never really aware of the kinds of company or what they really did. Time was so precious, that you just never got into that part of it. But technically they were terrific, and they made you learn.

Q: What building were you in at that time?

A: WE shared two and a half floors of the High School of Needle Trades.

Q: So you were still there...227 West 27th Street hadn't been built yet...

A: Oh, no. I don't think it was even a dream yet. But the
High School of Needle Trades had been Dr. Ritter's child and F.I.T. grew out of that, and I think it was the 8th and 9th floors and part of the 7th floor, in the building. And it was kind of strange coming into the building with all the High School students, and there you were, in a Junior College. So, physically, we were all contained in one space...

Q: Did you have any kind of library there?
A: Not really.
Q: Not really.
A: No. In terms of research material, even at that age, I already had started to develop a library of my own. Take a peek in my bedroom and you'll see that there isn't any wall space left. In terms of reference material...

Q: That kind of thing...
A: Starting at that time, of course, was the history of costume. And then through the years, later on, I realized that textiles were very important resource material, for inspiration, so that was the other thing that I acquired. I also knew how to use a library other than what I had, and other than what was in the school. Because I don't think they even had a library...

Q: Were you a good student?
A: I was a wonderful student in high school. I wasn't considered a great student at F.I.T. I don't think, because they did put emphasis on sewing skills, and I detested sewing skills. Really detested them. My draping was excellent; pattern making and draping. My sketching was good. But
when it came to sewing, and if you were judged on the final garment, it was really a rough row for me to hoe. I really didn't enjoy mechanically making it. I enjoyed seeing it made, but putting it together myself was not what I was all about.

So, I guess it might have been just my own perception, but I always felt that if they had taken a poll of the teachers, of who would be least likely to succeed, but I would be down pretty much at the bottom..

Q: And this is not being modest.
A: Oh, no, no. It's very, very much the fact.

Q: That's interesting. You had...Of course, in your class, I think you had several other people who went on to become designers in the industry, right?
A: Yes, but in all honesty, they disappeared so quickly that I can't today think of anyone who's in the industry that came from my class. The only one I can think of is somebody who was six months earlier than I was, and whom I knew before that, who was Ruth...At that time it was Ruth Zwifach. .. Ruth Norman.

Q: How do you spell her name? Her maiden name?
A: Z-w-i-f-a-c-h. I think her...Ruth Norman is her professional name...So I knew Ruth, and Ruth is still in the market. But people didn't stay....

Q: Well, let's talk about that problem, because that's interesting...We're now talking about a class that was graduated in '52. I believe the first graduating class was in '46, so that you had had...There were several classes between you and the beginning. But in those days, some people
went into the market but they apparently didn't stay in the market.

A: It was very rough to find a job. The reason was....

Today, for instance, if you're looking for young designers or new talent, you'll call the school to see if there are either graduates, recently graduated, or people with a couple years of experience. And they're willing to take them on and train them and develop the talent. It just didn't exist in '52. If you didn't have five years of experience you couldn't get a job. Well, how could you have five years of experience, if nobody would give you a job? And for the breaking in, the first year was probably the most crucial year for somebody who came out of school. The placement office could just do so much and after that it was just not possible, because the amount of jobs for new graduates was really minimal. Therefore, after the first year, if you couldn't get a job you disappeared out of the market. I think we discussed earlier, when I said to you that there were always more women than men in class, the men were the ones who were more visible in the industry, because they had to earn a living. This was their chosen profession. Women at that time were not so career minded, and got married or went into other fields, and they really didn't have the drive because it wasn't necessary. They got married instead. Men had no alternative. So of the smaller percentage of men who graduated, they were the ones who did stay in the market, but even then it was very difficult. I remember getting jobs and losing jobs rapidly, because you lie to get the job and, of course, your abilities are not up to the job. The first couple of years were terrible years, because you knew no one that could get you an interview, and you had to beat the bushes to find a job. And of course what they paid you was a pittance...

Q: Now, as long as you've gotten to that...Why don't you talk about your own experience.
A: I had worked the last six months of the last term in school...We had an internship/apprenticeship idea, and you worked for half of the term or ten weeks of the term and the school helped get you a job. They helped you with an interview, anyway. And I remember going to work for a sportswear company, Eileen Rickey, in 1407 Broadway...

Q: Eileen Rickey?
A: Right. It was a Junior Sportswear company. I didn't even know what "Junior" meant, because of course it was in its infancy at that time in the industry...But I learned rather rapidly. And my position there was...The designer there was so overloaded with designing the line that she had no one to do the blouses for her. She could never get to them. I inherited designing the blouses to go with the rest of the sportswear. And so I sketched ideas, showed them to her. She would select what she wanted, I would then drape it up, cut it and the sample maker would put it together. That was my first...that was in five week increments, and that was my first...that was my second five week increment job. I remember the first one, which was...I called it "The Chamber of Horrors," because I really hated children's wear, and the only industry they got me into was children's wear. I was the assistant to the assistant patternmaker, and my function was to cut out the patterns that had already been graded. And I'll never forget it.

It was a giant firm. It was called Suzy Brooks, and they were on Eighth Avenue, and it was so traumatic...I lived in the Bronx, I came down to school, and I lived in a little rarefied world, and now I was plunged into working in the industry...It was on Eighth Avenue and 38th Street (520 8th Ave.), and there I was, cutting out the patterns, and I'll never forget, the man who
made "markers" in the cutting room came to me and said...(I'll never forget the words),..."We strive for excellence here." I apparently had not cut, exactly, the pencil line off the graded pattern, so I was supposed to be more accurate. But then, of course, the irony of it was that you took your patterns to make the markers...the size of the pencil point that they used must have been a quarter of an inch wide, so it was kind of a contradiction. But I felt that I wasn't going to learn anything there because it was an industry I had no interest in. So...That was the first internship, and the second one was Eileen Rickey. And then when you got out, they sent you on a number of interviews and after that, how many places could they find for you to go? As a student of a school? So, you looked through ads in papers and you talked to other people, and I remember then getting a job on 36th Street in what I would now call a "schlock shop", that made skirts.

The industry in those days was quite different from what it is now. Everybody was a specialist. This one made skirts, that one made shirts, and somebody else made dressy blouses. Nobody made sportswear collections. You didn't make tops that went with bottoms, that kind of thing came later. I know, because I live in the sportswear world and I know when it happened.

But that happened later. So this place made inexpensive skirts. My design room was a corner of the cutting table in the cutting room and I had a sample maker who really was the head forelady of a little miniature factory. So when she had time she would make the samples up. So I would sketch up the ideas, cut the garments....

Q: I'm sorry. Now, which was this one now?

A: This was a little firm called "Eddie Lee Sportswear" on 36th Street
Q: This was your first job...
A: After I was out of school. And they paid me $35 a week.

Well, let me tell you, $35 a week in 1952 was just as insignificant as it is today. You couldn't do anything with $35 a week. By the time you took the taxes out it was $28 a week. But, nevertheless, it was a beginning. But you really worked as if you were making $100 a week...I remember...but the work was the same. And I found that these were the jobs that I was getting but I wasn't holding them very long. I had no idea of what merchandise was all about. Of course, the interesting thing was I had not been trained to go into a store and look at clothes. You went into stores to buy things for yourself; you didn't go in to shop the stores. At best, F.I.T. had taught us to go to the store and sketch the windows. But shop the stores? And look at the product? Everything was supposed to come out of your own head. And it did, in a lot of cases....

Q: Is that why they didn't ask you to shop stores...?
A: No. They had trained you that way. They had...Because the emphasis was on French couture....

Q: The emphasis was on product and not on marketing.
A: Exactly. There was no tie back to product, other than the very, very expensive and very design oriented. While they made you sit at the sewing machine and learn how to sew, they weren't teaching you to design or open your eyes in any way. I said years later that if I could teach a course at F.I.T. or any school that taught design, I would teach a course that wasn't specifically design, but that was specifically teaching you the world around you. And all the influences of what these things are to begin to make more sophisticated
to make them aware of the arts, of all the things that go on in the world
that affect clothing. Even the trade newspapers in those days, like Women's
Wear Daily, were really very, very limited publications. Everything was
very unsophisticated. So that you weren't exposed to this kind of thing.
Go into the stores and shop for product? What did that mean?

Well. So, it was a very difficult time getting started. And
of course you went from job to job because you lost your job. They realized
very shortly after you saw these creations that you had no idea what their
business was all about.

Q: In other words, you went into a company and you had no
idea what they were making. You knew what you wanted to make...

A: But even if you knew that they wanted to make skirts--like
Eddie Lee made corduroy skirts--you may never have seen a corduroy skirt, or
paid attention to it. Because, if you said corduroy to me maybe it might have
been a glamorous coat that Jacques Fath might have done, but I had certainly
no idea about what a corduroy skirt was all about. We weren't taught to
observe.

Maybe that's all part of experience, but I just wish I had
been exposed to it earlier. It would have made me grow up earlier.

So, I did it the hard way. I learned by being fired. I learned
by knowing what was expected of me and what was lacking. And it didn't take too
long to begin to understand what that was all about. So that by the following
year (it took a year of getting kicked in the pants, and maybe everybody has to
go through it, I don't know. Maybe that comes with the territory)...It took a
year of getting kicked in the pants to learn that there are other things out
there that affect the product and you have to be more sensitive to what business was all about. And the other expression that comes to my mind now is that the fashion industry is a product, not an art form, and that's very important to understand. And that's what I had to begin to learn. And I'm still learning it 33 years later. But...

Q: Do you think the art form...If I understood you correctly, you were saying that the art forms are what you should be aware of. You should not assume that...

A: ...that fashion is an art form.

Q: That fashion is an art form.

A: Because you have to appeal to so many people, and you have to make real clothing. So the luxury of art forms, perhaps, may be for the elites; a very small area of the couture. And even then I think that that is also disappearing. I think the only person left today who practices that is somebody like Galanos, who is his own person, has his own design point of view, and creates masterpieces.

So I had to learn the business, by walking into the stores, seeing what the product was all about. So it allowed these little jobs--sportswear was one...I'm trying to remember some of the others--There weren't too many that I can remember but they were all very much....Oh, there was another one on 36th Street, Sudbury Originals....

Q: Sunbury?

A: Sudbury. And I asked the owner's wife why the name, and she said when he was in the service during the war he was stationed in a town in England called Sudbury; ergo, the name. This too was a small sportswear company, but it was somehow...A year later, I really had gained the knowledge of how to
put things together. But, it was the first place where I ever looked at a textile line. A salesman came up and showed you a line. I never knew how that worked, because usually at other houses the boss said "There's the fabric; make styles." So that was the beginning of knowing that salesmen came up from print houses. We did printed skirts in those days. There weren't so many blouses to go with them. This was the first coordinating of sportswear. It was like a revelation from on high. You actually saw fabrics, and all these salesmen all had different things in their little bags. Well, that was my first exposure to it. And that job I stayed at for about nine or ten months. And then got fired. They had hired a pattern maker who also was a stylist. And in those days that was quite prevalent in the market....

Q: That's right.

A: Merchandise at that price, you know, and so you buy a garment there, and that's how they work.

So from there I kicked around not working for about 6 months, and I remember that particular time because right after that is where I think my career began to be serious. I went to work for a skirt company at the time, and a gentleman who was a true entrepreneur....The company was called Sport Tempos, in 1954, and the gentleman was Jack Baker, and he had the ability to take the most commonplace thing and romance it. And he made skirts...not even all skirts; we were so limited we made straight skirts.

Q: That was the classification?

A: That's right. Straight skirts. And with menswear detailing. Thr shining star in the industry at that time was Evan Picone, and their wool flannel skirt, for instance, sold for $8.75 wholesale, which was a $16 retail.
And we sold ours for $6.75, which was $12 retail. And for that price we gave 100% wool flannel, slim skirt, seat lined, which Jack Baker called "the inner secret." But these were all very slim pegged skirts. You had the seat lining because otherwise the skirts would get sprung. And I'll never forget it, because we talk about long skirts...Well, they were 30" long and "pegged", and if you didn't make pleats at the bottom you didn't have enough room to move. But, he marketed a highly successful product. He knew how to sell it, and that was my first exposure to somebody who was more professional in his approach to what his company was all about. And I worked for him for about two years, and then went to work for another company in 1372 Broadway and in those days buildings were also classifications. In 1372 were skirt makers of a particular price level. So you had people like, well, Russ Togs today, in that building. They were skirt makers. Jack Baker's Sport Tempos, Anne Marie Sportswear, Phillip Gurian -- these were all people who made skirts, that was their whole product. And so I went to work for the competition there, and during that period I think it was Anne Marie Sportswear. In fact, the children of the owner are now in the industry, they are the Benson Brothers, and these were all...Morris Benson was a principal and Anne Marie, and Jack and Irving Benson were his sons. And I remember them as they would be coming up to see their father at the same time. I think Morris Benson is still alive...

Q: How do you spell "Anne Marie"? A-....

A: A-n-n-M-a-r-i-e. Morris Benson is retired and I think still alive in Florida. And so...I worked with them for a while, and I began to meet people in the industry, and that was how the magic started. I met people in the
textile houses, and one of the ways to get jobs was to let your textile
salesman know if you were unhappy or wanted to leave. That's who you told.
And somehow that was the grapevine. And he would talk to the boss of so and
so and he would say, "I have somebody who's terrific for you," etc. That's
how it worked.

And I met a lady... The godmother to half of the industry,
although a lot of people perhaps are not familiar with her today. She was
dynamite. She was the fashion director of a textile company called Folker
Textiles, and her name was Elaine Crane, and she came from the public relations
world where she had worked for Mr. Kalish, who owned Anne Fogarty and Rappi
and people like that. She knew everybody in the market.

Now, they were a moderate priced textile house, but she would
pick up the phone and call Anne Klein and she would get Anne to use their
fabrics, and she had the ability to create magic with textiles. She also knew
everybody. Meeting her—I guess she liked me—it was the break that you need.
As somebody said, you need a Rabbi at the top. You need somebody to open doors
for you. Maybe it's different today, but I don't think so. But in those days
it was very definitely the only way you could get an opportunity to go some­
where else. And so from there I went, through her, I had an interview with a
large blouse company called "Max Shaw Classics," and they did not...

Q: What was that?

A: Max Shaw was the name, so this became "m-a-c-s-h-a-w." And
they were a big company in the blouse business. I wanted to go into sportswear,
because the shining star, the new infant that was rapidly making strides, was
sportswear. And sportswear that was now having mates that matched. Very important
was the blouse that went with the skirt. And that... just to go back to 1954-56, what started to happen with Sport Tempos skirts was that we dyed to match somebody else's sweater. Now, we either did it legitimately (i.e., we had a tie in with Garland and dyed to their color), or we did it surreptitiously when the buyer would bring the snips of their colors, and we would dye our wool flannels and our linens to match Bernard Altman's sweaters. Now Bernard Altman certainly wasn't packaged with our product, but that's what we used to do. That was the beginning of things that were made to go together. So by 1956 or 1957, when I went to work for MacShaw, already the idea of packaging began. And I think there was a company in the industry called Majestic and began to put things together in the late '50s... and that was the beginning of the coordinates in its great scope.

So here I was at MacShaw classics, doing sportswear...

Q: Is MacShaw one word or two?
A: It's two words... Because his name was Max Shaw, but the company became Mac Shore... The company no longer exists I think. Ten years ago it went out of business.

But from there I started to make the ascent into Junior Sportswear. Again through this lady, a very new Junior sportswear company had started, doing better sportswear, called Country Set, which was... people who came out of the previous company out of St. Louis called Joe Collins. This is how companies were developed in those days. And I went to work for them. And by this time, of course, my salary was moving upwards... Now this is 1959. My salary was now $275 a week.

Oh, I have to tell you... My big plunge, from $35 a week, was
when I went to work for Sports Tempos and Jack Baker asked me what I wanted, and I said I wanted $100 a week, and he didn't quibble with me. And I always said to my friends, if I ever make $100 a week, we're all going out to dinner. And they held me to it!

So I was making $275 a week at Country Set and it was tremendously important for me having that job because it was better Junior, design oriented company. It was the first time you were called upon to really design. Up until then, you designed within a framework. Slim skirts, some blouses, or a blouse to go with the skirt. It was relatively simple. But here, for the first time, you had to have concepts. And I did. And use of the merchandise you were going to design. And you had to be original. And it was tremendous. The exposure to fabrics that I'd never been allowed to use before. And the desire for unique, beautiful merchandise. It was the first place that I ever had that opportunity. And it was fantastic for me. I stayed there several years—two years—and then I was weaned away to my very first what I call Design-Director type job, working for a Dallas company, Lorck of Dallas, which is still in business, and I was Fashion Director for the company with input for all the various departments which they did—dresses, suits, sportswear....

Q: So you had several of designers working for you.

A: It was the first time I was ever able to direct design, which was a little difficult, because I was younger than the people I was toing to direct. I also stayed in New York. I commuted to Dallas. I lived two weeks of each month in Dallas.

Q: They kept their design rooms down there?
A: Yes. And they had this huge facility, and I had to be
down there. And ultimately I had a small design facility up here, because in
addition to the supervision of these other designers, they also wanted me to
continue to create part of the product in sportswear.

Q: They had a salesman up here, was that it?
A: They had no sales. They only had an office that they used
to use for buying fabrics.

Q: I see. So that's where you set up....
A: As an adjunct to that, I created a design studio. And
that's where I worked.

Q: How long did you stay with Lorch?
A: It was a year and a half...I had a five year contract. It
was the first time I ever worked with a contract, but I couldn't take the travel.
It was nightmarish. And we parted very amiably and they're still friends of
mine to this day. And then I wanted to come back into the market...You know, the
funny thing that happens, with this commuting schedule of a year and a half
away from the market, it was like people didn't know you. Because you didn't
have a New York base, in terms of a showroom, so it was almost like starting
all over again. But by then, because I had a network of friends...I went to
work for a junior sportswear company....the door was opened for me by the
people at Seventeen Magazine, whom I had gotten to work with very closely be-
cause I had been at "Country Set" and had been very much an editorial resource
for Seventeen Magazine. So through Ellen Sands ay Seventeen Magazine, I came to
see some people at a company called Kelita which was a Junior Sportswear
company.
I went to work with Kelita in 1961. I was their first designer and my design room was no bigger than a tiny closet. I hired a sample maker and... And when I say closet, I mean closet. It used to be used for the brooms and the sweeping materials, etc. There was a small table against the wall with shelves above it for fabric. The sample maker was behind me, and an ironing board was hinged to the wall, so that if I wanted to get out of the room I had to go and lift up the ironing board from its hinge in order to get out of the room. It was so tight. But, it was an interesting business. This was a company that used to make parochial school blazers and pleated skirts, and camp shorts. They had a small factory up in Peekskill. And yet they had what was called "a real young lion," who had come into the business. His father had passed away and he had come into the business. The man was very much like the entrepreneur that Jack Baker was. He was a man who went on to developing quite a few interesting businesses in his career...a man named Edgar Schlossberg. Subsequently, Klita was bought by Majestic, and he went on to form a number of other companies and the last one before retiring (I think he has just retired from the industry),... was the Ron Chereskin operation before it was sold to Aaron.

Edgar wanted to do something with this company, and he thought designing junior sportswear was one way and he was right. And we really created a lot of history.

The giant in the industry at that time was a company called Bobbie Brooks. But Brooks was a very structured, middle of the road company, so at Kelita I could do things they could never do. So, it was the beginning of a new kind of venture for them. It was a continuation of the designer-junior
sportswear line Country Set had been, and the only rival Country Set had at the time was a company called Petti, which was Rhea manufacturing, and that was all of the various Glenn family, and they came out of Milwaukee...

Q: R-h-e-a..

A: R-h-e-a, and out of that came Petti. Out of that came a dress division called Joan Miller. Out of that came the actual training ground for so many people who are all in our industry today. I think Petti was to the manufacturing end what a company like United Merchants or Lowenstein was in the textile area, where people went to work for various people. In fact, my current boss worked at Petty as manager of the Joan Miller dress division, because he came from that end of the world and knew the Glens and his first designer was Liz Claiborne. So, that's how everything comes together.

But Petti was a company that also designed sportswear. So Kelita was entering this world at one price point later. They were the designer of the higher priced points and we were at the lower priced points. And again it was a place where you might be very creative. You used very lovely fabrics, less expensive than what I had done before very, very creative. A little more middle of the road than Country Set. . . And it was here that I began to learn, really learn, what I call conceptual thinking to bring a product line together. And not just reacting to a piece of fabric. So, you started with an idea of what you wanted your line to be in terms of where you wanted...What type of "press board" you wanted; what type of customer you wanted to go after; and what type of end use you wanted your clothes to fulfill.

Q: And you give the credit for that to Schlossberg?
A: Edgar Schlossberg is the gentleman who taught me what the showroom is all about, and what selling clothes is all about. And taught me how to merchandise. I was merchandising my ideas before I made up, indiscriminately, every idea that came to me; just because I sketched it out didn't mean it was great.

Then, I learned how to be an editor by working with this man. And it was a skill that really served me very well, because...I don't think he realized he was teaching, but he was, and I learned my lessons very, very well because I subsequently went on to work for Petti, which was a junior sportswear company...

Q: P-e-t-t-i...

A: P-e-t-t-i....And probably of all the creative areas that I have been in in the 33 years in my industry, that job was the most creative. Simply because their position in the market demanded that they be the most creative.

What do I mean by that? Well, up until this point, you would go and look at a fabric line, for instance, and you had Country Set, which did expensive things, and you could find patterns or fabrics, but they had already been created. And certainly at Kelita you would look at things, and certainly what we would do is we would dye our own colors in something. . It was an established fact that if you wanted the print, you used the print. You might recolor it to go with your group, but basically you used material already developed.

Q: And you got it exclusively?

A: And you got it exclusively. But at Petti, you would go one
step further. You took the conceptual thinking, and you created everything. You created the pattern and you had to learn how to create it. You started from scratch. It wasn't good enough to just take an idea, just take an idea, just take a fabric and put some colors into it and put a pattern to go with it for your blouses and shirts and that was a group. You started with an idea of what a group should look like, and you made the fabric to make that group happen. Or, you saw unusual fabric from unrelated areas. I remember one year at Petti, doing a white herring bone fabric in cotton which had a spearmint green pinstripe. The base fabric existed, except it didn't exist in the fabrics for ready-to-wear. It happened to be the uniform cloth made for the Coca Cola company.

And it was that kind of creative idea that you developed. Or we found a knitted stocking that was made in Portugal and it was an interesting knit pattern, so you took the pattern and printed it and knitted it and made a coordinate for it...

Q: You say "we"; is that an editorial "we"?
A: An editorial "we" yes, because...How I worked at Petti for instance is I would develop my ideas, and yet let's say any given season I would have to do four groups or five groups...I would put together ideas and present them to the principals of the company, or the principal of the company was another gentleman who was THE creative capitalist....I learned my merchandising from Edgar Schlossberg; I learned how to be open minded and I learned how to create from a gentleman called Bruce Glenn. I found him second to none. He was not a creator; he stimulated the creativity and he brought out the very best in every designer who ever worked for him.
So, I learned how to do this... and the "we" in this case is the "we" as a company put these ideas together, and we would look at them and decide which of these ideas (because there are always too many) that I should then pursue and create. And that's what I would do.

But you still had to start from scratch. And it was also at Petti that I learned to design sweaters. Of course, sweaters were something that... At the other companies we had sweaters, but we had a sweater man or a consultant who would bring you ideas that you just selected and they would make them up in your colors. You didn't design sweaters.

Well, I didn't know that I was going to design sweaters when I went to Petti, but I was informed that later on I'd develop sweater groups. And what were sweater groups? I had no idea what it was all about. But I was fortunate. I was assigned a technician who took me with him to the knitting mills in Cleveland, and in those days they knitted all over the United States. And I learned what knitting machines were about. I also had a wonderful man... If I didn't know something, or if I tore a picture out and asked him what it was about, he would explain it to me. So I began to learn how to create. Especially in the knitting industry, you have to know what the technical aspect of it is, in order to create your product because you're starting with nothing.

But this was probably the most creative job that I ever, ever had. Each group of merchandise had to be unique, from concept on. And again, that was wonderful training because... Interestingly enough, I went back to work at Country Set for one year and then Bruce Glenn now a consultant for Bobbie Brooks brought me in to work at a small division of Bobbie Brooks, which was Junior Petite, and six months after that I became design director for Bobbie
Brooks, working again now with designers. But this was not really on a magnified scale. It was the first time, and it was a very difficult transition—working with designers, not doing it yourself. But, because I'd had two kinds of training—conceptualizing with Edgar and learning how to be truly creative with Bruce, it was not difficult. The only difficult thing was in learning how to work with a designer so that you got their input first, thought about it, and then re-packaged the whole thing into commercial ideas and then sold the management a bill of goods on the direction each line should take...

Q: And they had to be different from each other...

A: Yes. And to proceed and get the product developed, without destroying the creativity of the designers who were working for you.

Q: Were those designers stationed in...

A: In New York. Yes they were. And in the Bobbie Brooks setup, they were all entirely here. They were not elaborate kind of facilities, but they required a very special kind of designer, because they were really very, very aggressive and if you had any kind of ego at all, it was a difficult position. Because they always were faceless in this kind of situation. And we had, I would say, a great turnover. They became technicians to a great degree; they became extensions of myself. It was unavoidable. Because the amount of product that had to be developed on a continuous basis...We restructured the company after a while so that we had...And I was learning all this as I was doing it. I had never directed this kind of thing before. And I discovered that I needed a good assistant, who was in a sense a head designer, to work with designers. And I needed a good assistant who did research and development in fabrics. Because we were creating all our own fabrics. Because we worked so early; we worked so far in advance of
the season, you didn't have the luxury of waiting to see a product line.

And so we would get young designers who would come in with ideas; I would then digest the ideas, come up with the concepts, play it back to my head designer, who would then work with the designers to develop the specific styles (meaning, three pants in this group; what should they be; what kind of thing?), and I still was the final editor. And that's how we functioned and I was there for about 12 years, and it was a learning experience, it was a growing experience. It was also the very beginning of going to Europe. I had started to go before, but frankly it was at Bobbie Brooks that we started to go to Europe to shop the stores, to shop the...If you could get into the showings...

Q: This is now in the '60s?

A: This is not 1967...Just to back track...When I went to work for Petti, in 1964....If you want to ask how long ago did the French ready-to-wear business really begin to become a product...Oh, they always had ready-to-wear, but designer names, as such, that were not couture designers, I would say you would have to go back to no earlier than 1964. And I remember the first of the designers that we saw were people like Emmanuel Khahn who came into the business through designing these giant industrial zippers. I remember going to Europe in 1965. I went with one of the people from Tobe. She was going for the first time. I believe one of their people who's still there, was talking about these funny stores and people that we'd never heard of. There was a shop out on the Avenue General le Clerc. And you know who owned the shop? A lady named Sonia Rykiel, together with her then husband, Sam. And she was a young, trendy, junior designer. And you had THE star of ready-to-wear at that time; the biggest business of all
was Cacharel. And what did Cacharel make? Crepon shirts at that time. He
was a blousemaker. So we were at the infancy of the French ready-to-wear.
Daniel Hechter had inherited a coat and suit tailoring and contracting business
from his father, and continued to make tailored coats and suits. So when you
look upon what seemed like a business that had been around forever, it wasn't.
It was in this relatively short period of time. But rather rapidly, the
influences these people had became very important. You had Jacqueline Jacobsen,
together with her husband, had a little store called Dorothee B's which is still
there. These were the new creators; the new input. A magazine that we kind of
all looked at but never told each other about was Elle. Elle had descended on
the American market in the early '60s, and very few people knew about it.
Nobody was telling anybody else about it, because it really had astonishing
merchandise in it. It was really all of these people's product.

Now, when I got to Brookd and we needed creative input all the
time, I started to go to Paris, and then to London, and of course to Mary Quant.
Which was the really hot number at the time. And through the years, other areas
developed. We had the explosion in Copenhagen and we had a whole group of companies
like Deres and Bristol and...

Q: How do you spell Deres?
A: D-e-r-e-s. It's a chain of stores that's still there, and
they used to create their own product. It was the age of the mini-skirt, and
you could find a million and one variations there. And we went to...Wherever
we thought there was a new product. I remember venturing in Stockholm at the time,
but nothing ever really happened with that. We were so anxious for new product...
Then later on in the '60s...I'm sorry; it must have been in the early '70s, we had
Milan with the Fioruccis and all of that beginning to be important. So we were constantly traveling... In those days I made six trips a year to Europe. St. Tropez had emerged upon the scene. And if you remember, in those years, the only shop in San Tropez was Choses in the early...

Q: Vachon?

A: Vachon, right. And what did they make? Shirts. That's all it was. But, you began to discover this whole new influence. So, by the middle '70s, it was imperative that you see that product line, because it did influence what you did. So off we went... I remember, the last week of June was when I went to St. Tropez, because it was early enough so you didn't get the typical tourist, you got a certain fashion minded person. But also early enough so that you could incorporate that into your plans for spring and summer product line. And, of course, later on the world discovered it and stores started to proliferate down there, to the point where they became extensions of the Paris stores, so it no longer had its uniqueness. But in those days, the stores only created the product there. The first Sascha, before they went to Paris, was there. The first of so many stores--Mic Mac had been a St. Tropez... of St. Tropez origin, and they were terrific. There were wonderful ideas that could be transferred. These were real clothes, real sportswear. You didn't only copy. Because you couldn't just copy. It had a different point of view in that respect. But you had input into new fabrics, new proportions, new ideas. And it was fantastic. So that was a fresh input into it. Volume, junior sportswear manufacturers. In those days, Bobbie Brook's volume was $100 million. Unheard of in the business. And it had peaks and valleys because it was so vulnerable. But I stayed with them, developing product, up until, I would say, the late '70s. At which point I did what I would
call just a straight switch. I joined a competitor, which was College Town. And I didn't stay there very long because I had begun to feel, even my last year with Bobbie Brooks, that something was changing in the industry, and I didn't feel that the junior business, as we had once perceived it, was any longer valid. And now, of course, in 1985, in point of fact, it's come to pass. And today the junior business is nothing but a price oriented industry.

So I stayed with it for a brief period of time and left there and did nothing for six months. I had the luxury of deciding what I wanted to do and where I would grow. I also felt that I wanted a more sophisticated, more updated product. I was growing as a designer, and in the last days at Bobbie Brooks I had already begun to put that input into the product line and it just didn't add up. The customer must have also responded to it, because we did very well with more design oriented influences, and the big star at that time was Ralph Lauren. It was the beginning of Polo and his really very chic, classic clothing. And I really tried very hard to bring that taste level into the junior market. And it really started to work. It really was the beginning of a change in the business. And so I began to see that my level of merchandise, my taste level, was shifting away from cutesie, gimmicky, real young kinds of things. And so, after a six months' hiatus, I joined a company as a designer...I went back to just a designer, because with College Town I was also the Design Director and merchandiser.

Q: For College Town.

A: But now, I decided I was tired of large companies, I wanted small businesses. I wanted something where I was back in the product. So I joined a division of Country Miss, which made various product lines. They had a dress line,
they had a moderate priced sportswear line, and they had begun to dabble in a little line called Weathervane, which was a better Missy sportswear business. And they did about $4.5 million. And considering that I had come from College Town, which also did in excess of $100 million business, it was a very difficult transition, not from the designer point of view, but because I was so used to being able to get things done by staff. All I had to do was say I wanted to do X, Y and Z—I want to do this kind of plaid or that kind of print, and people created it. Now I had to do it. I had to work with the resources and directly develop it again. I also had to develop the designs, but that wasn't difficult.

So, I really enjoyed the whole "back to designing" activity that I had at Weathervane. I worked with a patternmaker who was my assistant, and looked at muslin fittings again...I really loved it. It was a wonderful luxury. But it also began to grow, and it was ironic, because my boss was a man who was very satisfied with the size of the business that he had. Because collectively, the various divisions they had totalled about a $65-70 million business, and he had just sold it to the Hart-Marx people. And so he wasn't really interested in exploding anything further than where it was a healthy growth each year. It was wonderful...And despite his modest attitude toward business, the business grew in three years time to almost $26 million...Because it was a product that had validity. I did everything...I did the designing, the fabricating, the merchandising everything that had to do with it. I also...this was the first time...I also went over to Hong Kong to design sweaters. I had never done that in the Far East. We did produce product in the Far East in some of the other companies that I worked for, starting in the late '70s with Bobbie Brooks; however, you sent your knitwear designers over. Now I did it all. And off I went, and it was a wonderful learn-
ing experience, learning how to produce product.

Then, while I was there, about three years ago, Art Ortenberg and Liz Claiborne had asked me, would I like to join their company? And I went to visit their company, and by then, of course, they were already rolling along rather strongly. And it was really the kind of thing that I had been running away from—a large scale business. By then they were also over $100 million business. By then they were probably at $150 million. And today, of course, they are at $300 million. And it was exactly what I had not wanted, and I walked through some of the merchandising offices and I saw these on-line computer terminals and... I saw these on-line computer terminals and I saw the masses of people they had to keep track of everything that was happening, and it just was not what I wanted. I liked the idea of going back to designing my own product and being involved in a nice, small business, where you controlled everything. And so I said I didn't think I really wanted the job.

Well, two years later, I guess because I was more ambitious to make this business grow (which couldn't grow, because the principal of the company had determined that he wanted to keep it small and contained, so again, I came back from Hong Kong and they approached me again—would I like to join them in the capacity of Design Director—and this time I didn't say no so quickly, because I thought I was ready to go back into design director. And I said, "Before you say anything else, I would like to see the product line." So off I went to the showroom and I sat, and one of the salesmen showed me the product line. It was overwhelming. I looked at it and I said, "I don't know how anybody could take on this magnitude of job, because what they have created
is so awesome." And I really had to think about it long and hard.

Now this was in early October, two years... It would have been October '83. Early October of '83. It wasn't until December that I finally said yes to it. Because it was scary. The product line, the diversity of the product line and the amount of creativity that goes into it was... And the excellence of the creativity that went into it, made you really have self-doubts. Because one might have all the skills to make something like this happen. In terms of getting it done, I didn't know if I had the talent to make this happen. And it didn't mean that I personally was going to design all this, because there was a staff of designers. But just to be the guiding light, the inspirer and the teacher, the director, is a very, very awesome responsibility. And it took me several months to make up my mind as to what I was going to do. And, of course, I decided to join them and it was a very exciting moment for me.

But I must say...I joined them in January of '84, and probably last year was the toughest year of my life, because it called upon everything that I had learned in 32 years. And I said to a lot of people that I think that all of my experience of 32 years was made so that I could now take this job. Because it required you to be a technician, a conceptualizer, a merchandiser, a fabricator, a director of people and an administrator. It's all of those skills rolled up into one. And, it also requires you not to have an ego, because there's no time or place for it, and you kind of have to learn not to be in awe of Liz Claiborne, who is a terrific person just in terms of...just in the talent alone... who created this and made this happen. It's a rough act to follow, and I remember saying the same words to her right after seeing the very first fashion show that I saw in January, even before I joined the company, I said, "This is a very difficult act to follow." It's awesome. And it's only after the middle of
last year that you begin to fall into the tempo of how a product has to be
done.

The line is very extensive. It's expensive in its variety; it's three lines in one. Each line has a "Spectator," which is the ready-to-wear portion; "Sports" which is more casual, and "Lizway" which is more active and jean oriented. There are six line releases a year. Every two months a fresh line of product going to the stores, every two months a line opens.

Q: So that talented, as I think you are, you should be very famous before working very long here. I remember you showed me a long time ago that time period is...

A: Oh, yes. Actually it's even more complicated, because we don't even have the luxury of that amount of time as we had when I gave you that calendar.

Q: Could we just...I just want to go back a little bit to F.I.T. ...Were there, as you went along, courses that you wish they had given that would have saved you time?

A: Yes. I was also thankful for the things that they had given us, but they hadn't given us enough of them. The textile courses were very general and perfunctory in my estimation. They gave you a basic knowledge of weaves, of different kinds of cloth, so that you could also know that this is a woven fabric and this is a knitted fabric, but htey didn't give you anything more than that. They didn't teach you textile design. If I were going to do those courses today, I would say...Interestingly enough, they did certain things which were not as important. When you took apparel design, you were stuck with, at some point, millinery design. Whether you wanted it or not, you had to minor in the millinery design. And that to me was worthless in retrospect.
Q: Yes. And, of course, they discontinued that department.

A: Yes. But, what they should have done (and hindsight is always greater) is the textile design courses which should have been broader, to let you know that you are going to be called upon to create fabric. But they didn't know that. Because the world that we were living in at the time didn't demand that of it. But I would wish for greater depth in the design of textiles. And I don't mean just the technical aspects of it; I mean creating from an idea, or taking an idea and working it all the way through. I would also wish that they had given us knitting courses. But who knew that sweaters were going to be such...

Q: Well, did you ever communicate any of this to them? Because they do give those things now...

A: Today. By now, of course, I know...I've learned the skills, but you see I had to learn by being thrown into the pool and it was sink or swim. But in those days they didn't. I don't think they do things still the way I would do it. If I were teaching a course, I would take...I would say, "Okay, let's learn conceptual thinking. Take an idea....if you have one. A mood of clothing...Develop it. Develop it from textile, right through to its finished style, and merchandise it as you do it. So that you can take an idea and create a sportswear group starting with your idea." If your idea, for instance, is Provence, Prince and Yarn dyes mixed together (an idea that we just did), start from scratch, as we did. We created a yarn dyed pattern in a color range that we liked and developed Provence patterns. Do research and then create your own. Two different ones. They have to work with each other and work by themselves.... Take an idea like that and make it become a real piece of merchandise. So that you actually have created a total product. That's something they don't teach.
And I know it's something you learn when you get out there, but it's something you really should know before you get out there. How to do it. It's the how to do it skills that I would like to emphasize, at the creative level, not so much the technical. You need the technical level. You need to get a job, so you've got to perform a technical function. . . .

Q: You also need to know what can be done or can't be done...
A: Yes, but somehow...I mean, if you're going to get a job as a sketcher, you have to know how to sketch. To get a job as a sample maker, you have to know how to make clothes. If you're going to get a job draping patterns, you have to know those skills. That's your foot in the door. But you also have to know how to create a product. And it's not just making an isolated picture. That is what they still tend to do, and it drives me crazy. Because I've spent time at the school as a critic for some of the sportswear classes, and the frustration is incredible. People don't think in concept form. They think in specific garment form. Until you break that habit, you can't think the way the industry wants you to think. And I would say that if I had courses like that it would be fantastic. To make you rethink everything in a different manner.

I remember when I used to design for my portfolio. Each plate was a production unit itself. And there were contradictions in silhouettes. Because if I felt something was...This bonbon should be a big, full skirted, lifted waist, I did that. And then the next one would be a slim, pullover silhouette. There was no continuity in ideas and they still tend to do that. Maybe it's indigenous to individual design schools. I don't know.

Q: Well, the design schools, want to stay up to date. Therefore, this kind of critique or suggestion is very valuable I would think.
A: If I were going to retire from the industry, or even at this point, were would I go? What would I like to do personally at this point? I would love to teach. I would love to teach the craft. How to make things happen. Not the dressmaking skills or the pattern making skills. Those are what I call givens. You must have those. But just how to take and maximize the creative talent you have inside that you may not know how to put together, package, conceptualize. That's what I would like to do.

Q: Would you ever have thought it would be useful to have more business training? Business management?

A: That's the other part of it. When I came out into this business, I knew nothing about how business is run. I knew nothing about how you administrate a business. Perhaps if I did I might have gone into my own business. It was always a very frightening aspect of the business. I also think that if I were to do it all over again, somewhere in my 32 years, I would like to have gone to work for a retailer. I think that understanding the retail business helps you become a better designer. Understanding what it means to get merchandise on the floor, what about the presentation, what about how you sell to the customer. What about markdowns? I think it was years before I even knew what that word meant. Because you were so isolated...And it's very important...I don't know if the courses include that today. Even if you're a design major, you must have merchandising and retail oriented courses. I don't know if they do that today, but if they don't they should. Because those two areas--the administration of a business and the retail experience--those are the key ingredients to making you the very best designer. Because even today, when we work on a product, we're always aware of how the package will look on the floor. How will the retailer
house what we're going to ship them? What are the price points that we want our merchandise to be at?

Q: And what segment of the consumer are you targeting for?

A: Exactly. You have to do that. In fact, I even, just this Friday...in order to know what price fabric we can afford for the coming season that we're working on, we have to know what price points we want for those garments to be at. So that we would not violate that. If we love a fabric, and buy it and then make garments that are far too expensive for our customer, that's wrong. Know your customer. That's what the retail experience will give you. And I wish I had had it earlier. I think I would have been a better designer.

Q: That's very interesting. Well, thank you very much. It was wonderful. Thank you.

A: My pleasure.