For the Oral History Collection

at the

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

an interview with

GEOFFREY BEENE

Interviewed by:
Mildred Finger
March 9, 1989
Q. For the Oral History Collection at the Fashion Institute of Technology, this will be an interview with Geoffrey Beene. The date is March 9th, 1989; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

Mr. Beene, let's talk about when you were a child, born in Hainesville, Louisiana. Right?
A: Yes.
Q: Nineteen-twenty-seven.
A: Right.
Q: Okay. What was your life like as a child?
A: It was quite beautiful and quite lovely, because a great part of the time I spent on my grandfather's plantation in the South, and I became so aware of animals and plants and vegetables and flowers. A lushness that exists in the South is my first image of color and texture and beautiful things.
Q: You must have been a very good student, because I noticed you were graduated from high school at 16.
A: Right.
Q: Which was very usual in New York in those days, but not in Louisiana or anywhere else in the United States that I know of.
A: They were great schools, and I went to Tulane when I was 16. I had won a scholarship. I was the first male
student. I mean, in the class, and I won that scholarship to Tulane, so I was in the university when I was 16, and it was during the war years, and I had to do four years work in three years. So, by the time I was 20 I was--
Q: Out of college.
A: --out of college.
Q: I didn't mean to cause you to cut your childhood short. I'm sure you have more to talk about than I let you do. You said--
A: Well, it was a very small town. I have just wonderful images, mostly of just flowers and organic things.
Q: Did you have any brothers and sisters?
A: I had two sisters that I was very close to, and the three of us would just sort of--could always have fun unto our own. I was never a gregarious person, I was always--If my sisters weren't there I was always doing something--
Q: Were they older or younger?
A: Younger.
Q: They were both younger.
A: Yes. One died when she was 30 years old, of cancer, and the other is--My sister is married and living in Houston, Texas.
I remember loving school and going to school. Everything was a discovery for me. I remember my first art
class.

Q: What were your favorite classes?

A: Well, Geography. Travel. Foreign countries, foreign cultures. Not so much history in that sense, but the geographical differences in countries and the culture changes, and languages used to fascinate me. Anything foreign, I suppose because Louisiana was so provincial and--

Q: Yes, but I was going to say, that sounds so sophisticated; to have a course that was really wonderful in--

A: They had great schools, and in Fine Arts and everything, and they taught foreign languages. The school was known to be one of the best in Louisiana, and very, very high standards. My first study of Latin was there; I had four years of Latin, and I had taken some Spanish, which I didn't enjoy, and I switched to German before I went to Tulane, where I took it up seriously, because a lot of--I don't know. The German language interests me.

But, I remember my mother telling me in my first years of school that I would come home drawing--She remembers particularly women's shoes, as opposed to dresses, and I was always fascinated by women's shoes and its delicacy and lines across it. I still am. Then I went into Fine Arts. They had a Fine Arts school where you could recognize--They
taught us to recognize every great painting that existed in the great museums of the world. That was in elementary school.

Then, it became difficult because my mother and father were approaching divorce then. Then I changed schools and went to Texas and came back, and there was a sad period for me when I would just be adjusting to one thing, and be pulled from another. But I remember so specifically, when I was in "Pasculane," Texas, that I wanted a pair of--I had seen some Dutch clogs, the true gardening clogs that came from Holland, and I asked my mother could I have a pair? She was perfectly right, she said, "Of course not." She had financial difficulties then, and how dare I ask for such a thing and what on earth would I do with them in Texas? I remember the story because it's amusing to her, she reminded me of it. I was determined to get those shoes, and I think because I liked shoes and because it would have been the first tangible thing I would have had of a foreign culture, and they were strangely bizarre to me and became a fascination. So, I gave up my lunch money and my lunch for about two months or so, and I would just walk during lunch hour and save that money, and I saved it until I finally acquired the shoes. But before I got the shoes, my mother called me in and said I was losing so much weight, and what on earth was the matter? Did I not feel good or something
like that, and I told her I felt wonderful. Anyway, she got the truth out that I had given up my lunch for these shoes and I was just--She me never to do it again, but I recall doing it many times since and I probably still am doing that sort of thing. I will sacrifice one thing that I think is--not to persist, but if something is so beautiful that it becomes an obsession.

Q: Getting on to college--
A: I've realized at this point in my life that it's foolish to believe that beauty can ever be possessed.

Q: Do you think the perception of beauty is your very own, is that what you mean?
A: I don't know if it's my own, it's just--

Q: As opposed to having the object, the perception of the object, for example.
A: Yes. I don't have to possess the day, it's just to see it and to--I have learned too that just because the wild orchid is found in the forest does not mean that it has to be consumed, and that you must leave things of beauty alone or else you must look forward and turn it into another form of beauty yourself. But the possession of beauty fascinated me for many years of my life.

Q: When you went on to college, what did you specialize in?
A: Still I loved languages. I took German, I can't speak a
word today, but I was very good at languages--
Q: Can you still read it?
A: Some. And if forced to I could manage. A lot of German, and a lot of History. I was fascinated with Anatomy, Biology—again, the plants and flowers—and then when it got into gross anatomy in medical school, with human cadavers, it just became repulsive to me. I had gone to the university in the first place because my grandfather and two members of my mother's family, of course, were doctors, and in the South it was quite logical to do what had been done before. But I was just—Even studying that first year of medical school, every disease I would study I would begin to have the symptoms of them and I would go home feeling quite bad at the end of the day. Then, when we had to take the human head home and dissect that, that would be—I got to where I was absolutely having nightmares; dissecting the human body and the cadavers was getting to me, and I got very ill from it and had to go to the hospital.
Q: This was out in California?
A: I had pneumonia—No, this was at Tulane.
Q: At Tulane, yes.
A: Then, at that time I was being enlisted in the army and my parents were divorced and I was literally falling apart, being apologetic for having changed my career and hurting my family. It was a tough moment for me but I knew I had to
withdraw from all of it. I did, and I left medicine behind me and I went to California, supposedly to finish at USC, but that's when I began to see clothes for the first time in the windows at I. Magnin, and that was Carnegie and Rosenstein, and all of the ones from America. Adrian, in particular, became—that was a magnificent obsession, and he had his own salon in Beverly Hills and his imagination was just something awesome to me. So, I did not go to USC—

Q: Did you ever meet Russell—was he somebody that you—?

A: Yes, but I didn't know him well. I didn't know him when I was working at Magnin's because—When I went to work at Magnin's, of course, I had no experience in fashion whatsoever.

Q: I see. Had you thought about fashion by then, as a career?

A: I have always thought of it, all my life. I've drawn fashion. But, as it goes in the South (and I've said this before), if you're not a doctor, lawyer, merchant or thief, everything else is a hobby, so it was only took a few years to know that my family looked upon my career as a hobby. Having had a retrospective in my home town in January, certain people still look on it as a hobby.

Q: What relatives have you still got back home?
BEENE

A: I've got aunts and uncles--
Q: You do? Of "a certain age" as they say?
A: Yes, but--My mother is in her 80s but she's a young woman.
Q: I'm sorry. I thought you said earlier that your mother and your father had died.
A: Oh, no.
Q: No.
A: No, divorced.
Q: Divorced. I'm sorry.
A: That's a death of sorts, I guess. But, no, my father's dead but my mother's alive and well and looking good and feeling good. But, they still look upon it as a frivolous thing, as do many of our--
Q: Do you still have aunts there?
A: Yes.
Q: Cousins?
A: Yes. A lot of family.
Q: Don't they take great pride in what you've done?
A: I don't know, because members of the family did not come to the retrospective. None of the men came.
Q: Really.
A: So, it meant to me that they simply do not respect me.
Q: That was the most extraordinary thing I have ever seen, anywhere.
A: Well, if it had been a golf tournament they would have all been there.

Q: Really? Oh, dear. That was so fantastic. I remember so many of the bodies I've seen over the years.

A: Really?

Q: Oh, yes. Just a glorious experience. It really was wonderful. So, I'm sorry that they missed it, but if they are not interested in fashion, I guess, or design, they wouldn't have anything important to think about that.

Anyway. I'm sorry. Then the next step--You were at Magnin's working in--Where? The display--?

A: In the display department, because when I went in they asked me did I have any experience and I said no, and they said, "Great, we love to train people, what about the display department?" I said, "Wonderful," and that was when I began to really touch fine clothing and know the quality of it and how they were made. It was a thrill for me. I think that was the trigger of--Everything started with that, and I began to sketch a lot. I've always been able to draw, because even in the summers, in the South, I used to go to art schools in the summers, in fine arts, and oils. I started painting in oils and pastels and water colors. I mean, I cannot remember a summer being free that I was not doing something at school in one way or the other.

Then, when I began to be close to the clothes and
sketching a lot a lot of people began to notice my sketches and I was called upstairs and the president of the store (I've forgotten his name) said, "May I see the sketches--?"

Q: Escabosa?
A: It was after him.
Q: After Escabosa.
A: Oh, no--It was Escabosa.
Q: Yes. Okay. Because he was president for a long time.
A: He looked at them and he said, "I'm hearing great things about them, why don't you go into fashion?" I was just overwhelmed and I said, "But, what would I do?" He said, "Go to school." I said, "What would be the best school?" He said, "In France, in Paris, if you can do it."

Of course, I told my family that and they went berserk, and then the melodrama started--"To leave this country--" and all that, but I knew I had to do it, so I left. I worked a year to earn my money to go steerage class on the Queen Elizabeth and I set sail. I think I had $100 in my pocket as I hit France, and I had a GI loan, so--

Q: Oh, you had been in the army? Or--No?
A: It was like two months, when I had pneumonia. I mean, getting in the army, and the divorce, and now suddenly my body gave way and I acquired such a horrible disease, I mean a horrible case of pneumonia, that the army said they simply could not afford me because they had to put me in--I don't
know—I had asthma. It was horrible. Anyway, they said they couldn't afford me so that's when I got my discharge, but I still--

Q: What was this, '44?
A: Forty-five. Then I had the rights, GI rights, and I got a loan to go to a certain extent there. Then, my family forgave me and--

Q: I'm sorry. Let's not skip over France so fast. When you were in France, did you learn to speak French?
A: I had studied—Again, when I was working that year for the money, I was studying French from a Frenchmen near my home town. I would drive every day—

Q: Do you speak French with a Southern accent?
A: I'm sure, but as the French told me then, it makes an American more easily understood, simply speaking it more slowly. But they used to laugh at me and still do, but I speak very good French slowly.

I landed in Cherbourg. I had taken the Queen Elizabeth to Southampton and then the ferry from Dover—No, from Calais to Cherbourg, and when I landed in Cherbourg and came on the train, it was one of the most memorable experiences of my whole life. I really knew that I felt at home, and it's the same thing, that there was nothing strange about France to me. It was an immediate love affair. I was at home. I had no reason to feel that way, it just happened
Q: That's great.
A: It's been a love affair ever since, and my two years in Paris I would not exchange for my four years--
Q: Where did you live during those two years? With a family or a pension or--?
A: Well, we lived sort of grandly, and I had met other students on the Queen Elizabeth who went in steerage class, and none of us really had much money, and we went to--We first stayed at the Cité Université in a dormitory--very cold--and then we went to the American Embassy Home Away From Home, and we began to look at notices of places for rent. There were four of us, and there was a villa in the St. Germain-en-Laye. That was where General von Rungstadt had stayed when--
Q: How do you spell von Rungstadt? I don't remember that.
A: He was one of Hitler's generals.
Q: Yes.
A: v-o-n R-u-n-g-s-t-a-d-t, I think.
Q: Yes, I see.
A: The entire villa was 12 rooms and beautiful gardens, which they had built (What do you call those underneath, concrete protection things?) during the war. It was all for rent for $125 a month. It was exquisite! So, between four of us we paid--what? Thirty dollars each, which was a lot then,
particularly if you didn't have it.

Q: Yes.

A: We commuted to school from that--

Q: Because St. Germain-en-laye is--

A: Seventeen miles from Paris. It's not far from Auxerrois. Then the winter became so severe that we couldn't take the snow, and there was very little heating in the house, so we all sort of split up. I took a maid's room on Rue de Rivoli. I always had grand addresses in Paris--maid's rooms--I didn't care. I was just staggered by the architecture of Paris and the--But I do remember nights that we would pull the carpet off the floor to keep warm and that we would have no electricity and we would have to bathe and shave by candlelight. So--I remember all those things but I never remember the hardships. I tell students it was such a joy being there and doing what I wished to do that the other things were just secondary. Then I continued French at Berlitz--

Q: I'm sorry--Did you go to the Chambre Syndicale school?

A: I went to Berlitz two hours day. I started at the Chambre Syndicale and stayed about a month and I couldn't stand it--

Q: Really.

A: --because I have always been awkward with my hands as far as drawing grain and fabric; the precision that is
needed in the hands of fine workers. I'm much more mental about my approach to design than I am physical, physically adept, and I couldn't stand it. It was so tiresome, pressing and ironing--

Q: Were all these people French, for the most part?
A: Yes, but it was in the GI bill. A lot of them were Americans, most of them from California, strangely enough. It was a big bore, and I kept thinking, "This-is-a-bore!"

Q: How disenchanting.
A: So, I thought, well this is--Yes, that too. My drawing, it improved that, so I switched to the Academie Julien which is a fine studio where Toulouse Lautrec was and a lot of famous painters, and I took up life drawing, anatomical drawing and clothing, draping and that sort of thing, and it was just the most wonderful--I don't know--lesson for me, and, again, after that some--the recording part. The body is nude, and then with clothing, and I think it gave me a great sense of proportion; of what the body is really like. I advise students today that the very first thing is to take life drawing and know that a woman is round and a man's body is mostly angular. It's just a lesson in what you are putting clothes onto.

Then I tried to get a job with Dior and Jacques Fath and I think it was Lelong at the time, and none of them wanted it, because they would all say, "You're an American,
you will learn our metier," and you will return to America. So finally I went to Molyneux and there was a tailor there who said I could work for him at night. So, when I would finish school I would work Thursday from 5:00 to 9:00 in the evening, and it was just wonderful, and the only reason I was able to work there was I said to them, "Well, what if I worked for nothing?" I did; I was never paid for anything, but it was still one of the most gratifying experiences and sources of knowledge--

Q: He was a tailor, right? This person?
A: A tailor--
Q: Yes, but I mean, what part of it did he do? Did he do jackets or--?
A: He didn't design at all, he was the technical part--

Q: I know you weren't working for Molyneux directly, you were working for somebody who worked for him, right. A tailor. And that's what I'm interested to know. Did he teach you about tailoring--?
A: Yes, and fitting. He would permit me to go into the fittings. It was pure couture work, and the management of people and how it's transferred to the table and then the fittings of everything, and the inner workings, which I never ever planned to do, but I have the appreciation of. It was just wonderful. So I was going to two schools a day and then working at night, but it was such fun
Q: So, after you were through with that assignment--How long did that last?
A: Two years.
Q: Oh, that's a long time.
A: Then, my grandfather died, or else I would probably be in France today. But I loved him so. He had sort of been the mentor of my life, and I had to come home and once I got home my family--Whoosh! Moved and grabbed me, said, "You must stay in America!" Then I came to New York and I entered Traphagen one summer, and from there I got a job uptown at Mildred O'Quinn--
Q: Aha!
A: --and she had very fine fabrics and a very small business but I had not even known so much of stuff about or heard much about it. I remember Miss Trigere was uptown and, oh, many, many fine designers. Charles James was on Madison Avenue and--Having just come from Paris and working with very high priced couture, I just tried to find it here. I worked for Miss O'Quinn, and it was a small business and we couldn't even drape with her fabrics because they were so precious, so I used to pick scraps up in the evening and put them on a figure, after she had left, and in the morning would have in scraps what I thought was a design, and she would say, "But, who did this? Who did this?" I'd say, "Well, I did, there's nobody else, I guess, who would have."
Anyway, she liked them very much and I was encouraged and I put certain things in work. They were in magazines. But she didn't have much money--

Q: She didn't mind your designing things?
A: Well, I mean, she didn't want it known--

Q: I see. So you didn't have your name on them, in the magazines.
A: No, no. That wasn't for years and years. Then, also, she had very little money so I had one showing, I had the secretary and all, a million things to her, but again, it was an apprenticeship, so those things do not become tiresome if you're learning something.

It's funny. I tell a funny story that I was in the showroom when she was out to lunch, and she had beautiful furniture, and there was a Louis XVI desk and Louis XVI chair, in the most beautiful setting. I remember the color was something between olive and ochre. Anyway, I ordered a sandwich from the outside and I really liked mayonnaise, and some of the mayonnaise spilled on the Louis XVI chair, onto the satin--

Q: Oh, dear.
A: --and when Miss O'Quinn came back she saw it and she fired me instantly and pushed me, literally, to the elevator, hysterically, and that was the end of that! So, I said I came to Seventh Avenue where there were fewer Louis
XVI chairs! And here I am on an aluminum one, should I have mayonnaise on me there would be no--

Q: That's all right.
A: Then--oh, God--

Q: At what point did you work for Harmay? Later?
A: That's--I'm just trying to think how I got down there.

It was after that that I went to Harmay and Seventh Avenue and I worked for a few years under Arno Bouchard, who was from Berlin and a wonderful man. He wasn't a very good designer and I realized that right away, and I was always in the second designing room but I realized it would be a good chance for me to exercise--

Q: This was at Harmay?
A: --yes--my own ideas with him. Never, ever to take his place, which I didn't, but at least he was open minded enough and I knew intense enough that he would accept ideas, and he did. Then the owners began to see what I was doing and they finally gave me my room, and I made lots of money for those people.

Q: I remember that. I remember that collection very well. I did a lot of business with them. They were the kind of clothes that were not--They were certainly not exciting and they were certainly not avant garde in any sense, but they fit very well and they were in nice fabrics and they were clearly--A pleasant product, not a great product--
A: Well, I think those dresses started at $28--
Q: Oh, yes.
A: --$35, but I was mixing velvet with linen. I remember a coat, a camel coat, that was made with a breast of white satin on either side so it would day into night. So I was doing what I liked in very small doses but getting money at the same time. Then I had--I've forgotten what happened then. I took an apartment in Rome one summer and they sent me a cable that I was fired--

Oh! I remember exactly. I had begun to loosen up a little, because my clothes had sold so I thought I had earned the right to begin to express myself, and I began to make chemises and--
Q: Yes. This was in the '50s, when that was in style.
A: --they didn't like it at all. They wanted me to stick to the type--"decollete" clothes and I didn't like it anymore and I kept pushing looser clothes and chemises and short skirts. Things which I've always liked, still do. So, I had just acquired this apartment in Rome and I spent all my money and I received a cable that I was dismissed. So I thought, oh, God, am I going to stay, just live in Rome? Shall I go back or what?

Anyway, I was advised to come back and I had a difficult time getting a--[recorder off momentarily]--I'll get up to Teal Traina, okay?
Q: Yes.
A: Okay. And I came back and I tried for jobs and had two or three offered, though I don't even remember the names of the Houses, and I would always be doing something that was too expensive, or unaffordable, or what other manufacturers wanted and never what I wanted, and it became tiresome and I was not working out, and I was just really fighting it. Then I was without work for almost a year, and a buyer from Texas I had known I met one night and he said, "There's a new House called Teal Traina that's looking for a designer, would you like an interview?" I met with Trainor. He was a young man and it was a new House and I thought, oh, God, maybe this is it, because there's nothing I have to design like! I can do my own thing, and I did, and it worked out and I stayed for four years.

His production man wanted to leave him and he asked, if he found a partner, would I like my own business? I do like my own business.
Q: Tell me, at that point, what did you think constituted top management of a ready-to-wear firm? Obviously a production man. I guess that would--
A: Well, the most--Good fabric, always--
Q: Well, as far as the personnel is concerned. You would need a top piece goods person, and a production man.
A: At most, yes.
Q: Who ran the business. I mean, who administered the business?
A: Traina ran the business.
Q: No, but, after you left to do it yourself.
A: Oh, you mean here.
Q: Well, yes. Here. Sure.
A: Oh, I thought you meant--I didn't make those decisions. Though it was my own business, it was two business men that invested in me, so they found the production--
Q: May I know who they were?
A: Leo Orlandi--
Q: Oh, yes. Who became a production man.
A: --and the piece goods man was Dave Lettinger, who's still with me, but then "Cheryl" was with me, Orlandi and--
Q: And then was your financial backer.
A: Well, they weren't the financial backers. Between them and a loan at the bank, they scraped together $125,000 and my business started on that amount.
Q: Nowadays it would take how much?
A: A million, or safely $2 million.
Q: Although, to raise that much money in those--in 1963--must have been as tough as it is in 1989 to raise 10 times the amount, the amount. Sure.

So, there you were, starting a business in January of 1963. In the same showroom? I don't remember the floor you
were on.
A: No--
A: Traina was in 530 7th Avenue and I opened in 550 7th Avenue, the old--which was next door to--
Q: Sure. Oh, sure, right--was in 530.
A: I mean 530, I went to 550, Traina went to 530.
Q: Right, right. Right, and that was on the 12th floor, yes. I think--

[End of Side 1; begin Side 2]
A: In 1989 there is one thing I have learned; a designer cannot be all things to all people. It should be decided as quickly as possible whether you desire to appeal to the masses or fewer people, where you simply express your metier the best. It's--The two are almost impossible. You have two different audiences, you have two different taste levels, but to experience one's work, and particularly as is done, you can compromise so much, and then if you feel it very strongly, you must give up the compromise and go totally to whatever you have selected.
Q: Now, what constitutes top management at this point, as far as you're concerned, in your kind of a business?
A: It's exactly the same thing. The management is always the same, the goals are what are the differences. Do you want lots and lots of money without any creative reward? Or,
do you want the reward of your designs for less money but greater appreciation of? At this point, when I'm in very expensive clothes, the audience is naturally limited, but it's so fulfilling to be able to do what you wish to do. I would never be happy if I--When I started Harmay was $28 dresses with a precise bust and waistline and skirt. At the moment form and substance, fabrics and color--whatever it is--is my own decision, so I have worked for the freedom to design as I feel--

Q: And without worrying about what the stores individually are going to say.
A: I don't worry about that. I don't worry about the stores. I worry about something being beautiful. I worry about it being wearable. That's one thing in my whole career--

Before the retrospective I had an interview by a very well known journalist, and she sat down and said to me (it was when "Le Croix" was coming out with ridiculously wonderful things, not wearable, but--), she said to me, "But your clothes have always been wearable," and I said, "Of course, and if clothes are not wearable, then they must have another name." I have never thought of any design that could not go on the human body and maybe be attractive. I mean, the premise of my design is its wearability. That's what makes the clothes modern and, I think, endure. Because I
make the models all but do handsprings in clothes to show that they're modern clothes; that they move; that they're not clothes that stand in a corner. I remember when I worked for other people, clothes could stand in a corner. Now they move out of the corner, and they're moving on with our time. But one must work for that freedom, and it's not given to you. You have to earn it. Sometimes I hear the word couture used by lesser designers with more money, and I remember my first impression (and I still have it) that the word couture is a term that has to be earned, not delegated, not chosen at random. It's something very special which requires great knowledge and, indeed, a creative image.

Q: Does "couture" imply that it must be made to order? For fittings?
A: No, not necessarily. I mean--from the French, "to sew," I think "couture" is the word "to sew," does not mean--but it's on the same scale, and the costly scale of a thing like couture clothes, because they're made so beautifully and precisely that couture is an endeavor of perfection that there is very little margin for error, and that comes through knowledge and creativity, because women who pay that amount for clothing know exactly what they're paying for. So, the precision of it is there.

Q: Would you go through the whole time frame of the putting together of a collection? When do you start? Let's
say the fall of 1989, which is going to be presented very soon, when would you have started to have developed your ideas?

A: The week that a collection is shown, the spring collection was shown, was the week I started the fall collection--

Q: And how did you go about it?

A: --because you must--In order for me to get the fabrics that I want, I must have lead time, because the factories in Europe handle special things for me--my own colors, my own textures, my own ideas. Particularly in Lyon, the French people are coming to me. It's the first time I've designed my own "laces." You have to have that much lead time in order to have your fabrics, and the fabrics are my collection. They actually dictate--Whatever they are is what the collection is going to be. If they're rigid, then you've got architectural--

Q: Of course, part of your selection of the "laces" determine whether they're going to be rigid or fluid. I mean, it's how you feel about the fabrics at any given time that makes you select them that particular year and not some other year, right?

A: Yes, but as I told the "lace" people the other day when they came in for my new "laces," they said, "Oh, from Europe we're getting to have orders for stiffer laces." Well, I
dismissed Europe a decade or two decades ago from my life, and I do my own thing--

Q: You don't go to Europe anymore for fabric?
A: Sorry?
Q: You don't go to Europe anymore for fabric?
A: Oh, yes, but I mean, Paris and the influence of the couture; of what clothes are in Europe--
Q: No, you said you "dismissed" Paris--Europe.
A: Well, I mean in the sense of inspiration, such as the collections and adapting--Whatever they're doing should be done here. I couldn't care less. I think Europe has the least comprehension of modern clothes of probably any continent in the world.

But, no, the fabrics--and they were saying to me, "Oh, in Europe they want stiffer laces. But I have learned that it doesn't matter, and you can have fabrics, but what really makes them wonderful is often mixing the soft with the hard. So, as I replied to them, you must have both. Why should laces be stiff one season or soft another? It's ridiculous. I mean, something "out" and "in" is about them, so, I don't like fashion in that manner that "stiff laces are in." They're always "in." What--They're always in. Soft laces are "in" if they're beautiful.

Q: How do you feel about colors this coming season?
A: I make my own colors. When I do look to Europe (and I
must look to other people) and fabrics, to sometimes know what not to do, even, or to judge my own work, is that I usually have a palette of color that's all my own. When you get into expensive clothes you can do that. That is a great advantage because everyone—all the fabric people are pushing brown or something and I may want orange, and I can do that, and they'll work with me with small yardage.

Q: So you've got the ideal situation, because designers here have always complained terribly that they could not use European fabric because they could not get small quantities.

A: Well, I have earned that credibility. I have taken from a lot of the factories and I go right into them and they listen to me and I do my own prints. The collection starts—Someone said, "How do you get your ideas for a collection?" Well, you have it. You've got your—The very thing that makes the collection, before I even start it, before I start to sketch, I know what I will be working on.

Q: I noticed in one of the articles that you are friendly with and close to Suzy Gandini, and years ago, when I used to go to Italy all the time, she and I were very good friends. We survived a period in her life when she was divorcing, and she was really very upset. I remember it so well. She was really a bright lady.

A: And still is.

Q: Yes.
A: I'm working a lot in Lyon, maybe more in France than in Italy. Just wonderful.
Q: And in Lyon, do they still work in silks or a melange of silk?
A: No. No, the great companies are still there. They may have new management and new owners, but they are there, still doing exquisite things. But the exciting things for me is doing laces, which I consider actually one of the most modern fabrics there is. They always ask me, "Why do you think lace is modern?" because it's one of the oldest--Well, it's probably one of the oldest because it works. You don't have to press it generally, it folds up, it has all the qualities of modern jersey or whatever it is. It's not as fragile, though
Q: Just think of Balenciaga and brown lace dresses all those years. Extraordinary.

Anyway, you start with the fabrics, and then having selected your fabrics, while you wait for your samples to arrive, you start to think about the collection, right? In what terms?
A: When I start a collection it's mostly in shape, cut, form, proportion. It's a funny experience--This season, at this point, six weeks from the collection opening--In November, after the last collection, I went to Turkey, which I've never been to in my life, and I went expecting to see
Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, you know; the magical part of Turkey that I guess I had seen on film, or even as a child. I perceived myself in my own manner, and I went and I was very disillusioned, and it makes me realize too there's perceptions we have too long about certain things. But I felt that there is a kind of certain ornamentation that was exotic--not Turkish--but exotic because of Turkey, which is not unlike that of anything else--glaring things. Then I went and I was just totally turned off. Then I began to think well maybe what I really like is--When I think of ornamentation, when the Moorish culture was at its highest, the Alhambra and the graphics of that. That always appeals to me, anything black and white, and the graphics anyway. Then I came back and I felt bad, and then you get so to thinking about things you finally get to a point that I really don't want any of that; that's not really what I'm thinking, and I'm not sure it's so. So then the sifting and the analysis starts, over again. It's constantly going on, and on. Anything very modern--and I can only say at this point it's like a new way of layering things. The two things are cut alike, but their "links" are totally diverse.

Q: Have you ever read a book called *The Towers of Trabizond*?
A: No.

Q: It's one of the most extraordinary books about Turkey
that I've ever read.

A: Is it?

Q: Yes, and I think the philosophy within it might very well be of interest to you. If I can ever find it I'll get you a copy. Wonderful book.

Anyway. I'm sorry. You were talking about layering. That's an interesting idea.

Q: There's two things--I had done some layering, which was wonderful, in the '70s, in which--

That was just wonderful but because I always have geometry in mind when I design, or even if I don't something comes out about it, and it's beginning to get very angular and very sort of strict, and two years ago I did a collection which was inspired by The Name of the Rose by Sean Connery and the austerity of the Jesuit monks and the black, mystical part of it, and it was a wonderful collection--in the sense that I was very pleased with it--and the press was as well, and then--It still missed it though but it's much more modern than that collection was in the--but shrouded in something that is sort of the unknown; of what you see is not necessarily what it is. There's still tricks of geometry to the eye that you cannot pinpoint exactly what's going on or what "keeps the clothing" or where it comes from. Maybe the petticoat--What is under something becomes the most ornate part of it, and
it is seen at a glance. I have one suit that just--I take roses, I have like a bouquet of roses around the midriff on the very naked tie with the bow, and then I thought, well, roses? Then I had gone to Honolulu for Christmas and I saw wreaths of protea--Do you know--?

Q: No. I don't know how to spell it either. Would you spell it?

A: P-r-o-t-e-a.

Q: Thank you.

A: They are they are the conical, exotic stalk-like things that come from Africa.

Q: Oh? How did they get to Honolulu?

A: What?

Q: How did they get to Honolulu?

A: By air, I guess. Anyway, on the cover of Honolulu Magazine was a wreath and these protea, and I had never seen such exotic colors in my life, such subtle--But anyway, I colored the Victorian roses in African colors and it's working, and on black, and it's that strange--When people look at it it's going to be familiar, because the form of the rose is familiar, but then the color of the roses are from Africa, and so represents my whole way of thinking and what's going on in the world today; this cross-fertilization, hopefully, of cultures in one world, and one world commerce. And it worked. I was just amazed, so--
I remember someone told me once that--I told them that a uniform would come from--and they said to me, "What will the designer do when the uniform arrives?" And I did say, "You simply recolor it." They design it and we color it and make it different, and I believe that. There's this shift in color from the rose to totally some exotic culture, sort of.

Q: Okay. So now you've gotten your fabric and you've gotten your concept. Then what happens?

A: Well, the long process of executing it and perfecting it.

Q: Do you start with sketches?

A: Hieroglyphics.

Q: Hieroglyphics, okay.

A: Not sketches. I don't have the patience for that.

Q: Do you have assistants who understand your hieroglyphics?

A: They're very good, yes. My draper understands them in a second, and I have some very talented students who are students who sketch--

Q: Students from Parsons or--?

A: All over. Europe, Parsons, FIT, because I have 28 licensees now.

Q: Oh, really? The students must be thrilled.

A: Yes.

Q: Where can you accommodate 28 people?
A: No, 28 licensees, which doesn't mean--
Q: Oh, oh, licensees. I'm sorry. Okay, right.
A: Each one. There are only about six in the whole group.
Q: So you supervise your licensees' designs directly?
A: Well, you try. I have Madeleine Fleischman, who's the head of my firm--the business--and who polices things. It's very important, because when I first started, my business manager was signing me up with people just for money, to gain, without quality control, so I had to go through the process of getting rid of those and trying to get into new ones where you could control it. It's a tough job.
Q: I'll bet.
A: It's like policing.
Q: Right. But anyway, there you were, doing your collection, and you have assistants who execute your hieroglyphics. At one point do you begin to work with a model?
A: Oh, the first day. The fabrics--
Q: The first day. But you don't--Do you drape on the model?
A: Very often.
Q: Oh, yes?
A: Some of my best clothes have happened--That I like the best. I don't--
Q: Because Pauline Trigere does most of--
A: Well, I don't have the patience to--I just see the way the fabric falls and what it's telling me to do, then I take a dummy, which sticking a pin into is less painful than my house model, and start that way. And I've learned to work with tape a lot now, particularly in architectural things, of taping on the body or certain parts of the body, that I've--of being exposed that I've never exposed before, this area which is very sensual--

Q: Upper hip?
A: Yes. And the thigh, and I've never worked in that area, and it's interesting. But I do it with tape and outlining. I even use polaroids now--

Q: Oh?
A: --and then that is polaroid and given to my drape assistant, so that--

Q: Who cuts and drapes.
A: It's there. Yes. It's recorded and documented--

Q: Great.
A: --so if any moment you go to lose it, you've got a point of reference.

Q: So there you are, cutting and draping--or there is somebody cutting and draping. Then, when it's close to being finished you have your first fitting? Is that--?
A: No, when it's very crude. Fittings are like three and four sometimes, then they're pulled out if they get too
tedious and I'm not working enough. I like to see crude--No, no, not one stitch is made until I've fitted, until I know it's going to work, you know, on a body--The fabric, that's the big test. An effect, an idea, then detail it--

Q: Do you do all this with one model only?
A: Yes.
Q: Yes?
A: Yes, one model.
Q: That must take a long time.
A: It's--Yes--It's tedious.
Q: You aim for how big a collection? How many pieces?
A: Usually 125.
Q: Oh, my.
A: I usually make 125 and we show about 90. I edit my own collection.
Q: And do you save one of everything? Because it seems to me that that show you had at the National Academy must have had a tremendous number of samples that were saved--

A: I did not have any of my clothes, hardly, because when Leo Orlandi was my partner, everything was sold for $50. He would not have any samples in the house, get rid of it.
Q: So you did not have your own museum, so to speak?
A: No, Oh, I only began to save clothes when I bought him out.
Q: Because, again, to use Pauline as an example, she saves
one of everything.
A: That's wonderful. St. Laurent does that.
Q: Yes. Right.
A: But he didn't want to. Maybe he was right. But--
Q: So you had to start redoing everything? Did you have the sketches?
A: I had to--No, I didn't redo any of it. I had my sketches, but we began to call women all over America. And I had given some--The Met had 35, and a lot of people I knew had clothes. So, whatever the clothes were, apart from the '80s, when I was in business, came from customers, who want them all back.

It's just--There's one dress too, I loved. It was a black pique, it's one of my favorite dresses of all time. A woman in Cincinnati has it, and it was in the show and it was done from the awnings in Venice that I'd loved so. The hemline, which is so--
Q: Scalloped?
A: Yes. The neckline was made I wanted. Anyway, I just adored the dress, and that woman said I could borrow it but she had to have it back. I have offered her any amount of money, I will make her anything, she will not part with that dress. So I have said, well, if anything ever happened, would you give it to the Met or someone? Because it was just perfect. Exactly what I think I meant to do all my life in
clothing.

And I liked the football jerseys--

Q: I remember those so well. Bill Shidleski at Lord & Taylor did those
A: And that was--And I knew right then, and I was saying that casual clothes were in the mode, it was going to happen. That was when I did the grey flannels with the It is menswear going into the mode, it's all happening, and this time I probably have more of it. I did the checks besides. It was meant as a social commentary.
Q: Yes, yes.
A: Clothes would get more sporty, more casual.
Q: It certainly made a sensational impression, really. I, for one, have never forgotten it and it was a long time ago.
A: Sixty-eight.
Q: That's a long time.
A: So, it's so funny, that story. There was a woman in Jersey who found out, through someone else that had one of those football jerseys, so we got her name and called her and we asked could we borrow it for the retrospective and she said, "Yes, I've got to have it back because our daughter adores it, but most of all my husband adores it. Every Rose Bowl game he makes me wear that dress."
Q: Oh, my heavens.
A: Funny, isn't it?
Q: Isn't that funny? Yes, indeed.
A: In London--
Q: Maybe it is. So, anyway, there you are now, getting there, you are approaching showing time and you have your clothes all finished, right?
A: Some.
Q: And then do you--
A: Thirty-five pieces, which were started in December.
Q: Well, do you have--When do you start to price them?
A: Oh, they've already started that.
Q: Oh, they have.
A: It's about finished. They go to production.
Q: I see. Immediately.
A: Immediately.
Q: Right. Yes.
A: We don't wait. Everything is priced. We have confidence in what we do, so the patterns start right away.
Q: When does your production person order the fabrics for stock?
A: They have already started on the first 35 pieces of
Q: Your showing is going to be when?
A: In April.
Q: In April.
A: But before the buyers went to Europe they came in and wrote.
Q: Well, they had previous--Because obviously you were not all ready, I mean, the collection is--
A: No, 35 pieces, my first 35, to see what they liked and just--and some of it's already gone
Q: So that you will be, by the time you open you probably will have the bulk of your things priced--I mean, you have to have the bulk of them priced--
A: Oh, you have to.
Q: Sure. Because when the showings take place you have your writing. Yes.
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