For the Oral History Collection

of the

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

an interview with

LIZ CLAIBORNE

Interviewed by:

Mildred Finger

July 10 & 17, 1990
Q: For the Oral History Collection of the Fashion Institute of Technology, relating the development of the fashion industry, this will be an interview with Liz Claiborne. The date is July 10, 1990; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

I think the one question I have in my head--and have had since I read all about you--is how, with your kind of innate abilities, you were able to sit quietly on a job for 16 years working for the Pomerantzes.

A: It was the Schwartzes.

Q: I beg your pardon. It was the Schwartzes, yes. Even moreso, then.

A: Well, I didn't work directly for Dave Schwartz. When I met him, I realized I never could have worked for Dave. What was important to me was really two things. Obviously, what I was designing, but the honesty of the product and the taste level of the product. The second important thing was the atmosphere in which I worked. That's why I say I never could have worked directly for Dave, for, even though I admired him and he owned the company, he was not my boss. The man I went to work for was a very nice gentleman and the atmosphere at "Youth Guild" was always, I would say, a very pleasant atmosphere. But also, there was a taste level. We didn't do things just because it was a fad, or because something was "in." We always stuck to what we thought was
good taste, popularly priced, and appealing to a large audience. But, nevertheless, not even what Dave Schwartz's line was. It wasn't as broad as that. It was a much smaller company and I needed the work also, very honestly.

Q: I think what I meant, more, was that you were there for 16 years, which is a long time, and yet you had inside you all of the abilities to create the kind of business that you did, together with your husband, but you obviously had an enormous amount of knowledge of the business areas. My question, I guess, is really, how you could limit yourself to the kind of work you did—which is perfectly desirable work.

A: Well, you know, it's sometimes easier to limit yourself. When people suggested to me that I should perhaps think of going into my own business, the idea frightened me a little bit, because, as you say, you may think that you "have it," but if you are limited, and if you have to design within a framework and you've mastered that, you feel pretty safe and secure doing it. If, suddenly, that framework is opened up completely, you have to prove yourself. So that, as a woman, with a family--with children, always rushing but needing the job because we both had previous marriages so we were really supporting two families--it was easier to go along, designing within this tight framework than having to prove myself and perhaps fail. So that in a way it was no
coincidence that we went into business much, much later, when I was—what? Forty-eight? Yes, I was 48. My son was then 21 years old. He was the youngest, and I felt at that point I could take the chance; that if we went broke it was okay. He was old enough, he could manage on his own.

Q: Well, that's very interesting. I hadn't thought of that as the explanation. I just was enormously curious to know how you could restrain all the abilities locked up inside up while just continuing to design for one small firm.

Now, I guess, we might just as well go back to your origins, since that's usually a good place to start. I know, of course, that you were born in Brussels and that you were there through your early childhood. So, would you take up the story at the point where you were getting ready to leave Brussels? Unless there are things that you think about that experience that are useful.

A: No, except that I always knew I wanted to be involved with clothes and with drawing at a very, very early age. I didn't know what it meant being a designer at that time, but I learned to sew from my mother and I took all the art courses I could, and I knew somehow I wanted to combine them. As I got older it became obvious to me that it was being in fashion and trying to be a designer.

Q: None of your schooling was.

A: No. Because I had a very old-fashioned, authoritarian
father who didn't believe that girls should work. He thought
I could be a painter and, therefore, pushed that side of my
education, and I bided my time until I was 21, because, as
he put it, as long as he's paying the bills, I do what he
says. But, I was 21, and luckily we were coming back to this
country on a visit and going through New York, as we
normally did, on a boat, with the car, and we were supposed
to drive back to New Orleans, which was really their home
and where all the rest of the family was. I knew this was my
one and only chance. I got out of the car--Well, first I
just announced from the back seat of the car that I was not
going to continue to New Orleans, I was going to stay in New
York. I sort of expected an explosion, but not at all. He
stopped the car, got out, got me my suitcase from the
trunk--

Q: Did you have any money?
A: No. He got in his pocket and handed me $50 and said,
"Goodbye." It's not quite that simple, because his mother--
my grandmother--was visiting New York and she had really
been in cahoots with me. She encouraged me to leave. She
said, "You've got to leave your father and do what you want
to do," (she was in a way a women's lib person way back
then) and said, "If you're going through New York in August
I'll be in New York, you can stay with me." So I stayed on a
cot in her place and pounded the pavements.
Q: Great.
A: Finally I got a job through Harper's Bazaar, because I had won a national contest and that gave me an entree. Quite soon, within days, I connected with Tina Leser, who was now a sportswear designer--
Q: How do you spell "Leser?" It's been misspelled, I think, in your reports and the stories about you. I always spelled it with one "s."
A: You are correct. A lot of people spelled it with two, but you are correct. It's L-e-s-e-r. And that was a wonderful experience. I mean, it was a wonderful experience because I didn't know anything about the business, but I think I was very lucky to have her as the first designer that I worked for, because she was very untraditional. She had all kinds of principles, however, about how you construct clothes, how you put clothes together. She would never allow a facing, she would never allow all kinds of things--interlinings, that we use in tailored clothes; she believed that everything should just be one layer of fabric and would have her own method of finishing things off.

And I did everything. You know. Girl Friday, answered the phones, sketched, sewed, modeled. I was thrown into the showroom to model bathing suits, of all things, which sort of took me aback. But, from there I went to work for several other designers and I knew that I had an awful lot to learn
because I had never gone to design school, and I felt the best way of learning was to work for different designers. I wanted to work for Claire McCardell and I tried every way to get in. They gave me lots of interviews, I lost weight to be a model, I did everything and I was always turned down. But, I did manage to work for several other designers and formed an idea of--

Q: You worked for Ben Reig, I thought.
A: I worked for Ben--

Q: That was interesting to me, because that was just totally out of the--

A: Well, it was interesting and I went there intentionally because I thought I'd like to find out about real couture clothes and whether that appeals to me or not, and I realized, after working there as a sketcher--a very lowly sketcher--that that was not for me. It just wasn't. I liked Omar Kiam, a designer I worked for. I thought he was extremely talented and, again, had principles about things. He would never put a slit in the back of a skirt, for instance, because he thought it was kind of sexy the way a skirt would ride up if you didn't have a slit. Those kinds of things always impressed me along the way. And I designed jewelry for him; he finally let me do that aspect. But, I realized that was not the kind of clothes I wanted to do. I wanted to do clothes that I could wear myself, that I could
allow myself. Very early on that began to formulate in my head; that you didn't have to spend—in those days, a Ben Rige suit was close to $300, and that's back in the early '50s.

Q: Yes. And, of course, they were very conservative, weren't they, in their look? There wasn't anything dramatic about them.

A: I suppose so, but he was—Kiam did the more advanced line and he had another designer who did the more conservative things. Kiam was very into the new look—a very nipped waist, padded hips—just the opposite from Tina.

Q: Yes, right. Did he also do the evening clothes for—?

A: No. He did do some evening clothes but—No. The only thing I ever got an opportunity to do was the jewelry, because I had spent hours sketching the jewelry and he liked the way I did it so he would give me projects to do. I even worked for him on a free-lance basis after I left Ben Reig, but just on jewelry.

Q: Where did you go from Reig?

A: I went to—Oh, my goodness. Now my memory is catching up with me. I went to work for a designer who was a free-lance designer. I'm embarrassed to say that right now his name escapes me, but he had several jobs, one of which was a Duchess Royal, which was a really old suit house.

Q: Indeed, yes.
A: I hated it. I didn't work for him there, I worked for him at his other job, which was a sportswear house, and I can't even remember the name of that house.

Q: I can't help you with that, because I haven't seen it mentioned.

A: They were quite well known at the time. Very classic, New England type of merchandise, but the reason I took that job was because, knowing that he had three jobs he would not be spending all his time there, and he gave me much more responsibility. I was responsible for putting things into work, for buying all the trims, and I also had the responsibility (not always fun) of designing all the leftover fabrics. You know, the fabrics that you don't sell the first year.

He was a southerner, so that he was a lot of fun to work for and understood my family situation quite well, and he became a very good friend, long after I left.

Q: He's beginning to sound familiar. His name may come to me if it doesn't come to you.

A: I don't know. He was never well known and died, oh, maybe three years after I started working for him.

Q: Well, then, what was your next step?

A: My next step was a fairly lucky one. After he--They needed a second designer at a firm called Juniorite, which was part of a large conglomerate but it was the junior
sportswear line, which was exactly what I wanted to do. The disadvantage of being a second designer is that I was given a little room about the size of here to the desk, with a telephone, a sewing machine, a cutting table, and they did give me one sample and I was supposed to do everything else. Q: You made the patterns and--?
A: I had lied when I took the job. I said I knew how to make patterns and cut and all of that—which I really didn't know how to do even though I had taken some pattern-making classes just to understand construction. I really was not equipped for the job. However, I had a very good friend who used to work in the same place, the sportswear house that I had mentioned before, and I spent all my time with the phone crooked on one shoulder doing exactly what she told me to do, on the telephone. I would say, "I want to do X,Y,Z," and she would say, "Okay, Liz, get out the fabric, fold it in half, do this, do that, drape it on the form," and I really learned by listening and having to do it. Very luckily, in my first little group of sportswear corduroy group (I don't remember it very well), was very successful so I was moved as number one designer.

Q: The firm was Junior Rite? How do you spell that?
A: Junior r-i-t-e. All one word. It was part of the S.N. Elowsky firm, and they had a children's-wear firm and several others. It was a big company and volume priced.
But, I had also lied about something else when I took the job, in that I was pregnant and I didn't tell them. And even though I worked until the last day I only took two weeks off, something that I have not advised anybody else to do. When I came back the firm was full. In other words, they had hired another designer. They didn't bother to tell me so; I just walked in and here was this young man. So, I was out of a job and that was out of a job because it was the first time I had been fired, and to be fired right after you've had a baby is not the most pleasant thing. But, again, I needed the money because--

Q: Well, at least you knew the reason for it.
A: Yes. Oh, yes, I understood but I didn't like it. And thank goodness they had had some publicity on some clothes that I had designed—a full-page New York Times ad—so I spent the next few days reading Women's Wear, all the want ads for designers, and had gotten many, many copies of this ad, folded up the copies of the ad, and answered all these prospective jobs. One of them was with a dress company called The Rhea Manufacturing Company of Milwaukee, but they had a design one here in New York.

Q: How do you spell Rhea?
A: R-h-e-a. My present husband is the one who then hired me, because that's just what he wanted; he wanted a sportswear designer doing these junior, inexpensive dresses.
That job did not last terribly long because, first of all, I really didn't like what I was doing that much. But second of all, he and I fell in love and before we knew it we were both separated from our spouses and the company really didn't like an affair going on under their noses.

Q: Yes, sure.
A: So, from then on in I hopped to a few other jobs, small designing jobs. I was a little shaken at that point because it was the first time I had really run into problems. I had been very successful before. Now I was running into problems. Here I was leaving a husband with a six-month-old baby, etc., etc. But, I came through it fine. However, I got classified as a dress designer as a result of that job and spent the next five years designing dumb—what I would call dumb dresses at another firm whose name escapes me—Dan Keller.

Q: Not a big one.
A: From then on in I was typed as a good, stable dress designer. "You can count on her and she does dresses that sell," and you know what kind of stamp they put on designers. Again, I had five years of quite successful business. I was fired on a Friday afternoon and that's when I sort of gritted my teeth and thought, "This is terrible, the way designers are treated. We have no security whatsoever. We get paid a lot, but if they can call you in
after five years, on a Friday afternoon, and say 'Pick up your check at the desk, we're closing the design room because we're trying to save some money.' I made up my mind that I'd have to be a little bit more careful and try to do something so that the security was a little bit more stable.

But, from there I went to Youth Guild, which was a junior dress house.

Q: Now, this was the Lefkowitzes, right?
A: Well, it was before the Lefkowitzes. My memory is really failing; I'm getting old I'm afraid. But the man I worked for I liked very much and that's one of the reasons I stayed at the Youth Guild so long. Again, I was hired as the second designer. They kept assuring me that, bide my time, bide my time, I'll be the first designer, and sure enough within six months I was the first designer, but at first my designing room was down on 14th Street in a terrible building, along with part of the factory and what not. It's terrible, I'll have to ask Arthur his name, but I admired him very much. He had a lot of taste and he was a Class A man in this business. But then he had a fright. He thought he had throat cancer, and from one day to the next he was no longer there. He just left the business and thought, "If I've only got a few years to live I'm not getting mixed up in that." By this time Dave Schwartz already owned the business, but he never set foot in the place as long as
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what's-his-name was there. But then Richard, who was really running things, corporately, appointed Arthur Lefkowitz as president.

We got along fine in those days. As you say, for 16 years. I tried to turn the business toward sportswear, was somewhat successful, and did successfully change it from juniors to misses sizes, because I think, as a designer, as you grow up, your tastes change and you should do what you feel for best, and I no longer had a really junior taste, and the junior business was changing.

Then--Shall I just rattle on?

Q: Sure.

A: What happened then was Richard Schwartz really decided to close Youth Guild. It was a sort of nuisance division. I think we had at one time done a volume of about $16 million; we were now down to about eight million, because the knitwear line, that had been extremely successful and had been the added volume, was now down. Trends were very, very different. Double knits were not as popular as they used to be. Everything was trending down and he really just wanted to get rid of it and concentrate on Act III and his big company. He offered it to Arthur Lefkowitz and myself. He said, "Why don't you two buy it? Both of you are so involved," and we spent a summer going over the books with Art, because obviously Art would have to be a part of it as
far as I was concerned, because he's the one with the business sense. He's the one who knows operations and how to put something together that would work. After a whole summer of going over the books and learning what was really going on (which was that the company was being milked, frankly), there was no way it could be a successful company in the way that it was being run, and to change it, we finally felt, would be difficult. Also, Richard changed his mind at the last minute. He got frightened that maybe he wouldn't be successful and we would always sort of be an anchor around his neck (have to come to him for help), and for other tax purposes decided to postpone selling it.

At that point I knew I knew that much about the business that I couldn't stay there.

Q: Incidentally, I don't know if it would be of interest to you to know it but Richard wouldn't mind my saying it and it's in print and you could read it--He said that that was a great big mistake that he made; letting you go, not having you buy the company. He was very clear about that.

A: I think he was advised by his tax lawyers--

Q: Could very well be.

A: --but that's what he said to us. He said both. He said both that he was afraid if we weren't successful (he knew neither of us had money) he would have to--we would be a burden; and, from the tax point of view, it was better to do
it a year later anyway. But I didn't know Richard well. Richard never stepped foot—He checked with Arthur on the numbers, but—Anyway, Art and I looked at each other and felt, you know, if we could we'd like to do it ourselves. I remember we had dinner with an aunt of mine a few nights later and we talked about things and over that weekend she called us and said, "If you are serious about going into business and you need financial help, we will help you," and that gave us the boost or the acceleration to try to do it. So then we begged and borrowed and scraped up every last penny that we had, tried different ways of going into business, going to the normal angels on Seventh Avenue, and as Art put it, they all understood what I was doing but they didn't understand what he was doing. They were used to backing designers, they were used to backing, particularly, designer-designers. They all wanted me to go into the designer business, and I said, "No, I want to be a notch under that. I want to be less expensive," and they really didn't understand that kind of business. So, with leaning on some of the business people that we knew—Art on his side, in the textile area and me other people that I knew in the business—we gathered up about $250,000 and launched the Liz Claiborne name, in very small quarters, doing everything ourselves. We hired—The first person we hired was my assistant pattern-maker, a sewing girl. A third person that
was finally hired was one sales person for the showroom. Because I was never a seller. I was always a behind-the-scenes person, very happy back in my design--

Q: Well, besides which no one person can possibly do both jobs, in a way.
A: However, one day, after we had opened the line and we were showing it to various stores--and Art and I had really made up the list of stores and divided the list and every afternoon we just hung on the phone--though my name was not known at all to the public, it was known, to a certain extent, in the trade and there were certain buyers who knew me, whom I'd worked with, so I was calling completely cold. We did get a fairly good response, but one day when she, that one sales person, was really tired from being on her feet for almost a week, she came behind the screen (because this was one big room divided into three areas--showroom, sample room, management, accounting, etc.--and said, "Liz, I'm going to sit down and have a sandwich, you get out there"), my first account was Nordstrom's.

Q: Not bad.
A: Quite an experience. It was my first sort of public confrontation in having to peddle my own wares.

Q: Were you dealing with a buyer or also with one of the Nordstrom's.
A: A buyer, but at Nordstrom's the buyers are very
powerful. From then on in it was--I got used to being a more public person. I always used to show the lines to our best accounts and worked with them and swallowed hard when they didn't like anything and learned how to do it.

Q: I'm sure when they didn't like anything it was very unusual, because that never--I would think not.
A: No, they had to be very honest and--

Q: Yes, but I mean to say, considering the way the business opened up, instantly, it doesn't sound as though there were not very many groups on which you did not earn their approval.

A: Oh, there were plenty. There were plenty, you know. You can tell, when you're showing the line--This is something I learned and I'm very grateful for all the experience of those first couple of years where we had to do everything ourselves, because I learned a tremendous amount, having to work with buyers. Sometimes I would say, "Why? Why don't you like this?," and they patiently explained to me that that color just doesn't sell; that you may like pea green but most women don't. Why don't knickers sell? Well, I mean, really. Where do you wear them, how do you wear them, and you have to worry about the leg gear, you have to worry about what accessories you're wearing. All these things I had never really known. It helped me.

Q: Did it ever get to the point where you talked not only
to buyers to also to sales staff?
A: Oh, yes. I mean, up until the last couple of years at Liz Claiborne, I always presented the line to the wholesalers and, again, it was a good exercise to do because, as I have told many young designers, you have to sell the line three times. First to your own sales force, then to the stores, and only the third time do you have a shot at your ultimate consumer. So, you have to learn to do those first two steps; otherwise, you're not going to get the clothes in the store.
Q: I know that you've always had very good relations with the sales people. I think—I'm not sure you realized, my question was, did you go into the stores to deal with retail customers?
A: Oh, yes. Almost--
Q: Because that's a very time-consuming thing, and yet--
A: It is a very time-consuming thing, but I used to plan two trips a year, two weeks each, for the spring line and for the fall line, and I began to enjoy it because, again, particularly in the early days when they had no idea who I was, on the floor, I could pretend just to be another sales girl and go into the fitting rooms and discover first hand why something didn't fit, why a woman put it on and didn't buy it. It was terrific. As I got to be known as a designer it was a different thing, because I couldn't be incognito,
learning first hand. It's a very different thing to have your own sales people tell you they didn't like the bottom of the pant or they don't like pleated pants or whatever, and seeing those same items come out of the fitting room time and time again, and then working with a customer, realizing and hearing right then and there why they don't like something.

I always wanted to design for women flattering clothes. If they felt they were unflattering, and I couldn't convince them I was right and they were wrong, then why do it? What's the point? I always got my kicks out of seeing the clothing being worn. That really gave me a thrill.

Q: Did you ever get involved, in those days, in dealing with your workers, with the union? With people involved in pricing garments?

A: Oh, pricing? That's a very much a part of the whole procedure, and to me was a very important part of the clothes themselves because, as I mentioned earlier, one of my principles was not to be too expensive; to really make clothes that I felt the average American woman could afford. The average busy American woman. So, pricing was almost done before we even designed the clothes. You would figure backwards how much you could spend for fabric. If it is going to be a long, full skirt and you're going to use four yards of fabric, you would have to work backwards and say,
"All right, the cost of my fabric will be X, then labor, then union percentages on top of that." I really didn't work with the union directly, but certainly with our production partner, worked together. And, how to economize. Not cut corners in quality, but how to economize if I really wanted to do X,Y,Z how could I bring it out at the price? Either give up some labor, detailing, or give up the quality of the fabric; or, make it in an entirely different fabric that was okay. I remember once having done a pleated skirt and sort of a midi-tunic top that I loved in a worsted crepe. But the pleated skirt was quite full and it priced out too expensively, and I kept hemming and hawing, "Oh, but I really love it, etc.," and our production partner said, "Well, if you love it so much why don't you make it in rayon crepe or something inexpensive?" And he was right and that's what I did, and it was very successful. So, then, before a line ever went to the sales people or to the showroom, we had several costing meetings, which is where you really itemize each garment and how much it costs, and I would go over the sheets, because I had learned by then what all the items were. I would say, "Well, why is the labor so high on this, and--" You know. We went over everything together, and after the costing meeting, knowing exactly what it's going to cost us to produce it and to sell it, with out markup (which was lower than the industry markup, because we ran a
very tight ship), then we would have a pricing meeting. You hang up a blouse. "Okay, this blouse has to--" We always talked in retail terms, and then we talked wholesale prices, because I wanted everybody to realize what the consumer has to pay for it, not what we could get the clothes for or what the stores were buying the clothes for.

Q: When you started a collection, where did you start? Color, fabric, look—what?
A: With me it was mostly color. Color was one of the most influential things that would start the germinating process. However, color is very attached to silhouette, because as the silhouettes change color is not always the same. In other words, back in the '60s, when we were all dressing in very skimpy little clothes, you could do brilliant colors because you had only about 19 inches of skirt. When you were doing long, ankle-length, easy clothes, somehow I can't see a bright green suit with a long swing skirt in apple green. So, colors have to adapt to silhouette. But I always believed that somehow I had to bring bright colors into the picture, even if the trend is toward more voluminous clothes (therefore more neutral colors), I would always bring bright colors in to the sweaters, the blouses, the accessory pieces.

Q: And how did you merchandise your collection?
A: We tried, always, to (and I don't know if I'm answering
your question, because everybody has a different idea of merchandising), but we tried to edit the line down to the bare bones. In other words nothing superfluous, so that a store theoretically should buy every piece.

Q: I think actually I meant something different. At what point, or, how did you decide that this season you were going to do seven groups including skirts, and three groups including pants? How did you decide what the emphases were going to be?

A: Well, you guessed. Your intuition told you. It depended on the time of the year, it depended on the fashion trends--I suppose those were the two most important things. There are certain times of the year (and this was also something I learned that I never knew) that pants sell better than skirts. If you get into the holiday season or the mid-winter season, as it actually is in the stores, pants will sell better. However, in the early fall and in the spring, normally, skirts will sell better. However, then, it also depends completely on what the fashion trends are, and I must admit that I always watched Paris and was always anxious to know what they were showing. I still consider Paris the leader in fashion. I think they design in almost a laboratory setting because the European clientele is much more fashion receptive and change receptive. But then you'd have to balance it. As we grew larger I found that it was no
longer that kind of a choice; it was a choice of whether you had two skirts and one pant, or two pants and one skirt. That we could fool around with fashion, but we always offered some of the basic, key elements. 

Q: And when it came to things like tops--the tops that went with the bottoms--did you decide ahead of time that there were going to be this many knits and that many worsteds?

A: Absolutely. First of all, we had a percentage (and this is something I got to hate), tops-to-bottoms ratio. It all became quite scientific. What is your top-to-bottom ratio, Liz? And we always--I mean, at one point we were doing three tops for every bottom, which is really about two-and-a-half, and sometimes even two. Again, another thing I learned is you really can't predict at all and it isn't a science, but you do use guide rules and if it is a very knit-oriented cycle, you would do more sweaters or more T-shirt type of things in the summer, and if it wasn't you still offered a sweater but you made more blouses. You just had to--You had to follow fashion to a certain extent because, after all, women want to be in fashion; they don't want to buy something they're going to feel is not right. They want to be in fashion; not the first one on the block with it, but they want to feel secure that they're dressed the way they should be dressed today, for this season, this summer. So
you have to swing a little. However, as the company became larger it also became a production. Again, I worked very closely with production and if you have made commitments to certain factories for producing X number of sweaters a year, and suddenly (and you do this almost a year in advance) the fashion trend is against sweaters or knitwear and toward wovens, you still have to balance it a little because you don't want to put your best factory out of work. It's just not—Not that we ever owned any of our "iron," as we put it. But, we worked very closely with manufacturers' factories in the Far East and—

Q: Who went to the Far East in your firm? Somebody else? Not Art?

A: Oh, yes. He used to go four times a year.

Q: Oh, he did.

A: I went three times, sometimes four times a year, and our manufacturing partner—One of the principles, when we went into business, was I will not go into business without a production person as a partner. I worked too long in the business not to realize that the production men were extremely important and I wanted that person to have as much interest in the business as we did. Because I always felt you could make beautiful samples and it doesn't mean a thing.

Q: What was the beginning of that period of traveling in
the Orient for you? At what point in--?
A: Probably a year after we went into business, and it was through, really, an acquaintance of ours in the textile business who said, "You know, you all should start thinking--"

[End of Side 1; begin Side 2]

Q: You were talking about fabrics from Hong Kong.
A: --and was very familiar with Hong Kong and China and Japan and just urged us that we should start thinking that way, gave us a couple of names of agents, and we did. The first year we dealt strictly through agents, but when I saw the samples of what could be made at what prices, I was amazed at the value, the quality of the stitching. Working in the U.S. is fine, but you are so limited in detailing and quality stitching, at a price--You can get anything done in the U.S. if you're willing to pay for it, but since I was always trying to get out a shirt in 100% cotton at $28 retail, or whatever it was in those days, it was difficult. I had to go with whatever pockets the factory wanted to put on, or whatever collar and stand they had the cutting equipment for. I couldn't make my changes, I had to go with a certain, buttoned-front. Whereas, in the Orient everything was hand-adjusted if not hand-made, and the stitching was
beautiful and the prices were fantastic. So, from a
designer's point of view, it was like opening up a whole new
area, but it did entail many, many trips and, again, I will
give Leonard Boxer, our production coordinator, the credit
for, when we decided to go on our own and not deal through
agents, he had dealt with the Orient before and knew how to
go about looking for factories and he had a very gentle
nature so he was perfect for working with the people we
ended up working with and formed wonderful relationships
that--

Q: Do you have any idea what percentage of merchandise is
made in the Orient now--?
A: Not today, Mildred, I really don't because it has been
shifting. It's been shifting to the Caribbean, to Central
America--

Q: To Rumania?
A: Not yet. I know they're on trips to Turkey, to Rumania
perhaps, but more in South America, and that we had already
started quite a bit--both in the Caribbean and Central
America--and in Brazil for knitwear for cotton T-shirt type
knitwear. But now it's a great deal more than that.

Q: Let's talk about 10 years ago. What was the percentage
of merchandise made off-shore, in the Orient, 10 years ago?
A: Ten years ago. Oh, Mildred, I would guess--and this is
only a guess because I was never allowed to quote numbers in
the company (I'm terrible with numbers), but it was, I would say, about 80% at one time.

Q: Yes, I've had a couple of manufacturers tell me it was also 100%.

A: No, but that's never been true because there were a lot of jackets, for instance, that were made--

Q: No, I don't mean for you, for them.

A: Oh, for them. Oh, sure. We always worked in Puerto Rico. We always had a relationship with a factory in Puerto Rico for sportswear.

Q: How about the Philippines?

A: Oh, yes. We have an office in the Philippines.

Q: Do you.

A: Yes. Oh, yes.

Q: And they don't make just nightgowns?

A: Oh, no. They make all--We made jeans there for a while. We made our children's wear, when we had a children's wear business. We made a lot of cotton in the Philippines, and there was a part of a sweater company that we worked with. It was really owned by Hong Kong people, but it was manufactured in the Philippines. And that's happening now. The Hong Kong manufacturers are going off shore, as they call it. They're starting plants in Panama, in this country, in Indonesia--

Q: In Mauritius.
A: In Mauritius. We're in Mauritius now. Everywhere. It's around the world.

Q: Yes, yes right. Now, as you mentioned your different divisions, as they opened up, you have several divisions in which the precise designing tends to overlap more than in something like the children's division. How did you handle those divisions?

A: With difficulty. Well, obviously, as the company grew and as we began to open divisions, I needed a lot more help. In the beginning--I think the first division we opened was the dress division, which I really dragged my feet on because I thought--We went into business--One of the reasons was so I could get away from designing dresses, and here we are, back again--However, I remember interviewing--This was one of the first designers specifically for a division, interviewing the gal who was going to do them, and she had the same kind of background as I had, except that she had never designed a dress before. She was strictly a sportswear designer. I thought, wonderful, we're going to get along just fine.

And that's the way it was in the beginning. But then when we got larger and got into divisions that obviously I didn't know that much about, such as children's wear, such as menswear, I felt it was important to get people who knew those businesses, and I would not back off but certainly
understand them when they insisted on doing certain things that I was a little bit dubious about. In menswear—I got along very well with the menswear designer, and even though we didn't agree at times, I could persuade him just so much and he would persuade me just so much, and we got along pretty well. It got a little rough toward the end, because it seemed to me I was just running around from one division to the other—

Q: Well, what happened with divisions that really did seem to overlap? Except perhaps in the different price points? How did you keep those collections apart?
A: Perhaps you're talking about the sportswear division.
Q: I'm talking about that which could resemble—where one division made merchandise not that different from the merchandise of a different division.
A: Well, we had—There were certain rules, but other than a few basic rules it had to do with whether they were carried in the same department. The three sportswear divisions, which traditionally were carried in the same departments in a department store, there were very strict rules about and I insisted on that, because I said, "You designers, you do LizWear, you do Sport, you do Collection, but you don't shop the stores as much as I do and there's no way we can have three divisions overlapping within one department."
Q: So that they did not buy fabrics from the same firm?

A: Oh, we bought fabrics from the same firm--

Q: But not the same fabrics.

A: But not the same fabric. For instance, only LizWear could do denim, even though during denim phases Sport would have loved to have done denim, and they did it once but it was just washed; it was dark denim, it was a different approach to denim so that was okay. There were certain things that each division had a right to claim as its own. However, with the dress division, which was not carried in the same department (it had an entirely different department, off on another floor), we really did not put down rules. When they started making cotton jumpsuits, I sort of raised my eyebrows but then realized if jumpsuits were that much in fashion they should be running their business as though they want to maximize every opportunity they can; let them make cotton jumpsuits, and they did. They made chambray dresses. LizWear made chambray dresses, but they were slightly different and carried in two different areas. Recently, when we opened the Liz & Company division, there was great fear that it would step on the toes--

Q: I don't know it, Liz & Company--

A: Well, it's one of the newest divisions and it's strictly knitwear. It's casual knitwear. We make casual knitwear--
Q: That could be acrylic or--
A: Anything. I mean, we push for natural fibres as much as possible, but blends of cotton and--But it's sweats, it's T-shirt dressing. The rule there is simply that it is casual knitwear, no wovens, and it's called Liz & Company and the original principle (and I think it is stuck to to this day) is that stores are not allowed to house it in the same department as the sportswear division. They must house it in another area of the store. But, very often we overlapped on fabrics menswear to women's wear. No problem there at all.
Q: Approximately how many people do you have on your design teams.
A: When I left there were something like 31 designers, which is a lot of designers to work with.
Q: Yes. Did that include people who worked with the licensees?
A: Yes, but at this point I think we have two licensees left. We had not been--or, the company (I've got to stop saying we) has not been successful with licensees. I think the reason is that it's not just design that makes the product--
Q: No, not at all.
A: --and that with the licensee you do not control the manufacturing, pricing and merchandising--Yes, you can control the merchandising pretty much but you can't control
the marketing end of it. So that three things that we control very closely, along with design, isn't possible to do with a licensee. In hosiery there is a licensee, and frankly there was an assistant designer who helped with that and worked with the hosiery designer from the company that we license with. We had a shoe licensee. I believe that's being taken in-house, as we call it, at this point. Before that goes into posterity I'd like to check where we stand on it, because they've been negotiating. Everybody knows about it, but it's not really for publication. Because, again, we've had difficulty, and I used to work with a designer myself, because I was very interested in shoes, and then found it a very frustrating experience because the marketing was not done the way we wanted it. The sourcing (in other words, where they manufactured the shoes) became a problem. I thought the fit was a problem. Overall quality, for the price, was a problem. It's difficult, when those are the key elements that make your product. It's not like a Bill Blass or an Oscar or a Calvin, where the design element is very, very important and the name, the prestigious name is very important. We are not a prestigious name, we are a household name. In doing market research, our customer always felt very comfortable with us. They felt that I was a person they could have in for coffee and chat with, and we promoted that image. We liked it, because that's what we were. So it
doesn't work in licensing in the same way.

Q: I don't agree with you.
A: You don't.
Q: No.
A: I know, a lot of people don't agree with me. But for whatever reasons, and maybe it's that we don't know how to work with licensees--

Q: Yes. I think your demands have to be extremely high and they have to be enforced.
A: I don't think we were. We never had a proper setup for it. When I say we worked--we ran a tight ship; we've always had everybody doing double duty. Our licensee in Japan, even though it went on for close to eight years, was not a success because we did not produce it and I was not willing to go over there and oversee it.

Q: I can understand that.
A: So, that has been brought--I think you're probably right in that we don't put enough emphasis on it. We find it easier to take it over and do it ourselves, as we did with the fragrance.

Q: Are you doing the fragrances now?
A: Oh, for at least--what? Two or three years now. First we went into a joint venture with Avon, which was good in the beginning because we learned about the fragrance business. And, we did hire some very good people because we
all admitted this is an area we know nothing about. We can't do double duty here, so we hired some good people and they worked with Avon, but after Avon bought--Oh, you know--Mr. Hayman's first trademark--
Q: Giorgio.
A: Giorgio. That really was against the contract. We were supposed to be the only retailer. We parted company and we've got a flourishing fragrance business. Now we're coming out with a second women's fragrance, we have come out with a men's fragrance--
Q: Yes, because you may not have the prestige, as you say, but you have the name. You do have a name.
A: Oh, I know that we're well known--
Q: And the name stands for quality.
A: Yes.
Q: So that's that's fine--
A: It used to bother me a great deal when I didn't think things were quite up to our standard.
Q: This will be the second interview with Liz Claiborne. The date is July 17, 1990; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

Liz, we talked about the years during which your business developed, and got to the point where you finally retired from it. Tell me, what was it that precipitated your retirement, at still a very young age.

Q: Well, not so young, Mildred. I'm 61, so I retired when I was 60, and Art is two years older. But it was really something we knew we wanted to do for a number of years. We had really become more and more interested in nature, as a result of, I think particularly, traveling to Africa.

Q: When did you go to Africa?

A: It must have been three years ago; therefore, it would be in 1987 that we went for the first time (we've been there three times). But I think that awakened or crystallized a feeling that we had about the environment and conservation. We had already started in small ways, even out at the beach where we have a house, by buying property, planting trees, donating it back to the village with the agreement that they would never build on it, trying to preserve some land around the bay, which was really a bird sanctuary.

Q: Was this in the Hamptons?
A: No, this is in Fire Island, where we had summered for many, many years and still love it and still go out there. But we had started doing little things like that. Then, that trip to Africa really did crystallize the fact that we both were terribly interested in the environment. I love animals and got very involved with African elephant and trying to save the African elephant from extinction, met some fascinating people, some scientists who worked in the field, and we realized that this is what we were interested in doing. Somehow, when you're working in business, you just don't have the time to concentrate on it.

We were also very lucky, or—I don't know how you want to put it, it wasn't all lucky. But, the business had been very good to us so that we had made quite a lot of money. We started our own foundation, there was the Liz Claiborne, Inc. foundation—

Q: What was the volume at the time—
A: --that we retired? It had just hit $1 billion.
Q: That was in eight years?
A: No, no, no. That was in 13 years, really. I mean, it still was an extraordinary number—
Q: Absolutely extraordinary. No question.
A: --from my point of view. But, as I say—
Q: From the industry's point of view.
A: Yes, but to me, it was never a realistic number. It was
something that I just couldn't quite grasp. It had gotten too big. I knew we were big.

Anyway, for several years we realized that what we wanted to concentrate were different things, different values. We also, both of us, wanted to travel a great deal. There was so much to see in the world that we haven't seen, and, again, we wanted to retire before we were too old to be able to do some of the things we wanted to do. So, we started preparing, really, back in '78. Excuse me, '87. A decade later. We started preparing what we considered was the best possible management for the company, because Art's ambition always was that we not only started this company in a small way, it became successful, but then to be able to leave the company that would perpetuate itself.

So, it wasn't a sudden decision. We even attempted to take a lot more time off. That really didn't work, Mildred. We started working one month on and one month off, and we found it just couldn't work because people knew we were coming back in a month, yet we weren't there to solve day-to-day problems. So, we ended that experiment in the fall of '78.

Q: The fall of '87.
A: The fall of '87, excuse me.
Q: Was there ever any thought at any time of any of your children coming into the business?
A: No, none of them were interested. Both our sons worked very temporarily, almost as summer job kinds of things, in the warehouse, but they really weren't interested in the business. Also, since we were four partners, we had agreed among ourselves that we really could not, as a company, absorb everybody's children. The experiments that were done--One of our partners did bring in his sons, and it was not a successful venture because it wasn't as though and his children could come in. But, frankly, our children weren't interested. As a matter of fact I think--

Q: What do your children do now?
A: Art's son, who's the oldest, is a publisher. He started--

Q: How old is he?
A: He's thirty--Well, he will be 38.
Q: And he's publishing.
A: And he's publishing. He started as a poet and then started publishing a poet's magazine. From there he started publishing alternative literature, and now he's got a full blown press that is becoming very successful.

Q: What's the name of his press?
Q: And where is it located?
A: Here in New York. And, as I say, getting quite well known and quite successful. Nancy, Art's daughter, is a
photographer in Chicago, and Alex, my son, is a musician. So that all of them sort of chose alternative careers and ran as far away from typical business as they could. But, they're great people, so we're very happy.

But, anyway, we really wanted to devote our lives to different values and that's what we decided to do.

Q: And what have you set up? How does it work?
A: Well, this office, for instance, Mildred, is really to house our foundation. This has nothing to do with the Liz Claiborne foundation. The company has a foundation too--

Q: Oh, now what does that--?
A: It's Liz Claiborne, Inc. Foundation, whereas this foundation is the Art Ortenberg and Liz Claiborne Foundation. Art, who really enjoys the managing of business, is on several boards. He's on the board of the Wilderness Society, World Wildlife Fund, was on the board of the Nature Conservancy. We both are considered senior conservationists for WCI, which is the international wing of the New York Zoological Society. So that we're kept very busy reading all material that comes to us, working on projects with these various organizations. Small projects, what we call "bottoms up" projects; in other words, projects that work with the people, whether it be in a third world country or whether it be in the United States. We're involved in any number of projects, which takes time because also you want to visit
the projects. We have small projects going in East Africa, we have projects East Africa and Montana and the greater Yellowstone area, we have started the initial funding for what might be the world's largest wilderness area in Tibet. So, it's a very, very exciting thing to be involved with.

Q: I'd like to hear much more about that, but before I do that, what do you do in the Liz Claiborne Foundation?

A: The Liz Claiborne Foundation really is the company foundation and has many projects, some which we helped to channel the funds to, supporting the nature programs on Channel 13. But, they are also involved in all kinds of other charitable projects, whether they be hospital support or day care center support in New Jersey around where our warehouse is--

Q: Have I heard the name associated with the School for Art and Designing?

A: Well, I worked down at that school when I was at Liz Claiborne. I devoted some time to it and got the rest of the company involved and now it's, again, a very exciting project. The company has adopted several of the students, worked with the students individually (that is, executives from the company each adopted a student), the designers from menswear and women's wear go down to the school and work with the students, etc., and this was just something that I started while I was still at Liz, Inc., because it's really
an inner-city school. It's not like Parsons, who gets all the top designers to come and lecture. This is an inner-city high school.

Q: It's funny. I'm a consultant for the National Executive Service Corp, and I just went to my first meeting a couple of weeks ago and I did hear the name, so--Okay. Now, to get back to the Art Ortenberg and Liz Claiborne Foundation. That is something which, I assume will take a lot of your time.

A: Yes, that was, as I say, the reason for setting up this office, really, and one of the reasons for leaving the company. And it's just very, very exciting work and we're both learning a tremendous amount while being involved with it.

Q: The totality of the foundation is going to be--is going to have to commission the conservation of land and animals?

A: Yes, but also, when I say 'bottoms up' projects, we also feel very strongly that you cannot just conserve the land and the animals without working with the peoples who live around who live on the land. Poverty has a great deal to do with the use of land, and very often with the destruction of the rain forest or the overuse of the land, or the poaching of animals. So that the only way we think (and I think conservationists and environmentalists in general are coming to this conclusion) -- you must work with the people, so that it is also involved in alleviating the
hardships of, really, the poverty-stricken areas around the world.
Q: Well, that certainly sounds like a very broad kind of venture.
A: But it's main focus is environmental. It's just that you can't do one without the other, and--In other words, one of the small projects we're involved with in East Africa is to help support a small school, really in the middle of nowhere, that has mostly Masai children. But they have nothing. They have no money whatsoever. As we helped a baboon research project and translocation project, we became involved in this little school that is right in the middle of this area and, hopefully, to help to educate the population.
Q: It's interesting: You always come back to education.
A: Yes, of course you do. It's something I think this whole country could concentrate a little bit more on.
Q: In the time that you have been devoting completely to the foundation, what have your activities been? What have you done?
A: Well, as I mentioned, so far as the actual foundation is concerned, it is to learn about, review and then support certain projects around the world. We have gotten two outside directors, one a naturalist and an author and the other a scientist who lives in Nairobi most of the time, and
Kenya. But, if you mean from a day-to-day point of view--

Q: No, I meant--Have you gone to countries, have you--

A: Oh, yes. We traveled back to Africa many times. We traveled to South America and stopped on the Amazon to see a project that we were helping to support there. We hope perhaps next May to be going to the Himalayas and to this area in Tibet. But in the meantime we're also going to New Zealand and Australia, not that we have any projects working there but, we're both, as I mentioned, very interested in traveling and seeing this whole world. There's so much out there.

Q: Before I lose you on the subject of the business, I'd like to go back a bit and talk--have you talk about some of the things you consider are interesting in the industry, some of the things you think are going to change, some things that really should change, or maybe are desperate and never could change. For example, we know now that many of the countries in the Orient are themselves expanding their own resources by going out of the Orient. What is there about the industry that you think is going to change?

A: Well, some of the obvious things--You are correct that Hong Kong, for instance, with 1997 over its head, is diversifying into other areas of the world, both the Caribbean, South America, this country--the U.S.--as well as Indonesia and Malaysia and Sri Lanka, etc. But the whole
business is going to become more global. The company manufactures now in many, many countries—in South America, Central America, the Caribbean, and we are investigating the Near East, Europe—So that that's something that is going to change. I also feel that with 1992, with the European alliance, that that will be an enormous market and we should learn how to export as well as import. I think, too, that in this country, things are going to change, are in the process of changing, in the way of distribution. In other words, in the large department store chains or specialty store chains. Most people think of them as department stores. Saks Fifth Avenue is a specialty store, but it's really a large department store. It's already beginning to consolidate itself. There are less stores, but the ones that are left are huge. However, smaller specialty stores, such as The Limited and The Gap, more specifically, have become extremely successful. It's a pleasure to shop in them. I think I understand why they're successful. Not that they service (service is a thing of the past), but it specializes in a certain type of clothing. That's what you want; go there you will find it in your size and the color you want, clearly displayed. You can be in and out in 10 minutes. So, I think that the profile of the retail store may change.

Q: Are you going to talk about your Liz Claiborne stores?
A: Well, we started really—Both Art and I felt quite a
long time ago that this was a direction that we should be investigating, so we did two things at the company. We started small sportswear, specialty stores called First Issue, and with product that was different from the Liz Claiborne product--

Q: These are not manufacturer outlet stores?
A: No. That we also had, but I think every company has that. I don't consider that a new area of retailing. It's just--It's an area, but instead of selling to discounters you really ship your own discount stores with last year's merchandise. But, the experiment into real retailing was with First Issue. We didn't want to use the Liz Claiborne name and we didn't want to use the Liz Claiborne product while we were experimenting with retailing, because we didn't want to in any way upset our customer base.

Q: What merchandise did you use?
A: We designed--started a whole design team, merchandising team, especially for these stores. It has been somewhat successful. I think it still needs work and fine tuning, but simultaneously we started building some of our own free-standing stores as well as doing something which I'm sure you've heard about, called the store within a store, which is really a--It's more than just a department, because it carried all of the Liz Claiborne merchandise, including shoes, accessories, dresses, sportswear. It was supposed to
be a self-contained unit within a large store but the independently standing stores were really the experiment, for several reasons: To be able to house the entire lines (in other words, not be at the mercy of a store selecting what they wanted), to be able to show it the way we had really conceived it, to design special fixtures and display cases so that our kind of color keyed separates and accessories and shoes could all be shown in a sensible way, so that the ultimate consumer could see the thought and the coordination that had been put behind the items. There, the company is still experimenting with both size and type of store, whether they encompass all Liz Claiborne merchandise (and those are called "Liz World"), or, whether they specialize in just what we would call the career portion of the line, in both sportswear and dresses, and whatever accessories are suited to the career look. And, as another experiment, the really casual stores that would carry LizWear and whatever; very casual dresses we might make, such as chambray and denim dresses. And, again, only accessories that are appropriate for that kind of merchandise.

From what I can gather, this really started in a big way after we left the company, even though it was in the planning stages long before we left the company. They really opened after we left the company, and from what I can gather
they have been extremely successful.

But, again, it's--The locations are picked very carefully, and--One of the interesting things that we've found, or that the company has found, is that it does not hurt the business in one or our regular retail outlets. For instance, in the Detroit area we opened a store in the same mall as a Dayton-Hudson. But there was great cooperation between the sales help in the independent standing Liz Claiborne store and in the department at Dayton-Hudson, to the point where if they, the Hudsons, didn't have a certain style in a certain color they would call our store, and vice versa, so business increased at Dayton-Hudson. I think also the fact that we were displayed so well in our own store gave them the incentive to make a little bit more of an effort and display us better in the department.

You know, that's one of the biggest problems today; how to show such a large line as we ship to the stores. How do you display it well? The poor department managers have never seen the clothes before. They need maps, guides. They need somebody traveling, telling them this works with this, this is the way you set it up, etc. So, part of the point of our independent stores is to show how it can be done.

Q: You know, do you remember the day that Jaeger opened his own shop and the brouhaha that created? My heavens, think what that anticipated.
CLAIBORNE

A: And certainly, I think, Ralph Lauren has done it extremely successfully and only helped his business. It has not hurt his business within the department stores at all.
Q: Absolutely. That's very true.
A: Also, it's a wonderful way of getting information back to the design team and the merchandising team. It's always been a frustration that you can't get immediate information back. It always lags quite a few weeks and it is only certain stores that are cooperative in giving you the information, who will cooperate with the company in giving them information. One of my frustrations had always been that, yes, we get style information but we never get color information. I don't know whether black is selling better than white. Obviously, you can talk to the buyers, to the department managers, but that's not really scientific information. So that this way you can get immediate information. It was meant to be a very helpful tool to the design team.
Q: Incidentally, if we're going to talk about designers, we haven't talked for a long time--in general, in the industry--about training for designers who are not the haute couture designers, but in between designers. How do you feel about the training that they have or don't have?
A: Well, I must admit I'm very critical of the training that most design students get in, in this country
particularly. The emphasis seems to be, as you mention, on spending a great deal of time making, designing, engineering, making a few pieces of clothes. The students at Parsons used to spend six months preparing for their end of the year fashion show, and of course some of those pieces, whether they were coats or sweaters or dresses, were beautifully made and handled with tremendous care. Everything was hand made, hand embroidered, hand painted, and I used to say, "What relevance has that got to this industry?" You're not going to sit and paint. You're not going to sit and embroider. You have to know how to be very prolific. You have to understand your consumer. You have to be technically proficient, yes, so that you understand how to put a garment together, understand fabrics. But they don't seem to get enough of that kind of training. They come as recent graduates with the wonderful idea that they're going to be designers without really understanding the industry or being open minded enough to realize that they are dressing an average woman. They are not dressing a model to parade in the showroom, they are not dressing specific customers. They are dressing Miss average America, if it's women's wear, or Mr. average America if it's menswear. So that I think it takes quite a few years of indoctrination, working with a company such as Liz Claiborne, before they really understand that.
I also find that their technical training leaves a lot to be desired. None of them seem to get education about fabrics; about how they feel, what construction means, what are the inherent properties of it. If it's linen you know it's not going to drape like jersey, but you should understand a little bit more of what makes a worsted gaberdine or a really high quality piece of goods, or a rougher one. What's the difference? What are print techniques? How do you achieve the look that you want to achieve? It's all for the same end. It's knowledge, so that they are tools at your disposal and you can achieve what you'd like to achieve at the price points that you want to achieve it. For some reason or other the English schools seem to give them a much better technical background. We've had several English designers. They understand draping, understand pattern making, understand tailoring, are used to being prolific. They apparently have to sketch out ideas very quickly. They do not belabor one garment. They're really taught the business aspect of it without crushing the creativity at all, and these students are equipped to be an assistant to a couture designer as well as in a large company that caters to a lot of people.

Q: Do you know anything about the school, Chambre Syndicale, in Paris?
A: No, I don't know that at all but I suspect the training
is probably highly technical but really aimed at couture, though we certainly, for the last 20 years or so, have had a flourishing ready to wear business out of Paris. I've worked with some of the French designers but they were already established and had already worked in large companies so they understood very clearly what it was all about.

Q: I've just come back from Lyons where I saw a man who had been a client of mine when I first became a consultant back in 1970, and he is now manufacturing ski wear, using a subcontractor 600 kilometers away from Lyons. Well, obviously, he must know, technically, how to work with ski wear, which has to be very technical because there are many technical problems. I didn't ask him, because I wasn't at that point interested, but how do those people get their training? They're not in Paris, they're not even in Lyons, apparently. They're somewhere in the middle of nowhere. That's kind of interesting.

Q: But Lyons has a tradition. It's not ski wear, it's silks, but I'm sure that a lot of those people--engineers (and I call them engineers because I really think someone who manufactures or prepares a garment to be manufactured is an engineer)--must speak to and work very closely with the people who are involved in the sport itself so that they know what some of the requisites are, what some of the problems are, what would be the ideal thing, etc. What is
important—weight, stretch, give, etc.

Q: Well, certainly, the area, including Grenoble, which of course is right near Lyons, is very conducive to learning how to ski.

A: Skiing. Yes.

Q: So that it's really very interesting.

A: But I think that's an important point, because I always believed that you shouldn't design anything that you didn't know anything about. I don't think you should design tennis wear unless you either work terribly closely with tennis players or play tennis yourself. The same thing is true of ski wear, of professional bathing suits, etc. You really have to understand what these garments have to do.

Q: Do you still have any people left in your business—your former business—who were apprentices in Europe? Does that exist anymore at all?

A: Well, I call them apprentices in this country. In other words, when we do hire graduates, whether they be from the Rhode Island School of Design or F.I.T., right here in the city, or Parsons, they become assistants to a designer. That's really an apprentice's job and, yes, he or she does a lot of Girl Friday kind of work but also is there and can't help but absorb what is going on.

Q: So you feel that schools do not necessarily teach as much as they should teach.
A: No, I don't. And also I don't feel they give as much pure art training. I know it sounds like a lot to ask, to give them art training as well as the technical training, but I think it's important. The art training gives you an understanding of line, of the human body. I think you've got to understand that. It also gives you a sense of color. Terribly, terribly important today, particularly where styles, I don't think, change radically from year to year. Fabrics don't change that radically either but what changes is color. You can offer new colors, exciting color combinations. Working with prints I so often saw designers who really didn't understand color or didn't understand how to change a color. If you wanted the blue a little bit greener or a little bit more on the purple side, what do you do to it? How do you give instructions to the printer? No, I think more work could be done in the training area, definitely.

Q: I don't think we talked very much about how you, yourself, used to design, when you did. What do you start with? Do you work from sketches? Do you work in the fabric, or do you work from sketches?

A: I work from sketches, but always with the fabric in mind. I always used to have a dummy—-you know, a form—-in my office, if my office wasn't right next door to the sample room because it's all very well to have ideas, and I would
sort of sketch the ideas, but then I would get up and get the fabric and start draping it on the form to see if it would do what I thought it would do. Because even though you can learn about fabrics and know what jerseys will do after a while, it's still a good idea to pin it up and see what it's really going to do. But the way I used to work was a combination of sketches and just experimenting—draping with the fabric itself—and then giving the sketch, which would be quite technically finished. In other words, there would be some measurements and dimensions to give the assistant. This is a little confusing because in the business we also call the technical an assistant, who is really a pattern maker, an assistant to a designer, because he or she is able to take a sketch and make an original garment. They will normally drape a muslin first and show you a muslin of your sketch, and you work with them and say, "No, I'd like the skirt a little bit fuller, let's try putting a few more pleats in," or whatever. Make the collar a little bit bigger or smaller or whatever. But I worked with one assistant at the very beginning, when we started the company, who was terribly demanding about wanting measurements, wanting some concrete ideas. "Don't just give me a sketch, Liz. How wide is the collar. How tall is the collar band? How wide are your cuffs? What do you want this—How do you want that? How deep a hem?" And I'm saying, "Oh, my goodness, I've got to
think all this out ahead of time?" Because in the dress business you didn't work that way. You sort of experimented as you went along. But in the sportswear business it's a little bit different. She was very good discipline for me. I had to sit down and think about it. And designing sweaters or knitwear, you have to give them all the measurements, on a flat sketch.

Q: Where did you learn all of this, technical materials?
A: You learn as you go along.

Q: You did not have any of this in Europe?
A: No. Not at all. I had taken some free lance pattern making classes because I wanted to understand the principles of draping and pattern making, but--

Q: Because when you came here you seemed very clear about what you wanted to do.
A: But I sewed, so that gave me an insight into fabric and how it handles and how you want a garment to fit on you. I became a bug about fit, because I thought it was so important. I could see women wearing nice looking clothes but were misfits. I thought if only they'd spend a little time getting it altered properly they could look like a million bucks. But, working in the stores, almost like a sales girl, in the early days taught me a great deal about how clothes should fit, how we could make them so they would be more flattering, and you would see so often the same kind
of figure problems in many, many women and know that, well, if you cut your skirt a little bit looser or tapered it a little bit more, it would be a little bit more flattering. Because you couldn't always be there in the dressing room saying, "Well, you should shorten the sleeves and maybe we should pick the shoulders up a little bit." Alterations have become extremely expensive; you've got to build them into the clothes.

Q: Yes. So, you learned what you learned by doing.
A: By doing it, and after all, I've been in the business a long time. But I think it takes a while to really understand it and to learn it. To me it was fascinating. I learned something new all the time. When jodhpurs came in, I knew I loved them and I wanted to design them, and one of our heads of manufacturing told me that he couldn't do a certain detail on the jodhpur, and I couldn't understand why. But we had a head of manufacturing, who was one of the most gifted people I've ever met in the business, who brought his own Austrian pattern book to show me. It was fascinating. There he had jodhpurs, as well as all different kinds of pants. This was a book on pants. To learn how these things were originally constructed and how to achieve the look that you wanted to achieve--how they should be pressed, etc.--I thought it was fascinating.

Q: How did you learn about fabrics? One of the things I
hear about, certainly in stores, from merchandise managers, is that buyers know nothing about fabrics. I assume many designers know nothing too.

A: They don't. I mean, they learn, eventually. There, I was very lucky to have been married to Art, because he was for many years in the textile business, so that he understood fabrics very, very well and taught me a great deal. The rest, again, you learn from experience. You learn the thread count and what it means. You learn that 60 singles, which is referred to in a very fine, cotton shirting, is really--

[End of Tape 2/Side 1; begin Tape 2/Side 2]

A: --how many threads you have in a warp, how many you have in the weft, and the reason, again, for learning all that is because today most companies--certainly companies as sizable as Claiborne--design most of their own fabrics. I don't mean that we design the construction, but sometimes we had to. If you wanted a certain balanced effect in the plaid, you learned that you had to have a balanced construction in the cotton or the wool. If you had a very unbalanced construction, you would not have a plaid that merely looked even. So, you really--I learned from working with the cotton people in Japan, from working with the
worsted people. They're very willing to share the information with you if you are interested.

Q: What about trimmings?
A: Oh, trimming, I think, are almost the easiest thing to learn about.

Q: Including belts.
A: How to afford what you really want is the problem with trimmings, and belts, for instance--I mean, we all know what we would like but how, number one, do you put a belt on a garment that isn't too expensive or--

Q: You say we all know what we want. I mean, if you operate on a certain level of taste you may want one kind of thing and--

A: True, but most designers would like something better than we could afford at Liz Claiborne. You want a good leather, you feel a good leather. You want the edges turned in, unless it's a very sporty, sporty belt. You want the stitching to be a certain way and certain kinds of buckles, etc. But you learn all that doing it. I knew nothing about how to make sweaters. The first time I was faced with having to do sweaters and knitwear, which I did at Youth Guild, I said, "I can't do that. I don't know anything about it," and they said, "Go on out to a knit mill and start learning." I did and it was fascinating, looking at the machines, finding out what was possible, what was not possible, how to make it
look new by using the machine or using the technicians. I always got very friendly with the technicians, because they could help you.

Q: I'd like to get some of your thoughts on the people you did business with. For example, the buyers. What kind of buyers do you feel were able to work best with you? Were you interested, for example—What about the difference between a specialty shop and a department store?

A: Well, basically, I, as a designer or head designer, only worked with, really, the larger store buyers. Of course, that changed over the years, Mildred. Back in '76-'77-'78, buyers were very powerful, knowledgeable people, who really did the selection for the stores and guided us manufacturers if we didn't have what they wanted. I mean, very often they would come in and say, "You know, what we really need is a black, cotton jersey for the summer," or whatever it was. So, working with those buyers was, again, very exciting, very informative, and you really felt that you were working with a knowledgeable person whom you could have a rapport with and then really do a line, design a line that would be well suited to a Saks, to a Bloomingdale's, etc.

Today, buyers are very different. They're much younger, they don't stay in one job for any length of time, to speak of. Their merchandise managers direct them from a budget
standpoint; it's all very cut and dried. They have X number of dollars to spend. They know about what the proportion should be—skirts to jackets to blouses and sweaters to dresses. It becomes a mathematical game, so that Liz Claiborne, as a company, began taking on part of that merchandising job ourselves. In meetings, when we would review the line with the sales people or the sales managers (our own sales managers), you almost wrote an order, a store order, to make sure that it made sense; that you had the proper proportions, that you were covering the important bases. It was an exercise that you just had to do, because the buyer really just knew she had X number of dollars to spend on that season. Yes, if the line looked terribly exciting, she would go back to her merchandise manager and say, "I need more money," and if the line disappointed her a little, or was too advanced or too classical, she might not spend her alloted dollars and wait for the next season. Whatever. But, it's a different procedure today.

What disappoints me the most about buyers today is that they don't get on their own floors. In other words, they don't shop their own stores. They certainly don't go to the branches, and this is a branch business. The flagship store is one thing, but, really, any of these names I'm mentioning, the branch stores are terribly important. The same certain stores, the buyers are not allowed to move a
piece of clothing. That never used to bother me; I just used
to walk in and move things around the department, because I
wasn't employed by the store. But the buyers are not allowed
to lift things off one rack and put them on the other; they
have to call "display."

Q: Yes, it's very different. Of course, it has to be, when
it is so big, compared to what it used to be.

    I thank you very much, Liz. I think I have covered
everything I would like to know. I would love to know if
there's something you think I've left out that you would
like to talk about.

A: I think we've really covered the whole fashion industry
and its parts.

Q: Okay. I think so too. Thank you very much.
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