ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRIES

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

MEMOIRS OF

NORMAN NORELL

FROM VARYING PERSPECTIVES

INTERVIEW WITH

LOUIS CLAUSEN

Designer

DATE OF INTERVIEW

Friday, October 15, 1982

INTERVIEWED BY

Mildred Finger
Q: Would you start to tell us about Mr. Norell, going back to the days when you first met him and...

A: I met Norman around 1951 or '52 when I had finished Parsons with John Moore whom he was friendly with. And we saw a lot of each other because I was a great buddy of John's. And, you know, Norman... as everyone knows... had the best taste. I don't know what to say... But... everything about him was so beautiful. And he loved teaching and bringing out the native taste in someone else. And I learned more from him than I've ever learned from anyone in my life--theatre, art, the simplicity of his designing. You know... really... the workmanship and everything and the best of everything. And he always insisted that whatever I do, use the best quality. Just use a smaller amount and do classics, and something that would last. And he was a great help to me. He was a great help... like furnishing my apartment. Advising me to start out with two good lamps. Don't buy any little cheap lamps. And he would help me find some nice Meissen white china vases, and then have them made into lamps. And buy a good sofa. Buy an old iron sofa. You know, don't buy anything cheap. And I've never forgotten it. And he had such a wild sense of humor. He loved stories on himself, where he was the butt end of the joke. And I really... I've never known anyone like Norman. I just couldn't believe the taste that he had. The beautiful colors that he would put together... When he did his own apartment, I liked it much better than when McMillen did it.

Q: Where do you suppose that taste... How do you suppose it was developed?
A: Well, he said that he was a sickly child, and he lived
with all the theatrical magazines and all the movie things, and dreamed
of becoming, you know, a theatrical designer, primarily. And he had very
...His family would take him to the theatre the minute anything came to
Indianapolis. But he would have to go. They would go two and three times.
He would see all the theatre. And he was bedridden for quite a while when
he was a small child.

Q: What was wrong with him. Do you know?
A: I think it was sort of like asthmatic, but I'm not sure.
I know that he was very sickly as a child. And they sent him away to school
in World War I, 1914, and he was in military school in Kentucky, and that's
when the big flu epidemic came around, and they...The school wouldn't let
them get any word out that the boys were dying like flies. And he finally
smuggled a note out and his family came and got him. But, he had...It was
all self learned. You know, your taste has to be there. You don't invent it.

Q: But it has to be developed...
A: ...Cultivated and developed, And he was so encouraging to
young people. And we always kidded him that he was staying young by keeping
us around him. And he loved the theatre more than any person I've ever known.
Every form of theatre--musicals, heavy drama, classics. Everything. I remem-
ber his telling me about his first trip back to Indiana, And he was going
to Penn Station, and his family.

Q: His first trip, when he was 18 or 19?
A: Yeah, He went back to see them, And his family had been
very upset that he was going to New York. And he said that he was walking down Seventh Avenue to Penn Station and that there was...They had clothes hanging all out on the street, and they sold things. And he bought a wild green and yellow plaid cheap suit, and he bought some spats, and he got off the train in Chicago, or wherever it would be, and got some tonic for his hair and slicked his hair all down. When the family car pulled up to meet him, here he was dressed up like a city slicker, and his father wouldn't speak to him. But Norman liked practical jokes like that. He loved to tell all these things. About his first apartment, when he did everything in patent leather. Even the couches. And Bobby Knox used to say that he would go up to see Norman, and no one could stay on the couches. They would go sliding right off onto the floor. And he had bought a fantastic antique French bed, and he couldn't imagine how he was getting all these bites all over him. And the thing was so old that it was full of bed bugs, and he had to take a candle and try to burn them out at night. But he wouldn't give up the bed because it was so beautiful.

He really loved life. I remember his telling me when John and he went to Europe for the first time, they sailed over on the Elizabeth I... They didn't fly. They sailed because Norman wanted John to experience, you know, the excitement of it.

Q: About what year was that?

A: I would say around '52. Because John got out of school with me in '50, it could have been '51. He went to work for Jane Derby. He was still working for Jane Derby, who was Norman's great buddy. And they
went over. And Norman was determined that John would see it sort of like he did, in the '30s and '20s, and they went to Italy first, and they went to the Italian collections and they ran into Bettina Ballard. And Bettina said, "Norman, what in the world are you doing here? I can't see you with the Italian collection." And he said, "Well, I like to see what other people are doing." And then they went on to Paris, and ran into Bettina at Dior, and she said, "You never come to Dior." And Norman said, "Well, I like to. You know. I think John should see it." And they went to Fath and they went to...which certainly wasn't Norman's taste. And Bettina Ballard again. And she said, "I just don't believe it." And they ended up at Madame Gres. They went to Balenciaga, which...Norman always went to Balenciaga when he was in Paris. And Bettina Ballard finally said, "Norman, what in the world are you knocking yourself...You know you're just going home and make those silly damn Peter Pan collars with the pussy cat bows." And Norman said that he thought all along that she thought he was...didn't need to see anyone else's collection, And that wasn't the case at all.

Q: No, I've never heard of his going to anybody except Balenciaga. Possibly Givenchy, I suppose, when Givenchy started...

A: He did go to Gres.

Q: Oh, Gres, Yes. Uh huh.

A: Her genius and the way she put things together. But he would buy the Balenciagas. You know, you had to buy your "caution." And then Norman would take them all apart and would call me back in the work room to see the Balenciaga jacket or collar, all taken apart carefully, so we could see how bias on bias worked in chiffon
or organza to give a collar a right roll. And it was his mastery of the technical part that Norman loved so. Not that Balenciaga's clothes weren't something that Norman would admire anyway, Because they were stark, simple, and no nonsense.

Q: But it was the technical...

A: Yeah, He loved to see even how a sleeve was put in. And that famous roll to the Balenciaga collar, And how they weren't heavy, but they were like little soldiers, He really admired Balenciaga.

Q: Are you familiar with the way in which he planned a collection of his?

A: Uh huh, Vaguely...

Q: Could you tell us...?

A: Because I didn't go to Norman's too often when he lived down by the New School, went to dinner...But when Norman gave up that apartment, he moved to 81st Street, to 18 East 31st...

Q: Which is Amster Yard?

A: Amster Yard came after that. And John would...Norman had all the sheet music from the '20s and '30s, and John played the piano, endlessly. Norman would sit and sketch on a little white note pad paper, Just the simplest thing, with the old wooden bamboo pencil with the soft lead. And he couldn't sketch at all. Or he didn't bother to, And you'd see all these little doodads all over. And you'd think, "My God, what in the world is that going to be?" Because I spent more time on my sketches, and consequently, my clothes weren't as good, I was more interested in having a pretty picture. So then, he never...He was always so late, because they
had to manufacture the...all of the Norell clothes were made by
the same people who made the samples. And then he and Jerry—that was his
Italian assistant, female—would work...He would work hours on end. We'd
wait around for Norman, and it would be 10-11:00 PM, and then we'd go to
Hamburger Heaven. Because he liked Schraffts and Hamburger Heaven, and
occasionally The White Turkey. Is that the one I want? Not "White Turkey."
There used to be one on 57th...at 3rd...Very old fashioned...(cross
conversation)...But he loved that simple, simple kind of food. And
he considered...fancy place...the Oak Room...And that he loved, because he
could have the simplest kind of food...He went to the best restaurants,
but he really didn't...it wasn't his cup of tea.

Q: So he would make his sketches, and from there...
A: Well, I should say that first he would start with all
these fabrics that he would...he went to Europe and bought all these fab-
rics. The room would be filled with, you know, swatches, swatches, matching, matching...And then he would work with, in the cutting of the toile,
Then it started with all the fittings and changing, and the slightest thing...
a sleeve...

Q: Do you know, did he fit at all on his muslins, or did he
fit directly on the fabric?
A: No, I think he worked first, to get the shapes, in the
muslins. I was never in his work room. Tony Traina would have had a high
Italian fit. But I know that he would talk about hours of fitting and how
Gerry didn't like certain models. She'd pin her...

Q: It was Gerry that I hadn't heard...G-e-r-r-y?
A: She was his head fitter. He worked with a man tailor, but he used to... His tailoring was done outside of the loft. The tailor would come to him and they would have all the fittings, and then they'd go back and make changes. I can't remember his name. And he'd work hours and hours. He'd be up early in the morning and late at night. Go to Schrafft's for lunch, where we all met. Eight of us, around the table... that little side room on 43rd Street.

Q: Was it during this period that he acted as a teacher/critic at Parsons?

A: I'm trying to think...

Q: Take your time. Ann Keagy talked a lot about that,

A: He must have become a critic around '55, or maybe...

Q: In other words, not when you were there?

A: No, I finished in '50. And Norman wasn't a critic then. I wish he had been, I had Mark,...

Q: Mooring.

A: Mooring. And Trigere, who was marvelous, except that she didn't carry through. She didn't come back. She's a nice lady, I like her. But he had just started the critic bit for... when I was there... for third year students. The graduating class was the only one that had the critics. And now they have it for all the classes. And they really do help the kids a lot. And Norman was always calling, "Do you know of any jobs," because he had a talented student...

Q: So he really was interested,...
A: Oh, yes. He was very supportive of the school and what they were doing. And they... You know their belief in quality, also.

Q: The description of the things that went into the preparation of the retrospective was very interesting, because obviously the school put in a tremendous amount because they felt so strongly about what he had achieved.

A: Well, he was great for Parsons. I don't think he went to Parsons long...

Q: No, he didn't. A very short time apparently.
A: Maybe a week.

Q: I think it was a little more, but I know it was short.
A: I don't know what he didn't like about it,... but I guess he wanted to do the shows.

Q: Yes. Since he subsequently went to Pratt, I assume he wanted more technical training perhaps...?

A: I think Pratt had more of the theatrical... The illustration ability, that at that point Norman loved, because he gave me a watercolor, a tempura, of a costume that must be for something like "The Merry Widow." Huge black hoop skirt and one bosom was out and a wild aigret headdress and everything.

Q: Well, that sounds much more flamboyant than the kind of thing he liked to make for his own collection.

A: Well, he made marvelous clothes for Connie Bennett, and all of this was at Carnegie. And Crawford... He used to tell how she would come and be so nervous that the clothes would be wringing wet when she was
through. And she demanded that everything be washable, and he'd say, "You can't wash silk-satin. You can't wash all this." And she washed it. And at the time, she wanted big dancer's weights put in all the bottoms of the skirts. She loved to dance, And he said her ankles would be black and blue from these things banging up against her.

Q: She didn't care I suppose, She wanted the look...

A: But she was...that thing...You know, she had that fetish about everything had to be cut in plastic when she moved. But she washed everything, that she bought from Carnegie. It was when she was married to Franchot Tone. And I know the fight...He left Carnegie because of an argument over one of Gertie Lawrence's dresses in "Lady in the Dark." But those were very flamboyant clothes.

Q: At the point...In the last several years of his life, when he and John no longer saw each other terribly much, did his life pattern change do you think?

A: Not a lot. He still saw John all the time, because John was, you know, Peck's Bad Boy, Norman was so involved with him. And Norman had not been well. He had the, you know, the throat...

Q: That was in 1962 that he had that operation.

A: But he had diverticulitis, and he was really...He took such good care of himself and he was always going to the doctors, and he decided that he could eat hamburger and beets and mashed potatoes, and he'd go to...Hamburger Heavens were all gone then so we'd go to Schraffts. There was one there at the Parke-Bernet...And there was one down lower
when he was living at Amster Yards. But he still saw John. Very often.

Q: And you still had your luncheons.
A: Oh, yeah. Norman started going to Madame Romaine, the omelet lady. He went there quite a lot with models. He started having lunch more with...what was her name?
Q: Yvonne, Claudia...
A: Yeah. That whole group. And they were kind of like body guards, or something. Norman, even in the summertime, would be all muffled up in a hat and everything. But he broke away...I guess we all just sort of went different ways from the Schrafft's lunch thing, in 1970...Well, it would be earlier than that. But the girls protected him so.

Q: Well, they were apparently part of his family at that point. Of course, he was not the sort of person to have masses of acquaintances...closer good friends.
A: Well, he had favorites. Knox and he were great buddies, Jane Derby, while she was alive. Travis Banton...And Jean-Louis and he were great buddies. He recommended Jean-Louis for the job in Hollywood, because he didn't want to leave Carnegie at the time...Maybe it was when he was forming with Tony Traina. What else can I tell you? I loved the guy so...

Q: That's come through in all these interviews. That everybody had very special feeling for his...The kind of humanity that he represented and the kind of goodness he represented. And the doing of things for people.
A: And he really cared about other people's work. A beautiful afternoon...I mean evening, after theatre, would be to walk from
Saks up through Bergdorf's checking all the windows, being there when they changed the windows at Bonwit's, when Callahan was there. I remember when Larry Barcher did Bendel's, it was slightly outrageous. Not that crazy kind of stuff we have today. But I mean, they were elaborate. He loved the window displays. He liked to see that.

Q: So he was always open for anything which would give him another visual kind of development of taste...A constant development of taste.

A: Right.

Q: Well, I think that's fine. Thank you very much.

A: I just...I don't know what else to say. I don't know where I would have been without him, because whatever taste I have he brought it out. And whatever I believe in in fashion today, goes back to Norman. It's something that he's taught me. And I'm glad that he didn't suffer, but that it was quick at the end.

Q: No, it was very quick at the end.

A: Highly emotional.

Q: I'm sure. Thank you,