ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRIES

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

MEMOIRS OF

NORMAN NORELL

FROM VARYING PERSPECTIVES

INTERVIEW WITH

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INTERVIEWED BY

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Q: Ann, when was the first time that you met Norman Norell? Would you tell us about that and go on from there?

A: I met Norman Norell, not in the flesh but in his clothes, at Loehmann's in Brooklyn, in the back room, was where I saw the first Norman Norell.

Q: What year was that?

A: 1940. And I was never so impressed. I'm a perfectionist by nature. I was never so impressed. This kid from the midwest, who had come to school to learn fashion in New York, to see the most beautiful crafted clothes, way back then. My second encounter--in the flesh, and then, of course, I did follow up his career and I saw things and collections--but I met him in the flesh in 1950. John Moore, who was a student at the Parsons School at that time and--this was told by you--I set up the Critics Design Program--John Moore said to me one day (you know we had Clare McCardell and we had Mark Mooring and a lot of the top American designers, because that was what we were all about; it was really educating the American designer), and he said, "You know, you really should have the greatest man ever, The greatest taste, designer...And that's Norman Norell." And I said, "Well, you know, by strange coincidence, John, this is the person I admire more than anyone else." And I was introduced to Norman in 1950, and from that day on, until the day he died, he became....

Q: And that was in 1972...

A: He died in 1972....I really don't know how to tell you all the things that I know about him, Mildred, without shedding a tear. When he died, all the reporters and many people said, "Who is the second
Norell?" And I honestly can't tell you who the second one is, because there was no one who could come up to this man's standards. For 20 years he came into the classroom and worked with the students. He never missed a session. He worked with them in their sketches. Then he proceeded in the muslin and he critiqued that. And then into the fabric. It didn't make any difference whether you were the outstanding, and he saw creativity. It didn't make any difference to him whether you were a good student, a weak student or a happy medium. His attention...You were the most important person.

Q: How many hours did he give to...?
A: Well, when he would work with sketches, he would work anywhere from...He worked with 15 students. I would divide them by various critics, and each critic got 15 students.

Q: Okay. This is part of the critics program that I really don't know enough about. How many critics did you have at that time?
A: Well, we had six....

Q: And that started in 1950?
A: No, that started way back in...Well....way back....in 1947, when I came in, and started using American designers and I no longer,... Because the school did use an occasional European designer...But it was purely American designers, And Norman would have 15 students, I'd use two critics for a "spring" problem. Two critics for the summer. And two for the fall. That's in the senior level. He worked in the senior level. And as I said, until '72, he worked for 20 years.
He would come in. The students would do a line of sketches, and he would critique each one, and tell them why one was better than another. Why the trend, or whatever you put down on paper, was advanced in thinking. It wasn't something that was going on in the market, or something the student had seen or read or whatever. And he would pick out the best sketch, the most outstanding design for each student. Then...and that was...he would give anywhere from 3-6 hours. And then he would come back in a week. The students would do a toile or a muslin, and he would come back in a week to critique muslins. Muslins were made on 7th Avenue mannequins. The students would sit around like an operating room, and observe, and he would critique. And I know of no living soul, then or today, the perfectionism. He was so meticulous. And as the film that you saw...buttons...He told students how you graded buttons. They're not all three inches apart or two and a half inches apart, but as you go from the neck down, you increase by a fraction. He knew that, and the students he taught have carried on with that knowledge, because as you go lower in perspective, if you kept them the same amount of distance they would look closer together, so you increase it a sixteenth of an inch.

He showed them how to put a pocket on it so it looked glued, and not hammered or stitched. How to do linings...And he would give us patterns that 7th Avenue would have paid thousands of dollars for, that he spent years in perfecting. And he would say that he didn't want it to get in the market, but to the student, You don't have the time....This is where you should learn to create and develop a taste. I'll give you the patterns. There
was not a thing that Norell wouldn't give to the students.

So back to our muslins. He would critique and tell them why certain things were done. If a student is very stubborn....And, you know, no, they want it this way. They didn't want it changed. He was amazing the way he would talk to them and show them. He would end up getting his way, and the student would think all the time it was their idea. When he worked in the muslins, sometimes he'd work one day or two days. Then, critiquing while the students worked. Every one...because every problem...What we were doing was solving a problem for each student. A different idea. Then he would come back again in another week or week and a half to see it in the fabric. So now, he's not only created in the sketch and the three dimensional form...in color, line and proportion. Because in the muslin, you may be working with a tweed, and when you see it in the tweed you may want to minimize (because of its thickness) the fabric. Or, if you go into chiffon, you may want to put more. So this is the way a designer works on 7th Avenue. This is the way Norman worked, and this is the way he taught these students.

And something that's very incredible about Norman...He lived at Amster Yard towards the end of his life. And as I said previously, he never missed a critic's session. Some of the models would say that he would... He knew that he had to be there, in school, at a certain time, and he had someone coming--the press or whatever--he would never change a class schedule. He would work that...He would work his magazine people or store people around his class sessions. He never wanted me to tell anyone the marvelous things he would do. For instance, he would select fabrics for the students. And he
said, "I think that you should use this crepe de chine or this crepe or taffeta, and the student would say, "Well, you know, Mr. Norell, it's $30 a yard..." And that goes back 10-15 years ago, which is expensive today. And he would never embarrass them...This is the incredible thing about this man. He wouldn't say anything. He would make a second choice, and when he would finish the critique, he would come in to my office and say, "The one thing these people, young people, should learn, is to work with the best. Once you strive for the best, you can always come down. But if you never have the knowledge or the ability to work with the best, it's all lost. And this is the time for these people to do that." He said, "Explain to the student." Now, he could have said, "I'll give you the fabric," or embarrass them...But he'd say, "Tell them to go ahead and get that taffeta, and send me the bill." And he'd always end, "Please don't tell anyone."

I said he never missed a critic's session. He missed it once. And that was when he had his...in...I think it was 1962...The operation on his throat, for cancer...

Q: A laryngectomy.

A: And he was in the hospital, and he was supposed to see the sketches. He had them call and had all the sketches sent up to the hospital. He critiqued every one. He wrote out on the sketches, and then someone else took over for the muslin and the fabric, because he had...he couldn't speak at the time, and that was the only year. He carried the sketches which he critiqued at the hospital.
Other instances of what a tremendous man he was, is that when he would do a critique, this was a very important thing in his life. He liked young people, he liked working with them, and he would have a critique session, and then he would go down to Florida to Martha and he would do a benefit...cancer benefit shows and things...And he would call me from Florida and he would say, "You know, Ann, that John Doe," or whoever it was, "really seemed very upset. Is there a problem? If there is, once he gets involved, I'm going to be at such and such a hotel on such and such a date. Two days later I'm going to be here. Five days later I'm going to be here." And this...an obligation that he...It was just unbelievable.

The other things...sometimes he would critique and I would call and I would say, "Norman, we have a snag. A problem. Should I send this student to you?" And he would say, "Ann, no, it's easier for me to come to them.

Q: And this is when the school was downtown.
A: This was at 410 E. 54th Street...
Q: Oh. Uptown.
A: Yes. We were over near Sutton Place at the time. These are...

Q: Because now, of course, you're at 560 Seventh Avenue.
A: Yes...The strange...The whole strange thing...As I said, this has been going on, and these marvelous things...and we learned, in 20 years, he was our greatest teacher. We, as teachers, were able to learn something each year from Norman. And he shared it with us, and he wanted
us to come to the show, anytime he did something new. He asked the teachers to come so that he could show them certain things that he perfected.

So, in 1971, I said to Norman, "Norman, there's only one way of thanking you...How can I ever thank you for all the marvelous things you've done? I want to do a retrospective on you. Most people...They're always doing retrospectives on people who are dead. I want you really to know how marvelous...What you have given." So, I started in 1971...... And Norman said, "Oh,...You'll never find any clothes." And, "You can't possibly do a show." But I said, "I wanted to ask you for the permission to do this, It's going to be a labor of love." Which it was. It was true for everyone who worked on the show.

He gave me a list of all his customers, Private customers. All over the United States. And from...That was the greatest experience. I've been now with the school for 35 years, but that was the greatest experience of my life. I traveled to eleven states. Everyone was alerted at the time where I would be, at a certain place--in Chicago, I pulled from a great area. From Texas...And I would meet with the women and their clothes, and I edited as I went on, and I brought in...I saw over a thousand pieces, I edited because there would be many people who would have the same type of clothes. And at that time, is when I met the millionaires of this country, All the ladies of taste. The condition that the clothes were in...They were 10, 15, 20 years old. They didn't give them up, They didn't give them up to the museums. They had them because they were so incredible. And they were classics. So many people wore them year after year. And I brought them in
to the school and I said, "Norman, I want you...This is really a very special thing...And this is my way of saying 'thanks,' but I want you to edit." And so we did edit, and on Saturday, the show was, I believe, Saturday before the show...which I think was on a Monday, I said...

Q: It was October of 1972, when he was 72 years old.
A: Right, And he came in Saturday morning and he gave me all his accessories. Because he had them from the '20s and the '30s, and we took his clothes and the oldest living dress that he had was from 1932, that I got from a woman in Kansas City. And...so...He gave me his...

Q: But wasn't he then still working for Hattie Carnegie... in 1932? He wasn't?
A: Oh...He was at Hattie Carnegie in 1932. Yes, you're right. And Norman brought the accessories...Simply because, if you're going to show a dress of the thirties, you're not going to put glossy, white kid gloves...That is 1972...So that everything...The shoes. Such a perfectionist. As to the length, the buttons...So that retrospective was truly a very accurate...Because he checked everything. The way it should be shown. Whether it was a mitt, a four inch glove, an 8 button, elbow length, or whatever. The hats, the jewelry...

He came in on that Saturday...He came in around 9:00, and about 1:00 he said, "Ann, here..." (The great Norell!) "Can I run out and get my hair cut?" He went out, and I said, "We'll have hamburgers for you." He was a great hamburger guy, "We'll have lunch for you." Because we weren't stopping, WE had to really get the final part of the show. He came back,...
and I said, "We could just eat you." He looked absolutely the most beautiful man.

Norman was average when he was young. But as he grew older, it showed in his face what a beautiful human being. So we continued accessorizing until 11:00 at night, and he wanted to check with one of his models who was out in the Midwest, and her name escapes me now. I can't think of it.

Q: Yvonne? Because Yvonne married and went to live in the Midwest. She married Bob Presser.

A: That's the model. And he called from my office at 9:00 at night, and she assured him the flight that she was coming on--because he wanted all his models, and I used all Norman Norell models, Showroom models. And the ones that had retired...And as he left, he said, "Ann, my housekeeper is going to be gone tomorrow, which is Sunday. I'm going out to lunch at 12:00, And if David Carter..." who was doing the staging...He said, "If he needs me or wants to change anything, in music or pull something out, you can reach me at the apartment." And that was it. I stayed in New York. Sunday I was working, pulling the show together, at the school, and David Carter called me and said, "You know, I just can't understand it. I can't get Norman. And you know how Norman is. If he says he's going to be at his apartment at 12:00, he's going to be at his apartment at 12:00," And I went over the story about his saying that his housekeeper was out, and he would go out to lunch, and you could get him. And then David called me a second time and said, "I have a premonition something's wrong, because
I cannot get Norman." So he got in a taxi and he went over to Amster Yard ....Of course, on Sunday, trying to get into an apartment is just impossible. And he couldn't find the super. He went next door and asked whether there was anyone who could get in the apartment, that something was really wrong. And finally they did locate the super of Amster Yard, and they opened Norman's apartment, and Dave found him on the floor. He had had a stroke.

In the morning...Monday....It was the most difficult thing for rehearsal for the show that night. Monday night. David Carter broke it to the models and we had mass hysteria. Because everyone was doing this for love. No one got paid a penny. David Carter, the Producer, got us all on stage, and said, "We've got to stop this nonsense. We are going to put together the best show that the City of New York or anywhere has ever seen, I want you to get out there, and I want you to follow me. We don't want anyone crying. We all feel the same," And he put us through a routine. And that retrospective was the most brilliant thing that this city,...There hasn't been a show anywhere, because it was in memory of a tremendous human being. Dr. Cahill, in the morning, asked me if I was going to put the show on or cancel it, and I said, if anyone knew Norman they knew he was show biz, and the show goes on. And I said, "I think if there's some way of getting to Norman, if there's any way of communicating..." And he said there was, because he had feeling in his hand, and Dr. Cahill talked to Norman, saying, "Should the show go on?" And if he understood there was any way of getting the information to him, and he gave him his hand and said, "Press as hard as you can, if the show should go on." And he did. And the show
went on... We did the show at the Metropolitan Museum, and after the show, Stella Blum, who's the curator, wanted to have as many of the Norells as the ladies would give up. And then... In fact, a letter went out to everyone who had clothes in the show... "At any time, when you're going to give it up, so that the Metropolitan Museum would have a complete and a very carefully edited collection of Norman Norells." And practically every year was represented, and practically everything that was in the show went back to the ladies, but in the past years they've gone to the Metropolitan Museum.

Q: Did he ever talk to you about the days when he went to Parsons as a student? Because he apparently went in 1919....

A: He came to Parsons, and he also went to Pratt. At the time, when Norman came to Parsons, it was purely a design school, and he wanted more technical work. So when he graduated from Parsons, he went to Pratt to get the technical work.

Q: And this was when he was 19 years old, because he was born in 1900, right?

A: Yes. He came to Parsons at age 19.

Q: And he got... As you say... He got his design background here, and his technical background at Pratt.

A: Pratt.

Q: Right. Is there... Did he ever tell you anything about his early days? When did he decide he wanted to be a designer?

A: Norman really attended the local schools in his hometown, and then, during World War I, he went to the Kentucky Military
Institute. You asked about where..., When Norman really got interested in design, and what really..., What Norman told me is what stood out, as far as his early introduction to design was the theatre. His great love was the theatre, to the day he died. I think he saw everything on Broadway.

Q: When did he start going to the theatre?

A: His father used to advertise in the local theatre programs, and as a result would get free tickets to all the vaudeville and variety shows, and at an early age--like seven--he would get his parents to take him to the theatre. And some of the neighbors thought it was awful for the family to take this youngster and to stay up so late. And he loved to brag about everything he saw in vaudeville, and I don't think many people realized what a great theatre and stage designer Norman was..., He had..., He did stage designing, lighting, costumes for almost all the great movie actresses of his time.

Q: At approximately what point in his career? When he was in New York, or...?

A: Ah..., No..., From the time he left Parsons, and Pratt, and he did a lot of theatre work before he started with Hattie Carnegie in the thirties.

Q: Well, he started with her in the '20s. Yeah...Right..

A: 1928..., But it was before he really..., Around '20, '21, 22, '23..., During that time was when he really did a lot of work for the theatre. Then he did a lot while he was with Hattie Carnegie, and that seemed to be where all his trouble started with Miss Carnegie...,
Q: Did he ever talk about the time that he actually went into business with Andy Traina, or...?

A: No... He went into business in 1940, and that was when it was called Traina-Norell, and I covered the collections but I didn't have the personal contact until 1950. Then, in 1960, when Mr. Traina had a stroke, and that was when Norman went on his own and opened his own company, and it was... the label read "Norell."

Q: But he had already been working with you at Parsons in your critic's program.

A: While he was at Traina-Norell, yes.

Q: Yes. Right...

A: For almost ten years, before he went into business...

Q: And, have any of his students become critics? For Parsons?

A: Almost all of them.

Q: Who were some of those students?

A: Vicki Tiel, who has a boutique in Paris, has been a critic. Albert Capraro... John Warden, from... a Canadian designer. Dominick Rompollo... Kay Unger of St. Gillian, Michaele Vollbraecht... was in the last class he worked with. And Sandy Slepak, who does costumes for NBC-Burbank, I have to really get my little black book out and...

Q: There were quite a lot of them.

A: A great many young American designers were under Norman Norell. And he never took an Assistant, and so many students wanted to apprentice, and he said he just absolutely didn't know how to use an Assistant,
Norman was an overseer over his production...

Q: He did the accessorizing for his shows?
A: He did, Dressing..., accessorizing... He watched over production. He did the buying, watched colors... Sometimes he would send sequins to Paris two and three times to be redyed. His color ability was incredible. In fact, I remember, one of the remarks I made to Norman one day,... I said, "Norman, you're just not human. You never make a mistake. Please, make a mistake." His taste... His ability to use color... He could... When he'd do a collection, he'd do five bodies, and he'd show 200 pieces. Do you know what kind of a creator it takes to take five ideas and do 200 pieces in coloration, combinations...?

Q: The choice of fabrics...
A: And... the taste... was incredible.

Q: You're saying that his collection was very often five silhouettes and then...
A: Five bodies... Usually... And then there would be 200 variations, or variations of a theme... .

Q: Okay... Thank you... Ann, when you were talking about the sessions of critiquing, did you have a chance to talk to him after the critiquing session? Did you go and have coffee, or something like that?
A: No. This is pretty hard to believe, but whenever we'd have any problems to solve or working with the students, and Norman would say, "Let's go and have coffee," after the critique, we wouldn't go to a famous restaurant or someplace where we should be seen, but we would go to
either a...It was usually a drugstore...For coffee...And discuss the most involved problems. And I don't think many people realized, except Norman, that when he finished a collection, he went over all the minute things that go into putting a collection together. And he used to remark, he said, "I wonder how, so many of these young designers, when they finish a collection, they go off here for a vacation. They go to Europe, Hong Kong, and South America, When I finish a collection, my vacation really is taking my models and going to Europe and buying fabrics for my next collection." He just never stopped. And again, I don't think other people realized, he gave every ounce...He wasn't a very strong person. Every ounce of energy to putting the collection together, and many times he would end up in the hospital for a few days to recuperate. And it was always amusing because he ....I remember one day his coming in to the office...

Q: Your office, At Parsons,

A: My office, And he left after the critique and he called me frantically, and he said, "My God, Ann, what did I do with my sketches? I know I had them all in my pocket, and that's my next collection." And we did find them in the office. And there they were, On regular 10¢ pads that he had scribbled every idea. And he had put it in his pocket...And another thing I'll always remember...is this mangled hat. He had this old hat that was...Maybe it was his security blanket. But this was Norman,

Q: His old hat on his head?

A: Old crumpled hat on his head, and his pockets full of sketches. And he constantly had a gold pen and pencil...He had very
distinct handwriting, and it was these bold sketches, thumbnail sketches...

....And the proportion was there, no matter how small the sketch. The proportion was there.

Q: Well, he was a genius. Of that there is no question.

...Ann, if you were summarizing Norman Norell, how would you say it?

A: The only way I could put it...If there is any such thing as a Jewish saint, Norman was it,

Q: Because he was a warm, loving, giving...human being.

A: The most marvelous, human, warm, kind, understanding, generous human being.