ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRIES
FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

MEMOIRS OF
NORMAN NORELL
FROM VARYING PERSPECTIVES

INTERVIEW WITH
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Publicist

DATE OF INTERVIEW
Thursday, September 2, 1982

INTERVIEWED BY
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Q: Miss Lambert, you knew Norman Norell for a number of years as somebody who was involved with the Council of Fashion Designers...

A: ...of America.

Q: ...of America. In business, generally. So would you tell us what your feelings are about him as a person and about him as somebody who made a contribution to American fashion?

A: I don't think there was any doubt that he was one of the finest people who ever lived, in my knowledge at least. And also he was one of the finest people who ever operated in the fashion industry. And he was one of the reasons that American fashion today has stature throughout the world. He was very gentle but he was very strong. He seldom took umbrage at anything, but when he felt the principles of good design or the essence of...the art essence of fashion were threatened, he was very violent. He could be very violent. There is, of course, the famous anecdote of when he returned his Coty award trophy, his Hall of Fame award trophy, when Rudy Gernreich had been given an award by the jury. He sent the trophy to me with a note saying that he had always cherished the Coty award and the honor of having win it three times and reaching this Hall of Fame, but that he could no longer be proud of having a trophy that would go to someone who would design a coat with one lapel. He was such a purist in fashion, and Rudy had done a jacket with just one lapel that year. Now, I think his head would be spinning.

Q: Could we go back a little bit...Was it just a coincidence that you both came from Indiana, or you didn't know him from Indiana?

A: No, no. I didn't know him at all. He came a number of years
before I did. I think he came here, probably, in...

Q: About 1919...

A: 1919,...And I came in the early thirties. But I had heard of him in Indianapolis, because I went to art school there and, of course, he was already a celebrity when I came. But I don't recall when I was in school he ever came back. If he did, he never came to the school. But I didn't meet him for several years after I came, because I was doing other kinds of work. But the minute I got into the fashion publicity area I did meet him, and found him...

Q: That was about what year?

A: Well, I think I met him about 1940. Maybe '38, or something.

Q: That was before he had gone into business with Mr. Traina, right? Because he went into business with Andy Traina in 1941.

A: Well, then, that's probably when I met him. Because I don't recall knowing him before that. Before he was in on his own. He is one of the founders--and I was too--of the Council of Fashion Designers of America, and he was the first President, and he was re-elected two or three times, I don't remember; we could look it up. And he was totally beloved. He never had any enemies within the Council, and that's unusual in an organization. He did finally....

Q: In an organization of people who are apt to have...

A: ...who are in the same field, I think Geoffrey Beene got mad at him once, and refused to speak to him for a few months. But
that's about all. And we used him as a means of raising money for the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum because...Let's see...In about 1963, we wanted to have matching funds for a grant we got from the National Endowment for the Arts, to help fund the Costume Institute, so we gave a party for Norman and raised the money that way. Everybody came.

Q: When he won his first Coty award, was that the first year that award was made?

A: I think he was the first designer to win the award, which was...it would have been 1941, I think, or '42. And he was the first to be in the Hall of Fame, to get it three times.

Q: Who made the presentation at the first award? Do you remember?

A: I think the Mayor did, because we didn't...We had a ceremony at the Metropolitan Museum, but it was not a fashion show, it was just a ceremony in the Museum. And Grover Whelan, of course, was the person at Coty, he was Chairman of the Board then, and it's my recollection that Grover Whelan arranged for the Mayor...

Q: Who would have been Fiorello LaGuardia at that point...

A: I guess so. I don't remember. But he was always very genial and very impeccable in his business dealings with everyone, and he also had a sense of humor which was...I remember him telling me at one time that he was walking down the street behind a woman who looked just ridiculous because she was so overdressed, and it suddenly dawned on him that she was wearing the complete costume of his that he'd shown on the runway. She had bought the hat, the shoes, the stockings, and everything,
And he said it gave him a terrible shock.

Q: That...What he thought didn't look great...

A: He could be...He could present clothes in a very dramatic way. But he was always very down to earth in telling women how to dress.

Q: Did he ever tell you about himself, growing up, when he decided to become a designer, or anything of that sort?

A: Well, I think so. He...His father, of course, owned a hat store in Indianapolis, and I think he used to go to the theatre...Of course, everyone in our area of the country benefited from the fact, number one, that when he was growing up and when I was too, we had wonderful road companies...Or rather, we had wonderful theatres there. In those days, the New York company would tour with the play, when the engagement in New York closed. So we saw...You know...Nijinsky, and Marilyn Miller and all the big shows...Ethel Barrymore...They came directly to the town. You didn't see the watered down version, or the second company, And I think that he...As I remember, he told me that he adored the theatre and the glamor of it, and the great actors and the great production. The Diaghilev Ballet, the Ballet Russe came out there, and it was a first hand, colorful life because of that. The culture was very definitely stronger than it is today. And I think that must have been what inspired him. I think...Didn't he plan to be a painter?

Q: He went to art school. Yes

A: Yes.

Q: But the information I have is that he really did not find
himself a good enough painter to continue in that, and... On the other hand, he loved costume design.

A: And did he work in the theatre? I've forgotten...

Q: Yes, He worked in the theatre, and he worked for Brooks Costume as well.

A: And for Hattie Carnegie.

Q: Right, But initially his designing was for the theatre, and it would appear that at least he loved that. And then left to go into the making of ready-to-wear apparel. And it would appear as though the theatre had an influence on a number of designers.

A: Yes...

Q: Certainly he was the foremost one.

A: Yes,

Q: A lot of designers... The... How do you think he affected the promoting of clothes? Which, after all, was your primary concern and interest?

A: I think he affected it because he was a gentleman for one thing. He made a very good appearance. He was just the antithesis of the Seventh Avenue image that had been created, of the tough manufacturer. And I think he was one of the first designers to emerge with a glamorous personality. And he was also, in a very quiet, reticent way, very articulate. He knew the subject of fashion and he knew how to speak about it intelligently to the press, which helps.

Q: Did he do much of that? Like talking...

A: He wasn't... He didn't go after it. He never sought publicity.
But he was such a strong presence that he became... I mean, he was just a natural leader. He wasn't flamboyant or anything, but he was just there, in the quiet authority role....

Q: What kind of clothes did he like best?
A: Oh,... Well, you know, very unadorned, and,... Really, you talk about architectural clothing,... He was certainly one of the first to do that. And it was strange that you never felt an influence with him, although I'm sure he respected people like Chanel, and the one time he was influenced by Chanel, he called the collection "Hommage a Chanel." But mostly he worked things out in a sort of rectangular way. He blocked his clothes very much, and then there were long sweeping lines. He never put a lot of fuss on them unless he did a feathered dress or, of course, the sequins, but...

Q: Which were really...
A: Same shape,... The shape was always rather pure and uncluttered. He didn't do ruffled necks, fussy things at all. The fuss was in the ornament...

Q: When he,... That means, really,... If you're talking about architectural clothes, they also were clothes that were very good to sketch, I assume, and that, therefore, a lot of articles about him must have used sketches.
A: Yes.

Q: And,... When,... Do you know the story of his,... the financing of his business when Mr. Traina died and,... or left the business?
A: I might have known it at the time but I don't recall. And I think that gets into an area that would be dangerous to make statements about unless you really do... But I'm sure Bernegger probably knows...

Q: Right...

A: Wasn't Charlie Ballon his lawyer? Did you...

Q: Could very well be... The Nizer firm. It would have been... I mean, Charlie Ballon represented so many people in the industry, he might very well have been...

A: Well, he would know...

Q: Right, Yes... To get back a little bit to the days of the Coty award... Apparently Mr. Norell died just at the time of the retrospective in 1972.

A: Yes,

Q: Could you talk about that a little bit?

A: Well, I wasn't involved in it except just to be on the Committee. So, I think it would be Ann Keagy who would know more about that. That was her...

Q: I thought it was part of the... Wasn't Coty in some way involved in that?

A: No... As I recall, not. Did you talk to Sally Kirkland? Because she was involved... He was never a joiner and didn't go rattling around on committees and things, but when he saw something that was going to further the cause of American fashion, he got behind it 100%, and that's what happened with the Council of Fashion Designers of America. And he was...
so meticulous that when we had fashion shows, he wanted to choose the clothes, he wanted to be part of the committee that chose the clothes, and he defied the tradition that no designer ever went into another designer's showroom. And was welcomed everywhere. He really broke all precedents, just by his honorable attitude and his absolutely...his great integrity as a human being. And I think that's one of the rare qualities of people in business. That they observe the rules of a gentleman in their business life...

Q: So actually you're saying that the Committee of...Was it a committee of editors who chose the award winner? Usually....

A: Well, we didn't have an award winner. We didn't have anything to do with that...

Q: I'm sorry. Yes.

A: We gave big fashion shows for charity, and we gave the shows and we didn't ask...We might have asked a committee of...a couple of editors to come in and look at them after we'd chosen them, but it was something done within the circle of designers, that represented their judgment of their own and other people's clothes. It made a cohesive statement of American fashion for the first time.

Q: And how often was this show done?

A: Well, it wasn't a regular thing. We did them for charities, because the Council of Fashion Designers is organized to help the other arts. And through that, to elevate the stature of American fashion. We raised the first money ever raised for the Kennedy Center in Washington and for the Shakespeare Theatre, for the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan
Museum, for theatre...for fashion wings in museums all over the country. We really were the spearhead...or the Council was...for that, and every fashion show we ever did was to help something else. Because it's not an Honorary society, the Council isn't. They don't raise money for themselves, although they do have a foundation now for needy designers. So we take a little bit from any fashion show that we do...

Q: But you're saying in many cases, if not all, he really took an active participatory role in...the selection...
A: He was actually a leader...
Q: ...in selecting the clothes or approving them...
A: In selecting the clothes. In staging the show. In the organization of the different scenes...He was really extremely strong, but never arbitrary. He was just a very good leader, and could get people together and make a team, which is very rare.

Q: And this was without very much fanfare about him.
A: Yeah...
Q: I, for instance, didn't know that.
A: Yeah...No, he never was a showy person.
Q: But...So then he really did take time from what was an enormously hectic schedule, from what I know, to add another activity....
A: Yes...And he used to go to...He would show up at industry meetings, which lots of designers would shudder away from. Rubbing shoulders with just...manufacturers or volume manufacturers, and so on...
Q: Could you give us an example of one of that kind of thing?
A: Well, when the Dress Institute was going, that was a joint
organization of business of manufacturers and the union, and I did the publicity on that and we used to call meetings

and he'd be one of the few designers who would come. He was very, very conscientious in his relationships with the industry...

Q: Despite the fact that he was such a private person.
A: Yes, ... Very private. And he didn't go out at night. He stayed at home. He wasn't a night owl, ... He would go to the theatre. He loved his apartment with a passion, and he had beautiful things...

Q: He collected Chinese...
A: He collected Chinese, but he also collected 19th Century Regency furniture. That table belonged to him, because it was too big for his apartment. He bought it at auction, and I bought it from him.

Q: Was that an auction here or an auction...?
A: Yes. He was an auction hound. He'd go to the auction every ...

... That was his recreation on Saturday afternoon.

Q: Did he buy much when he went to Europe on his trips?
A: He might have. I don't think he went very much to Europe did he?

Q: Well, he apparently did take the models with him and there are pictures of him...
A: No, ... He went to Japan. I don't think he ever had a show in...

Q: No, he didn't have a show. But he would go to see, as you said, Chanel and...
A: He took the models on a trip, ... Little group of models.
And then they all went to Japan, on a trip that turned out to be somewhat of a fraud... Because he phoned me... It was organized by a Japanese lady, for a big hotel in Tokyo. And they paid all his expenses, and let him take his models with him. And I knew about this woman and I knew she was sort of an operator, and I warned him that it wouldn't be as lavish or wonderful as she had painted, and if he wanted to go just for the trip, fine, but if he hoped for a beautiful show over there, just to be careful. So he telephoned... from Tokyo, very much upset, and said he found out that when he got there no arrangements had been made at all for behind the scenes, for pressing, for— you know— just the normal assistance for the show. And that nobody seemed to be able to make any decisions about it. So I telephoned Hanae Mori, who was not really active in America at all, but she had been honored here through the Silk Association, and she, naturally, knew who he was. And she was wonderful. She closed her work room, and had all her people go over and help them. They just closed up for the day, or two days, or whatever, and got the show on. So... he inspired that kind of loyalty, and courtesy, from other designers.

Q: That's really very interesting, and really very unusual. Because Hanae Mori is a lovely woman, and very special.

A: Yes she is,

Q: Do you know anything about the launching of his perfume? Which, I believe, started in '68?

A: Well, I know, because his association with Charles Revson and Lynn Revson... Are you seeing her, by the way? She'd be wonderful.
Q: Yes, she would be.

A: I think the association he had with those two was very close and warm, and they were so enthusiastic about his clothes that Mr. Revson just decided, when he had the power to do it, that they were going to have a Norell perfume. And then I think it was several years, because ....Lynn could tell you that... But, he must have been very, very long in making up his mind, because he was such a demanding perfectionist when it came to getting what he liked. In that respect, he wouldn't put his name on anything that he wasn't totally proud of. And it was the first designer fragrance, I think, in America. And also a very big success.

Q: Well, I think that Rentner had tried to do a fragrance, but, of course, not on that scale...

A: He had tried it on his own.

Q: Right.

A: It takes a big company....

Q: Yes. And this was apparently an exception to the rule that it takes three years for a perfume to become financially successful....

A: And I guess it's still a success.

Q: Uh huh... Is there anything else that you,... that occurs to you that might be interesting....

A: I was trying to think if I knew anything about his preference in colors or anything like that, I don't think I do.

Q: I know that he never worked with you as a fashion publicist professionally. But you did have some dealings with him, or did some things for him sometimes, Could you tell us about that?
A: Yes. Well... If someone asked to interview him, he would call me up and say, did I think he should do it and what would he talk about. And we'd discuss that. Also, I used him frequently,...Did interviews with him on behalf of the New York Dress Institute, which I represented. And he was a member of the couture group of the New York Dress Institute. So that we had many, many associations, and I think sometimes I helped him slightly with his press releases... But as I remember, he dictated his press releases himself, which were just a statement of what he believed in for his collection...

Q: But I gather he was an articulate person...

A: Yes he was. Very, very direct and succinct in what he said. He wasn't flowery at all, but he knew what he believed in and he knew how to say it.

Q: Thank you very much.