ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

THE FASHION INDUSTRY LEADERS

MEMOIRS OF

NORMAN NORELL

FROM VARYING PERSPECTIVES

DATES OF INTERVIEWS

Alan Levinson - Tuesday, November 9, 1982
Ann Keagy - Wednesday, September 15, 1982
Eleanor Lambert - Thursday, September 2, 1982
Louis Clausen - Friday, October 15, 1982
Denise Linden - Thursday, September 16, 1982
Edna Sullivan - Monday, October 4, 1982

INTERVIEWED BY

Mildred Finger
NORMAN NORELL was an extraordinarily gifted designer and an equally extraordinary human being. The interviewees who discussed him for these memoirs talked of him as though the impact made by him on their lives continues until today. His impact on the fashion world is immeasurable.

Norman Norell was born in Indiana in 1900, and died in 1972. He appears to have been extremely creative, with great taste and superb skills. His standards of quality and craftsmanship were very high.

The clothes he designed and manufactured found their way into the wardrobe of women of taste and money all over the U.S.

He gave freely of himself to students, his employees, and to a vast number of people who never knew the source of kind deeds performed for them by Norman Norell, anonymously. He was a warm, kind, loving, generous human being.
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ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRIES

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

MEMOIRS OF

NORMAN NORELL

FROM VARYING PERSPECTIVES

INTERVIEW WITH

ALAN LEVINSON

nephew to Norman Norell

DATE OF INTERVIEW

Tuesday, November 9, 1982

INTERVIEWED BY

Mildred Finger
Q: Mr. Levinson, this morning it is going to be very interesting to hear from you about the growing up, the birth and growing up in Indiana, of Norman Norell. So, would you tell us what you remember of him and what your father, who was his brother, has told you about him.

A: Most of this information does come from my father. He was six years older than Norman.

Q: Norman was born in 1900, so he was born in 1894.

A: 1894. So he was sort of an older brother. And his earliest recollections were some of the things, of course, that were things that were problems with Norman, and one of the first things he mentioned was that when they went to Methodist Sunday School, he practically... His job was to take Norman, and he practically had to drag... And Norman would... The mother gave them each a penny to contribute in Sunday School. It was a small rural community. It was only 20 miles north of Indianapolis, which is the State capital, but it was definitely a rural type setting because the farmers were the support of the town. And my Dad remembers he would get mad and throw the penny down and not want to go to Sunday School, and things like that. So he had his own ideas at an early age, I'm sure. Also my Dad's recollection was that he himself was interested in sports and things like that, and Norman definitely wasn't. Well, from the beginning he had an artistic bent and I guess some of the boys would call him a sissy or... depending on how you look at the situation, some would say he's artistic, and as it turned out later, he got to be known as artistic. And when he was quite young even, unlike some of the boys, he played with a lot of the girls and paper dolls and things like that, and
that was one of his recollections, and he was definitely very close to his mother. And his mother, of course... was... My father was closer to his father. And my Dad recalled one thing... He was the first boy in the county to have a corduroy suit when he was quite young, and I'm sure that was done through his mother.

Then when they moved to Indianapolis, which was when he was still quite young, he attended school there, grade school, and later he went to high school there. One thing my Dad recalls which I'm sure was carried over later was being on time. The motorman had to come by in the trolley car and stop the trolley car and ring the bell and wait for Norman to come out. He always seemed to be behind schedule. When he started bringing out his lines with Hattie Carnegie in late... also with Traina later... it was always that problem, getting the line done on time. I'm sure it started at a young age. That would have been somewhere around 1910 to 1915.

And, of course, at that time, boys worked in their father's business at quite an early age. Not so much now, in high school... but even before that, my father started working early in the family business, and when the family business moved from Nobleville to Indianapolis, it wasn't a clothing business, it turned into a hat business. Strictly hats and caps.

Q: For men?

A: For men, yes. Strictly hats and caps. And their motto was "$2 hats and $1 caps." That was about 1907, I think the store opened. And my father worked in the store, but my uncle definitely did not like to work in the store. It was a real problem. My father would drag him down.
My grandfather would drag him down, and he would....he had a friend that worked there and neither one of them liked it very well, and they would almost tell people, "Go on, don't come in here." So finally my grandfather put him to work in the store trimming the windows.

Q: Really?
A: Yeah. So that was his first artistic job, trimming the windows.

Q: How old was he then, do you suppose?
A: He was around 14 or 15 at that time. And for some reason he wanted to go to Kentucky Military Institute, and no one knows why, but he did. And once he got down there, it was pure hell, because of all the regulations and the military life, and so he wrote these pitiful letters, if he could just do anything to come home. And his mother relented and brought him home and he finished up at his high school, in Short Ridge High School, which was...at that time there were only three high schools in Indianapolis, and he was quite artistic at that time. My Dad recalled...Although my Dad was long gone by that time, he was in Michigan, the University of Michigan. And he could draw anything. He was just a wonderful......

Q: Norman could draw anything.
A: Norman could draw anything, yes. And his...the school was always...Anytime they wanted some decoration done or wanted some kind of art work done, it was always Norman who was called upon to do that sort of thing. He was always...his pictures were on display. And Short Ridge was the High School in Indianapolis as far as that time. There were a couple
of other high schools, but the nice high school was "Short Ridge High School." And then World War I came along, and he wasn't old enough for that—he was only 17 at the time—but he went out to Fort Harrison and got a job.

Q: Fort Harrison...
A: Fort Harrison... That was... that's still a fort in Indianapolis. It's still an army post, and it's the payroll center for the country. And he worked at the fort, and he earned $5 a day, which at that time was an enormous salary. And my grandfather told everybody in town how the government was wasting their money paying Norman $5 a day, which my Dad told us... But, at that time he was still quite close to his mother and my Dad recalls he always went to L.S. Ayres & Co., which was the big dry goods department store in Indianapolis, and he always helped her pick out her clothes. That's one thing he enjoyed, and she enjoyed doing it with him too.

And then... Well, you've got his history from then. He went to school... art school in New York, the Parsons School, and my Dad does recall that, but not too much about it. He does know that he required quite a bit of support at that time, and his father sent money to him so that he could maintain himself in New York, and this was at the insistence of his mother. His mother was the one who really wanted him to stay in New York and follow what he liked best. Now, I don't know if in your history you have anything about it, but he did make theatre sets at first...

Q: Well, I'd love to hear about it from you. I do have some...
A: Well, I don't know a lot about it, but he did make theatre sets,...

Q: In Indianapolis?

A: No, no, in New York. When he first came to New York. This was some of the work,...

Q: He apparently had an interest in theatre as a very young person,...

A: Very much so. And then....They used to make...Now, I'm not sure of all this, but this is my father's recollection....They did make movies, originally, out on Long Island. Paramount and Warner Brothers,... that was in the early days. That must have been back in the early '20s. Do you know anything about that? Do you recall,...?

Q: Well, I believe...It has been commented on.

A: Well, my uncle designed sets for those, also, for which he was never paid. Back in those days, it was hard to collect money. These fellows would do the work and then not get paid, and that was his situation. So that's when I think he went to work for...You had in your history about the ready-to-wear,...

Q: Yes. He went to work for Charles Armour in 1924, and then he worked for Hattie Carnegie a little bit later on.

A: Well, Armour was very unsatisfactory, because it was sort of a cheap outfit, and he really didn't like it,...He had very expensive tastes, and he really didn't enjoy Armour. That was a necessity. He wanted to get the work, so he did take the job there, but he really didn't
like the work. And this is an interesting thing....I don't know whether you've ever heard this story or not, and I don't know whether Mrs. Sullivan told you this, but my Dad knew the story...He had arranged, before he went with Hattie Carnegie, to set up a custom shop, and I think it was with Gimbel.

Q: I don't know that story.

A: Well, anyway, he went to Jake Gimbel? Would he have been the original one...?

Q: Adam Gimbel?

A: I'm not sure. My Dad wasn't sure of the name. But anyway, he arranged this interview, and he agreed to make clothes. Custom design...to set up a custom design shop within the store...

Q: Adam Gimbel, early on, was at Saks 34th Street, but it was subsequently Saks 5th Avenue....

A: That's where they were going to do it, Saks Fifth Avenue...My Dad's right, That was the information he gave me....You know, my Dad's 88, and I thought, well, I'm not sure of all that...But the story is true. I'm not sure of the people. But, okay, It was Gimbel, and Saks Fifth Avenue, and they were going to make exclusive clothes, designed just for the customers that were there. It would be a custom place...And they set up the machines and they had the thing ready to go, and then all of a sudden Gimbel dropped it and changed his mind, And my uncle was heart sick. But anyway, after that, when he went to work for Hattie Carnegie, and years later, when he was such a success there--the chief designer--this Gimbel would come to see some of the showings and say, "Oh, my gosh, What a
mistake I made. I had him, and he wanted to work for me, and I turned him away." So that was a really funny story.

But, when he went to see Hattie Carnegie....Did you hear that story? About how he went to work for her?

Q: I don't think so.

A: Well, let me tell it, because that's sort of interesting. When she had lost her designer, her chief designer...I don't know who it was, but he had quit or she had fired him or something. She was quite temperamental I guess. And he went to see her. And he waited all day. He took some of his sketches and he waited all day. He just sat there in the office. And finally, about the time she was going to leave, she ran out and said something; said hello to him, or something, and, "We're you waiting to see me?" And he talked to her just briefly and said he would like to apply for this job, for this opening, and she said, "Well, nobody could take his place. It was impossible." And my uncle offered to work...He said, "If I could work for you for several weeks...I'll do it for nothing. And if I ruin any material, I'll even pay for the material I ruin." So, on that basis...That's how he went to work for Hattie Carnegie. Because he was quite young at that time. And Hattie Carnegie said, "Well..." That sounded good to her. She was a hard nosed business person as well as cranky....But he offered to do that, and that was all he needed. Once he got started, then she was delighted.

Q: That is a good story.

A: It was interesting. And he worked for her I guess for...does your history say 12 years? Is that about right?
Q: I think it was nine years.
A: Nine years. Okay. Nine... From there on, you know the history pretty well, because Edna Sullivan gave you that story. And she was with him quite a while, and Traina... It was a good relationship with Traina, although he was hard to get along with. And my uncle really wasn't very good at business. He just wasn't. But he needed someone like Traina to come in and set up and run the business part of it, and that was a break for him, really. And all his life he was always... He made a lot of money with Hattie Carnegie and with Traina, but he spent a lot of money, and he never had much money. He paid taxes, too. He was a bachelor all his life, so he was, you know, just a... my grandmother left him quite a bit.... Properties.... Some property in Florida and different...
Q: That was his mother...
A: His mother, Yes... Did I say my mother? I meant his mother.
Q: No, you said grandmother.
A: Yeah, His mother, Right. And she had always thought that property was the place to invest in, and whenever she had any money from her husband, she always invested it in property, and she did go to Florida a lot. So... but he spent a lot. I mean, he would sell the property and then spend the money. So he really... When he went with Traina, it worked out a lot better, And I used to..... When I was.... This was quite a bit later, When I was in the Navy in World War II, I was stationed in Philadelphia in an OTC school, and that's when I got to know him fairly well. I used to come up here to New York at least once or twice a month.
and he would always have theatre tickets for me, and I would go to dinner with him. And then he would go to the hospital.....He did volunteer work in a hospital, during the war. Did you know that?

Q: No.

A: You didn't know that. He just killed himself. Every weekend...He was too old for the draft, and he felt like he should be doing something, so he did volunteer work every week, in the hospital. He emptied bedpans and everything....It didn't include any office job or anything. It was really just hard work....But he didn't mind it. That's what he wanted....So he never really did go to the shows with me, but I would bring a friend up or something, and the theatre tickets were always there and they were always third or fourth row center. They were always great tickets....

Q: Isn't that wonderful?

A: Oh, yeah. So he was really a fan of the theatre, that's for sure. And he used to....When my grandmother, his mother, was living, he used to come home every Christmas....And, of course, he was busy. He was so busy....here in New York, and he didn't have a lot of time to spend, but he always would come home for maybe a day or two, and we used to kid him. It seemed like the visits were so short, that it seemed like, when he started flying, later maybe he'd just fly over and wave at us from the plane, his visits were so short...But he did enjoy getting home for Christmas. And he would spend Christmas with us. And this went on, I would guess, the period of time from, oh, the middle '20s till even after World War II
some. Then, when his mother died, he really didn't come home much anymore.

Q: When did she die? Do you remember?
A: Oh....

Q: After the war?
A: Oh, yeah. It was after the war. It was after...I guess it was around 1955, something like that. Because my children, his grand-nieces and nephews...I had several children who were born, and they got to know him slightly. So that would have been in the late fifties. So he came home until 1960, say. Maybe 1960.

But our business was such that we used to come to New York, twice a year, and we would always have dinner with him, and he would....

Q: When you say "we," do you mean you and your brother?
A: My brother. Yes, I have two brothers, and sometimes one and sometimes the other...But I usually always came and one of my brothers would come. So we did keep in close touch with him. But as for him coming home, actually, he didn't come home too much after his mother died.

Q: When you were in New York, did you get to see your uncle's apartment?
A: Yes, occasionally my wife would come with me. Maybe once every two or three years, and on those occasions she would love to go out and see his apartment or his town house, and it was unbelievable. I'm not very knowledgeable on artistic things, but of course she knew a lot more than I did, and she would describe everything to me, and it....He
did have a... When he would go to Europe he would collect all these things, and this had taken place over many years. This wasn't just a one or two year venture. So he did have a houseful of things that were quite valuable.

As it turned out later, after he passed on... One thing I might mention too..., I forgot this..., When I was in the Navy, and I would come to his apartment to visit, he had a double apartment, really. And he had a bachelor, but the bachelor had passed on at that time. The bachelor was quite musical..., I remember his name was Alan Arthur, and so I always got his apartment. He had... He was no longer living with my uncle. And so, I really had a deluxe suite of rooms there for the time I visited New York. And...

But I never did see my uncle much. He wouldn't go to the plays with me because he was extremely involved in hospital work, and he was a volunteer all through the war. He was too old for the draft, but he was a volunteer. And he did everything in the hospital. Not administrative work, but changing bedpans, and any kind of work that he was required to do. And it was... He was extremely humanitarian in everything..., every aspect of his life, and I remember him as being quite nice.

Q: You mention that... I mean, he was a great humanitarian and not terribly..., a terribly knowledgeable business man. For instance, what happened at the time of the perfume negotiations with Revlon?

A: Well, it happened that I was in New York at that time, and he told me about Revlon. They wanted to make an arrangement with him, to pay him a royalty fee, based on how long he lived. Or, as contrasted, as long as they sold the perfume. And my advice to him was that, "Well,
you don't really have any family, and you need the income as much as you...

...You should use your income yourself, so why not make the contract for as long as you live, which would be for a considerably higher figure."

But unfortunately it was bad advice, because he passed on within a year, I believe, after that. So, he did not realize too much out of those Revlon royalties.

Q: And you really did not have any great awareness of the fact that he had, in..., through his business, perhaps... Really become a millionaire. And when you came for his funeral, I believe that there was an incident...An anecdote that was kind of interesting.

A: Well, my father was always a businessman, all his life. And my brothers and I had been brought up in the business. The retail business is a lot different than artistic design in New York. And so my father always had the idea that my uncle never had any money. Which...He made a lot of money all through his life, but he did spend a lot. He was a bachelor. He paid high taxes, and everything. So, it was true. He really wouldn't accumulate a lot of money. At least we didn't think so. And so when we came to New York--my Dad was ill at the time and unable to come--So he gave us $2,000 and said, "You may need this to bury him. I hate to say it, but he probably doesn't have any money. He died..." And when we came to New York, the first thing we talked to was the lawyer, and he informed us that Norman was worth a good deal of money, probably a couple of million dollars. And this was a great shock to us and surprise, And part of it had been the year's contract with Revlon, and a lot of it was locked up in his art objects
that he'd collected throughout the years when he went to Europe. He went to Europe regularly, all through his life. And every time over there he spent time in getting ideas for clothing and picking materials. Mainly getting materials. That was what his trips to Europe were for. He liked their materials. But also his time was spent in art museums and in auction places in Europe. He spent a lot of time there also.

Q: Could you give us...sort of round up of your recollections and reminiscences about your uncle?

A: Yes...Let me sum up my recollections, or about my relations to him or family relations to him, were always great. He really had warm family ties and he really loved to come back to Indianapolis. But he was extremely hard working and the business was very demanding, and he didn't get back as much as he wanted to. But he really did enjoy...his family and he did enjoy...I don't think he ever turned into what I call a "typical New Yorker," where he was all, you know, out to make money. I don't think he was that way, I think he was first and foremost an artist. And he did think about other people. You know, things he did all his life. He was interested in the Parsons School, and during the war the hospital, and I'm sure he was deeply interested in other people, and that's how I really remember him.

Q: Thank you very much,