ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRIES

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

MEMOIRS OF

NORMAN NORELL

FROM VARYING PERSPECTIVES

INTERVIEW WITH

DENISE LINDEN

Mannequin

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INTERVIEWED BY
Mildred Finger
Q: Denise, would you tell us about your own experiences when you worked with Norman Norell, and also those of the other mannequins, who were with him.

A: It was an extraordinary experience. Norman always had four girls, as opposed to other designers, who may have used 20 for shows. There were four girls who were a very integral part of his collection, and he would decide, for example, that he was going to start the fall collection. He would book—at that point in time it was designed for an hour and a half for her fittings—then Deborah would come, then Gunn would come, and then I would come. At that point in time, I was with him, I modeled for him as a free lance model in...I started in 1968, '67, I'm not sure. And then I used to come in for my fittings.

In 1970, when he asked me to come with him full time, I began to realize how he actually worked. For example, if he was doing a new silhouette, he would do...Each girl had a coat that represented that silhouette. If he was doing a new suit, we each had a suit. His collections generally always had a theme to them. So every girl would get a part of whatever new theme he was introducing in that collection.

The fittings were extraordinary, simply because they were very...I was thinking about him this morning, and I realized why he was such a tremendous success. He was totally professional. He never wasted time. The fittings were wonderful. We would go in, The coat...if it was a coat, was almost finished. Maybe he'd move the collar a quarter of an inch, an eighth of an inch. But by the time that particular sample
was on you, the collection was...His collections were fabulous in the sense that he had a direction, and by the time the samples were, you know, ready to be fitted, it was one, two, three. He'd move the buttons, he'd move the collar, you know, shorten something an eighth of an inch, and it was over. He would discuss...During fittings, it was wonderful, because he would discuss...He was terribly interested in everything that was happening. I mean, you weren't standing there thinking, "Do you love this coat? Do you hate this coat?" We would go in...He was very sure of himself, very professional. He knew he was good. And he would talk about Broadway. He would talk about food. He would talk about...Anything that had come up in the newspapers. He was an avid reader of the New York Times. He read the obituaries which was hysterical. He would come in and tell us, "This one died," and "something happened," and loved funny stories. He told us crazy things about himself as a kid.

Q: Good.

A: He was very open minded that way. I remember asking him how he decided he wanted to be...You know, how you do with...And he said he was always interested, really, in what his mother wore. And then he came to New York. His father was very upset, but took him to New York. He found an apartment...

Q: That was 1919, I believe.

A: His father was wonderful to him. He found an apartment and started to school. And...I think he went to Hattie Carnegie to work and then by boat to Europe...All these stories. And you really looked forward to going in there. It was wonderful. And to work for him was incredible,
The four girls...Every girl had her turn. We had our own shoes, our own stockings, our own jewelry. And, I must say, I never felt like I was working. Or that we were working hard. I felt it was a privilege...A privilege to know him. And when I was with him all the time, I was one girl who got up in the morning and looked forward to going to work.

Q: Did you all go to lunch with him?
A: Yes, sometimes we all went. In other words, if he had fittings, and the models were there, he used to take us to...Oh, he loved this restaurant on 46th Street, or we'd go to Madame Romaine's for omelets. Yes. He took all the models. In other words, if we were working on a collection we'd all go, if not, and he wasn't doing a collection, he and I would go out to lunch every day.

Q: In other words, you worked for him full time,
A: Yes, That's right. I think at this point in time I was talking about going to look at fabrics in Europe with him, and he said to me, "You know..." He had a reputation...In other words, he was Norman Norell and I believe he knew he was Norman Norell in the sense that everybody perceived him. And it was wonderful to watch the people in Europe when he would come. They all, each and every one, had a tremendous respect for him. We used to go to this lovely lady in Milan, that he found, and her name was Suzy Gandini, and I tell you, she was...She used to...Women reacted beautifully to him. And in another case, when we were in Milan, I know he went to a firm...And it was new...It hadn't been in the United States; in other words, they hadn't had representatives here at that point. I think Mr. Norell found that source. It was called Agnona, which is the finest woolen mill in Milan. And Mr. Llorani was the man who owned it and ran it,
and he adored Mr. Norell. They had an affinity, because they both adored beautiful fabrics. He would take Mr. Norell through the looms to see how he was weaving and stuff like... And so forth... And people thoroughly enjoyed his visits.

Q: Did you also go to Zurich? Did you see Gustav Zumsteg?
A: Yes we did. As a matter of fact, Mr. Zumsteg came to Milan... I remember meeting Mr. Zumsteg in Milan. His mother had a... I believe... a beautiful restaurant.

Q: The Kronenhaller... in Zurich.
A: I never can remember that name... And it had the most incredible paintings. And Mr. Norell was telling me that his mother wore Balenciaga... She had a Balenciaga black dress, and that was her sort of uniform. And he was fascinated... He loved... I must say, he knew good food, but his diet was very simple. He ate very simply. And he lived simply, but he always was surrounded by beauty. His apartment in New York was incredible. You know, so often people who have beautiful taste designing... You think, well, maybe... I wonder what their homes look like. His home was a joy to go into. And comfortable as well as beautiful. And he was... He was interested in so many things. He knew about furniture. He would tell you about different periods of French furniture. I remember the time we were going through Paris, and we were taking a taxi across the Place de la Concorde and he said to me, "This is where Marie Antoinette got it." He had a wonderful sense of humor. Really wonderful. Loved animals.

You know, it's hard to say. It wasn't working for him... I guess we all... And I'm sure every model would tell you that it's true...
guess we felt Norman was like a father. And he always referred to us as...

"Denise, are the kids going to lunch? Where are the kids? What time is Yvonne coming?" Whatever, I think we were his children. I think that's how we probably all felt. He was a father figure. And...As well as a friend... I mean, it was never a boss and employee relationship of any kind. And I think...I suppose everybody knows...When we worked for Mr. Norell, every season we were allowed to have one outfit of his, that he would give us. And then we could buy them at very little. Whatever it cost, I think, to make. So, I mean, we were all walking around in Norells. And we felt terrific. It was a fabulous experience.

But I hope that people...I enjoyed his genius, and I loved the idea that he was, you know, fabulous, and the kind of craft that he had. But I loved him as a person. And I missed him terribly when he died. I was very...We used to...I remember that he had gotten a haircut, and we were sitting...He had taken me to J.G. Melon's for...He loved hamburgers. Hamburgers and mashed potatoes, And he had just gotten his hair cut, and I said, "Oh, you're so handsome." And he said, "Handsome I'm not. I look neat." I said, "No, you look wonderful." And that was Saturday night. We had worked all day at Parsons...He was putting the shoes and the accessories with the clothes.

Q: This was getting ready for the...
A: For the retrospective in 1972.

Q: '72. Right.
A: And he said to me, "I will call you tomorrow." We used to
talk to each other a lot on the telephone...

Q: This was on Saturday?

A: This was on a Saturday. It was a Saturday night. I remember it so well. And he, you know, he was such a gentleman. He lived on 49th Street in Amster Yard and I lived on 85th and Madison, and he used to love the luncheonette across the street from me for the hot fudge sundaes. And he said... Anyway, we were leaving Melon's, and he said, "And now I'll take you home in a cab." And I said, "Mr. Norell, you go home, and I can go home in a cab." And he said, "No, I'll take you home to the door, to see that you're okay." And he said, "I won't call you tomorrow. We'll rest. I'll meet you Monday in the luncheonette right across the street and we'll have, you know, our coffee and whatever." And that was that day. And that Monday, I don't know... I often think why I did not call him. But nevertheless... I miss him. I miss him as a friend more than anything else. And he was wonderful to talk to. You know what he had which I adored? He came from the Midwest. He was born in Indiana, and he had that Midwestern quality... He was sensible, and he also never got... He never got terribly inflated with himself. I mean, he was... He was a genuinely lovely human being, with good values. And he had his... He was a devil too. I mean, I remember saying to him one time... He was telling me that he had made a lot of money when he went to Carnegie, and it was before taxes, so I said to him, "What did you do with all your money?" And he said, "I spent it and I had a wonderful time!" He bought furniture. He bought... He had beautiful china. He had wonderful, you know, silverware. I must tell you, everything he
touched had style. Someone said to me, "Do you suppose he was born with it?" And I have to say I think he was. He just kind of instinctively knew what was the right thing, and what was the most beautiful thing. And he was so good to us, he really was.

Q: Did he talk about his own family, since you mentioned Indiana?

A: Yes. He talked... He was obviously very... not well as a young man. Young boy. He was sickly. He said to me, "As a matter of fact, I was a spoiled brat." He adored his mother, and I think he took her to Venice with him, and I think she traveled with him, but I must say, he always said, "I gave my father a hard time, and he was a very good man." He was very good to him, and he was very understanding. I mean, I thought that was such a nice story, for him to come, you know, to New York... And I said to him, "Did your mother know who... in other words... who you were in the industry?" And he said, "No, I think she knew I made very nice clothes but she had no idea of the kind of success, or what the industry, certainly, thought of him." But he said, "That's fine." And he used to go home for Christmas holidays to his brother's house. And he would talk about... He had two nephews and... I must say... When we did talk, most of the time, he would tell me about his earlier years. About the boat trips. About working at Carnegie. He would talk about movies actors and actresses he knew. Jean-Louis. As a matter of fact... Now, I don't know which studio it was, whoever owned the one that Jean-Louis finally went to... The man who owned it might have been Cohn, I'm not familiar with...

Q: Harry Cohn,
A: Was it Harry Cohn? Came to New York and said to Norman, "I want you to come and work for me at the studio." And Norman said, "Look, I'm not good with bosses. I have to be on my own, or whatever. But I have a friend who I think would be terrific." And that was Jean-Louis. And they remained friends for a long time. I remember when we went to California, Jean-Louis came to see him. And he was very close with Jimmy Galanos. He respected Jimmy's work. He had his friends for a long, long time. And a lovely little...

Before I came to know him, and I know he used to go to Schraffts, and meet all his cronies for lunch. They had a big group of lunch people at Schraffts. I don't know...It's very hard...I'll tell you one thing that I think people should realize. There is...There was a reason for Norman's success. He would love to tell you...I thought he was brilliant. Not, maybe, book smart, but he was a great professional. He knew what he was doing. He was a severe critic of himself. He was...He was a very hard worker. And I said to him one time, "What do you enjoy most about it?" And he said, "You know, I really enjoy going to work. I enjoy doing the collections." It made him nervous as heck, but he loved what he did. And I think that he...

The reason he was such a success was that he loved it so much, he was very, very good at it. And he worked very, very hard. Because I see, you know, people now that...And he cared. He cared about a lining as much as he cared about the outside of a coat. It took us hours to pick out buttons. Not because he was indecisive, but he would find the right buttons. Every,...every detail. He was very, very careful of that. And...I learned a lot from him. I just
cannot tell you what a beautiful human being he was.

Q: You used to go to his tailor....

A: Yes. And as meticulous as he was about us and the fittings... We used to have to stand on his desk, and he used to hang a plumb line down our backs. And one day he said to me, "Do you want to go to the tailor with me?" And I said, "Oh, I'd be delighted." I wanted to go anywhere with him. I just loved his company. And I couldn't believe it. We get to the tailor, and he was having a coat made. And I thought Mr. Norell was going to stand and let the man take his measurements. He has the coat on, he bends over, and he puts his hand like sort of in the middle of his knee and says, "That's kind of where I want it." He took the coat off and that was the end of the fitting, I said, "Mr. Norell, you're so particular about us..." And he said, "I just want to look all right,"

He had... He had wonderful stories. I must say... And he was always cold. He always had his muffler wrapped around him and his little hat and he had a delicious sense of humor. Really delicious. He used to say funny things.

Q: Do you remember when he first got together with Mr. Traina... There was a story about it...

A: Yes. He had decided to leave Carnegie, and Mr. Traina... that was Anthony Traina, heard about him, however, and he called him up, and he said to him, "Mr. Norell?" "Yes, Mr. Traina," He said, "Look, I'd like to meet you, I think I have a job for you." And Mr. Norell said to him, "Well, where will I meet you?" And he said, "There's Schrafft's..."
I think it was 12th or 13th Street on 5th Avenue... And Mr. Norell said to him, "Well, Mr. Traina, how will I know who you are? I've never met you." And he said, "That's okay. I have a red carnation. You'll know who I am." Mr. Norell goes down. He meets Mr. Traina. And he...he respected him. He liked Mr. Traina. And he said Mr. Traina said to him, "You can have it two ways. Either we go as Anthony Traina and I'll give you more money. Or, we go as Traina-Norell, and I'll give you your name and less money." So Mr. Norell said, "No, I want my name." And he said, "Fine." I think they got along fairly well. I know he felt very bad when Mr. Traina was...became ill, or whatever.

Norman always said, "I want it..." I'll never forget when his perfume came out, and it was such a fabulous success. He said to me, "You know something, Denise? All my life I had my own business. And now, maybe, I'll have a little money," And...You know...Just at that period...1972, his perfume was a big success. He was going to move...He was looking at an apartment, I remember. It was somewhere on Madison Avenue. I think it was 79th Street. But we went to...We looked all up and down Fifth Avenue...And his life was really going to be, at that point, terrific...And he was all settled. But he used to talk about his careers and things...I just...

Q: But he was 72 when he died.
A: 72 when he died,

Q: And he had apparently done what he wanted with his life. I mean, he loved work and he did his work, and that was what meant a lot to him...
A: Yes.