ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRIES

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

MEMOIRS OF

NORMAN NORELL

FROM VARYING PERSPECTIVES

INTERVIEW WITH

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Physician

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INTERVIEWED BY

Mildred Finger
Q: Dr. Cahill, could you just tell us when you met Mr. Norell, and what the circumstances were, and how long you knew him and anything that comes to your mind.

A: I met him about 1965, and I met him because he was referred to me by another physician for a medical problem at the time, and actually the way I became closer to him was that he called back, say, three or four months later, and I remember refusing to see him, saying that the ethics of medicine mandate that a patient referred by another physician go back to the original physician. And so I said, no, I wouldn't see him. And he got into some problem medically, and the physician asked me if I would see him again, and gradually I remember him saying to me, "It's a free country and I can see who I want." And so he asked the other physician to turn the records over to me and I assumed his care. He had a fair range of medical problems which I think everybody knew. His husky voice was a reflection of previous surgery. But he was a very, very stoical individual and very calm and uncomplaining person. And I recall, without going into his medical problems, there were many episodes where he would call on Monday morning, for example, in somewhat desperate straits, and I would say, "For goodness sakes, why didn't you call me?" Because it started on Saturday, and he'd say, "I didn't want to bother anybody over the weekend." He was a person who thought often not only of your leisure as a physician, over the weekend, but indeed of your secretaries. He'd always bring gifts to the secretaries. So I first knew him medically....

Q: Incidentally, my records show... Just so that we have a
little bit of background on this...that starting in his early childhood he did have a lot of medical problems. He was born in 1900 and died in '72. But nonetheless, throughout his early days he did have medical problems and was very stoic about them...

A: Well, in his adult life as well. And I think all of the other physicians who cared for him were always impressed by this; by his stoicism and by his ability to accept serious medical problems without talking about it to other people, or without complaining, and continuing to do his work. He was a much harder individual than his slight frame would have you believe. And...

Anyway, I got to know Norman through medicine. We shared a number of interests in beautiful things, I traveled as part of my practice and got into some international work, having interests in Chinese and Asiatic art, and I would come back and discuss those things. When my wife and children would go away for the summer, we started, in the mid-'60s, having dinner two or three nights a week, and it would be mostly talking, on art, on movies, on furniture, I remember going to a restaurant one day and his pointing out to me why that dress was an ugly dress. "Can't you see how it was made? Cheaply, and,..." I had lived all my life and never focused on a dress. It just wasn't something that if you're not trained to do, you would really focus on, like a work of art, Same with a dress! Why a dress or a coat is well designed.

I also took care of an inordinate number of people that Norman, always anonymously, paid for their medical care and sent on. These
would be seamstresses and buttonhole makers and out of work models and friends in his own social group who were on the down. And he would always send people up and always insist that they not know who was paying the bill. Sometimes in order to save their self respect he would say, "Send them a very modest bill, and I'll pay the rest." That went on until the day he died, and there are still many of these people that I do care for now, who ....Respecting all his wishes...I've never divulged to them...that he did set up a $15 office visit which I maintain for the people because there's no way they could do anything else.

Over the years, as I say, we became closer friends as well as physician/patient relationship, and he would call me oftentimes to tell me that he was going to the opera with someone that he didn't particularly like to go with, and he would call me at...in between acts..."Oh, what am I going to do? How am I going to get out?" But it was a relationship to... It was always done with humor. He impressed...There was this boy from Indianapolis who was a stage/set designer, or whatever he was, and grew up to be really a very shy and retiring person. And when he got caught into these sort of social, hyper affairs, he not only didn't enjoy it, but he had something even better. He could see the humor in it. And he'd share that humor of going with some person who is impressed by their material success in the world and the Rolls Royce would break down. And he would get more joy out of that I think than selling two more dresses,

He was a generous person not only...particularly to those he knew...He had a very deep concern. If there was a change in his business style...After he'd gotten into making very high priced clothes, he used to
tell me if he was doing it all over it isn't necessarily what he would have done. He would have taken a different path. But by the time I met him, he was very much a captive of his own success. And his clothes, he had become very well known, and he had a very good sense that if that changed, it would alter irrevocably his ability to keep the people that worked for him for so many years employed. He used to say to me that some of the people who were working with him wanted to...I remember he said, 'They want to put out raincoats. They want to put out galoshes.' And the pressure to do that...

Q: That was the licensing of his name...

A: Well, at that time (and this is something that you'll get better from someone else), although his name was there...He had some major financial backers. I think there were some bankers in Cincinnati, as I recall, or it might have been Columbus--it was somewhere very unlikely--who owned a significant percentage of Norman's business. And there were certain pressures to really make more money quickly, and Norman could see beyond that, and he'd say, "If we do that, it will damage the real basis of my success, and that is the ability to put out good quality year in and year out." But the thing that always impressed me as a physician was that his concern was very genuine, as, say, you get to the age of 65--and he died at 72--those six or seven years, he was not unmindful of the spring show or the fall show, and he would be very happy if it went well, and he'd get depressed or sad if it wasn't reviewed well and showed personal satisfactions or disappointments in that. But he was equally concerned about maintaining a job for all these people that worked for him. He was...And
I remember many of his concerns about these raincoats or galoshes were that that would cause this buttonhole lady, who had been with him all these years, to be out of work, And he had a very beautiful concern for other people. In the last few years of his life, the perfume that bears his name became the vehicle, I think, for the type of security that he almost needed. But then I'm not his accountant or his lawyer or anything else, so I can't...He was not poor by any means, and he had a nice home, but he was not really wealthy at all as many people would imagine Norman Norell would be. And the perfume, and the success thereof, brought him a type of security to make certain that no one could use his name inappropriately. I recall at one time he was actually going to...thinking of retiring, and he talked about what he would do. And he was not free to use his name...For example, to open a small boutique in a "retirement town..." I'll put it vaguely because it would give a clue as to why he was going to retire and where and I don't think I should. That's confidential.

But he wasn't permitted to do that. His name was part of the company, so until the perfume came along...The perfume was also a source of shared joy, it did bring him a lot....I say "shared joy" because Norman used to come in almost every day, literally, for a year, and say to me, "Kevin, smell this," and I would sniff it, and then he'd say, "I'm coming back in the afternoon," and I'd smell it in the afternoon and I'd say, "That's too strong," or "That's too weak," or, "I can't smell it in the afternoon." And it was a wonderful example, again, to me, of how little so many of us know about so many fields that surround us. I knew nothing
about perfume, but I learned in a year the difference between a scent that was strong in the morning and had no lasting power. Or, just as bad, it lasted too long and you didn't have to put the perfume on the next day, and so it was important to have one that was just right. And then he came to, even, the making of the boxes. I remember Norman designed those boxes, the Norell boxes, himself. He used to go down to the apartment on 49th Street, all the designs on the table and work...

I didn't mention to you a story that I think captures much of Norman, to me. It was on Christmas Eve. A very cold, snowy day, I remember. And I was to get some pearls for my wife. And Norman, being my person in fashion and design, I called Norman and said, "Norman, where do I go to get pearls?" And he took me to a place on 5th Avenue, somewhere, it was up on the third or fourth floor. And we eventually...after debating on the cost of the pearls, selected a strand of pearls. And we came down, and it was just about sunset and we were standing out on the corner and it was very cold. I remember the wind blowing a great deal. A young man came up to me and said that he had just gotten married, and his obvious young bride was standing a few steps back, and he was from Iowa, or someplace way out in middle America, and had come to New York. And he wanted to get a gift for his young bride, something at one of the stores, and he was asking which store you go to here--Altman's or Bergdorf Goodman's or Saks--and how do you know which store to go to? And I said, "Well, I'll ask a man who knows the stores." And I looked over, and I said, "Norman, where should they go? He wants to get a gift for his wife?" And he said, "You tell them to go over to 'Martha's.'" I think it's on Park
Avenue...But it's a store that used to handle his dresses. "And they have some very good things." So I wrote it down for this young man and he went off with his young bride, to Martha's. And Norman stepped into the lobby of a building, and he got on the phone and he said to Martha's, "You give that young couple who are coming in one of my dresses, and that will be a Christmas gift to them." And that was just a little vignette on a snowy evening in the fifties or sixties, and you can see that this man, who was very well known—nobody will ever know. In fact, he said not to give it to them for free, but for a very low price—$50—and say that it was on sale. Because that would not make them feel embarrassed in front of the bride, and he would look like a hero because he got this wonderful buy, that just happened to be close.

Q: You know, I'm just interested in something...It's very unusual, isn't it, to become so close to a new friend, at the age of 65?

I know...

A: Yes and no. I can't say that I have many, many close friends, in or out of medicine. In fact, as a physician, one often tries to keep distance from your patients, both socially and certainly emotionally. It's very important to do so. But on the other hand, medicine is a very privileged field in which you can become much more close to a person than any other discipline that I can think of. And you can see a person...particularly one who has a significant illness...They're more open, their major concerns that they share with you...Norman knew...He died of a stroke, which in a way was a blessing, because to die of a malignancy, which he
had...would have been muchmore painful. But Norman faced these things and I came to have great admiration for him. For whatever reasons.....
I wouldn't say he was a lonely man in the sad sense, but he was a man who had preserved his own privacy and shared his innermost thoughts, I guess, with very few people. But for whatever reason, he decided that he trusted me, or wanted to share those with me. He did, and we became closer than I ...I have become close to a few other patients, but in a busy practice I can count them on, you know, one hand.

Q: Your children, with whom he also apparently had some rapport?

A: We had five sons, and Norman used to come down...As I mentioned to you, to our beach house. And he's dead ten years now. But the children remember him well enough. We had a very busy house of five boys. They still refer to the downstairs bedroom as "Norman's room," where he used to stay. Yes, he felt very comfortable. And most times, in fact, although he would come up to the occasional dinner party that we would have, we're not really terribly socially active or involved in....Once every couple of months we'll have people for dinner. But Norman would come up much more often. He would just stop in on a Thursday night for whatever was left over, and sit and talk, and we would be together a great deal during the summer, just because we enjoyed one another's company. There were medical reasons, as I say, that were ongoing that would maybe cause me to see him. But it was the pleasure of his company that.....

Q: And he apparently did talk to you quite a lot about his
business, even though, in theory, you didn't know terribly much about things like perfume and packaging...

A: I knew nothing about any of those things. I think I probably knew more about his business at the end... I don't say that with any pride. Yes, we did talk a great deal about those things that mattered in his life, and that included, certainly, his business, to which his name was attached. But to which he, as I say, was very loyal. He employed many people. Yeah, I knew very much about...

He was a remarkably open person. For example, even with brothers and sisters, I would not normally know what their income is, or what their debts are. That was the type of thing, for whatever reason that Norman always felt comfortable discussing. And I'm obviously, not going to discuss it now, nor have I ever. But yes, it was an unusual relationship.

Q: I'm sorry... But when you said he was discussing brothers and sisters, are you saying...

A: No, I'm saying I come from a large family and I can't think of my own brothers and sisters telling me how well they've done last year, or all the problems they're having. And yet Norman... I can't say instantaneously, but as our relationship evolved, and certainly for the last five or six years of his life, I... He would talk a great deal to me... Not compulsively... It was just a pleasant thing. And for whatever reason, he felt very open and comfortable in discussing things that are normally very private. And he knew that I had respected the confidences that he had to have in a medical setting, before...
Q: When he had his stroke, on October 15th of 1972, as I have in my facts here, he had his stroke the day before the show, is that right? And then died about 10 days later. Did he know anything about the show actually taking place?

A: I think it was a Sunday morning, that's my recollection, because I know we were out at the beach, and he called me at the beach, and literally had the stroke while he was on the phone. And his voice was changing. He was saying, "K-e-v-i-n, I c-a-n' t g-e-t t-h-e w-o-r-d-s..." And it was becoming garbled, and I sensed right away what was happening. I hung up the phone and called somebody in New York to get an ambulance over there, and I got in the car and started to head in. And they had taken him to Bellevue, I believe, as the first stop. It might not have been. Maybe he went directly to Lenox Hill. I honestly forget where it happened. He must have gone directly to Lenox Hill. I don't think they would have moved him, because he had a massive blowout, and I don't think he knew anything from that point on. In fact I'm sure of it. He did last ten days, but there wasn't a prayer in the world that he would survive. And once we knew what we knew from doing the necessary tests,...This was the days before C.T. scan, but there are other tests that one does...And clearly showed massive, massive haemorrhage. But he had...He did last a few days thereafter, but it was... I didn't go to the show, but my wife went. He didn't know much. Too many people knew our relationship and knew he was in the hospital and this was going to be an inappropriate time. So I never really did see the show, which I regretted. I enjoyed going,...It's the only time in my life I've ever done that,...going to some of his shows that they have in the fall and the spring.
As a person who had not been in the field, I found him tremendously professional, an exercise in the display of many months work in an afternoon. And then an awful lot rolled on how you were seen by the media and the press and the salesladies who came by...

Q: Well, his..I don't think he ever had a collection that was not successful. He might have had one that was slightly less well received but basically, certainly in the last ten years, all very, very successful.

A: I think we may have...My secretary may have,.get out from one of his files, a eulogy that I gave at his funeral.

Q: I would like to have it...

A: Because that captured...

Q: Could you remember any of it? I mean, I'd really like to have it on the tape,

A: I can't remember it...But...I just remember saying, he called me the night before and said,,Norman's brother...He had a brother out in the Midwest, And the brother had come in, and Norman had actually expressed to the brother a number of things about the funeral that were very interesting. I don't know if anyone has talked to you about this already, but they had Bobby Short play Noel Coward and Cole Porter songs, And they had white lilies and this apparently,...I didn't plan this...I think Norman and the brother had actually talked about what was his taste...It was a non-denominational service in a church up on Lexington Avenue and 80th Street with a tall white pinnacle, And they called the night before and said that Norman had actually asked the brother if I would say a few
words at the funeral, I remember writing about that morning someone wanting to ask an Irish Catholic to talk at a non-denominational funeral. I turned to one of my little children--they're bigger now--had waked up that morning, and I said to them that Norman had died. And he said, "Well, that's all right, Daddy. He's up with the angels now." And I remember using that as part of the theme. But I'll find a copy. I know we had one here...somewhere...And I tried to capture in there this really remarkable man, who had gone through what is perceived by some people as the epitome of luxurious dressing. But he was a very concerned, passionate, modest individual with a wonderful sense of humor about the world. Never a hurtful sense of humor, but he could see the foibles of the world he lived in and I think he would have been hesitant to share any of those with other people for fear of misunderstanding; that people would think he was laughing at them, which he wasn't. What a hard world it was that had gotten him to this point...And I recall he told me that he had come from Indianapolis, or wherever it was. Some little town...in the 1919 flu...And he remembered the coffins being in the little towns of America, lined up. There was a girl who used to be a writer, Eleanor Landis.

Q: Lambert,
A: Lambert. And she was born in the same little town.
Q: Right,
A: Just...a bizarre fact, you know...
Q: Thank you, Dr. Cahill. I think that's an interesting new dimension on Norman Norell.