ANNA PIAGGI IS UNIQUE. SHE IS A FASHION REPORTER, EDITOR, DIVINER OF TRENDS, DESIGNERS’ MUSE AND SELF-STYLED ICON. *'FASHION-OLOGY’ REFERS TO HER IDIOSYNCRATIC WAY OF LOOKING AT CLOTHES: WITH HER OWN TAKE ON SCIENTIFIC PRECISION, AN ATTITUDE RATHER THAN A METHOD. SHE HAS FOR OVER 30 YEARS TOLD THE NEW STORIES ABOUT FASHION. PUTTING WORDS TO CLOTHES, TURNING PAGES INTO SHOWS, STYLING THE FUTURE: THIS HAS BEEN ANNA PIAGGI’S ART OF FASHION. *

TO SEE PIAGGI AT WORK IS TO GAIN A RARE GLIMPSE INTO HER FASCINATING CAREER. LONDON WAS A CATALYST, AND HIGHLIGHTS FROM HER PERSONAL ARCHIVE IN MILAN DETAIL HER EXTRAORDINARY TRAJECTORY ON THE WORLD FASHION STAGE.

FASHION-OLOGY
JUDITH CLARK EXHIBITION CURATOR

‘Fashion-ology’ is a translation of moda-logia, a word Anna Piaggi invented to rhyme, or work graphically with – one is never sure which takes priority – mitologia (mitology). Mitologia was a Double Page spread in Italian figure in 1994, one of Anna Piaggi’s famous Double Pages (D.P. or Double Pages) on the classical references in high fashion that season.

Visually, Mitologia was not as spectacular as some of the pages Anna Piaggi created. But the spread did encompass a lot of what Piaggi is about. It conveys the reason that I have been a reader of those pages for almost twenty years. Myths are associated with the historical and the classical; they assert the gravity of their claims, but without the weight of absolute truth. Myths have a suggestive ancestry, a transcendental one. This ancestry preoccupies Anna Piaggi; for its genealogies – or animism, as she some-times calls it – convince us that equivalent words such as ‘provenance’ or ‘reference’ in dress miss, in their supposed accuracy, the point. As Wilde said, we run the risk ‘of falling into careless habits of accuracy’. Piaggi’s references are inspired, cultured and unpredictable. One detail goes with another because at some point in history, the history of her browsing through images, they were juxtaposed. We are invited to join in. If curating is about putting objects together, then a broader cultural account of how this might be done can only be useful.

Piaggi led me to Aby Warburg’s Mnemosyne Atlas, his famous series of screens to which he attached fragments from pagan art and antiquities to the Renaissance and beyond. On his screens a stamp could go with a classical relief. If curating is about putting objects together, then a broader cultural account of how this might be done can only be useful. Warburg described it as an art history without words.

The exhibition is divided into thirteen statements, sometimes only the size of a text panel, sometimes a room full of objects. The logic of the layout is a series of intersecting As and upside down As which become Vs: Anna and her husband Alfa, and Vern, and the V&A. Bending the material to fit this system is keeping with Anna Piaggi’s loyalty to typographic design, each month bending words to fit Luca Stoppini’s font in her Double Pages. The shape allows each section to open on to the next; her ideas are never contained or finished, but will be picked up at a later date. Chronology overlaps, punctuated by favourite themes, her love of Englishness, for example. The exhibition celebrates Piaggi’s love of fashion illustration, the affectionate drawings by Karl Lagerfeld of her immut-able style, the dramatic spreads for Vanity Fair magazine by Antonio Lopez, and a specially commissioned 3D tableau by Richard Gray, the British illustrator who for years contributed to her pages. Luca Stoppini, art director of Italian Vogue and the designer of her Double Page spreads, has with Piaggi created the dramatic work especially for the exhibition. The repeated presence of collaborators shows her loyalty and explains the thirteen ‘favourite’ outfits in the final section, created by the designers she promoted at the beginning of her career. They are displayed on a final A, painted in the bright red used by Ettore Sottsass for the 1969 Olivetti typewriter which Anna Piaggi uses daily – and of course the red of her lipstick.
Anna Piaggi and I first met in London in the 1970s. It was a hugely creative time—a bit more ‘grown up’ than the 1960s, but still very exciting. London was a hub of talent, a source of energy and ideas. It was a fantastic place to be in.

Even amidst all the extraordinary people in the city, Anna was unique. From the very beginning she put an indelible stamp on me visually. I remember the first time I saw her—she was like a dream in a mix of Oscar Clark and other treasures, with the most amazing Grecian-inspired jewellery and a turban. I was wearing a Dior New Look coat in red flannel with velvet details which I had just bought. Our flamboyance must have caught each other’s attention.

Our thirty years of friendship developed in my shop on Old Church Street, where Anna lived then. I used to see her passing by, always wearing the most divine creations. She would drop in with Vern Lambert—the most knowledgeable fashion person of the time. When I moved my manufacturing to Milan, she became the architect of my career, helping and encouraging me, advising me on who I should work with and how to find them. Anna and her wonderful husband Alfa Castaldi became like an extended family to me and my friends Paloma and Tina. It was one of the most exciting periods of my life. The highlight of every month would be waiting for the newest scores of close-up shots, things like buttons and trims, no clothes in sight. I knew what Vern was getting at: it was all in the details. My editor sadly did not see it in the same way. It was pure Vern, always a greater, more perceptive notion of what initiated fashion and more importantly style, the turn that ultimately made the difference to what would become relevant.

Some years ago, while living in New York, I recruited Vern to cover the men’s fashion season in Milan for a magazine I was working on. Vern agreed and I eagerly awaited what I knew would be an interesting observation. But when it arrived, I was taken aback. Enclosed were scores upon scores of close-up shots, things like buttons and trims, no clothes in sight, yet I knew what Vern was getting at: it was all in the details. My editor sadly did not see it in the same way. It was pure Vern, always a greater, more perceptive notion of what initiated fashion and more importantly style, the turn that ultimately made the difference to what would become relevant.

I cannot remember exactly how or when we met, but I know it was in Vern’s tiny shop atop the Chelsea Antiques Market. This is where Vern held court, and visiting was as much an event as shopping. It was the total reflection of Vern’s fashion dynamic—his vision, if you will: mad, surreal and court, and visiting was as much an event as shopping. It was the total reflection of Vern's fashion dynamic—his vision, if you will: mad, surreal and parodic. It was here that he came alive and thrived. One month it was all camp sailors in dyed pastel bellbottoms; the next month crinoline gowns with plastic flowers à la Elmer’s glue to the tip of her nose and then proceed to dip it in paper glitter. It was odd and refreshingly wonderful and somehow it all made perfect sense.

Vern’s own style can best be described as, well, eclectic. Silk dressing gowns over riding pants, brightly checked suits with winklepicker shoes, the pure dedication to old and new, a juxtaposition he loved long before it became fashionable. He always held such insight. His knowledge was legendary. He could not only identify any designer or collection, but by looking at the stitching could often tell the seamstress. But he was serious about the unimportant. For Vern, fashion was the pursuit of the yet undone, unseen, uncharted.

As our friendship grew he would often come down to my shop Granny’s at World’s End, and he was always great with ideas and advice. He was a newcomer, a kid from Brooklyn and not always welcome. It was never like that with Vern. He was attracted to my style and would often bring vintage clothes that would complement the velvet suits I would wear. And of course they were always gifts. He was generous to a fault. He was a pioneer in the age of pioneers, a dandy in the age of dandies. He made it all exciting and evoked this sense in us that we should lead with our imagination, our instincts—in short he encouraged you to make it all singular, to leave your mark, to leave your fingerprints, and nothing since has ever conveyed this with more nuance or punch— he made it all matter.

As time passed we without knowing became somewhat estranged, but continued to remain current as best we could and years later we were to meet up in Milan where Vern was managing the shop of the designer Sam Rey. I met Vern on the street. Dressed in a long black frock, he looked like he was headed for the Vatican. We went back to Sam’s shop and I bought a bunch of stuff, a suit in fact for his former staff Louise Doktor. I would see him from time to time in Paris during the shows—I was working for Vivienne Westwood—and he and I would have dinner and catch up. It was always fun, and as usual Vern, who was a gifted storyteller, would make me laugh. Vern loved to laugh. A big never-ending laugh—that was my final memory of him, as he passed away a short time after our last meeting.

Certainly fashion was not as kind to him as it should have been. To me it is the greatest loss. When we put his life and career in perspective, we see just how innovative he was, but the people who mattered knew that Vern inhabited a place where creation and style were the keywords, they were his credo.

To say he was a genius is not enough to say that he was a master is not enough to say what he has given me is not enough. I can only say that some forty years later he is still my inspiration and even that does not come close.

So I celebrate and dedicate this to my friend. ‘Imitated but never duplicated’—that was Vern Lambert. I will do my best to keep his contribution, his gift, his memory alive. I owe him and fashion history that much.
There is a moment when fashion ceases to be itself and instead becomes a moment. There are bodies which distil the poetry and the sign, the occasion and the indecency of this moment. There are faces that love masks more than their own skin, and through that mask allow time’s irony to live. Anna Piaggi is all this. She is beyond fashion, but she feels fashion profoundly. ‘Being’ fashion, it would be more accurate to say, and thus living in the air that fashion brings with it, breathing in its incessant, inconsistent, unfaithful breath of disguise. Anna Piaggi performs fashion’s semiotic nature. To use a musical metaphor, the rhythm of her performance is like a jazz session, where each instrument tells the others a story in its solo voice while at the same time converging with the others in unpredictable chords. Her extravagance is often intimidating, as though her appearance is the scene of a ritual in which she is the ‘officiate’ and all others tacit spectators.

Fashion always implies a spectator. This is what turns it into a semiotic system, a system of signs. In this sense what Anna draws our attention to is fashion’s practice of dressing up and of disguise, in which the ‘dress’ itself has no function, is not useful other than showing itself to be a creator of new and unexpected information which both for its spectators, and often itself, remains incomprehensible. It is carnivalesque, for the spirit of the masked event and of carnival consists in destabilising certainty and institutional systems, using risky combinations brought into being by rhetorical strategies and the poetics of emphasis, exaggeration, quotation and parody. Its strategies speak of the unpredictability of signs, and its motifs from a ‘world upside down’ are at the foundations of fashion. Fashion can forget this, when its desire to be taken seriously loses the spirit of eternal carnival. But Anna Piaggi is there to remind us — at every catwalk show, with her fairy tale hero hats, music-hall diva make-up and her blue curl of hair which challenges the surround of the everyday object.

Always different and each time the same. Anna Piaggi follows a precise rhythm in her fashion compositions. A few key elements, stable and distinctive, make her a recognizable and unique icon. Piaggi is an actress with a uniform — the uniform of A.P. — but we don’t know what her costumes will be. She changes the clothes, the adornment, but in their styling and combination creates a consistent aesthetic that is identifiable by her own. One would want to preserve this style, as in her previous vintage clothes, as one would have wanted to preserve ritual robes that belonged to kings and religious leaders. And yet her appearance reminds us that fashion is always new. She demonstrates a dynamic principle in which a world that is apparently static, where clothes become sacred relics, can reference the power of the past while being made anew.

The lessons of Pop Art and postmodernism have shown us the sacred aspect to goods designed for consumption. Vintage clothing, for example, the second-hand, the already worn garment — these represent a bridge in time. It is a bridge which fashion implicitly erases and that Anna Piaggi knowingly displays. Her garments are a renewed version of Werther’s: when he wears, even on his death bed, the same suit that he wore when he met Lotte. Dress allows him the luxury of becoming the other.

A female dandy, if this oxymoron is allowed, is the image A.P. presents. Her dandyism maintains two fundamental characteristics: the feminine sprezzatura and the visionary. Sprezzatura refers to a lightness of touch, a disdain for taking too much care over things, of trying too hard. It is a precise understanding that acknowledges the seriousness of pleasure, as in the touch of irony when Anna Piaggi wears on her head a hat shaped like a clock. The visionary is a prerequisite of living fashion as a predictor of trends. It is enough to look at the magazine Vanity which in the 1980s was the site of a virtuoso creative encounter between Anna Piaggi and Antonio Lopez. This visionary element is also the knowledge that the glamour that emanates from the contemporary image of the dandy cannot be excluded from current modes of visibility — the photograph, the catwalk show, the magazine.

The clothed body of Anna Piaggi is a ‘proto-body’ in semiotic terminology, with her coverings of many colours and objects, her extreme styling and make-up. Her body appeals to a daily surrealism, exaggerated and unpredictable. Her make-up is as heavy as that of a transvestite; such an excessive mask worn by a woman dramatizes her and turns her into a transfigured icon, while not questioning her biological sex or sexual preference. Fashion allows this to occur, as a complex site of body, senses and signs. And beyond fashion and inside it is Anna Piaggi.
Chanteclaire

Worth 1882

Anna à Rome
22 Jan 77

Ce n'est pas
Ma jupe
"San Fer"
My first meeting with Anna Piaggi was through her pages in Panorama, a news, lifestyle and political magazine where she had a fashion column. I got to know her there, reading her thoughts, notes and reports during the mid-1980s, before I would later be working at Condé Nast, and that one day I would see her arrive at the offices of Vogue at Piazza Castelli in Milan—taking her small geisha steps, clutching her cane, her face made up to resemble that of a porcelain doll.

I had been immediately taken and surprised by her writing style, so different and fresh, so deliciously unpredictable, with no intellectual baroque constrictions like those of many journalists, without the Prussian flights, the rhetoric, the circumlocutions of all kinds. Her prose was closer to resembling that of a reporter—a clarity, a precise, objective, succinct, rich.

Short sentences, few, almost no subclauses, clear statements expressed with her essential lightness. And Anna was so precise, exuberant, scintillating in her way of narrating—it was, after all, the late sixties—she expressed with her essential lightness. And Anna was so joyous, exuberant, rich.

“Less is more,” I am always struck by the apparent ease with which she writes, her titles are decided in advance of the design, the selection of a typographic font, how much space to leave for text. Her musicality might come from the fact that she writes in rhymes, in total accordance with the layout. Only her titles are decided in advance of the design, and hers are always examples of different linguistic games, of onomatopoeic effect and intensely personal analogues. Rodolfo Reines is one of my all-time favourites.

Anna doesn’t use a computer. She writes by hand in the morning and then types out the text on her flame-coloured Valentina. I miss her envelopes that would arrive with Swiss punctuality, her tidy pages complete with notes in the margins. These days as soon as Italian Vogue arrives at the Condé Nast offices in New York where I have worked now for the last eleven years, I immediately turn to her Double Pages, which today she produces with the same pleasure I always have.

Once I told her that she was a true Futurist, an authentic surrealist, that she belonged in the company of Marinetti and Breton. ‘No, no,’ she answered, ‘I am not like that. Alfa was the cultured one.’

This is what she called them—exercises—as though she were still a student, and she used to call her columns for the Espresso (1985–9) and Panorama (1993–7) exercises as well. Anna doesn’t improvise, even if the final result might convey the idea of a playful sound sequence of Futurist parole in libertà. These words are studied, pondered and selected with an accurate diction almost equal to that with which she decides what to wear.

I was able to have a closer look at how she works, read fashion and writes about fashion from 1985–92, when Franca Sozzani took me under Vogue under her new editorship. The magazine was to be reinvented, it was a real experimental gym, and she gave Anna a space within it where she could express herself with the least possible editorial interference. She liked the idea, as did Alfa Castaldi, her unforgettable partner in life and work. She liked the idea as she was indifferent of rules or anything predetermined, and she had already proved this with her great, courageous adventure with Fundy, the magazine which she invented using only illustration, and perfecting through its writing, which became quickly, quick, onomatopoeic, surreal. In other words, now.

The double pages for Italian Vogue began during a summer’s morning in 1988. Anna would determine the visual material—with Alfa, who would be shooting in the Mirmontino Studio or backstage during the shows, and Vere Lambrini, who would turn up at the offices with piles of books, just in case any additional material was needed. And even though they were an oasis of creative freedom, she always wanted to know ‘what the plan was’, what we were going to be printing in the rest of the magazine.

I used to call her after our Vogue editorial meetings, and often during our conversations it would come to her like lightning—she would decide what it was that inspired her, what struck her.

If, for example, I said that we were printing a story with red dresses and we were doing a feature on flamboyant dresses, she would suggest a ‘volcanic’ story with hats fit for the Wicked Witch of the West. Under the title Moda cosmica, colori sismici, linea conic’A, Vesuvio!—Cosmic fashion, seismic colours, conic’A lines, Vesuvius!—Vogue Italia, December 1988. If we had a page on Italian elegance dedicated to great stars like Sophia Loren, Anna would suggest Fashion Menù Pasta! (May 1991) where she would read in culinary terms the white details of the clothing signed that season by Castellani; thin fringes became capelli d’angelo, thicker ones linguine, frills were regine and she quited lavare of matelin fabric could only remind us of ravioli. For that D.P. she contacted a famous pasta-maker to have the names of all the different types. This kind of precise, detailed quotation is her hallmark.

Words are incredibly important for Anna, the voice that becomes words, first of all, even if in note form she interviews designers or their PRs in an attempt to establish an objective, concrete expression, a clue to a collection. As much as her imagery is fantastical, her words are grounded in an essential directness, with a copywriter’s twist, and very English word games and puns. Dictionaries always present on her desk—Il Dizionario di L. Robert, the Oxford Advanced Dictionary—are her essential working tools. They are used to verify whether the word she has thought of or likes the look of has its desired meaning.

Her immutable, unmistakable prose is a technique which interacts with the graphics of the Double Page. She has always had a great complexity and intense relationship with the art director, Fabrizio Ferracene, Anna Cattini and most of all Luca Stoppini know how important for her the layout is, the selection of a typographic font, how much space to leave for text. Her musicality might come from the fact that she writes in rhymes, in total accordance with the layout. Only her titles are decided in advance of the design, and hers are always examples of different linguistic games, of onomatopoeic effect and intensely personal analogues. Rodolfo Reines is one of my all-time favourites.

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Once I told her that she was a true Futurist, an authentic surrealist, that she belonged in the company of Marinetti and Breton. ‘No, no,’ she answered, ‘I am not like that. Alfa was the cultured one.’ It is true that Alfa, who for me was an irreplaceable frame of reference, both human and professional, could talk for hours on any subject, enchanting me. But Anna is no less inspiring. She always states I am superficial, frivolous, with her brief laug and nod. I just smile. After all these years, I’m not sure that I can believe her.
My vintage dressing matured in lucky seasons of ‘gathering’ or harvest, in freezing forces in the English countryside where Frances, Pellevois and Zinnia, mistress of dress-treasures of secret provenance, stored their private collections, open to, amongst very few, Vern Lambert.

Vern, the wonderful pioneer of historical street style, would introduce me on returning from these outrause expeditions, to a marvellous world populated with female figures who had originally owned these treasures. I would wait anxiously in London for Vern’s return. I remember when, without betraying any emotion, without speaking, he took out two huge alligator travel bags, from Africa but found at the Portobello Market; his discoveries were very simply rolled up, and inside out Vern always inspected the inside of garments, against the light, and could almost always, through looking at idiosyncratic details known only to him, establish the exact date of birth of the dress, and any later domestic alterations.

One of the first ladies I met like this through Vern was Lady Mary Curzon – married to Lord Curzon, the former viceroy of India, in the drama of birth’ of the dress, and any later domestic alterations.

So many other stories, including the incredible sisters. When I first met Anna, about eighteen years ago, I was struck – like most people who meet her for the first time – by her dramatic looks and her utterly original sense of style. There’s no one else like her and no one who can replace her. She is that special. She is that unique.

This was during the time of Franca Sozzani’s first issue at Italian Vogue, and she had just hired me as the art director. We had met briefly in New York, and she had decided to give me the job on the spot. I would be working from New York, and flying to Milan for each issue. I was young, eager to succeed, and full of energy. I was looking forward to this amazing opportunity and my new international lifestyle. I arrived in Milan with Steven Meisel’s first fashion story in my bag. I had also brought the cover for the first issue under Franca’s new leadership. And that’s how it all started:

Franca always knew what she wanted and where she wanted to go with the magazine. She was a strong leader with an acute vision. Early on she hired Anna Piaggi as a special fashion editor. By then, Anna was already a legend and an arbiter of taste and design, having founded the avant-garde magazine Family. Anna was given her own section of the magazine called ‘Doppie Pagine’ or ‘D.P.’ These pages were entirely dedicated to her ideas and fantasies. A montage of words and images, they encapsulated the trends and styles of the moment. But instead of limiting the scope to fashion, Anna mixed in art, literature, music and architecture. She understood how everything was indirectly related and how fashion influenced other media. She would illustrate her points in the most brilliant and modern way by juxtaposing eclectic ideas. The result was always original, surprising and a feast for the eyes.

I was mesmerised by her vast understanding of not only fashion, but culture in general. She knew everything from then till now. The only other person I’ve ever met with such an impressive breadth of knowledge is Karl Lagerfeld. No wonder they are best friends. One can only imagine the incredible and rich discussions they have.

Anna’s enthusiasm, her passion for creativity, her endless search for the new and her knowledge of the past have made her one of the most influential personalities in fashion today. I cherish the moments I worked next to her on her pages at Italian Vogue. For me, Anna was a strong guiding light to my future Anna was.
1. A.P. claims that the work she does for Italian Vogue is ‘purely decorative’. 2. A.P. has an Olivetti Valentina typewriter. She bought in the 1980s. There is a copy of it in the Victoria and Albert Museum in New York. It has lost its number. 3. A.P. has written over 7000 editorial pages in her career. 4. A.P. has written many things repeated in fashion, but understands that the carbon copy from a typewriter has a different look and feel from the original. 5. A.P. has arrived at the Chinese restaurant called La Route Mandarine. She drew over 250 sketches of Anna while she lived in Paris in the early 1970s. The first sketch was drawn on a paper napkin in a Chinese restaurant called La Route Mandarine. 6. A.P. was married for over thirty years to Alfa Castaldi. He suffered from amnesia and lost his way. She doesn’t suffer from amnesia, but can easily adopt the look of amnesia if prompted. 7. A.P. has written many things repeated in fashion, but understands that the carbon copy from a typewriter has a different look and feel from the original. 8. A.P. is unable to distinguish between what’s serious and what’s funny, as she can be seriously funny. 9. A.P. was married for over thirty years to Alfa Castaldi, who passed away in 1995. She believes that in successful relationships you have to ‘enjoy each other’s noise’. 10. A.P. is unable to distinguish between what’s serious and what’s funny, as she can be seriously funny. 11. A.P. is at this moment in time into the idea of superficial advancement. But as we know, this moment has just passed. ANNA PIAGGI’S FAVOURITE NUMBER IS 13.