

Marylou Luther: The Angel Wears Prada Too

By: Kanika Chadda-Gupta

This is by far the most poignant fashion piece I've ever written. It's about another fashion writer...a legend...a woman who so seamlessly wove herself into the fabrics of my life and became my mentor. We met in 2009 at Lakmé Fashion Week in Mumbai, India, and when we got to chatting, we discovered we both have ties to CNN (I was Chief Fashion Correspondent for the CNN affiliate in India; her son Walter has been an acclaimed video journalist for the bureau in New York for the past 30 years), have a penchant for Parisian cuisine, prefer our coffee with a spoonful of vanilla ice cream, and are members of the Gamma Phi Beta sorority. Long lost sorority sisters (nearly sixty years apart) meeting for the first time in India? We think there's only one word to describe it – "serendipity." I am so thankful to have my 89-year-old gal pal and soul sister in my life. Cheers to you, Marylou!



Fashion writer Marylou Luther

When non-fashion folk palaver about the fraternity finding fodder in *The Devil Wears Prada* and *The September Issue*, *Vogue's* reigning queen Anna Wintour is quick to come to mind as one of the most influential fashion writers ever. Yet only those rooted in the firmament know of and revere Marylou Luther who's spent 60 years in the business and was at the forefront long before Anna's time.

At age 26, during an era when most young women opted for a domestic life over professional pursuits, Marylou had a reserved front row seat at coveted runway shows in New York, Paris, London, and Rome (Milan was not yet on the scene). She embarked on her career at a time when *fashion* became a vehicle for change, a conduit for social revolution, and a way to challenge the status quo. Amidst an economy maimed by nuclear spending and anti-Vietnam protests was a sliver of hope found in the Beatles' soul-stirring ballads, the bourgeoisie's newfound independence (e.g. "love, sex, and rock & roll"), and knee-high go-go boots *discoing* their way down the catwalk where Marylou was "staying alive" with Coco Chanel, Emilio Pucci, Roy 'Halston' Frowick, and Geoffrey Beene. She's fortunate to have witnessed many firsts on the runway: the mini-skirt (Mary Quant, Rudi Gernreich, Pierre Cardin, André Courreges), pair of jeans at a haute couture show (Gianni Versace), African American models (André Courreges), and celebrities sashaying down the ramp (Thierry Mugler). Can you believe today's closet staples were just mere experimentations by the trailblazing designers back then? Marylou knew it was a pivotal time and chose to stick around.

Belied by her sophisticated black-rimmed spectacles and modest attire ("You can never own too much black"), Marylou is surprisingly obsessed with all things imaginative, edgy, and anti-establishment. She was a huge fan of Rudi Gernreich, maverick designer of the 1960s. Together, the creator and the critic developed a strong, symbiotic relationship, so much so that Marylou was the first person Gernreich's partner called when Rudi passed away. Etched in her memory is the "unisex look" he unveiled at the Japanese Expo in 1970 where he left onlookers in a trance. He was all about shock value and the *monokini*, or 'topless' swimsuit, takes the cake. "Rudi always challenged the system. I loved that about him!"



Austrian born, LA-based designer and gay activist Rudi Gernreich

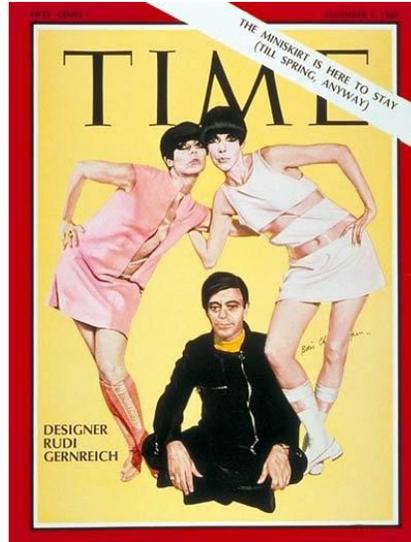


The "unisex look" as modeled by the cast of "Space 1999," a TV series in the '70s



Peggy Moffitt, Rudi Gernreich topless swimsuit, 1964
©William Claxton LLC, Courtesy of Demont Photo
Management/Fahey Klein Gallery

Rudi Gernreich's muse Peggy Moffitt donning his infamous monokini



What Hindman catalog called a tunic, Gernreich referred to as a “mini,” as seen in Time.

((VIDEO: <http://hubpages.com/hub/Rudi-Gernreich-Futurist-Fashion-Designer>))

Peggy Moffitt reveals the designer’s versatility with his in-your-face color schemes, hypnotizing geometric patterns, jumbo herringbone skirts, and assortment of plastic, vinyl, and metallic knits

Marylou tells me she continues to be bemused by the works of Sonia Rykiel, “the first designer to challenge the stringent tailoring of the ‘50s and turn clothes inside out.” Incidentally, it was Sonia who presented Marylou with the prestigious French Ministry of Culture’s Chevalier award (Chevalier de L’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres) in 2008.



French designer Sonia Rykiel and Marylou Luther

Also to make her top picks are Rick Owens, Maurizio Galante, Isaac Mizrahi, Isabel Toledo, Norma Kamali, Christian Lacroix, Tom Ford, Karl Lagerfeld, Miuccia Prada, Missoni, Raf Simons for Jil Sander, Stan Herman, Betsey Johnson, and Derek Lam. "It's a long list, I know, but I can't leave any one of these brilliant people out!"

A Stylish Writing Style

Marylou's writing style is a lot like her. Informative, witty, and completely unpredictable. She dared to write what others couldn't. During an interview with Christian Dior she asked him about the overt sexuality in his collections, which caused him to wag his finger at her and call her "naughty."

I've attended a few of her audio-visual shows for the Fashion Group Foundation in New York and found that her voice, peppy yet subtle, served as an apt soundtrack to the runway photos she was describing. Using statements that stuck with you like "The color story began with white, the non-color that opened many shows" and "The next big thing is *Big*. Oversized. Voluminous. Roomy. The new expansionist movement stars white evening dresses that create a cocoon of softness." Much like catchy headlines and magazine taglines we see today, she was one of the first to implement a play on words that made fashion fun – "Stripe Up the Band," "The Wedge with an Edge," "The Pant Extant," and "Who's Going Online"?

Marylou's dear friend Giorgio Armani said, "She [Marylou Luther] has a keen eye for fashion – almost as if it were religion." Valentino claims, "Marylou Luther is one of the best and most intelligent fashion columnists I have met in my career. She is a great professional with a clever, sensible and positive approach and is an excellent observer of all the new fashion trends." When she was asked to write an online Q&A column for "Clotheslines," the late Bill Blass wrote, "Small wonder why 'Clotheslines' is such an important column. It is written by the smartest fashion columnist in the business."

From the Farm to Fashion

The antithesis of the big names she adores and their even larger than life personas, Marylou finds refuge in a more subdued, unpretentious existence. Case in point: she gave me flack for writing this piece. "Kanika dear, what could people possibly want to read about me?" she pressed. Well, for starters, Marylou wasn't your average fashionista-in-the-making attending boarding school and summering in the south of France. Born and raised in Cambridge, Nebraska, (pop. 1,203) she was more likely to be

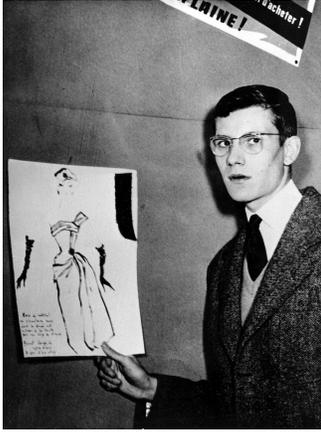
seen milking a cow than hobnobbing with celebrities at black tie soirées. “We only had outhouses on our farms,” she told me with a straight face.

Marylou grew up country. Her dad Walter, an American of German descent, owned three farms, a grocery store, a Plymouth Dodge car dealership where he also sold Chase and John Deere tractors, and a filling station. Her half-English, half-Welsh mother Zola was a voracious reader (she initiated the construction of a town library) and was way ahead of her time. Openly homosexual French designer Claude Montana met her at a show in LA and said “she’s the chicest woman I’ve ever seen.”

Marylou’s two elder brothers, Walter Jr. (aka Bob) and Dick, were twelve and ten years her senior, respectively. Bob was a star football player for the University of Nebraska Cornhuskers (the college she went on to attend years later) and led the team to achieve the 8-1 record that earned them a ticket to the Rose Bowl in 1941. “That day was a 24-hour long celebration. We even got the governor to join in our fight song, “There is no place like Nebraska!” Four years later, Marylou’s world turned upside down. Her brothers had enlisted themselves to serve in WWII and Bob didn’t make it back. He had been shot by a German sniper while stationed in Italy. A few months later, her father died of a heart attack. “1945 was tough. I remember feeling terrible for my mother. Her only brother died that year too. Three of the men she loved so dearly were gone.”

Last in line to graduate from her family’s alma mater, Marylou had a job waiting for her at *The Lincoln Journal* starting the very next day. “My journalism professor Mr. Bill Hice helped me land it and said there was no need to enjoy another summer vacation. It was time to get out there and work.” She stayed at the local newspaper for a few years “writing about weddings, engagements, and moving my editor’s car every two hours so she wouldn’t get a ticket,” and then moved on to the *Des Moines Register* where she was assigned to the fashion beat. She insisted “I don’t know a thing about it,” but her managing editor Frank Eyerly told her, “You’ll learn.”

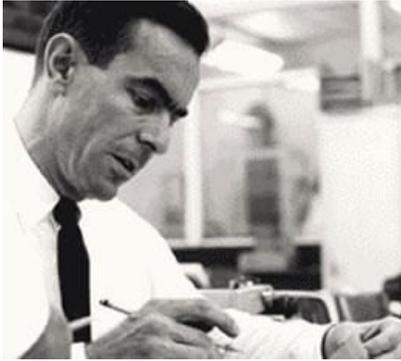
After three years of eating, sleeping, and breathing fashion, she was hired by *The Chicago Tribune*. There she got the opportunity to interview the crème de la crème including Christian Dior and Coco Chanel. “I can still see her sitting on the steps of the Rue Cambon, her piercing eyes watching the audience respond to her work.” In 1958, she made another trip to Paris to cover 21-year-old Yves Saint Laurent’s first collection for Dior following the couturier’s death. “He came out of the balcony of the House of Dior and traffic stopped. People were yelling and screaming in the streets. It was a national event.”



Scion to Christian Dior, a young Yves Saint Laurent showcases his billowy "trapeze" dress

Marylou thoroughly enjoyed her role as fashion editor for the *Tribune* journeying to Europe four times a year (to cover both the haute couture and ready-to-wear shows), often consumed by late night deadlines and jetlag, so she had no idea she had caught the eye of the man who would one day sweep her off her feet. His name was Arthur Imperato and he was the publisher of five trade magazines for the *McCall's* corporation. Arthur was a man of conviction who wasn't afraid to go to great lengths to get what he wanted. He asked her to join his team as an editor in January 1961, to which she agreed, and in June of the same year, asked her to be his wife. Marylou spent thirty memorable years with her soul mate (he passed away in 1998) and says, "He was one of a kind. He was always cracking jokes and saying quirky things that his friends and I called 'Arthurisms.'" Arthur was all praises for his wife too. During a press interview he said, "Marylou is the best fashion writer there is. She's also the sweetest person in the world. Anyone will tell you that."

Gaining ground in LA, Marylou went on to serve as fashion and beauty editor of the *Los Angeles Times* from 1969 – 1985. She reported to editor Nick Williams, who had already seen her work in the *Tribune* since it was the first newspaper to use color pages for its fashion spreads. He counseled her, "to be a good writer, is to be a good reader." Marylou found another trusted mentor in associate editor Jim Bellows, who said, "Walk softly and carry a big typewriter."



Jim Bellows, associate editor of the LA Times from 1967 – 1974, went on to become managing editor of “Entertainment Tonight” (1981-1983) and executive editor of “ABC News: World News Tonight” (1983 – 1986)

In 1985, Marylou decided to look for opportunities in New York City, backed with Arthur’s full support. They set up shop in Manhattan, yet made frequent visits to the West Coast and Europe. By now the Imparatos had two sons, Walter (who is a Peabody and Emmy-award winning video journalist at CNN and had previously shot for “Style with Elsa Klensch”) and Andrew (who serves as the Senior Council and Disability Policy Director for the US Senate HELP Committee). Arthur had a son from a previous marriage, Arthur Jr., whom Marylou continues to stay in touch with.

Winters in New York, Summers in Nebraska

Even at 81, Marylou’s got her finger on the pulse of fashion. She serves as editor of the International Fashion Syndicate where her column “Clotheslines” is read by over 5 million per week. She is also the Creative Director of the Fashion Group International, a non-profit organization dedicated to disseminating fashion updates and information to industry professionals. A firm believer in shaping fresh, new talent, Marylou is the jury chairman of the Ecco Domani Fashion Foundation Award where up-and-coming designers compete for a prize of \$25,000 to launch their labels. Past winners include Proenza Schouler, Zac Posen, Derek Lam, Peter Som, and Richard Chai to name a few.

Though the living room in her one-bedroom apartment in Murray Hill (which doubles as a fashion library) is filled with mementos and trinkets from her famous friends including illustrations by Isaac Mizrahi, his former assistant Behnaz Sarafpour, Yves

Saint Laurent, Hubert de Givenchy, and Alber Elbaaz for Lanvin and her boudoir boasts collectors' items by Maurizio Galante, Ralph Rucci, Geoffrey Beene, and Valentino, she's not one to name drop. Two standout qualities that make Marylou an anomaly in her field: her magnanimous nature and appreciation for the simple things in life. Perhaps that's why she decided to keep her childhood home in Nebraska and makes a trip back every year. "I could never forget my roots," she says as she proceeds to teach me the lyrics to her college fight song:

There is no place like Nebraska,

Dear old Nebraska U.

Where the girls are the fairest,

The boys are the squarest,

Of any old school I knew.

There is no place like Nebraska,

Where they're all true blue.

We'll all stick together,

In all kinds of weather,

For dear old Nebraska U!

About the Author:

Kanika Chadda-Gupta is a seasoned journalist with experience in television, print, and the digital world. In 2015, she founded her digital marketing firm, Kronologie Agency, which specializes in branding, web design & development, and video production. She is a former Television Anchor/Producer for CNN in India, where she covered fashion, lifestyle, and entertainment. Her podcast, "That's Total Mom Sense" has garnered rave reviews as she helps first time moms navigate parenthood, their careers, and wellness. She is the President of Business Networking International Chapter 58 and a member of the Hey Mama community, National Association of Women Business Owners, Asian Women in Business, International Radio & Television Society, South Asian Journalists Association, and Gamma Phi Beta (Boston

University, '04). She and her husband along with their three children [twins + 1] reside in New Jersey.