

## Industry Insight: extended

**Vanessa Denza, buyer for the 21 Shop at Woollands, founder of Denza International consultancy and founder of Graduate Fashion Week, complete interview.**

*Vanessa's interview appears in abridged form in Chapter 1, page 29.*

### **How did you get into Fashion?**

I took my 'A' levels early and there was nothing in those days at all for somebody like me to study unless I was going to do an academic subject and I knew that I wanted to go into something much more creative, although I am not a designer. And it so happened that my Godfather was the head of Condé Nast, Reggie Williams, so he said why don't you go and do six months in Paris with *Vogue*, we will set it up.

So I arrived and one of those wonderful French women met me and she said "your typing is disgraceful, we cannot have you," so that was it, I was out. She said "I think you sell very well," so she arranged for me to go unpaid as an intern to Jacques Fath, after Jacques Fath had died. The designer there was Phillipe Giborgé who became very well known, and I was put into the new boutique with the ready-to-wear collection and that was being run by the woman who had been head of fashion at Galleries Lafayette, the Princesse de Polignac. Because I had been to a French school in England, my French was pretty fluent, so that was fine, and I was selling to all and sundry including ballerinas who would say things like "don't put me in front of that mirror I look so fat." So at the age of 18 I had to learn all about that kind of thing.

I had been to a convent and I had learned to sew, I could fit anything, I could sew anything. These clothes had one fitting so when I was dealing with the Premiere who used to come out and fit the clothes. Of course they were partially made or they had to be altered, I knew what I was doing. I remember Sally Tuffin saying to me "my god Vanessa, we never knew you could sew, we'll put you on the machine."

### **When was your first real fashion job?**

I told my father, who was a very tough man, that I was not going to be a secretary, because if I ended up being a secretary I would go mad, and anyway I am not that organised. So, I came back [to London] and they said there is a new managing director at Woollands [Martin Moss], and he is putting together a lot of very bright people and I think you would enjoy working for him. So I met him and later he told me I was the first person who ever told him that I wanted to be a buyer. I had learned in France to pick the clothes that would sell and you either have it or you don't have it and I understood that. So he said to me, "you are going to have to work in a rather boring department, the coat and suit department," and then he put me in the Emilio Pucci department and I was with a great friend. We had such fun there because it was the first modern-looking and colourful sportswear and we ended up with clients galore. I would get Lady Seaford and she would say, or her secretary would say, "I want six outfits to go to wherever with. I'll be in at 10.30," and I knew

that she would be with me for half an hour and she would have bought everything. So, between us, we were all bright young girls who would never be able to do it now because there was no such thing as just people picking it, you had to know what you were doing. I remember the Duchess of Argyle, I said to her, “the shirt will look much better on you when you take your pearls off”, and she said “my dear, I never take my pearls off.” I could go on and on, there were lots of incredibly interesting people we met.

Martin Moss said to me “Emilio Pucci wants someone to go and work with him in Italy for two months, and as you speak the languages why don’t you go?” My father hit the roof and said “Italian men, my daughter, blah blah blah, you have only got to stay in Florence.” Well, I arrived after 24 hours in Florence and Emilio had me working in half an hour in the boutique and then he said “no, you’re not staying here, you’re going to Capri,” so the next day we went to Capri via Rome. The problem with him and his bloody clothes is that if Onasis turned up in the shop he would double the prices ... but we never knew that.

In the end there was a great hoo ha because he told Martin Moss he had a visa for me and he hadn’t, so eventually the police turned up and I just skipped up the bay and went to my relations who lived on the other side of the bay and had a wonderful time.

Anyway, I went back to Woollands and decided that the only way I was going to learn what I wanted to learn was to go to America. In those days, as an English person you could get a green card very easily, and a part of my American family sponsored me. I went armed with letters from Ernestine Carter who was writing for The Sunday Times, introducing me to various people and I had five days of interviews when I arrived and I was offered, I have to say, five jobs. And being me, I chose the most difficult one to get into. I was working with Lisa Fonssagrives [possibly the first supermodel, working in the 1930s onward], developing new ideas, in New York in Lord and Taylor. I went with two other girls and we shared a flat. If I tell you that we had a party for 150 people after three months you can imagine what our social life was like.

### **What did you want to learn in New York?**

I wanted to learn how to buy and the training for that ... even if you were an Assistant Buyer as I was, your training was how to answer the telephone, how you should address people, the paperwork and everything. So, I learned the structure, which was particularly useful but because of family reasons I had to come back. I came back and met Martin Moss again, and he said “look I want to start a very young new shop, and there is a designer called Terence Conran and he is going to design it.” He had been at Simpsons as managing director and there was another buyer there that he wanted to bring in. So we were mentored by this fantastic man, Williams, who had come up in the 1930s from the valleys. There was a site at the back of Lowndes Square that was a hostel and when he was 15 he had been brought up and put there. He had the best taste of anybody, he was the most wonderful man to work under.

### **Woollands was in Knightsbridge near Harvey Nichols?**

Harvey Nichols was a dusty shop with dust everywhere and really run down and Woollands was the bright one. It all started with the new departments and shows and we had the beginning of Habitat which was begun by David Phelps but it wasn't called Habitat then. This is 1961 and the building was eventually sold (the whole site) in 1964/5 because it was a bigger site than Harvey Nichols and Harvey Nichols had the car park underneath. All those bright people (Jean Muir was started there) all those bright young things started there.

### **Did you do shows in the store?**

We did three shows on the opening night and never any more. He [Martin Moss] used to have some Emilio Pucci shows in the store. The opening night was interesting because there was Claire Rendlesham who had designed the look of the department and brought in the Royal College of Art so that we could get new looking designs. We were all supposed to wear gloves on the Tube in those days and navy blue uniforms in the shops. So Claire Rendlesham was a mentor. She was a character and a half who later took over Yves St Laurent and she had powerful ideas. I can remember her saying to me "I do hope David and Jean stay together until the end of the shoot." Fifteen pages in Vogue, it was revolutionary.

We did three shows, the first at 6pm, the second at 9pm and the third at midnight. By the midnight show there was a queue right round the block (by word of mouth) and the show room was just the department, it was small. After that, the word just got out and Maggie Arkel and I did the buying but she became very ill and died shortly afterwards, so I ended up with buying absolutely everything. I hit my first year's figures in three months.

It was like a damn bursting because Mary Quant and Alexander were the only people having a show with music.

### **So was it one long continuous show?**

No, we stopped and emptied the place. We had the Temperance Seven playing. Vidal Sassoon did the hair and all the top models were there, and were also in the photographs, but mostly it was Jean Shrimpton. And the music was very important because before that you had those shows with models having a number.

Nobody did shows before that, only show room shows, with models walking up and down holding numbers: presentations. I had to buy coats and suits before that and all you did was go to the showrooms and pick out the numbers. So, this is when fashion shows as we know them today started, as opposed to models in showrooms walking up and down with numbers. The models for Quant danced around and they didn't do that couture type of walk any more. And that is why we had all of the music.

### **...and didn't the style of the models change?**

All of the models Claire chose were modern looking, that is why she got 15 pages in Vogue. It was mostly Jean [Shrimpton], but all of the models that came out, like Roz Watkins, were all of them that new look, and the hair was obviously new because Vidal was doing it.

The dancing and the exuberance about it all was amazing, and the amount of clothes we sold, we got another 1000 dresses in and they had gone. Then Biba [another fashion retailer] started and Biba was turning their stock every two weeks and manufactured in the UK. Everything exploded, there was new music, the 21 Shop and the fashion shows ... it was the precursor of so much.

### **Who did the PR?**

There was no PR, not even for the fashion show. I had all the journalists coming to me ... [from] the *Mail*, Veronica Papworth in the *Express*, Ernestine Carter [of *The Sunday Times*] and particularly Ernestine's assistant, Bridget, they would phone me up all the time "Have you got a new story?" and I could always place something ... we were in the right place at the right time. And then we started going to the South of France. I didn't initially, Martin did, and we started buying t-shirts and all that sort of thing that wasn't being made here.

### **Was the 21 Shop ground-breaking?**

Yes, and it was also a shoplifters' paradise. I had to go with one of my clients to talk about a new chain of shops and we all ended up talking about a shoplifters' paradise. He looks [in the] nooks and crannies and nobody can see. Mary Quant had had problems with shoplifters and I expect Kiki Burn had. But nobody else because nobody liked the clothes. The clothes were so boring, so who would want to steal them?

### **Who did you stock in the 21 Shop?**

In the beginning, Martin and Claire went for people like Susan Small and then I worked with people like Maggie Shepherd who was teaching at the Royal College of Art, and she brought in people like Sally Tuffin and Marian Foal and Gerald McCann and John Bates. He did have the very short minis. In all that time, if you look at the 21 Shop you will see that most of them are just below the knee and they very quickly went up. And of course, there were no tights until Mary Quant; people were wearing suspenders then. Anyway, we did those three shows and it was mind-blowing. Nowadays you would think nothing of it but nothing had been seen like that. Mary and Alexander had put on some smaller shows.

### **Who were your main suppliers?**

I bought Mary Quant Gingerbread, the young collection. It was backed by the Stanbury family and the Stanburys were one of the biggest manufacturers in the country. But the difference in those days is that you could get clothes made so quickly. I will give you another example: Polly Peck was one of those clever rag trade companies. I had two Davids, one was Morgan dresses, David Silverman. Both of them were absolutely brilliant and they were the leaders in taking the designers' ideas and getting them out. No store opened on a Saturday afternoon or Sunday, but

there was always one late night. We would always have discussions about turnover of stock and quick replenishment by UK manufacturers. It was ten days to two weeks ... and there were no ticketing machines ... clerks did everything by hand.

### **Did you work for anyone else in London?**

For a short while I worked for Geoffrey Wallis. He used to take his main designer to Paris, went over to couture shows in Paris. You had to get invites to get into couture shows. The designer would go back to his hotel afterwards, lie down, and he would sketch the whole collection. He had a total photographic memory. He had something which was called "The pick of Paris," which was getting the Paris look, and, above all, it was Chanel. The designer had no compunction about pulling buttons off or snipping a bit of fabric off. But he could actually memorise a total collection and sketch it accurately, and of course six weeks later you've got your pattern. There was an embargo, you couldn't photograph the collections and you couldn't release anything for six weeks.

### **Did you do shows at Wallis?**

I had to do a fashion show for the Wallis's; Harrold and Geoffrey. Sylvia Ayton could tell you about the company. She was one of the designers. She became the most incredible coat designer. The business they did in coats was phenomenal. Fashion shows were not the important thing that they are today because PR hadn't become that important. That was all just starting. Buyers would go to all of the shows (as well as the exhibitions) to decide what to buy. For instance, Lucille [Lewin] at Whistles. Designers and clothing companies didn't always do shows and exhibitions, sometimes they would go along to see buyers with their collections in stores ... people like Jean Muir ... I used to go and see them in their showrooms.

### **Were there shows in the showrooms?**

It was different: if you were going to a big manufacturer like Stanbury ... they would literally have the girls walking up and down with a number and you would have a tag and you would give it in if you were interested. But when it came to working with all the younger designers it wasn't like that. There was probably one person who tried the clothes on and we were all on the same wavelength whereas all the old fashioned people didn't get it, they didn't understand what I was after. Then Way-In [Harrods] opened and I remember the first person in was a knicker manufacturer at 9 o'clock in the morning saying "do you want to buy some underwear."

Mary [Quant] was important and then us and then Biba. Biba started in 1963 and Ozzie [Clark] left college in 1965. That was the show that everybody loved. I can remember him sitting in square glasses. In those days, Royal College shows were in the basement of the main building, but it was a much smaller then. The industry was smaller then. People flying to different places didn't happen like it does now. The Americans would come over twice a year, if they were buyers, for the couture shows. I was an important buyer and I was deluged by designers.

### **How were the French shows different?**

A different type of model and styling, and more international more quickly than we were, the French and the Dutch. The schedule is crazy now. Journalists had to learn to call in clothing, style a shoot and write quickly and when you look at Suzy [Menkes] she is on her laptop and she is writing because she can write quickly.

You can't see everything now [so many shows]. I was with someone from the LVMH group who said "the only money we make is through the accessories and I said to the designer, we shouldn't be reinventing the wheel all the time. The designer is enjoying life for the first time and the figures are up 150% in 18 months."

### **Will you tell me about starting Graduate Fashion Week?**

We started Graduate Fashion Week because the first graduate shows started on 4 June and they finished on 4 July. They were all over the country. The reason Jeff Banks, John Walford and I started it was that we had to give vivas to every graduate designer (and they wanted Jeff and I together), and that is when we had enough time to sit together and talk out about the problems of all of these fashion shows all over the place.

Smirnoff paid £35,000 into the Business Design Centre which had only recently been formed and Jeff knew them so he said "that will be enough money to get us off the ground," and then every college had to put some money up and I think we got £5,000 of sponsorship. That's all. And I think all three of us called in every favour in the book. We just went for it, and everybody supported us. We did a Saturday morning too. We had to fit in between the shows they already had booked.

Graduate Fashion Week was important because the colleges had to think about how they were going to put themselves forward. It was up to five days and we did up to ten shows a day. We had a smaller runway and a larger runway. And we had a lot of judges, which we were always criticised for but I think it was important, and lots of different awards. We put in a childrenswear award, and every winner had a job out of it.

There were no mobile phones. We had to have telephone lines brought in. There was no Eurostar, Paris was a long way away.

The Morris family were bright enough to know that Jeff Banks was doing the Clothes Show Live, and that they were going to get the biggest publicity about their Design Centre that anyone could ever have asked. And they did for several years while we were there, but it became impossible because there was no air conditioning, it was stifling. We outgrew it very quickly but it was enough to get us off the ground. I got Esprit in and then we got BHS. We were at the 11th hour and thinking of cancelling, and with five days to go BHS sponsored it.