Cultural Couture

Clothing, a foremost type of self-expression in American culture, has evolved a great deal since the beginning of the twentieth century. What people choose to put on their bodies not only speaks volumes about their own character, but also of the persona of the individual who created that garment. Fashion design, a unique art form, indirectly displays a sense of a designer’s claim to fame. In the case of Vera Wang, the classic designer made a slow yet steady ascent to the top of the fashion sphere. Seizing every job opportunity she could and working many sleepless nights, Wang epitomizes the “self-made (wo)man” in American culture. Through her tireless yet successful journey, Wang proves her persona and her masterpieces to be the best in the American fashion culture.

Born “to wealthy immigrants from Shanghai, China” (Fitzgerald), Wang enjoyed an affluent life in New York City’s upper east side. Attending several prestigious schools, people might assume that Wang hand everything handed to her. To the contrary, Wang worked extremely hard and diligently throughout her life. When Wang suggested that she attended design school after college, her father sharply replied: “Nope, go get a job” (Fitzgerald). Obediently, she did just that. Working in sales at Yves Saint Laurent boutique on Madison Avenue, a Vogue editor noticed the young Wang (Vogue). Realizing
this momentous opportunity, Wang became a fashion assistant at Vogue in 1972. Wang's career continued to escalate throughout the 1970s and 1980s, receiving job offers from Geoffrey Benne and Ralph Lauren (Vogue).

In 1989, the high-powered fashion guru was "engaged to marry businessman Arthur Becker" (Krohn 4). Describing herself as "modern and sophisticated" (Krohn 4), Wang found the bridal industry too feminine. Tommy Fitzgerald shares her comment on bridal gowns: "Well, everybody doesn't want to wear the 4-inch cap-sleeve where you can't lift your arms and a bodice of sequined lace with a big pouf skirt and stuff around your hair dangling down. I just thought there was another vision." Certainly, there was another vision, as Wang designed and created a unique wedding gown for herself. Once again recognizing a business venture, Wang quit her job designing for Ralph Lauren and "opened her own bridal boutique, Bridal House Ltd., on Madison Avenue" (Vogue). Expressing her individuality through her one-of-a-kind wedding gown and her newly founded business, she had no qualms about taking a fearless leap of faith. Wang's powerful entrepreneurship supported her future career and the empire she would soon construct.

Rising to the pinnacle of her bridal career, "Vera Wang soon became to foremost designer of wedding gowns in the world" (Krohn 6). Wang's journey to her immense success was preceded with hard work, passion, individualism, and seizing opportunities. Her rigorous education and work ethic portray how diligently she worked to ascend to greatness. Far from hesitant to share her opinion, Wang constantly displayed her individual sense of style. For instance, Alice in Wonderland inspired Wang's Spring/Summer 2012 Ready-to-Wear line (See link below). In a review of this show, critic Indigo Clarke remarked: "While Wang's latest wares may have been more
aspirational than usual…, the majority of the collection was original and keenly wearable.” According to Clarke’s opinion, Wang knows just how to take risks, yet still design a stylish, versatile line. With an awareness of how to make it in the fashion world, Wang grasped any and all opportunities that arose. Finally, Wang describes her difficult, yet rewarding journey: “It’s been a trip of passion, but it has not been a quick trip. Nor has it been easy. And that is the truth” (Fitzpatrick). Channeling the classic American sense of perseverance, Wang truly proves herself a “self-made (wo)man.”

Vera Wang, a humble yet driven women, worked extremely hard for the several opportunities she was offered. Gaining the appropriate experience in her earlier years, Wang was able to express her individuality and move in her own direction as a designer by 1990. Not only to her remarkable clothing speak volumes about her talent and diligence, but also her optimistic attitude implies an impression that she truly deserves her success. Because she persevered through the relentless fashion business, Wang’s hard work and individuality prove her to be the best of American fashion culture.

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Works Cited


Gene Kelly, a twentieth-century dancer, actor, director and choreographer, is considered a uniquely American icon. One of Kelly's most remarkable performances, “Singin' in the Rain” from the 1952 musical, portrays several aspects of quintessential American culture.

The carefree and upbeat atmosphere of his performance evokes a strong sense of Kelly's individuality. With no regimented choreography, Kelly is able to express his emotions openly and cheerfully. Along with the individuality of his performance, Kelly presents his optimism. Despite the dark and dismal rain, his buoyant singing and dancing contrasted with his upbeat style of entertainment, allows Kelly to depict American optimism in any situation. In addition, Kelly shows the bountiful opportunities that American offers. Specifically, he sings “Why do I get up each morning and start? Happy and head up, with joy in my heart.” Emphasizing positivity and fulfillment, these lyrics explain Kelly's individual version of the American Dream.

Kelly portrays other fundamental aspects of his characters. For example, he gives his umbrella away to stranger on the street. Displaying generosity, Kelly continues to sing and dance optimistically, even without an umbrella. Also, the presence of the police
officer in his performances shows an underlying motif of rebellion. Kelly’s “casual grace and an earthy masculinity to the high romance of lavish Hollywood musicals” (Krebs) will perpetually remain iconic in the pursuit of the individual American Dream.

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Works Cited


Fashion Icon: Lilly Pulitzer

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Roam into any Lilly Pulitzer boutique across the nation, and this powerful statement decorates the brightly colored walls. “Lillian Lee McKim, a New York heiress” (Elle), was born in 1931 to Robert and Lillian (Bostwick) McKim. Attending prestigious academies in New York City (Wilson) and being accustomed high society, Lilly Pulitzer “shocked her family” (Wilson) when she eloped with Herbert “Peter” Pulitzer in 1952. Expressing their individuality from their upper class families, the couple “escaped the hustle and bustle of New York City for the sun and sand of Palm Beach” (Lilly Pulitzer). Because the Pulitzers abandoned the elitist society of New York, they were forced to find another way to prosper in Palm Beach.
In 1959, Peter Pulitzer opened a “juice stand among the citrus groves of Palm Beach” (Wilson). Lilly, a devoted wife, helped Peter sell the juices; therefore, needing “a dress that would camouflage the stains of orange and grapefruit spills” (Wilson). Venturing into West Palm Beach, Pulitzer purchased remnants of kitchen curtains and other tropical fabrics. Her dressmaker transformed the fabric into modest, simple, and timeless shift dresses: the Lillys (Vanity Fair). Pulitzer did not set out to make a high fashion garment, but a functional dress that expressed her individuality. What started as Pulitzer's “uniform” to sell juice, has become a popular and upscale fashion line.

The line began to gain attention in the 1960s and 1970s (Wilson), when First Lady, Jacqueline Kennedy (a former schoolmate of Pulitzer) was spotted donning the colorful frocks (Wilson). In 1962, “Kennedy appeared in a LIFE Magazine cover wearing a ‘Lilly’ shift dress” and the brand “took off ‘like zingo’” (Lilly Pulitzer). Despite Kennedy's assistance, Pulitzer attain acclaim through her own hard work, optimism, and individual vision of fashion.
Admitting to her lack of fashion experience, Pulitzer remarked: “I designed collections around whatever struck my fancy... fruits, vegetables, politics, or peacocks! I entered in with no business sense” (Wilson). The company thrived in the 1960s and 1970s (thanks to Jacqueline Kennedy), but declined in the 1980s. Pulitzer had made some ill-advised decisions, thus her business suffered (Wilson). The independent woman did not allow this setback stop her from reviving her precious company. During the 1990s and 2000s, Pulitzer utilized her **individual** vision to create monumental fashion empire (Wilson).

“In reality, her persona was far more colorful than the clothes. In so many aspects, she was a very reluctant fashion icon” (Wilson). Steven Stolman, a fellow designer, made this remark after Pulitzer’s death in 2013. As a “self-made” [wo]man with drive, optimism and **individualism**, Pulitzer ascended to the top of the fashion sphere, after spending numerous days pouring fruit juice to passerby’s. Her fashion empire certainly did start with a juice stand.
Click here to learn the history of the Lilly shift.

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Works Cited


