

AND FASHION FOR ALL

If Fashion Week is a barometer,
the weather is changing in
the world of style.

by Carol Pearson

Writer, editor and somewhat fashionable beach walker

*“You have to be yourself,
and when you act in that way
you’ll be a much happier person ...
and you’ll look a hell of a lot better.”*

— Iris Apfel

Her steely eyes seemed to dare the cameras to look away as Jan de Villeneuve strode down the runway during London’s 2017 Fashion Week. The 72-year-old model’s chic silver bob set off the dark, rich look of the faux fur she wore to beautiful effect, as she modeled the latest creations of fashion designer Simone Rocha.

“This is my customer,” Rocha said after the show about the stunning de Villeneuve. “What I do is for all types of women, and that’s what I wanted to reflect in my casting.” (Holt, 2017)

Rocha’s show with de Villeneuve included several other models who began modeling long before many of today’s younger catwalk stars were born. She wasn’t the only designer to expand the idea of what a model looks like. De Villeneuve walked another show for designer Osman and has high praise for designers who celebrate fashion at any age.

“Life doesn’t end when you start getting a pension,” de Villeneuve, who started modeling in 1966, told *The Telegraph* after her catwalk appearances. “Older women love fashion too. I’ve always thought it would be nice if people of all ages, shapes and sizes were included, because that’s more relevant to day-to-day life.”

Her thoughts are becoming reality, and it’s not only age that is more broadly represented in the halls of fashions of late. When actress Selma Blair, 46, revealed her multiple sclerosis diagnosis last fall, she lamented the lack of fashion choices for people like herself who were dealing with disabilities. (Kratofil, 2019)

No stranger to the red carpet, Blair looked absolutely stunning at the Vanity Fair Oscars party in a gorgeously flowing pink and black gown ... and a custom-made cane, designed especially to provide the support she needed due to her health challenges while looking smashing and so stylish.

Blair’s no-nonsense and no-limits approach to her disability is inspiring designer Christian Siriano, who has gained a reputation of inclusivity by designing fashion not limited to the pencil thin, to consider a line of clothing for people with physical challenges.

Fashion has always struck a balance between influencing culture, and representing it. Spring 2019 Fashion Week in New York last fall drove that point home beautifully, as the diversity of models reached what fashion blogger Cordelia Tai called “an all-time high.” (Tai, 2018)

Tai notes more inclusion of plus-size models among the notoriously waif-like ranks of the runways, a sharp spike in transgender models, and some representation of physical disabilities too.

“Season in and season out, our diversity report takeaways stay much the same: that the industry has a long way to go when it comes to inclusion, that the principle always seems to be one step forward, two steps back,” Tai writes. “But this season’s results were more straightforwardly optimistic with a startling number of New York designers making serious strides toward genuine diversity.”

While our own sense of style may adapt as our personal circumstances change, the basic essence of who we are remains. And for 97-year-old fashion designer Iris Apfel, it’s essential to remain true to one’s personal style. In her signature gigantic, owl-eyed black glasses, she’s garnered 1.2 million followers on Instagram; it’s no wonder the fashion industry has taken notice of this self-named “accidental style icon.” (Apfel, 2016)

“You can’t really give specific advice about style, because style to me is an extremely personal thing,” Apfel says in a video on HSN’s website, where she sells her line of clothing and accessories. “What’s my style and what looks good on me might look absolutely ghastly on someone else. I hope with what I do I can show people that you have to be yourself and when you act in that way you’ll be a much happier person ... and you’ll look a hell of a lot better.”

Is the fashion industry driving our recognition of the need for self-expression for all? Or are designers just playing catch-up to what society has already decided? The jury is out. Yet this we know: There are more people like you, me and our best friends on the catwalks lately than ever before.

Fashion belongs to us all. ♦

Sources:

- Apfel, Iris. (2016). *Iris Apfel: Accidental Icon*. NYC: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Holt, Bethan. (2017). “Meet Jan de Villeneuve, The Fabulous 72-Year-Old Model Who Ruled the London Fashion Week Catwalks.” *The Telegraph*. Retrieved March 12, 2019, from www.telegraph.co.uk.
- Kratofil, Colleen. (2019). “Christian Siriano Says He Might Design Adaptive Clothing After Friend Selma Blair’s MS Diagnosis.” *People*. Retrieved on March 9, 2019, from www.people.com.
- Tai, Cordelia. (2018). “Report: Racial, Size, Gender and Age Diversity Reach All-Time High at New York Fashion Week Spring 2019.” *TheFashionSpot*. Retrieved on March 9, 2019, from www.thefashionspot.com.