

# ICONIC IRIS

Meet a true American original: the one, the only Iris Apfel. For the past nine decades she has been forging her own idiosyncratic style – a style that has, along with her razor-sharp wit, propelled her from relative anonymity to geriatric starlet. She's not just a hoot; she's a 93-year-old inspiration.

BY MAX CROSBIE-JONES  
PHOTOGRAPHY FROM CORBIS AND METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



“Do you guys want a macaroon? They’re too fancy for me,” she says in her New York drawl, her eyes blinking quizzically at me through giant spectacles. Too fancy? This is Iris Apfel: the nonagenarian fashion maverick whose apartments in New York and Palm Beach are a maximalist jumble of the exotic and the baroque; whose exuberant accessorising has inspired legions of fans and propelled her on to magazine covers; and whose collections for the Home Shopping Channel – usually the preserve of the tackiest of tack – twinkle and sparkle like fallen stars. No, nothing is too fancy for Iris Apfel, surely?

Just look at her. Today, in a plush hotel that backs onto Miami’s palm-lined waterfront, Iris wears jeans: bell-bottomed, could-be-from-Walmart blue jeans. But this is no run-of-the-mill outfit. Accompanying them is a tasseled white leather jacket, a bright blue feather-boa bag, assorted turquoise stone necklaces, and a pair of dainty suede shoes. Then, offsetting the ensemble’s eclectic theatricality (*Has she just raided a dressing-up box? I can’t help but think to myself*) is her imposing presence. The title of the 2005 exhibition that brought Iris to public attention, “Rara Avis,” is Latin for “rare bird.” And, looking her up and down, I’m struck by just how bird-like she looks: the sagging turkey neck; the fine-feathered, flamingo-pink hair; those humungous round spectacles, which give her the air of a giant owl (and also remind me of Janine Melnitz, the secretary from *Ghostbusters*).

Iris is here to give her views on authenticity (Iris, it quickly transpires, has a view on everything) at the New York Times International Luxury Conference. But first she has a



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bone to pick with technology, or more precisely its intrusion into the worlds of glamour and fashion. When I find her calmly nibbling macaroons in the foyer, she has just watched a high-profile panel talk about the advent of wearable tech: fashion accessories that bestow the wearer with 21st-century connectivity as well as style. She isn’t sold on it though. Our obsession with technology is approaching madness. We have, she thinks, collectively lost the plot. “I don’t happen to be a fan,” she says dryly, the plate of fancy macaroons wobbling slightly in her hand. “I think to condemn it is ridiculous. But it’s been carried to an absolutely insane extreme. I think we’re living in a world of total distraction. Why would you want to be plagued with emails on your wrists or your boots? I think it’s insane. What the hell do you need all these things for?”

Iris has a point, but, in fairness, one could easily ask her the same question. Her and her one-hundred-year-old husband Carl’s three-bedroom Manhattan apartment is, by all accounts, as flamboyantly decorated as she is, housing several department stores’ worth of clothing and ornaments, from painted Genoese chests to chinoiserie mirrors and Florentine paintings. It is a boiseried rabbit-hole down which the fashion scholar Harold Koda tumbled and spent weeks happily foraging, his plans for the show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Costume Institute getting more ambitious and expansive with each new idiosyncratic discovery.

Tell me how it came about, I ask. At first, she tells me, it was to be a small accessories show, but Koda decided that showing them out of context was counterintuitive and so requested five outfits to accompany them. That opened a Pandora’s Box. Of the two weeks





that followed, she says: "He looked in the closets, he looked under the bed, he looked in the drawers, and he kept oohing and ahing and finding all kinds of things I had forgotten I owned. And before we were finished I had to buy 10 racks, all the furniture had to be pushed to the side, and my husband was allotted a small space to dine on. He said I was lucky I didn't make him sleep in a drawer."

Her husband's hardship was worth it. Comprising 85 outfits (a lot more than the original five), "Rara Avis" was a crowd-pleaser from the get-go. The ensembles (assembled "as I had worn them maybe sixty years ago," she says) included a pink wool-pile Lanvin jacket and loose black trousers set off with turquoise Native American necklaces, Italian cuffs and a Mexican leather and hammered-silver belt. Another paired a House of Lanvin evening gown with Bhutanese and Tibetan cuffs and necklaces, the golds, browns and pewter tones of the dress's silk faille offset beautifully by the silvers, ambers, corals and turquoises of the jewellery.

Above all else, Koda was out to demonstrate to New York audiences the transformative power of the accessory – how it can function as a sort of sartorial fairydust – but the show also struck a deeper chord. Confidently mixing and matching genres, colours, textures and patterns without regard for period, provenance or aesthetic convention, Iris's richly layered costumes showcased a very rare and brave sort of élan. Each mannequin stood as a nostalgic celebration of one lady's unfettered imagination and anything-goes courage – was a witty and worldly fashion statement that said, in no certain terms, "'I dress for me, not the rest of you.'" At the not-so-tender age of 85, a new fashion icon had been born.

**S**o this is how her second life – her fashion life – began, but who was Iris before the adulation? What turn of events gave rise to such extraordinary taste? Who was she before she became a magazine covergirl? And when did this love of offbeat things and free-spirited dressing start?

The chapters in her life are long and many. But condense her life-story and it boils down to this: before she was Iris, the "geriatric starlet" (an epithet she is justly proud of), she was Iris, the respected interior designer – still a *somebody*, just not a somebody you are likely to have met or heard of unless you are familiar with the American home-furnishings trade.

Born August 21, 1921, she grew up in the working-class neighbourhood of Astoria, just across the river from East Manhattan. Her earliest memory of articulating her own style is, as she recounted in a 2007 profile for *The Daily Telegraph*, standing on a stool at the age of four, screaming because she objected to the hair ribbon her mother had chosen for her. "I was saying, 'It doesn't match! It doesn't match!' Now I hate things that match – I hate matchy-matchy!" she told the reporter. She acquired her love



of accessories from her mother. "She worshipped at the altar of the accessory," she says, "and I've been collecting them since I was eleven years old."

She read art history at New York University, and spent her early twenties working at *Women's Wear Daily*, a fashion trade journal, and scouting locations for the fashion illustrator Robert Goodman. But these were dead-ends. Only after a stint working for a woman who dolled-up apartments during the post-WWII housing doldrums did she find her true calling.

By the early 1950s, she and her husband, Carl, who she married in 1948, were well on their way to becoming somebodies. They had a textile-and-design company, Old World Weavers, which produced meticulous hand-loomed reproductions of antique fabrics for high-society clients, including the White House (they sold it in 1992 but are still advisors). Soon they were hanging out with some of them at parties and making twice-yearly buying trips to far-flung corners of the

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world. It was on these trips – while ferreting around Parisian *maisons de coutures*, North African souks and Middle Eastern bazaars – that her wardrobe grew and her creative palette began leaning towards the offbeat and tribal. As *The New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith puts it, “Before multiculturalism was a word, Mrs Apfel was wearing it.”

Though space in her apartments is scant, today she is still a keen “hunter-gatherer” and still loves mixing high and low fashions, creating something unique out of disparate elements. “Then there’s some part of me in it,” she says. She sees no great divide between designing a room and dressing oneself. Both are a form of self-expression. “Composing the elements of interior and composing an ensemble are part and

about pairing haute couture with flea market finds, or 19th-century ecclesiastical vestments with Dolce & Gabbana lizard trousers. However, her opinion of her contemporaries has changed. Big time. When I ask who she admires from the world of popular culture today, there is a long pause. And a sigh. “Today? No. The past? Oh yes....Pauline de Rothschild and Millicent Rodgers were women of taste and individuality, but now everybody seems to want to look alike,” she says, picking up steam.

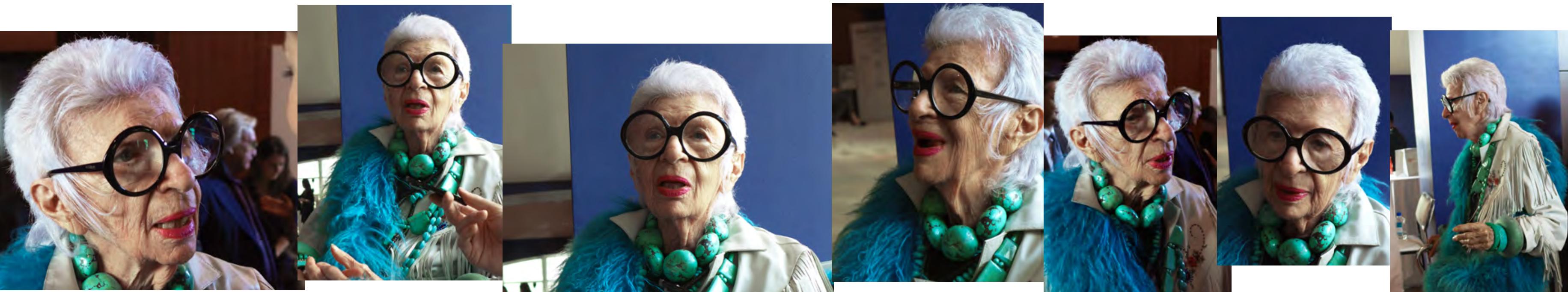
Style is not what it used to be. The fifties through to the eighties were the golden age, she thinks, as “everybody looked elegant, everybody took pains to look pretty and be chic.” Now we all look “dreadful,” especially

a website that delves into the lives of the individuals defining our zeitgeist, even has a go-to phrase for those moments when inspiration eludes them: WWID, or What Would Iris Do?

Her appeal is about more than mere appearance. It’s not just the Iris look, those specs (“the bigger to see you with”) – it’s the Iris attitude. No mere clotheshorse, she is a fount of good, old-fashioned advice at a time when many of us feel we need it. Her *bon mots* are the kind you want to stow away for safe keeping, all of them signposting one overarching principle: be singular, *be yourself*. She’s refreshingly honest, sometimes painfully so, and as fallible as the rest of us. Take her views on dressing: “The fun of getting dressed is

are in the works. And later this year, an up-close and personal character study, *Iris*, by the late American documentary-maker Albert Maysles, will be released. “I should slow down. But I don’t know if I will,” she says, in a manner that suggests she’ll do no such thing.

“It’s hard to explain all that is Iris: a curator of creativity, a preacher of confidence, a master of authenticity and a goddess of personal style,” says a fashion PR rep who’s such a fan she went and had Iris’s face tattooed on her wrist. “Iris’s vivacity dominates any room,” says Negin Kordbacheh, the Miami-based attorney who joined the conference. “She’s an innovator, never shy to take risks. I’m drawn to her maverick allure.” But for Iris, her status as a



## For Iris, her status as a venerated style guru is not so much about her as about what we’re all hankering for.

parcel of the same thought process,” she says. “You bring your own experience, thoughts, feeling, and your likes and dislikes.”

She likens herself to “a great big sponge.” When an exhibition of Matisse’s cut-outs was staged at London’s Tate Modern in 2013, Iris admitted to being unconsciously influenced by him, and pulled cut-out-esque Dior capes and Versace suits from her wardrobe to prove it. “Colour is one of the most important things in the wide world,” she said. It is also tempting, given the late-20th century New York milieu she inhabited (plus, her friendship with Duke Ellington), to see comparisons between her “looks” and the improvisational styles of abstract expressionism and jazz.

The way Iris puts together an outfit hasn’t changed much over the years (we’ve just been slow at noticing). She still does it quickly – “I have no time to think about it,” she says – and she still has no qualms

in New York. But you have so many young fans, I point out. She must have hope? Another pause. Another sigh. “Oh, I have a glimmer of hope. But it’s very faint. People are like sheep. Whatever anybody does – good, bad or indifferent – and whether they like it or not, they do it. We have given rise to a generation of robots and zombies.”

We might be a generation of robots and zombies, but we love Iris. We really do. Conducted on the sidelines of the conference, our interview is interrupted by people falling over themselves to be in her company, ask a question, furnish her with another plate of macaroons or cup of chamomile tea, express their love, or just say hi. And out there in the real world, the affection is no less strong, the effusive tributes ranging from Iris Apfel Pinterest boards and T-shirts to Halloween costumes (“Oh, that was really demented,” she sniggers). *The Coveteur*,

it’s a creative experience, and I never know what it’s going to be.” Or style: “Learn who you are, what you’re comfortable with, and what you can pull off. It’s better to be happy than well-dressed.” Or plastic surgery: “If women put some more of the time and money they put on their heads in their heads, they’d be better off.” And ageing: “Take advantage of it and put your experience to work.”

And boy, does she put her experience to work. After the talk today, she’ll head straight back to her Palm Beach apartment to look after Carl (“He misses me terribly”), but she remains a career gal at heart. “I’ve become a mannequin at 93,” she says. “I just did three commercials for Kate Spade, and one for Alexis Bittars. And I even did a vodka commercial, which was fun.” Few people in their dotage work this hard. Few people *any age* work this hard. She’s a visiting professor at the University of Texas, Austin (once a year she takes the best and brightest around New York to learn what “fashion is all about – that it’s not just a runway bubble.”) Her accessory designing for the Home Shopping Channel is ongoing; handbag and rug collections

venerated style guru is not so much about her as about what we’re hankering for. “There is a great sense of loss, and people are nostalgic,” she says. “I’ve spoken to people about it and it seems there is something in modern life that they know they’re lacking but they don’t know what is. And when they see me or my show, it touches a nerve.”

Perhaps it’s this: by imploring us to value our individual selves rather than the marketed selves we are sold, by championing the process of aging gracefully rather than resentfully, and showing us it can be done with a smirk and in bravura style, Iris has brought something that was lacking to the heavily PR-puffed worlds of contemporary fashion and beauty. Her iconoclastic outfits and her irreverent persona are an affront to our self-doubt and our conformity. When it comes to expressing ourselves, Iris is helping people rediscover a lost sense of whimsy and adventure. *If she can do it, you can* is the message. Stop being robots and zombies. Iris is Iris; now you, go be you. \*