

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRIES

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

MEMOIRS OF

MAURICE RENTNER

FROM VARYING PERSPECTIVES

THE FASHION INDUSTRY LEADERS

INTERVIEW WITH

PAULA NEIMAN

Stylist

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INTERVIEWED BY

Mildred Finger

Q: Would you tell us how long you were with Maurice Rentner, and what did you do? What was your job when you were there? And what year you started?

A: I don't remember the year, but it's probably...I was there 15 years.

Q: And he died in 1958. So you went there in the early forties.

A: Yes, that's right. He sent for me, 'cause I had given up my own business. He said, "Mrs. NEIMAN, just what do you do? What can you do?" So I said I would be very happy to work with the designers and tell them the changes I would like, and work with them, give them suggestions. Then he said to me, "Tell me, what else could you do?" So I said, "Well, I could correct the duplicates." He said, "That's what I do." So I said, "Well, that's what I can do." So he said, "Okay," and he laughed. But he talked to me for a long time about everything else. I said, "I can help select the fabrics. I'm very good at colors and combinations." He said, "That's what I like. That's what I want." So I used to work with the designers.

Q: How many designers did he have?

A: He had two designers.

Q: Two designers.

A: And then he had one designer...They usually were very good. He had a very nice business, and he was so well known. He was considered the king of the dress industry. He was a very pleasant man. He was short, but you never knew it when he was sitting in a chair talking to you. He was

very attractive in a certain manner. He never spoke above almost a whisper.

Q: You were creative, but you were not a financial person I would gather. So, when you worked for him, you were really working as a stylist, weren't you?

A: A stylist...and coordinator.

Q: Right, Right.

A: And that was something that most designers don't like. Because they like to feel that they're creating, and they don't need any help. But I was very lucky; the designers accepted me well. And I had no difficulty at all. I used to pick the fabrics. We'd sit around a table-- Mr. Rentner, the piece goods man and myself. And we'd have days when certain fabric people sent in the fabrics that we wanted to look at. And we'd sit around this table and pick fabrics for clothes. I thought they would be suitable for, and he would agree or disagree. That was another function of my job.

Q: So you were able to help in the selling?

A: Oh, yes. A lot of the people knew me, and I waited on them. That part of it was always very successful, and I liked it because they seemed to be very much interested in what I suggested.

Q: Did you also work with the press in those days?

A: Yes, I worked with the press. I also took full charge of the photographs for Quality Street.

Q: Did you? Quality Street was that special program for specialty stores?

A: Specialty stores. And believe me, they were the best stores

in the country.

Q: Across the country. Did you confine them--was it one store in a city, or something like that?

A: Yes. We'd pick a certain number of pieces for different occasions. I'd pick the quality, the fabric, the materials, the color combinations, for the samples that were bought for the book.

Q: Twelve styles or fourteen styles....How many styles were there?

A: Oh, maybe 15-16 styles.

Q: And how often was that catalogue, or book, sent out to the stores?

A: Twice a year.

Q: Twice a year.

A: I would spend maybe 10 days with the photographers. Having the dresses put on the models for the photographs. Telling them how to wear them, and so forth. I'd get all the accessories for the clothes for the photographs as well as for the openings of the showings.

Q: What about the advertising? Because I noticed that he did a fair amount of advertising in magazines, too.

A: The stores would each use clothes in the photographs in this book. Each one had a book.

Q: That was Quality Street.

A: Yes. Quality Street. And they would order...The prices were the retail prices for them. It was their book. Like their catalogue. And we'd have their prices. I would attempt to call that...Not the prices,

I'm not talking about that. But the arrangement...In fact, all of it. The models that were selected to show them, how to wear them for the photographs. And really, it was...Everybody talked about those books.

Q: I don't quite understand one thing. When those books went to the stores, did the store send them to their customers?

A: Yes.

Q: Oh, they did. So that they really were...

A: Each store ordered a certain amount of the books.

Q: I see. Because that's very early in this whole scheme of things, with catalogues, First one I've heard of.

A: That's right.

Q: And I'm interested that...

A: I don't know of any other store that did that at the time.

Q: Any other manufacturer you mean,

A: No manufacturer.

Q: No, I don't know of any either. So it was really a very innovative thing to do.

A: And it worked beautifully. And they always looked forward to getting the books. Getting the catalogues. They didn't call them catalogues. That was too cheap. Each store had them, with their own covers, you know.

Q: Now, was this an idea that Maurice Rentner himself invented, or created?

A: Partially, but he worked...He had a very good mind, and they looked up to him. They looked up to him like the king of the business....

Q: When you say "they", you mean the stores?

A: The stores.

Q: Right.

A: And he knew all the people. All the top people in the stores. The merchants and their assistants....Every one of them.

Q: But essentially, they all felt about Maurice Rentner that he really was the most important person in that price range.

A: He was. At that time, he was tops.

Q: Right. So he created the idea of a book. And he also went to Paris and you went with him...

A: Oh, sure we went to Paris. All the time.

Q: Would you tell us about those trips?

A: Pardon?

Q: Would you talk about those trips that you went on with him?

A: Yes. I went on the trips. He went on the trips, and wasn't always with me or anything. But I would go to Europe and select fabrics, see collections, make notations. You know, the other day, it was only the other day, I happened to go to one of my drawers in the living room, and I saw a little book. I opened it up....This was when all the collections at the one time, you know, one season...

Q: Yes. Right.

A: For example, one time when I went to Europe, the clothes looked lovely and there were pockets--pockets, pockets, pockets galore--on everything. And I cabled to Maurice and told him about it. And I said, "You're going to get a lot of those things. You'll have to have a lot of

things with pockets, pockets in the two piece things and pockets in the one piece things, and pockets all over. He thought that was a very good idea. Pockets on everything. And they looked beautiful. And they came in like mad. Everybody started to have pockets. Well, I'd go to Europe to look at the collections, and have a little sketcher with me. That they didn't know. An unknown sketcher, and I would talk to her and tell her, "Mark this down." And I had a photographic memory. That was one of my assets. All I'd have to do was see it and I could remember the outstanding feature of each thing. And I'd buy some clothes, the minimum that I had to buy. But I had a whole line.

Q: Now, when Maurice Rentner went with you, or alone, did he also buy fabric, or...?

A: He would buy some fabrics. Most of the fabrics he would buy would be imported fabrics. But we had people in New York, fabric people; that was their business. Also, he did a lot of entertaining while he was there.

Q: Entertaining store merchants.

A: He'd be there, and sometimes he'd have 12 for dinner at one of the top restaurants, sitting around. This is what he did for them. This was his way of showing respect, you know, and everybody was crazy to go to anything he invited them to. Now that took in all of the store owners that were in Europe, all the important buyers that were in Europe, and also the agents.

Q: Commissionaires,

A: Huh?

Q: Commissionaires,

A: He was very friendly with them. I knew them all, and he was friendly with them. But he used to entertain a lot. I went from one collection to the next with my sketcher, and every night, after we were through, for a couple of hours we did all the sketches, with all the important features. If she forgot something, I reminded her. And colors, and so forth. That was my job. My job also was to get all of the accessories. We had marvelous shows, with all of the accessories. For every dress, the model had a hat and bags, shoes, jewelry, everything that you could think of. Those were the things that I got. I also corrected the duplicates. Maurice was very choosy about everything. I did that.

Q: The correcting of the duplicates with....

A: The production man, who was absolutely marvelous. Very intelligent and educated man, who could stand criticism. He enjoyed it. And he was really perfect at correcting duplicates to fit. Then when we'd have a show, I would have each thing that I had...hats and gloves and shoes and bags...Everything. Jewelry,...to go with each costume.

Q: Did he approve the ultimate thing, however, before it went out in the showroom?

A: Oh, sure.

Q: I'm trying to find out just what his role was in the business.

A: When we'd look at the collection, notes were made. Some things were fine. Things that weren't, he suggested something that was going to be changed.

Q: This would be like a dress rehearsal.

A: Yes.

Q: Before the actual showing.

A: Uh huh, It so happened that there weren't too many changes, because even though he wasn't there, he'd come around sometimes and see some of the things that were being made, and some of the things that were being corrected. Then I would select the models, the girls to wear the clothes.

Q: Again...Remember, what I'm really trying to find out is what his relationship was to the various aspects.

A: His relationship was to everything. There wasn't a thing that he didn't want to see and talk about. Of course, he did know what was going on with everything. There's no question about it. He had a terrific sense of style. Terrific.

Q: I've been told that sometimes when he went on trips, he collected things. Art objects. Are you familiar with that part of his life at all.

A: Well, I know everything that he bought. Anybody who goes to Europe always looks for something that would be unusual, that he could use maybe for his home, maybe for gifts, things like that.

Q: You're not aware of any special interest.

A: No. There wasn't anything special that I knew of.

Q: So essentially, when he went to Europe, it was to look at a couple of collections and get a feeling for the trend, to entertain.

A: He entertained a lot.

Q: A lot...And generally, I guess, to be stimulated, as

everybody does.

A: Oh, yes. You can get stale very easily.

Q: In those days, I assume there were no such things as trunk shows. Shows in the stores themselves.

A: Oh, no. That came later.

Q: Were you with the firm until it closed? Until he died?
I don't mean until it closed. I mean until he died.

A: No.

Q: But you were there altogether for how long?

A: Fifteen years.

Q: Paula, would you tell us a little about the kinds of clothes that had the Maurice Rentner label, and that people think about...?

A: For example, he made two piece suits that were beautiful. Anyone who knows I was with Maurice Rentner...In Florida, for example, will say, "Oh, my God, I have a suit...I still have it. I don't want to give it away. I can't do anything with it. It was so beautiful. It's still beautiful." And they say, "You know the suit...The jacket has a little blouse in the back."

Q: A little blousing.

A: A little blouse in the back that nobody in this business knows how to make.

Q: Were the two piece suits always made with shirts to go under them, or...?

A: For the show, we'd have the shirts under them. Or scarves

or something to go with them. Sometimes blouses. Occasionally. Everybody remembers Maurice Rentner's clothes.

Q: Dresses and jackets, for example. Were they...

A: Jackets and skirts... Sometimes the dress was with a jacket. It had the distinction of being Maurice Rentner's. Nobody could miss that.

Q: Did he also make evening clothes?

A: Yes. Everything. Evening clothes. Daytime clothes. Cocktail dresses.

Q: Do you remember what the price range was in those days? Now we're talking about the early forties to the mid-fifties let's say.

A: Ninety-five dollars, \$49, \$69,...

Q: Those are wholesale prices.

A: Yes. Wholesale. \$59, \$69... Oh, occasionally there were a few \$39.75s, but all the way up. Not in the hundreds, but maybe \$150-200.

Q: For an evening dress.

A: For a suit. \$300 for a suit. Older women, especially, loved the clothes. But younger women would say, "Your clothes are beautiful. You look lovely in them, But they're not youthful." Which was true in a sense. The women who could pay the price for his clothes were not young kids.

Q: Did you tell him about the reaction of young women?

A: He listened to me, and I worked with the designers. I couldn't do anything about the suits, they sold beautifully. I worked on some dresses, and I made them younger looking and he approved. He loved it. He knew style and he set style and he wasn't stubborn about anything. He would like changes if they appealed to him. Well, there was no trouble

in appealing to him because the styles were really good.

Q: As long as the taste level was his taste level.

A: Absolutely, Because...As a matter of fact, understated clothes, Actually, what he loved himself. Understated, beautifully stylish.

Q: He was apparently very well dressed himself.

A: Yes,

Q: And liked clothes for himself.

Q: Loved clothes, And I know that he liked the way that I wore his clothes,

Q: So he wanted you to look the part, in Maurice Rentner clothes.

A: Yes, He was glad that I looked the part.

Q: You knew he was open to suggestions.

A: Oh, he was open to suggestions all the time. He weighed them very carefully. If something good was pointed out to him and he felt you were right, he accepted it. He had a very open mind.

Q: That sounds like a good reason for some of his success,

A: His success was due to him, completely. Designers and everything else. That designer he had, if she were somewhere else, wouldn't be that successful. But she was successful when she was with Maurice Rentner because he discarded this and he added that, you know,

Q: Good, Thank you very much. I think that's splendid.

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