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TALKS WITH WOMEN WHO SHAPED OUR TIMES



# Diana Vreeland

By Lynn Gilbert  
with Gaylen Moore





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— James Leonard Park, Authenticity Bibliography

# Particular Passions: Diana Vreeland

By Lynn Gilbert with Gaylen Moore

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## Dedication

*To the women of the past, who made a difference,  
the women of today who keep the goal of equality aloft,  
and the women of tomorrow in whom we entrust our future.*

— Lynn Gilbert



Diana Vreeland in her apartment, photograph by Lynn Gilbert ©1978, New York City.

## Diana Vreeland

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Vreeland (born 1906, Paris, France—died 1989, New York City) was an arbiter of style in America since the 1930s, setting trends in both fashion and magazine layout as fashion editor of Harper's Bazaar from 1937 to 1962, and then as editor of Vogue until 1971. Then, as special consultant to the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, she continued to influence fashion and the public, drawing vast audiences to her exhibits of fashions of the past, which illustrate the evolution of style, costume as history, and garment design as art.

I THINK STYLE IS A totally natural thing. One has standards and through concentration maintains them, that's all it is. It's a normal rhythm which covers everything. There's nothing difficult about anything that is innate. Style is a wonderful thing to have because it maintains you through the way you behave, the literature you read, your life with friends, with children and with your family. Style is always growing and changing, always finding new outlets and interests, of course, particularly through work. I can't imagine anything more onerous than not having a regular standard, a rhythm, a behavior, and a work.

Money has nothing to do with style at all, but naturally it helps every situation. You need money to eat and sleep and look properly, to have a good life. Of course, people have grown up from under a stone and have come up with plenty of style. We're all born to have it, we just need to get on to our own thing.

Fashion is not the same thing as style. Fashion is everywhere, on the daily air, and it's always moving. People can pick up fashion in boutiques, or seeing something on the street, et cetera, but that doesn't mean they have style. They can be very, very badly dressed, very badly put together, and have no authority because perhaps they have no authority within themselves.

I was born and brought up in Paris, remember that. You can say, "What difference does it make?" It makes all the difference. People who are born in Paris are a little different. I do believe that. It is a fact that people there are most interested in those sorts of things. Then once you have that standard, you must maintain it.

Before I went to work for *Harper's Bazaar* in 1937, I had been leading a wonderful life in Europe. That meant traveling, seeing beautiful places, having marvelous summers, studying and reading a great deal of the time. I lived in London, a wonderful town to read and concentrate in. I read Russian, English, French, and German literature, the classics—always in translation. My intense reading was natural. Everybody young reads and reads. I would have even read the telephone book for hours at a time. It's the concentration, it grabs you.



My education was rather spotty because my parents were very careless. They always forgot when it was fall and time for little girls to go to school, but then when they remembered they sent us. For years I was in ballet schools. I never went with the idea of becoming a professional. At a certain point I couldn't really go to a regular school because I didn't know anything, and ballet school was the only school my parents could keep me in. I was perfectly happy in a ballet class on a barre. I think that it's the only way to bring up a girl, you see, because it gives her a feeling, a rhythm. Through dancing you interpret the music, and you feel the wonderful, natural things of the earth. It's the discipline, doing everything absolutely perfectly, meeting the standards because, by God, with a ballet master like Fokine, if you didn't you were in trouble.

Before I went to work, my life was a life of leisure. I'd no responsibilities except my house, my family, and my friends. I could never have lived that kind of life in New York. I think it's something in the climate that makes one want to get out and about. To me, people live in New York to work, not to dream or to have a leisurely, imaginative life. There's too much interference, and there are too few people who can join you in leisure. There's great imagination here, but it's of another kind.

In Italy, there's a natural rhythm and it starts in the beauty of the people. When a stone rolls loose in Italy, it arrives at exactly the right place. It's an ancient land and it's grown very naturally in its own soil and things have evolved.

When I left the magazines I didn't miss them. When I left *Vogue* I had a holiday of three months. I had a wonderful time. I was in Spain, Italy, London, and Paris. It was all very gala and attractive. When I came back, the Metropolitan Museum of Art asked me if I'd like to work in their Costume Institute. They hired me to do whatever I felt should be done. I decided to do a show on Balenciaga.

You know, people like to look at pleasurable things, but I think so few people believe in pleasure. That everything should be attractive, for me, this is essential to every day. That's all I've been concerned with. I think the gondola and the



horse are the two most beautiful things in the world. The Islamic saying, “Thy name is horse, born of the south wind, you will be one of the five wonders of the world, forever and ever.” I’ve got it all crooked but it’s to that effect and it’s very beguiling. I’m mad about horses and the world of animals because they, of course, have style and beauty. Seeing animals and people together is something many of us miss today.

I say to evoke the imagination of the public is a wonderful thing if you can manage it.

Through the whole world there’s always been the spirit of ornamentation, and providing something for the onlooker, and we mustn’t forget it. People have always loved to look at fairy princesses, queens, beautiful objects, buildings, and gardens. Looking at beauty is a natural part of life. Beauty has nothing to do with possession. If possession and beauty must go together, then we are lost souls, a beautiful flower is not there to be possessed, it’s there to be beheld. You’re not going to take a beautiful painting off a museum wall. It’s there for your pleasure.

Here I always have doubts about what I do. When I start a show, I’m very timid and nervous for weeks and months. It takes a great deal out of me. It’s not easy to give the number of people who come each day to see a show the pleasure that I hope these shows do. It’s hard work. You start with an idea and you believe in it and then it grows around you. As you see things starting to grow, you gain confidence. Some days are big days. You jump. You get a whole excitable, marvelous, wonderful, wonderful, It doesn’t-balance, what-the-hell-are-we-going-to-do feeling. Then you know. It all comes gradually and then entirely. Then it somehow ends up that people like it and I’m very happy, and very proud and very, very pleased, because that’s the job. You feel it’s the best that could be done with the available material. Somebody else might be able to do a much better job, but I’m only talking about what I’ve accomplished. I hope I’m giving people pleasure, something to look at, to think about, something that fills their imagination or evokes a few thoughts.



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