The Late Bloomer: Iris Apfelâ??s Technicoloured Rise to Fame

# Description

The inimitable American fashion guru Iris Apfel (1921-2024) led a remarkable life, not least because she experienced her biggest career breakthrough at the age of 84, having already spent 10 years in retirement. She spent the bulk of her life running the textile firm Old World Weavers alongside her husband Carl, which included high profile work for several presidential administrations, quietly shaping the textures and surfaces of luxury interior spaces from behind the scenes. Throughout this time she was steadily building up a remarkable archive of vintage clothing in an array of vivid, technicoloured patterns, honing a highly personal style that was entirely unique, and it was this that would become the catalyst for her late rise to fame.

In 2005, the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Moden Art in New York contacted Apfel to stage a show dedicated to her rare, eclectic costume collection, titled *Rara Avis*, Latin for â??rare birdâ??. The display showcased 40 pieces from her wardrobe of remarkable garments indicating a life well lived, including hand embroidered jackets from Uzbekistan, oversized Moroccan necklaces, layer upon layer of costume jewellery, and her trademark huge glasses and sunglasses, staged into a series of outfits that

merged high and low fashion items she had spent a lifetime building up and playing with. The result was loud, big, layered and flamboyant, exemplifying her attitude, â??more is more and less is a bore.â?•

The exhibition was an overnight success, pulling in more than 100,000 visitors entranced by the daring individuality of her personal style. It went on tour throughout much of the United States, and launched Apfelâ??s status from a behind-the-scenes decorator to a global fashion icon, or, as she famously put it, a â??geriatric starlet.â?• An avid social media user, she garnered more than a million followers, and her soundbite quotes, such as, â??if your hair is done properly and youâ??re wearing good shoes, you can get away with anythingâ?•, and â??fashion you can buy, but style you possess,â?• became popular with people of all ages, expressing her uplifting and inspirational attitude.

A large part of Apfelâ??s appeal was her uncompromising approach to aging well, and enjoying life â?? rather than trying to look young, or hide her age, she embraced her life stage, with white hair, huge glasses, and draped clothing built up in layer upon layer in a vivid array of patterns, textures and colours. She famously called her wrinkles a â??badge of courageâ?•, and called age â??just a numberâ?•, refusing to shrink or disappear as she reached the eighth, ninth, and tenth decades of her life. Style, she argued, was about confidence, attitude, and ultimately, having fun. â??Iâ??m not pretty, and Iâ??ll never be pretty, but it doesnâ??t matter,â?• she said. â??I have something much better. I have style.â?•

The following decades proved the most successful of Apfelâ??s career, including a full-length documentary film about her life made by filmmaker Albert Maysles, the publication of her first book, *Iris Apfel: Accidental Icon: Musings of a Geriatric Starlet*, published when she was 96, and Mattel even created a Barbie doll in her honour, the first of its kind to pay tribute to a woman in her nineties. At the age of 97, she signed a modelling contract with IMG, modelling for Vogue Italia, Kate Spade, Citroen, and more, posing in her

trademark dayglo fur coats, huge glasses and bright red lipstick. She showed that self-expression and striving for success is not just for the young, but can be achieved at any stage in life.

What proved most remarkable about Apfelâ??s life was her unwavering self-belief, and how not caring a jot what other people thought of her could lead to complete freedom, an outlook that continues to inspire people across the generations today. She said, â??I dress to please myselfâ?¦ if they donâ??t like it, I think itâ??s their problem, not mine.â?•

## CATEGORY

1. TEXTILES & PEOPLE

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