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HOW GRACE CODDINGTON BROUGHT ART TO VOGUE

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More than just US Vogue's creative director for the past 30 years, Grace Coddington is a style icon in her own right. With her fiery orange hair and daring fashion choices – she arrived at the 2015 Met Gala dressed in a decadent pair of **silk pyjamas** that wouldn't have been out of place in one of her photo shoots – Coddington has been a pillar of the fashion industry since starting out as a model in the early Sixties. Her cool – and above all, comfortable – style flows with an ease that few others could pull off. Describing her outfits for a recent photo shoot **she said** “There's [...] one where I wear a long dress, over sort of pyjamas. I like any different kind of pyjamas you can put me in.”

Her first taste of the fashion world came in the 1959 when, despite being told she was “too fat”, she won a *Vogue* modelling contest. Fast-forward a few years and Coddington was in the heart of London's Swinging Sixties. Her unique look caught the eye of renowned hair stylist Vidal Sassoon and she soon became the face of his iconic – and rule breaking – five-point haircut, which many credited with liberating women from the stiff styles of the Fifties. “He cut my hair in a bowl cut and totally changed hair – everything before then was lacquered and stiff. Suddenly you could shake your head – it was a defining moment of the Sixties,” she said.

Ironically, losing her left eyelid in a car accident was partly responsible for her shift from model to editor. “I had to stop modelling for a couple of years,” she said in an interview. “Of course, I didn't have any money at that time, so I started helping around the studio. Then, once my face healed, I went back to modelling. But by the time I went back, I was getting older and I looked around and people like Twiggy were coming along, and they were cute, and I wasn't in so much demand.” Her lack of modelling work, connections in the industry and changes in her personal life – she had just split up from her boyfriend – led to her accepting a job offer from *Harpers & Queen* magazine.

Coddington has weaved in and out of the limelight since her modelling days, but it was the 2009 film *The September Issue* that brought her back to centre stage, portraying her as a kind of defender of beauty, art and romance against the magazine's business-savvy pragmatist editor-in-chief, Anna Wintour. The seemingly adversarial relationship between Coddington and Wintour was central to the film, and viewers could be forgiven for thinking that the two don't get along, but that perception is far from the truth. In fact, Wintour recently attended Coddington's book signing and when asked who designed her dress, she laughed and replied “I can't remember. I just wore orange for Grace.”



Before *The September Issue*, Coddington had been known mostly for her iconic *Vogue* photo spreads and the baroque-style grandeur she bestows upon them. Since then, however, she's gained attention through other works like her 2012 book, *Grace: A Memoir*, in which she describes her upbringing on a rural Welsh island and her struggle against anxiety. More recently, she released *Grace: The Vogue Years*, a collection of some of her favourite work at the magazine from 2002 to the present.

In January, at the age of 74, Coddington **announced** that she'd be stepping down from her full-time role at *Vogue* to become an editor-at-large. Her new title has allowed her the freedom to take on projects outside the magazine while still collaborating on four photo shoots a year with *Vogue*. This bold move, at an age when many others have settled comfortably into retirement, is nothing short of admirable. But Grace Coddington is used to taking risks – most of which have paid off.

Her colleagues agree. Lucinda Chambers, fashion director at British *Vogue* and Coddington's former assistant, **perfectly sums up** Grace's extraordinary talent, "Most stylists are interested in one specific look, but Grace has extraordinary range," Chambers tells *The Guardian*. "She can do anything from grunge to couture, she understands the point of view of an incredible variety of photographers, and she does simplicity well, but can also go completely over the top [...]" She was the first person to put a model wearing no makeup on the cover of *Vogue* in the late 1970s – I was her assistant at the time and we received hundreds of letters, "shocked

and outraged from Reading”. I don’t think she is afraid of anything – and the same can’t be said of many fashion editors and stylists today.”

Since changing her role at *Vogue*, Coddington has announced a series of projects including her own perfume, a return to modelling, this time for Calvin Klein, and an advertisement campaign for Tiffany & Co., called Legendary Style. The campaign will be accompanied by a documentary titled *Some Style is Legendary*.



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Despite this diversity and variety in Coddington’s career trajectory, if there’s been one constant throughout, however, it’s been art. From embodying art as a model, to producing magnificent photo spreads, and even steadfastly sketching the looks that come down the catwalk, instead of photographing them; she has infused her passion for the creative and artistic into everything she does.

Coddington is unapologetic about her methods, which she admits many see as old-fashioned. In *The September Issue*, she talks about how she sees the world is from another time. She explains that statement to *Interview*, “I should have been born in another century. I am kind of too old-fashioned for this crazy fashion business, but when I said that, I wasn’t referring to fashion as much as to the fact that everything has become about computers and blogs and all those things that I can’t come to grips with. Half of me doesn’t want to come to grips with

them.”

So much of Grace Coddington’s success has come from going against the rules, so there’s clearly no need for her to change her approach now. From high end fashion to her feline favourites (she’s an unapologetic cat fanatic) and sometimes combining the two, in her cat shaped perfume bottle and whimsical cat Met Gala sketches; Coddington’s work has a unique flavour that accounts for her triumphant fashion career. Taking the ordinary and making it extraordinary is her speciality, and is something she advises other people to attempt also. “Keep your eyes open,” she says in Grace: A Memoir. “Because whatever you see can inspire you”.


Words by Minerva Jacquier

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