

Article featured in Inner Circular magazine, December 1978

Catalogue reference: BC/AS/203/2

Transcript:

I.C. goes to a Fashion Show...

After hearing cries of “Why don’t you ever do anything about fashion?” and the like, at the first Inner Circular hacks’ meeting this term, we decided we had to do something about this gaping void before our reputation for enterprise became obsolete. Young hackette Jasmine Lawrence came up at once with our solution. Her mother, it turns out is chief seamstress to Ossie Clark, one of Britain’s leading fashion designers. “A contact!” we screamed, and off we went. Here, as a result, is I.C.’s definitive guide to the world of exclusive dressing.

First of all, I.C. went to Ossie Clark’s Spring/Summer fashion show. This, we discovered almost immediately, was a very glamorous occasion and only under the auspices of Jasmine’s impeccable credentials did we eventually manage to wheedle our way through the carpeted doors of the Holiday Inn’s swimming pool in Chelsea where the show was being held. Pretending to look as inconspicuous as possible, we took seats as far away as we could from the glossiest looking people. We needn’t have bothered as more, and even glossier people arrived to sit in front of us – obscuring both our blushes and our view with their expensive attire.

The parade began with exquisite, pure silk underwear adorning equally exquisite, pure-silk models who swirled around the pool sides at an alarming rate. One or two naked breasts slipped out, to the thrill of the younger hacks present – I was more impressed by the subtler creations; beautiful black lace overdresses and sultry two-piece suits in red, gold and purple velvet. The gold quilted suit for Marie Helvin got the heartiest clap from the audience and the biggest gulp from I.C.

As we slunk out we couldn’t help thinking, all very well and lovely and glamorous but there must be a philosophy, or something like that, behind all this effort to provide exclusive people with exclusive clothes. So, intrepid as ever, I.C. went down to Ossie Clark’s studio a couple of weeks later, to meet the master and explore the mystery further:

R.O’B: If you’re using really expensive fabrics and exclusive designs doesn’t this severely limit your market?

Ossie: To the few people who can afford it.

R.O'B: Doesn't that worry you?

Ossie: No. You just have to find these people. You obviously can't flood the market with the clothes because so much work has to go into them, so you make to order for a small number of shops throughout the world. That's what we're doing. If you were to sell three dresses to one major shop in each major city in America you'd need quite a lot of dresses, at that price.

R.O'B: Yes, but wouldn't you like some of your designs to reach a wider market?

Ossie: Yes I would, but I've had a very bad experience with that, in that I was swamped down by a rag-trade company that would only allow me to make dresses that would retail at a certain price. That became very disheartening after a while.

R.O'B: So what is the basic policy of your company?

Ossie: To make an expensive range of clothes and then, once we've got that established; to go into franchising. We've already done that with underwear for Charnos.

R.O'B: So it's the way the business goes that restricts you to making exclusive clothes until you can afford to branch out.

Ossie: We're going through a very dull period in England at the moment. There's no backing from the Government and so to get the right price for a garment you've really got to seek out the customer who can afford it.

R.O'B: In an interview I did a few months ago, Quentin Crisp told me that fashion is not style. Do you think that's true?

Ossie: Perfectly true. I think some clothes require women with style to wear them. I think you've got to have a philosophy of life and an understanding of clothes. You have to eat the right food – understand about your own looks, your own defects. Quite often style comes about from playing up some defect in your personality or in your body. That's Bianca Jagger's trick. Her body has a sort of size 8 top and a size 12 bottom – but she will only wear a certain style which she's made totally her own.

R.O'B: What is your general opinion of the way young people dress today?

Ossie: I loathe blue jeans. I think they're really boring and I'm sure it's got something to do with the colour. I think it's a kind of insecurity in youth that they feel they must stand together and wear a kind of uniform, and I think the colour blue represents solidarity and security. There's a kind of underlying reason that I think they themselves don't really understand. Blue jeans are just boring, that's why I welcome the punks. I think, in many ways, the punks go too far but at least they're out to live life and enjoy it and they don't give a damn about what anyone else might think.

R.O'B: Their enthusiasm is important?

Ossie: Yes. I'd much prefer to see somebody with a ridiculous hair colour and with zips and earrings everywhere and with pierced faces than someone just wearing blue jeans, which are soul destroying.

R.O'B: Do you think we'll ever get away from it?

Ossie: Not until the politics in this country change – I think that youth is being kept down. I was fortunate when I began work 12 years ago in that there was this terrific feeling for youth. Youth was given its lead and I fitted into that and got terrific opportunities. I think that opportunity is being denied youth now.

R.O'B: As far as I can gather, designing and all that's associated with it – such as getting the fabrics together, meeting deadlines for orders, thinking of new designs – is very hard work. Is it true that there is glamour in the fashion world or is that cancelled out by all the hard work?

Ossie: Certainly there is glamour. The people you meet and the satisfaction when you please somebody. The response you get when somebody puts on a dress and they understand it, they know exactly what it does for them and they say "this is wonderful" or whatever. It just makes you feel it's all been worth it.

Sometimes I feel I'd like to go and live in the country and just read, but doesn't last for very long. Generally I'm happy with what I'm doing.

Article: Rebecca O'Brien

Photos: Richard Ault

Research: Jasmine Lawrence