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Anna Piaggi and Australia: the eye has to travel

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Abstract

Anna Piaggi (1931–2012), *Vogue Italia* writer and contributor, had a unique style of dressing which combined vintage and contemporary fashion, popular culture and art history references in a synthesized review of fashion and culture. This personal style was informed by her encounters with a broad range of visual cultures and dialogue with a variety of fields and disciplines. It was also partially informed by her connections to Australia, and close relationships with Australians. She met her Australian-born mentor, Vern Lambert, at the Chelsea Antiques Market, where he sold museum-quality vintage clothing by Elsa Schiaparelli, Gabrielle Chanel and Callot Soeurs to key influencers such as Mick Jagger and George Harrison.

This encounter shaped her, and Piaggi's style transformed as she began to incorporate vintage clothing and contemporary fashion in her wardrobe and her subsequent editorial work for *Vanity* and *Vogue Italia*. This paper reflects on Anna Piaggi and the importance of her Australian connections.

KEYWORDS: Anna Piaggi, *Vogue*, Vern Lambert, vintage, Australia

Anna Piaggi (1931–2012), *Vogue Italia* writer and contributor, had a unique style of dressing which combined vintage and contemporary fashion, popular culture and art history references in a synthesized review of fashion and culture (see Figure 1). Piaggi's personal style was informed by her encounters with a broad range of visual cultures and dialogue with a variety of fields and disciplines. It was also partially informed by her connections to Australia, and close relationships with Australians, including Australian-born mentor and amateur fashion historian Vern Lambert.

Piaggi met Lambert at the Chelsea Antiques Market in 1967, where he sold museum-quality vintage clothing by Elsa Schiaparelli, Gabrielle Chanel and Callot Soeurs among others. This encounter with Lambert shaped her, and Piaggi's style transformed as she began to combine vintage clothing with contemporary fashion in her wardrobe. Piaggi is known to have been influenced by her husband, the photographer Alfa Castaldi, and close friend and fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld (see Figure 2), yet the influence of Australian-born mentor Vern Lambert has received less attention. This essay will consider the defining influence Lambert had in shaping her individual style over the course of their relationship as well as the importance of travel and Australia to her visual style.

There are some references to Lambert in association with Anna Piaggi. He is most extensively referenced in the biography, *A Big Life*, by Australian fashion designer Jenny Kee, who worked with Lambert at the Chelsea Antiques Market in the 1960s and remained a lifelong friend (see Figure 3). Piaggi and Lambert had a continued presence in Kee's life, with shared visits to Australia and Milan. Piaggi also wore Kee's garments as well as those by Australian designer Linda Jackson and featured the work of these designers in her fashion pages, including a double-page spread in 'Anna Piaggi's Box' in Italian *Vogue* in 1977. Titled "Australian Graffiti," the page featured knits by Flamingo Park, the name of Kee's Sydney store, as well as Kee modeling a wattle sweater herself. Piaggi wrote: "The colours, ecology, flora and fauna, and the paintings of the Aborigines, were the fountain of inspiration of one of the most inventive collections of fashion we have seen in recent times" (Kee 2006, 192). Other references to Lambert are embedded in the recollections of his friends and colleagues, some of which have been captured in interview. In an interview in August 2014 Kee described Lambert as a "background boy," meaning that he inspired those around him whilst staying out of the public eye and largely out of the media. In 1992 Vivienne Westwood dedicated her collection to "our gentle friend who loved fashion" (Kee 2006, 322).

Figure 1

Anna Piaggi in Paris, 1987.
Photo: Robert Rosen.



Lambert was an amateur fashion historian. He arrived in London from Australia in 1961 and opened one of the first antique clothing stores in the Chelsea Antiques Market. Initially he worked as head waiter at Parks restaurant in Beauchamp Place (Mulvagh 1992); he eventually took over its décor, and “started filling the place with art nouveau” (Special Writer In Melbourne 1969). From there he began foraging from old markets and junk shops, before eventually discovering vintage clothing.

In the 1960s, the Chelsea Antiques Market in London was attracting the patronage of influential creatives all over the world. In *A Big Life*, Australian fashion designer Jenny Kee describes the vintage treasures by designers like Elsa Schiaparelli, Gabrielle Chanel and Callot Soeurs which hung in

Figure 2

Stephanie Audran, Karl Lagerfeld and Anna Piaggi, backstage at his show in Paris, 1984. Photo: Robert Rosen.



an Aladdin's cave at the stall of Vern Lambert. "He had a history of global fashion hanging in his shop and filed away in his brain," Kee wrote, "and I determined that I would haunt him until I understood it all" (Kee 2006, 76). She records the visits of musicians such as Mick Jagger, Brian Jones, Jimi Hendrix, Roger Daltrey and George Harrison and designers such as Jean Paul Gaultier and Claude Montana shopping at the market and being dressed by Lambert. This kaleidoscope of vintage pieces was like a clashing encyclopedia of fashion history.

Piaggi's encounter with Lambert shaped her personal style as she began to incorporate vintage clothing along with contemporary fashion in

Figure 3

Jenny Kee and Vern Lambert in Robert Rosen's apartment in Sydney, 1989. Photo: Robert Rosen.



her wardrobe. He was described as “a shy man, a showman, a shaman of style” (Kee 2006, 321) and “her soul mate and ultimate style guru” (Kee 2006, 322). Piaggi’s subsequent editorial work for *Vanity* and *Vogue Italia* was informed by the amalgamation of vintage and contemporary clothing which became her defining legacy. While many others were visiting the Chelsea Antiques Market at the time, it was the continued influence of Lambert on Piaggi that would have an enduring presence.

In the introductory pages to her book *Anna Piaggi’s Fashion Algebra*, Anna Piaggi includes a quote from *Vogue Italia* fashion editor Franca Sozzani that acknowledged a restless and creative quality in Anna Piaggi which she described as “vreelandesque.”

July 1988. At *Vogue* I wanted a *Vogue* that was volatile, vivacious and vital and very quick at spotting trends, vreelandesque in its extravagance, a hothouse of new ideas. I wanted it to be visionary. But most of all *Vogue* had to be like a paper video, a barometer of style. It needed that unexpected something, it needed that famous ‘free variable; which had to disrupt every issue and all expectations. So were born the D.P.s by Anna Piaggi (Piaggi 1998, 5; emphasis added).

Diana Vreeland was editor at *Harper’s Bazaar* (1936–1962), *Vogue* (1963–1971) and Special Consultant to the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1971–1989). Vreeland’s “vreelandesque” was a certain *je ne sais quoi* which drew together diverse elements, to reflect the contemporary beat. It was presented in her verbal and visual juxtapositions, such as “Blue jeans are the most beautiful thing since the gondola” or “Pink is the navy blue of India,” which informed her fashion pages, visually and verbally drawing together the unexpected in order to disrupt and create.

In recent years, this has also been described by the term “The Eye has to Travel” through its use in the title of a book and documentary on Diana Vreeland. The quote was first used in Vreeland’s book *Allure*, which described “the figures that crowded her imagination” (Immordino Vreeland 2011a, 2011b; Frisa 2012, 16) and her inspirations and obsessions as she looked continuously and indiscriminately. It was also applied to Piaggi’s approach. The traveling eye helped inform Anna Piaggi’s references and inspirations, and this traveling eye included travel across stylistic time periods, as well as travel to Australia. Piaggi’s “free variables,” mimicked the roving eye, drawing together fashion, art, culture and text into her double pages. These reflected an insatiable curiosity and an active eye, which was reflected in her work, as well as in her clothing choices and ensembles.

Anna Piaggi’s traveling eye moved her from her early education in a boarding school in Italy to traveling as an au pair and learning languages to become an interpreter. Whilst in her secretarial job at the magazine *Grazia*, she began fraternizing with the bohemian set in Brera in 1950s Milan, where she met the photographer Alfa Castaldi. They married in New York in 1962. Her eye traveled, as did her connections, inspirations and stimulation. She became editor at *Arianna* and soon moved to *Vogue Italia* as special features editor. In 1967 she visited the Chelsea Antiques Market for the first time, where she met the Australian vintage clothing dealer Vern Lambert. “His stall changed my view of clothes,” she said (Herd 1987). They became inseparable, with Lambert eventually moving to Milan to live with Piaggi and Castaldi.

Vern Lambert would become Anna Piaggi’s mentor and advisor. He would also encourage her eye to travel to Australia, feeding her imaginary and creative referents. She visited Australia several times, which is likely more times than her contemporaries, given the perceived distance from Europe. From Melbourne, Australia she traveled as far as Mildura, a hot red dust town of apple and orange orchards and weatherboard homes, to visit Lambert’s close friend Snookie McWilliam, who had also worked at the markets. She traveled to the Blue Mountains near Sydney, a mountain range of about 4.8 kilometers hosting diverse national wildlife and flora, to visit fashion designer Jenny Kee. She traveled to Australian fashion week in 1997, and was introduced to the Japanese/Australian designer Akira Isogawa, whose work she admired (see Figure 4) and bought the work of fashion designer Sara Thorn. She was photographed with surfers by *Vogue Australia* at Bondi Beach in 1991 and bought swimwear by Speedo. And when she visited with Lambert, she shopped at R. M. Williams, “The Bush Outfitter” established in 1932 which specialized in outdoor wear, saddlery and leather accessories for the stockman. Castaldi’s son Paolo would travel to Sydney later to work as a photographer.

When I interviewed Stephen Jones in April 2014, I asked what it was about Australia that attracted her. “She loved Australia. Adored it. And I think mentally she was so far away from Australia. That’s why she found it so exotic,” he said.

Figure 4

Akira Isogawa and Anna Piaggi
Sydney, 1997. Photo: Robert
Rosen.



She loved that fresh outdoorsy lifestyle. The color, all those very normal things, which maybe weren't so well known then. We didn't have Google Images. You couldn't go tuperty tup Byron Bay and see what it looked like. You'd have to go to a library and find a book on Australia.

This was explained by a designer who would receive design commissions for hats from Anna Piaggi via fax, and from Anna Piaggi, whose prized possession remained an Olivetti typewriter. The predigital age demanded a looking—an observing and assessing eye—on the spot, not simply via images.

Anna Piaggi ensured that her eye traveled. It traveled across continents, it traveled across mediums and it traveled across time. One of her most

significant contributions to fashion has been her Double Pages for *Vogue Italia*. These mini-exhibitions represented a synthesis of fashion and culture in any given month. They presented a concept or topic in fashion in relationship to contemporary culture, history, art and design. At a time when fashion magazines were largely focused on the now, Franca Sozzani encouraged Anna Piaggi's broad historical, cultural and artistic view, with her travels across places, media and time. These Double Pages would later become the catalyst and driver for Judith Clark in her explorations of curatorial practice (Clark 2006).

In her book *Anna Piaggi's Fashion Algebra*, she largely dedicates the first 242 pages to her husband Alfa. Under the heading on page 77, "Visual romance," she writes,

The initial photographic idea of the Double Pages could never have come into existence without my total dependence on and union with the photographer-of-my-life, ALFA CASTALDI. MY α FACTOR. My hats lived with his Leicas, my clothes with his Linhof, my earrings with his "21 mm" or with his zoom. I would lift his Russian tele (lens) with trepidation of a Phillips auctioneer lifting very fragile sixteenth century lace. To go into the dark room I would slip on the lightest mules by Manolo, and if sometimes, at my most careful, I wore an aseptic lab coat, I would explain to him: "Alfa, clinical chic is in."

This homage to her husband is moving, tender and sweet. She credits the love of her life with inspiring her remarkable Double Pages. Collaboration is key. His name is peppered through the book, as is the creative motivation, inspiration and influence of Art Directors Luca Stoppani, Alexander Liberman, Fabien Baron and Juan Gatti.

But where is Vern? In 1988 he was at the forefront of *Lagerfeld's Sketchbook: Karl Lagerfeld's Illustrated Fashion Journal of Anna Piaggi*, which recorded Anna's and Vern's mad outfits as they stood side by side washing lettuce in a holiday house in France. She wore a bustier designed by Sonia Delaunay for a production of Fokine's *Cleopatra* by the Ballet Russes in 1909 (Piaggi and Lagerfeld 1988). He wore yellow framed spectacles. He was there shopping with her at vintage and antique markets, building her wardrobe and packing her traveling trunks for her many jaunts across Europe that she could only make by train because of her excessive luggage. But in *Anna Piaggi's Fashion Algebra* Vern only arrives on page 243. "Vern," she writes "introduced colour to my vision (which used to be more black and white)."

And, along with color, an Anglo-Saxon sense of humor and an Australian exuberance, both in his way of being and in his manner of dressing. In my pages he was a constant researcher, an inspiration and a fabulist. With him the story of fashion and the history of

costume entered my life in a light and natural way. Frivolously. The years spent with Vern have been a marvelous “moveable feast.”

Compiled in 1998, *Anna Piaggi's Fashion Algebra* becomes a reflection of her work and life. And as a true reflection of her life, Alfa entered first and Vern entered second. Alfa led her into the world of art and culture, and Vern led her to her iconic fashion status, by introducing her to the world of vintage fashion and the mix and match of time. Jenny Kee recalls the transformation from a chic Milanese woman to the dynamic fashion interpreter that happened at the Chelsea Antiques Market. “It was Vern,” she said. But it wasn’t just Anna that he transformed. He had a profound effect on a number of fashion icons at the time. “Let’s just say that Karl Lagerfeld wasn’t walking around with eighteenth century coats and a fan before he met Vern,” Jenny Kee said in an interview in 2014.

The pages that follow Anna Piaggi’s introduction in her book express a sense of fun and frivolity. When she met Vern she completed her transformation. In the 1950s she was a woman in twin sets and pearls. When she met Alfa she began to experiment with more eccentric looks, but when she met Vern she added history, a sense of fun and play, of color and spirit, completing her transformation. Piaggi benefited from Lambert’s sense of color and humor, she wrote above, and his particularly Australian exuberance. But what is this distinctly Australian characteristic?

Photographer Monty Coles credits Vern’s originality to the fact that he was Australian and an outsider in London. “With outsider status he saw things differently,” Coles said in interview in 2015. His Australian eye had traveled to London, where he was able to see London’s charms with spontaneity and freshness. The old antiques looked banal to Londoners, but to Australians they were fresh.

In *Out of Line*, Margaret Maynard argues that Australian dress is distinctive in the styling and the coordination of unexpected elements. In 1946, when Vern would have still been in Australia, women were criticized by a French dressmaker for their “loud” and complicated clothes and their suspect etiquette (Maynard 2001, 6). “They seem to have too many accessories, and wear too many odd bits and pieces,” the French dressmaker said, “and why wear hats with flowers, veils and feathers in the morning?” (Maynard 2001, 6). “Indeed,” Maynard writes, “it is how clothing styles are worn and the rhythmic patterns of their wearing that marks women out as distinctive” (2001, 5).

Several years later, in another culture, with another set of references, this tendency to over-style and over-accessorize created a different effect. Drawing on the “virelandesque” of a distinct editorial style, the historic references that were present in the Chelsea Antiques Market and the vibrancy of a London culture, it was with the “loudness,” color, pattern, boldness that Maynard attributes to Australian dress that the style icon Anna Piaggi evolved.

Interestingly, Maynard also notes stylistic disjunctures as evident in Australian speech, a subtlety Piaggi would have noted, given her broad knowledge of foreign languages and skill as an interpreter—her job in the 1950s. Maynard (2001, 5) describes Australian speech as characterized by a mix of exaggeration and irony, a boast and a shrug, coupled with common sense. She suggests, “Perhaps this explains some of these identifiable style disjunctures, marked as they are by the straightforwardly practical, mixed with a disconcerting streak of the irreverently offbeat” (Maynard 2001, 5).

Is she describing speech or a mode of dressing? Is it just the eye that must travel, or is it the ear too? And is this the key to understanding the influence that Vern Lambert, as an Australian, may have had on the styling and “fashion algebra” of Anna Piaggi?

My sense is that it is. While in the late 1960s there were other patterns of eclectic dressing, there was no other style leader who possessed the originality and references of Anna Piaggi. In the late 1960s the hippy movement combined a style of dressing up and dressing down, which incorporated ethnic and historical dress into contemporary clothing styles. The cut-up method of William Burroughs, adopted by David Bowie (Whitely 2013), achieved a general mixing and abbreviation of elements. The principle of the cut-up method was to cut up and rearrange existing text in order to reveal an embedded meaning (Savage 2013). It was described as absolute reduction, a way of synthesizing information. In some ways Piaggi used the cut-up method to shape her wardrobe. The fashion for vintage also mixed historic elements. Vern Lambert was not the only contender, but he excelled, as did Piaggi, in using it to form the basis of her fashion language.

The stylistic language she created for herself was a mix of multicultural influences both through people and objects. Her eyes were open to creative juxtapositions and cross-references. Vern Lambert was instrumental to the formation of that language, with his Anglo-Saxon humor and his Australian exuberance. Bold and unashamed, casual and uninhibited, classless and egalitarian, experimental and willing, Australian clichés include “she’ll be right” and “fair go” to suggest confidence and equality, as identified in Donald Horne’s *The Lucky Country* (1964). The national icon is a larrikin, a mischievous, good-hearted, spirited figure with a disregard for social convention and a keen sense of humor. This lightness of touch was what her wardrobe required. Add to these the icons of the Australian landscape, the opal jewel, the koala motif and the colors and patterns that Jenny Kee offered through her designs from the 1970s onwards (see Figure 4) and her wardrobe lifted again. Anna Piaggi also loved the patterns of indigenous culture. In 2012, Colin McDowell would write “that her hope for the future of the collection would be to give it to Australian aborigines to join Western dress culture and native Australian culture to create something entirely new and exciting.” (McDowell 2012). This intriguing comment requires further exploration.

When I asked Jenny Kee what it was about Vern Lambert, she stated matter-of-factly: “He was from Melbourne.” When I asked what she meant

by this, she said it is a design city. Like New York, a grid was imposed over the burgeoning city, forcing it into perpendicular streets and laneways. It was also the site of the first national art gallery, prospered in the 1850s Gold Rush and enjoys the status of the art and design capital of Australia. But Vern's skill seemed to be a mix of many elements. London, the swinging sixties, the abundance of Parisian couture being emptied from deceased estates, Vern's eye to catch it and the tableaux that he created for the markets, which inspired Cecil Beaton's landmark 1971 exhibition *Fashion: An Anthology* (Clark and De La Haye 2014; Kee 2006). His eye traveled. And through his, Anna's eye traveled too, to enrich hers and add another layer of reference and culture, and most of all fun. "She loved the word 'frivolity' and to her that was maybe one of her most important assets, or one of the things that she wanted to experience," Stephen Jones said in interview.

She said the world didn't have enough frivolity, you know, things to make you smile. At the same time, there was a complete depth to what she did too, but I think she was very aware of fashion's purpose in being an entertainment for the wearer.

And in her *Fashion Algebra*, she attributes this "frivolity" to Vern and his Australian exuberance.

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