



All shoots styled by Grace Coddington for American Vogue



# GRACE CODDINGTON: A LIFE IN VOGUE

The woman responsible for these amazing shoots is creative genius Grace Coddington. Bronwyn Cosgrave looks at the life of fashion's ultimate image maker



Meet a woman feted for her 50 years of experience in a world that ferociously celebrates youth. An icon on the front row of every catwalk show who still travels to work on the subway. A creative visionary who, despite being famously shy, outshone fashion's leading icon Anna Wintour in hit documentary *The September Issue*. A woman with everyone from Manolo Blahnik to Calvin Klein on her speed dial. Meet Grace Coddington, creative director of *American Vogue*, and arguably the most influential figure in the fashion industry.

With her famous flowing mane of Titian red hair and understated uniform of crisp white Prada shirt and perfectly tailored black Hedi Slimane slacks, it's almost impossible to believe that Coddington is going to celebrate her 70th birthday on 2 April. Yet this

is a woman who went from model to fashion doyenne, an icon whose spectacular 40-year career has launched everyone from Alexander McQueen to John Galiano, and who's worked with photographers including David Bailey, Helmut Newton and Bruce Weber. She's garnered universal accolades from a notoriously fickle industry. "Coddington's vision is unique," says Miuccia Prada. "Both her passion and dedication to fashion seem to grow every year and her interpretation of it is always witty and fresh." Manolo Blahnik agrees: "I've never seen her make the wrong choice of dress. Ever."

The praise is endless. But it took 2009 documentary *The September Issue* to make her a star outside the fashion world. The documentary about *American Vogue* putting together their most important edition of the year – the September issue

Klein's biographers so, three months after Klein checked into Minnesota's Hazelden Foundation for "treatment for alcohol and prescription drug abuse," Coddington rejoined Wintour, who was now at the helm of American Vogue.

The rest is fashion history. Assuming the creative directorship of American Vogue in 1995 was a move which was to cement her as a true fashion great. Her salary has been estimated at £370,000, although she probably earns more. She's launched the careers of countless supermodels and designers, from Isaac Mizrahi and Alexander McQueen to John Galiano, as well as a host of British photographers. But, above all, Coddington elevated the role of the fashion stylist from an anonymous, behind-the-scenes professional to a respected fashion force.

A series of influential sideline projects sealed her reputation, including a critically acclaimed November 1993 photo retrospective *Short Stories* at the James Danziger Gallery in New York. Displaying 375 Vogue photographs which Coddington had captured over 25 years with photographers Bruce Weber, Arthur Elgort and Ellen von Unwerth, among others, it was the first exhibit to credit a stylist's contribution to a shoot. Coddington referred to her 2002 book *Grace: Thirty Years Of Fashion At Vogue* as "her life in pictures".

### ARTIST STATEMENT

It was during my time as features editor at Vogue, from 1999 to 2003, that I discovered how Coddington's work foretold the next direction in fashion. She was always the first to investigate the interface between popular culture and style. She was the first stylist to produce fashion stories influenced by grunge and reality TV.

Then there was her blend of literature and haute couture, like her inspirational interpretation of *Alice In Wonderland* in the December 2003 issue. The surrealist-themed, couture-drenched tribute still sticks in the mind because, in 2006, I happened upon her lavish epic displayed in a New York art gallery. Russian model Natalia Vodianova portrayed the title character and I wanted every custom-made frock in which she cavorted - particularly her Helmut Lang petrol blue pleated mini. Ten fashion personalities played Carroll's characters. Sporting a top hat he designed, Stephen Jones was the Mad Hatter presiding over a tea party with Vodianova's Alice and Christian Lacroix done up as the March Hare.

Jones told me last week that, aside from Coddington's vision, her unerring attention to detail is what makes her work so important. "It was shot in a

castle outside of Paris," he remembers. "It was like producing a movie. There was Belle Époque porcelain on the party table and all of the smashed up cakes came from Ladurée."

Though Coddington's imagery is always arresting, blink and you would miss her getting on with the job. During the recent round of ready-to-wear shows which commenced in New York back in February and concluded in Paris a fortnight ago, Anna Dello Russo was the centre of attention. The high-profile editor at large of Japanese *Vogue* mesmerized the paparazzi, flaunting typically flamboyant ensembles of Moschino and Victoria Beckham aviators. Clad in understated black luxe casuals, Coddington, by contrast, was typically discreet.

And as other editors tweeted from the front row and captured passing looks with camera phones, she produced detailed sketches of key looks. Coddington exited fashion shows briskly, sidestepping the TV crews who charge at high-profile editors for commentary. "I can't stand it when editors become larger personalities than the people or the clothes they are shooting," she's said. But while she is



WITH KARL LAGERFELD AT THE COSTUME INSTITUTE GALA IN 2007



GRACE AND ANNA BEING FILMED IN 2007 FOR THE SEPTEMBER ISSUE

quiet in public, friends reveal a wicked sense of humour in private. "She is mischievous, she has a twinkle in her eye," says casting director and fellow New Yorker Olga Liriano.

"She doesn't take it or herself too seriously. Recently I was having dinner with her and Bruce Weber at the

Waverly Inn and Piers Morgan came over to our table and said 'Excuse me, I don't know any of you but I just have to say Grace you are my hero.' She enjoyed it, she was giggling."

And being approached by fans is something, Olga says, Grace has had to get used to. "Just the other day I saw her, walking in with this beautiful red flaming hair, and you can't help but notice her. She is a rock star here in New York, everyone knows who she is."

Her home life is famously contented, Grace has been happily living with the hairdresser Didier Malige for over 20 years (she has been married twice before, to restaurateur Michael Chow and photographer Willie Christie and doesn't have any children).

But while Grace is a regular fixture at openings and parties, supporting her friends in their various projects, she is also part of the literary scene. "I see her in book stores a lot more than I see her at Barneys," says Olga.

It's this endless curiosity, combined with decades of experience, that makes her such a legend. "That's what makes her extraordinary, and why even young photographers want to work with her. I remember talking to her about a book by George Harrison's wife [Pattie Boyd]. She knew her in the Sixties when they were modelling together and that is amazing. Grace can go way back there and still be here in the 21st century, doing beautiful fashion stories. I love that she can go way back to another time and place."

Grace's love affair with books is far from over. She is currently working on a wildly anticipated memoir. Just like her shoots which stand as her legacy, it's expected to be an original, compelling project. As Stephen Jones concludes, Grace's lifelong mission is "to tell the great story - a fantasy, that will make your heart soar."

## THE FASHION WORLD CELEBRATES GRACE

- ◆ "GRACE IS THE MAGICIAN WHO TAKES THE THOUGHTS AND TRANSLATES THEM INTO A MAGICAL PICTURE" **Anna Wintour**
- ◆ "WITH CODDINGTON'S BONE STRUCTURE AND SENSE OF HERSELF, SHE HAD SOMETHING BEYOND BEAUTY" **Vidal Sassoon**
- ◆ "ANY LITTLE IDEA YOU HAVE, GRACE IS GOING TO RUN WITH IT. YOU NEED A BIRD? SHE'LL GET IT. NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE" **Ellen von Unwerth, photographer and director**
- ◆ "THE FIRST TIME I WORKED FOR HER, SHE WAS WEARING HER RED HAIR UNDER A TURBAN. SHE COULD TRANSFORM HER PERSONAL STYLE THOROUGHLY AND INSTANTANEOUSLY" **Elizabeth Tilberis, former editor-in-chief, Harper's Bazaar**
- ◆ "WHEN SHE WAS AT BRITISH VOGUE, SHE WAS THE FIRST EUROPEAN FASHION EDITOR TO APPRECIATE AMERICAN DESIGN" **Calvin Klein**
- ◆ "SHE NEVER LOSES SIGHT OF THE CLOTHES. SHE ALWAYS SEES THE WHOLE PICTURE" **Michael Roberts, photographer**



CODDINGTON'S LATEST COVER FOR US VOGUE STARRING RIHANNA

— was a project in which Coddington was reluctant to take part. Yet while everyone was initially excited to see editor Anna Wintour up close, Coddington stole the show. In a creative battle of wills between the colleagues, Coddington's shoots prevailed and she appeared to be the only person whose opinions the notoriously demanding Wintour respected. It didn't surprise *Vanity Fair's* style editor-at-large, Michael Roberts, who Coddington worked with in the Eighties. "She has this absolute will — a quiet determination."

## A MODEL LIFE

The cocktail of shyness and drive was evident in Coddington right from childhood. Growing up on Anglesey, North Wales, legend has it she trekked to her convent school to spare herself the trauma of conversing with her classmates on the bus. At 17 she moved to London and waited tables, determined to become a model despite some critics saying that her pallid complexion and red hair made it impossible. After winning a *Vogue* modelling contest in 1959, she worked for everyone from Mary Quant to legendary Sixties designer Christiane Bailly. One of the first to be given a geometric bob by Vidal Sassoon, she was shot by legendary photographers David Bailey and Terence Donovan. One famous image of her by David Montgomery hung in the infamous London club The White Elephant, inspiring a then 16-year-old Manolo Blahnik, to pin the image on his bedroom wall.

But even then Coddington had her eye on art directing. "I always had an opinion," she has said. "I was one of those models you don't want to work with. I'm incredibly stubborn and I just nag on until I get what I want."

A serious car accident in 1967 left her, temporarily, without an eyelid. Rather than halt her modelling career, this misfortune enhanced her allure. Elizabeth Tilberis, Coddington's close friend who worked alongside her at *British Vogue* and then later became editor-in-chief of US *Harper's Bazaar* explained, "Her eyelid had been sheered off and a new lid was crafted

out of a flap of skin taken from under her arm. It gave Grace a wonderful individuality in photographs because her face is not perfectly symmetrical."

It was 1969 when Sheila Wetton — a former model and *British Vogue's* fashion director — urged editor Beatrix Miller to employ the then 28-year-old model as junior fashion editor. The lowly title belied her influence. Sure, Coddington was carrying and ironing clothes for senior *Vogue* staff. But she was also upstaging models and starring on *Vogue's* pages. "Right up until the early Seventies she was still getting into the photos," noted Tilberis. "Like Hitchcock in his films, she'd just turn up."

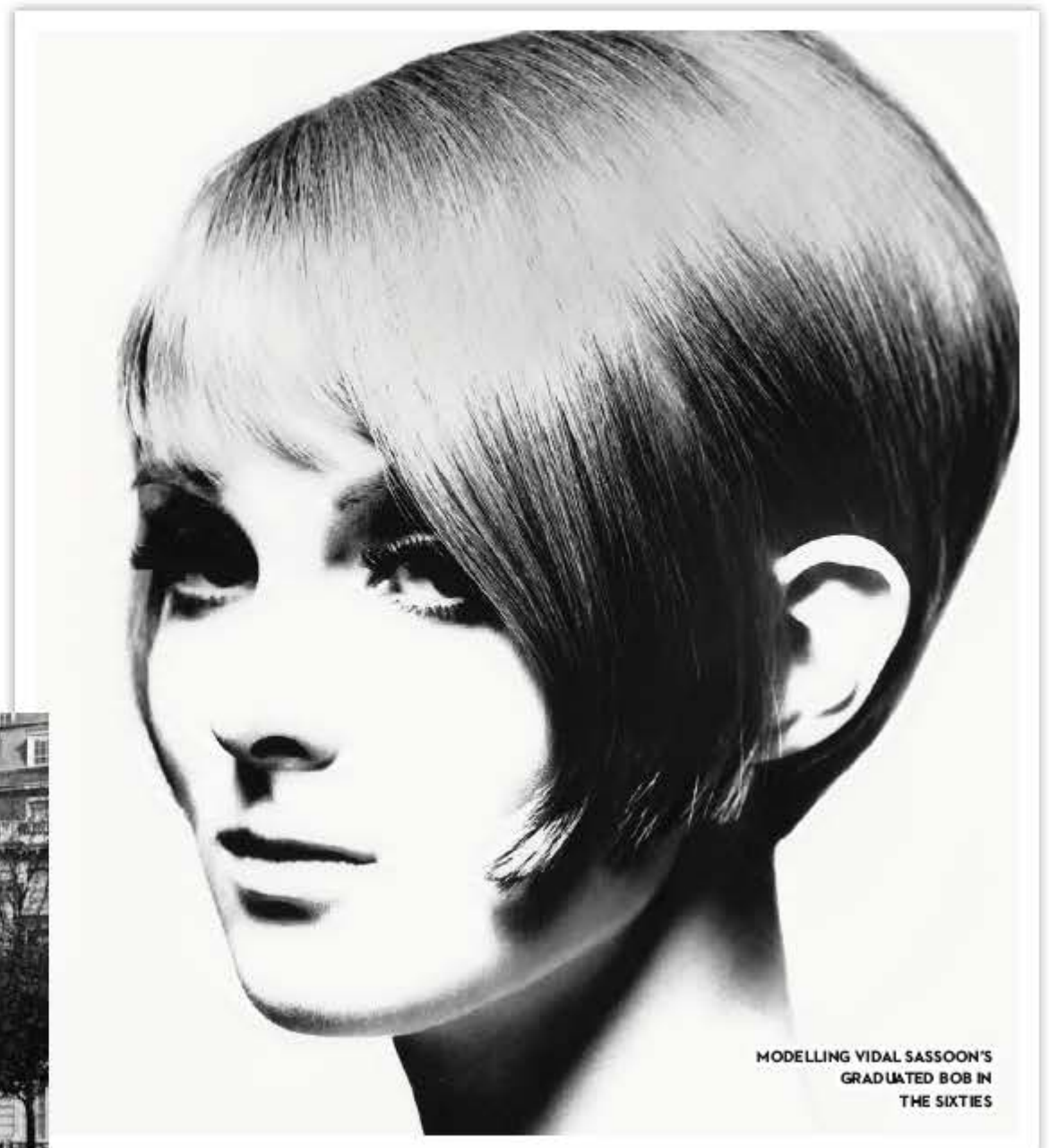


GRACE MODELS  
A DESIGN BY CHRISTIANE  
BAILLY IN THE SIXTIES

**"I always had an opinion. I was one of those models you don't want to work with. I just nag until I get what I want"**



WITH BRITISH VOGUE'S ART  
DIRECTOR BARNEY WAN  
AT MR CHOW IN 1979



MODELLING VIDAL SASSOON'S  
GRADUATED BOB IN  
THE SIXTIES

Take the infamous 1974 Helmut Newton poolside shoot for *British Vogue* at St Tropez's Hôtel Byblos. Coddington reported for duty says Tilberis in a "bikini... because it was hot." Amazonian beauties, including future Bond girl Barbara Carrera, were all clad in dresses and became bit-part players next to Coddington. Flaunting red fingernails, red Manolos and dark "harlequin sunglasses", she commanded the spotlight in a fashion story which was quickly recognised as iconic, due to her arch presence.

"She became such a figure because of those photographs," says milliner Stephen Jones OBE, whose designs Coddington soon championed. "Back then, I was a punk and punks thought her look was really cool."

Grace's career was soon on the fast track. Beatrix Miller made her senior fashion editor in 1976 and, by 1988 she was fashion director. All the while, she forged the influential style of fashion photography which remains her signature — conjuring memorable images which display the best current fashion shot in a fabulous locale.

The style has been endlessly copied but Coddington's romantic flair has always made her shots special. She's travelled to communist Russia and remote Africa, capturing John Galliano's crinolines drenched in the Jamaican surf, Linda Evangelista in

China, she photographed Maggie Rizer having a blast on a Bollywood film set and, recently, Rihanna on the streets of Manhattan's Bowery. "She can encapsulate the mood of a place brilliantly," explained Miller.

Initially, Coddington's personal style informed her work. "Most fashion editors don't wear the clothes they shoot for their magazines but Grace wore her pages — she'd live them and then she'd move on to something new," recalled architect Sophie Hicks, who assisted Coddington in the early Eighties. She also, say friends, had a killer eye for what was about to be big. Jones encountered Coddington at the Paris home of Azzedine Alaïa. "This was before Alaïa had established his fashion label," he explains. "He was just making clothes for his friends. I walked in and Grace was being fitted for a chiffon dress by Azzedine. He was pinning it on her. She stood stationary, in silence, for hours."

## RISE TO INFLUENCE

By Christmas 1986, with Wintour editing *British Vogue* (a stern regime which Grace found suffocating; she told Wintour, "You don't need a fashion director because you're it."), she left for a job at Calvin Klein. It was a challenging time, "[Calvin's] moods seemed to swing as frequently as he changed his mind," noted



ANNA WINTOUR AND PATRICK  
DEMARCHELIER JOIN GRACE  
TO WATCH VERA WANG'S  
S/S 2009 CATWALK SHOW