

I DRESS, THEREFORE I AM: A Journey Through Anna Piaggi's Unmistakable Persona

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Abstract

She was the Rara Avis of fashion journalism.
She was THE influencer before the influencers.
She was Anna Piaggi.
An analysis of the subversive style of the lady who re-wrote the aesthetic codes of the XX century.
And became an icon.

Keywords: Vanity; Vogue Italia; Doppie Pagine; Mixing and Matching; Hats.

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“Clothes are never a frivolity: they always mean something”

(James Laver)

“Fashion does not have to prove that it is serious. It is the proof that intelligent frivolity can be something creative and positive”

(Karl Lagerfeld)

When Anna Piaggi died of an heart attack 10 years ago, the fashion system was in complete shock for two reasons. The first, and most predictable, was the passing of the “only authority on frocks left in the world” as Manolo Blahnik had once declared.¹ The second reason, more banal, is that everyone was astounded to learn that Piaggi was eighty-one years old. During a prolific career that spanned more than 50 years, no one really seemed to pay attention to Anna’s age. To be honest, no one seemed to care. She was simply perceived as a timeless dynamo, a firecracker always ready for stunning *mises en scene*. Piaggi’s unique theatrical style — an arresting, colorful combination of vintage and contemporary dresses paired with the most whimsical hats — was indeed an everyday surprise, an eye-popping extravaganza. For Anna, dressing was neither a necessary routine or a shot at fame: it was a simple, intimate pleasure. It also represented a personal way to address a circuit of ideas and feelings using clothes instead of words. As Karl Lagerfeld pointed out: “Dressing is her means of communication. It is an ephemeral act which has constantly to be started over again. There are no rules.”² Anna’s penchant for “unsettling” looks reached the acme of creativity when she was at home in Milan or in France at Lagerfeld’s residences, free from business meetings and social gatherings. For sure no one — other than her — washed a salad wearing a gold red and navy blue corset designed by Sonia Delaunay for the Ballets Russes’s 1909 production of Cleopatra.³

Acknowledged as the one and only *Rara Avis* long before the global fashionista conquered the scene, Anna’d become the paparazzi’s favorite subject during the fashion shows from the 70’s on, appeared on *Vanity Fair*’s Annual International Best-Dressed List and featured in many magazines all over the globe. Even highbrow *The New Yorker* portrayed her as one of the members of *The Style Council*, a portfolio of the most renowned editors and journalists photographed by Richard Avedon in 1994.⁴ In 2006, a selection of Anna’s unorthodox wardrobe along with drawings, photographs, storyboards, magazines and other ephemera became *Anna Piaggi Fashion-ology*, an exhibition curated by Judith Clark at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. “The -ology suffix which transforms the word fashion in the title is an attempt to capture her world of contradictions, her illogical logic, as she calls it, as well as reveal systems of frivolity, patterns and angles in her works, her algebra of intuition,” Clark specified.⁵

ANNA-CHRONICLES

Anna Piaggi was born in Milan on March 22 1931 to a middle class family. Her father, a buyer for *La Rinascente* department store, died when she was only seven years old. Along with her younger brother Alberto, Piaggi spent her childhood and teenage years in a serene yet strict environment. Her mother firmly believed that a proper education would be the passport for a successful life: therefore Piaggi studied Latin and Greek, history and philosophy. She was a good student, but soon after graduating from high school, her independence and voracious curiosity led her to discover the “world out there.” Very much ahead of the time — as it was Italy in the early 1950s — Piaggi traveled alone in Europe, worked as an au pair, quickly learned English and French. Back home, in 1958 he found a job as a translator at

1. The Observer is the oldest English Sunday newspaper and the sister paper to The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2004/aug/15/features.magazine57>.
2. Anna Piaggi and Karl Lagerfeld, *Karl Lagerfeld: A Fashion Journal* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 9.
3. Anna Piaggi and Karl Lagerfeld, *Karl Lagerfeld: A Fashion Journal* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 66.
4. Richard Avedon, “The Style Council, Photographs by Richard Avedon,” *The New Yorker*, November 7, 1994.
5. Judith Clark, “Fashion-ology,” in *Anna Piaggi Fashion-Ology* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum 2006), 1.

the Milanese publishing house Mondadori, where she met the photographer Alfa Castaldi. Four years later, they married in New York City. A Gauloise chain smoker with a passion for Army & Navy surplus, Castaldi was five years older than Piaggi and already established as a photojournalist. A former architecture student and a devotee of the famous critic Roberto Longhi's art history classes, he soon dropped out of the university to chronicle post-war social and political changes with his Leicas and Linhofs. He also avidly captured the new protagonists of resurrected Milanese cultural life, including photographers Ugo Mulas and Mario Dondero, artists Emilio Tadini and Piero Manzoni, all regulars at Bar Giamaica, a popular hangout in the heart of the bohemian area of Brera. In the early 60's Piaggi encouraged Castaldi to shift to fashion photography and his passion for the social landscape informed his "new path". "With Alfa I breathed in a world of high culture, of passionate research. To me these were amazing particles, extraordinary molecules, but I would never allow them to affect my personality."⁶ Piaggi and Castaldi's creative business partnership took them to *Arianna*, a monthly fashion magazine edited by Mondadori where they worked until 1968. His sophisticated and intellectual upbringing mixed with her fresh attitude represented an astonishing approach to the Italian fashion world. Both anticonformist and totally free-spirited, they ended up paying the consequences of their unorthodox vision: in 1968, their infamous fashion reportage shot in Prague just invaded by Soviet tanks was considered subversive, and therefore censored by *Arianna*. Without even thinking twice they abruptly left the magazine, and never regretted it. The couple eventually landed at *Linea Italiana* and finally at *Vogue Italia*: here they produced unforgettable visual images for almost 40 years. If Alfa Castaldi was the beloved husband and working companion, Vern Lambert happened to be the ideal partner with whom Anna played her favorite game: the theater of style. They met in London, in the mid '60s: Lambert, an eccentric gentleman from Melbourne, Australia, had a vintage couture stall in the Chelsea Antique Market, a well-kept secret address for rock bands and fashion aficionados looking for one-of-a-kind clothes.⁷ He was also a renowned fashion historian who even worked with Cecil Beaton on the 1971 *Fashion Anthology* exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Voracious, curious and a passionate bibliophile, Vern introduced Anna to auction houses, flea markets, and "art-meets-fashion" movements such as Arts and Crafts, Vienna Secession, Italian Futurism, and the Ballets Russes, all of which played a pivotal role in creating her style. Under Vern's guidance, Piaggi's tweed skirts and Shetland twin-set sweaters were put in the back of the closet and she never wore them again.

ANNA-RCHISM

If we analyze Piaggi's style, eclecticism and freedom are the common denominators. She was the queen of mixing and matching, layering, deconstructing, and re-interpreting everything she wore. Not a physical beauty she was, however extremely confident in wearing the most outrageous outfit. Anna loved combining couture and contemporary clothes, and her special artistic treatment made them "her own" by "erasing" labels, so that the designers's style was unrecognizable. She also adored wearing the same outfit several times: her inventiveness and manipulation always made them seem different and new. We have zillions of photos of Anna's idiosyncratic looks shot by street and backstage lensmen such as Bill Cunningham, Roxanne Lowit, Bardo Fabiani as well as fashion photographers including Alfa Castaldi and David Bailey (who in the 70's even immortalized her for a Biba fashion-store discount card). However, as a pivotal early reference, Karl Lagerfeld's superb — and intimate — collection of drawings cannot be missed. Close friends and *partners in crime*, from the Seventies to the beginning of the '90s Anna and Karl shared leisure time in his Paris apartments — as well as in his Bretagne and Monte Carlo's residencies — where she loved to dress up for him. As a result of her multiple style improvisations, here comes *Anna Piaggi Karl Lagerfeld: A Fashion Journal* where Karl's portraits of Piaggi are paired with her memories and anecdotes. "Anna had never dressed up to 'pose'," he wrote in the introduction. "Karl actually prefers to sketch my wardrobe for *la vie quotidienne*", she observed, "even if there are none the less a few series showing the repertory or inventory of dresses that I wore for a particular occasion."⁸

6. Anna Piaggi, "Stripes: On the Surface," in *Fashion Algebra* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 93.

7. Gene Krell, "Remembering Vern," in *Anna Piaggi Fashion-Ology* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum 2006).

8. Anna Piaggi and Karl Lagerfeld, *Karl Lagerfeld: A Fashion Journal* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 9; 201.

Leafing through Lagerfeld's book, we become acquainted with Piaggi's trademarks. Edwardian jackets, Belle Epoque coats, Ballet Russes costumes and French vintage high-fashion (Callot-Soeurs, Lanvin, Doucet, Chanel) were mixed with contemporary brands (Walter Albini Fendi, Missoni and Chloé, and, later, Dolce & Gabbana, Dior by Galliano, Chanel by Lagerfeld). Another *fil rouge* is the constant changing of an outfit or the function of an accessory. As the fashion incarnation of a Dadaist artist, she wore legwarmers as gloves; belts as headbands; brassieres were used as belts; scarves became brassieres and wrapped skirts were transformed into sleeveless dresses. Three examples: no one could match Piaggi's audaciousness when she paired a Fortuny sleeveless tunic with little blouse with capelette by Karl Lagerfeld for Chloé. No one else dared to mix a Balenciaga suit with Chinese trousers, or used a Chanel cape as an apron.

Finishing touches were a bunch of eclectic accessories, a "fundamental part of my symbols game. And not only that, but also a journey through different eras, a perfect barometer of taste and of quotations."⁹ Alors, voilà! Piaggi used pincers for reading the papers and press releases, small canes carried like a late XX Century lady on a promenade, and costume jewelry worn even at home. Her favorite pieces — stored in a cabinet covered with oyster-colored eggshell — included a plethora of surrealistic bracelets and earrings by Ugo Correani, who designed many of Lagerfeld's bijoux; broches, buckles, and necklaces from La Scala's and other stages productions; ornaments made with found objects such as champagne corks, sardine cans and shells. Few "simple" items she never took off: her Tiffany wedding band, bought at the Fifth Avenue flagship store in New York the day she got married, and an African silver bracelet, one of many Alfa's ethnic gifts.¹⁰ However, there is no full description of Piaggi's style without mentioning the hat, which carried the most symbolic value in her aesthetic tourbillon. The hat truly represented the unexpected twist, the playful note, the surprising touch. It was the exclamation point which stamped all the looks (she would wear the hats more than once as with her clothes and, if necessary, would even put on everything backwards). Anna collected more than 800 eye-catching, whimsical headgears from all eras: half-moons, conical, spiral and halo-shaped hats, felt tricorns, plastic visors, classic berets, baseball caps, laced bonnets, and those irresistible "clown-like" chapeaux, ironic tributes to Ronald McDonald, Fortunello, Giulietta Masina-Gelsomina. In the 70's, swept away by a "minimal" wave, she briefly adorned her hair with an orchid or peonies. However, she preferred something more dramatic and sumptuous. A *flamboyant* intermezzo once took place in Paris during the dinner hosted by Karl Lagerfeld for Paloma Picasso-Rafael Lopez-Sanchez's 1978 wedding. Anna decided to wear a metal helmet from a production of *L'Orlando Furioso* directed by Luca Ronconi: the extravagant plumage touched a candelabra and suddenly caught on fire.¹¹ She adored to experiment and improvise, and more than once she trod a Duchampian–Surrealistic path, searching for an *appetite-gastonomique*. During another soirée at Lagerfeld's, she noticed a fantastic sugar sculpture. She took the pinnacle of the sculpture, added some multicolour plumes and created the perfect "exclamation point" for the Fedora-Bokassa look she paraded, the next night, at the party given by Loulou de la Falaise and Thadée Klossowski. However, nothing could be compared to the hat conceived for Lagerfeld's *Bal Vénitien*: it was a wicker basket filled with real shrimps, spider crabs and pigeons which, around midnight started to smell and forced her to make a Cinderella style-exit.¹² Since the early '80's the hat truly became Anna's indispensable ally, the exclamation point which "chaperoned" her even during food expeditions to the Esselunga Supermarket in Viale Papiniano, the frequent trips to the Conde Nast offices in Piazza Castello, and the informal dinners we had at La Torre di Pisa and Da Giacomo in Milan (by the way: Anna was a "good fork" and loved eating *pieces de résistance* courses such pork shank and Milanese veal cutlet). "The English milliners are the best, at least for me", she used to repeat. Luckily, she had met a young and highly talented one during the short and revolutionary period of *Vanity*, the magazine Piaggi edited from 1981 to 1984. The milliner was Stephen Jones, a 20 something British guy who had taken his first steps in London during the New Wave and the New Romantics, and was a regular at the Blitz

9. Anna Piaggi, "Teatralità: Banal & Olé," in *Fashion Algebra* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 201.

10. Grazia d'Annunzio, "Anna Piaggi Inedita," *Vogue Gioiello*, May, 2002.

11. Anna Piaggi and Karl Lagerfeld, *Karl Lagerfeld: A Fashion Journal* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 201.

12. Anna Piaggi and Karl Lagerfeld, *Karl Lagerfeld A Fashion Journal* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 192–5.

Club where his creations were seen on celebrities such as Boy George and Spandau Ballet. In 1980, after college at St. Martin's School of Art, Jones opened a salon in the basement of the hyper-trendy boutique PX at Covent Garden. It was the beginning of a glorious career which led him to collaborate with the most visionary designers (John Galliano, Vivienne Westwood, Jean-Paul Gaultier to name a few). Nevertheless, he soon identified Anna as the Client and Best Friend. They were in perfect symbiosis: his artistic vivacity / ebullience found her the ideal performer. Frivolity, joie de vivre, experiment were their common fields. "Her effervescence and inventiveness was unequalled in everything she did; writing, styling and, of course, how she looked. So often she would call me and say: 'Ah Stephen, I am doing a wonderful thing and I need a new hat'", Jones recalled. "She was not only my muse, but a talisman for all those around the world who believe that fashion is a way of life and that freedom of expression should manifest itself in what we wear."¹³

In Anna's never-ending transformation, only her hair and make-up remained identical, a "basic" frame ready for the most fantastic artwork. Despite being a beauty maniac — Anna adored reading Conde Nast's *Allure* as well as the international magazines' beauty pages — she only used Chanel products and wore Chanel n.5 as a fragrance. Her maquillage showed an homage to the Hollywood's Golden Age: Clara Bow's lips, Theda Bara's racoon eyes, Norma Shearer's "Fragonard-pink" cheeks and ivory skin as in *Marie Antoinette*. In 1973 she went for a short "a la garçonne" haircut by Henry Hebel for Vidal Sasson in London, soon softened by super-permed Marcel waves which covered her right eye. The inspiration came from the Sarah Bernhardt portrait hanging in her Via San Martino's living-room and duly executed by Per, her Norwegian–Milanese hairstylist. In the last 20 years, she opted for a more radical asymmetry. Her friend Roberto Pagnini razor shaped her salt and pepper hair, leaving the kiss-curls and the waves that became more stylized and dyed electric blue (I always thought that it was her punk homage to the Parisian coiffeur Antoine who — back in the 30's and 40's — invented a shade of blue which was the trendy treatment for socialites such as Elsie de Wolfe). Anna's graphic head, often wrapped with a series of colourful bandannas, was the perfect display for a carousel of architectonic masterpieces, delicate and elaborate hat "follies". Far from being merely ornaments, they were the synthesis of a free style which mixed high and low references. They were the multiple cards of one identity.

ANNA-LITIC & ANNA-GRAPHIC

Piaggi was a fashion revolutionary who also revolutionised writing about fashion. The columns she penned for the Italian newsmagazines *L'Espresso* (1987–89), *Panorama* (1993–97), and the quarterly *Panorama Icon* (2011–2012) are interesting examples of her clear, precise, objective prose. On the other hand, the press releases conceived for Prada and — above all — her longtime friends the Missonis, introduced a new and effervescent way of delivering bulletins on fashion collections. Goodbye to the boring notes and welcome to a plethora of witty cultural reference and unexpected associations! However, Anna most striking work was for Italian Conde Nast publications. Starting in 1969, she graced the pages of *Vogue Italia* either with trend reports (*Box*, her column, was a not-to-be-missed monthly appointment) or fashion stories she produced with visionary photographers such as Gianpaolo Barbieri, Justin de Villeneuve, Chris von Wagenheim, Bob Richardson, Oliviero Toscani and Alfa Castaldi. Piaggi always claimed to be "a squatter in an editorial office" as she was reluctant to become an official employee. She surrendered in 1981, when she was appointed as editor in chief of the hyper avant-garde *Vanity* magazine, a position she held until 1984. Launched as a *Vogue Italia* supplement, and originally titled *Vanity Fashion*, it became a quarterly the following year. Using mostly illustrations instead of photograph — the covers signed by Antonio Lopez's brilliant stroke became the mag's trademark — *Vanity* soon established its reputation for being the launching pad for young, emerging international designers.¹⁴ A kaleidoscopic visual feast, this unorthodox Conde Nast publication aimed to feature "many

13. <www.vogue.co.uk/article/anna-piaggi-tribute-manolo-blahnik-and-stephen-jones>.

14. *Vanity* closed in 1989. Piaggi was succeeded by Alberto Nodolini, who introduced to the magazine the young post-modern Italian artists, mostly members of the Valvoline group.

images and little text. The concept is showing, more than explaining, that fashion is everywhere.”¹⁵ Six years later she used the same idea for *Vogue Italia*'s Doppie Pagine, the double-spreads created from October 1988 until September 2012 with Luca Stoppini's graphic support. Like a glam-chemist, Piaggi forged her own language — a pastiche of English, French and Italian — with a penchant for puns, brilliant onomatopoeic effects and analogies. Her short, juicy texts showed a surprising copywriter's twist, and the exclamation point was frequently used to inject an extra dose of amazement in the titles.¹⁶ She also loved linking runway trends (always captured backstage) with esoteric, cultural and pop references from the Bloomsbury circle to street art, from music to food, from entomology to botany. And here comes Daily daisy; Sí, sea; Broches and brioches; Chic picnic; Etnique unique; Origamization; Più piume and many more.

Syntesis was Anna's atout, the reaching point of a long and elaborate process. I still remember how she could work on a title and a headline for hours — even days — reading them out loud until she thought she'd reached the rhythm that pleased her ears. Not surprisingly, she stated that “The sound of words is as important as the rustle of taffetà, the clinking of stiletto heels.”¹⁷ The D.P.'s graphic collages, always designed by Vogue's creative director and Anna's great pal Luca Stoppini,¹⁸ had total freedom from advertising restraints. As the late Vogue's editor Franca Sozzani wrote: “(The magazine) needed that unexpected something. It needed that famous ‘free variable’ which had to disrupt every issue and all expectations. So were born D.P.'s by Anna Piaggi.”¹⁹ A couple of curiosities: Anna's working tools were a bunch of dictionaries such as *Il Devoto Oli*, *Le Robert*, *The Oxford Advanced Dictionary*, along with her red-flamed Olivetti's Valentina typewriter. Plus, she always wrote in syllables, in total accordance with the layout. “For me, made-to-measure writing, where words run around pictures on a layout, becomes at times a graphic form of modern poetry.”²⁰

Today, Anna's memory has been kept alive. Soon after her death, the family established *Associazione Culturale Anna Piaggi*, a foundation which aims to preserve her legacy. Stefano Piaggi, the foundation's president and Anna's nephew, is active internationally giving lectures on her extraordinary career and collaborating with museums and institutions. *Hat-ology*, an exhibition curated by Stephen Jones of Piaggi's most alluring hats, took place in Milan's Palazzo Morando in the fall of 2013, and Alina Marazzi's documentary *Anna Piaggi: A Fashion Visionary* was released in 2016. In September 2021 *Fondazione Carla Sozzani*, in conjunction with *Associazione Culturale Anna Piaggi*, presented in Milan *Karl Lagerfeld, Anna Piaggi. Illustrated Journal of an Anna-Chronistic Way of Dressing*, a display of almost two hundreds original drawings of Piaggi which Lagerfeld sketched in the 70's, 80's and early 90's. Despite it all, the fashion world still hungers for a comprehensive Piaggi's monography. When Piaggi died, the *The New York Times* street-photographer Bill Cunningham claimed: “In hundred years from now, no one will give a damn about commercial fashion, but they all will want to know who this woman (Anna Piaggi, ed) was”.

We really do hope Bill will be right. Therefore, further action in Piaggi's memory would be very welcome.

15. Anna Piaggi, “Concetto Vanity,” *Vanity*, January, 1982, 17.

16. Grazia d'Annunzio, “The Glam-Alchemist of D.P. and Other Stories,” in *Anna Piaggi Fashion-Ology* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 2006); Grazia d'Annunzio, “D.P. di Anna Piaggi: Anna's Vision!,” *Vogue Italia*, July, 2013.

17. Anna Piaggi, “High Fantasy, The Sound of Words,” in *Fashion Algebra* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 61.

18. Paolo Castaldi, “Anna Piaggi ‘Private’,” in *Ephimera: Dialoghi sulla Moda* eds. Sofia Gnoli, (Firenze: Electa, 2020); Luca Stoppini, “Le D.P. ‘Doppie Pagine’ di Anna Piaggi,” in *Ephimera: Dialoghi sulla Moda* eds. Sofia Gnoli (Firenze: Electa, 2020).

19. Anna Piaggi, *Fashion Algebra* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 5.

20. Anna Piaggi, *Fashion Algebra* (Thames and Hudson, 1998), 127.



Figure 1: Anna in her sitting room in Milan, 1986. In the background, a portrait of Sarah Bernhardt. The French actress had a deep influence on Piaggi's iconic haircut. Foto Alfa Castaldi. Courtesy Archivio Alfa Castaldi www.alfacastaldi.com



Figure 2: Anna in front of a Corean red and gold laquered screen wearing a Poirer navy blue embroidered Pegnoir (dressing gown). Sketch by Karl Lagerfeld. Courtesy Associazione Culturale Anna Piaggi www.studiostefanopiaggi.com



Figure 3: Holding the book *Karl Lagerfeld: A Fashion Journal*, Anna boasts an ego trip look designed by Karl Lagerfeld for Fendi, Milan 1986. Foto Alfa Castaldi. Courtesy Archivio Alfa Castaldi



Figure 4: Anna wearing a 40's Balenciaga jacket "modified" with a croissant-shaped pannier around the hips. Sketch by Karl Lagerfeld. Courtesy Associazione Culturale Anna Piaggi



Figure 5: Anna with a *tres-parisienne follie*. Sketch by Karl Lagerfeld. Courtesy Associazione Culturale Anna Piaggi



Figure 6: After Alfa Castaldi's death in 1995, Bardo Fabiani "replaced" him, working backstage with Anna during the Milan and Paris Fashion weeks. In this photo Bardo — son of the renowned fashion designers Simonetta Visconti and Alberto Fabiani portrayed Piaggi at her desk with the Olivetti's "Valentine" designed by Ettore Sottsass. Photo Bardo Fabiani



Figure 7: For the August 15th 2004 Observer cover story, Anna chose a Stephen Jones's hat featuring the front page of the magazine paired with a Galliano cape with "newspaper print" pages. Photo Bardo Fabiani



Figure 8: D.P. Doppie Pagine di Anna Piaggi, Series Noire Vogue Italia, December 1995. Courtesy Luca Stoppini, www.lucastoppini.org

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Prior to her 25 years stint in New York as the Special Project Editor of *Vogue Italia* and *Architectural Digest*, Grazia was the deputy editor of *Vogue Italia* and the first editor in chief of *Italian Glamour*. She taught Fashion Journalism at Università degli Studi di Milano.