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Cultured, erudite, complex, generous, prolific, curious, elegant, eloquent, thoughtful, soft spoken, well-read, gentlemanly, aware, principled, intelligent, talented...these words only begin to describe Ralph Rucci, the acclaimed fashion designer and couturier who, in 2002 had the distinct honor of being the first American in 50 years to be invited to show his couture line in Paris in conjunction with the Haute Couture Collections.



And this true 'Renaissance Man' is in the throes of a revealing move: later on this summer he will transport his showroom from the heart of New York's fashion district downtown to Soho- on Broadway between Prince and Spring Streets, a far more eclectic, esoteric, and creative environment and one that perfectly captures and reflects his artistic, eccentric, highly individualist core. It also speaks volumes about where he is at this moment in time and where he sees himself heading in the future (but more on that later).

Simply put, there is really nobody else quite like Ralph Rucci- a sentiment that is echoed and corroborated by members of his loyal staff. In addition to being a highly respected world class designer known for his achingly modern, architectural designs that are more often than not, feats of engineering and construction (and who defines the notion, 'God is in the details'), he is also an accomplished artist. In fact, 66 of his expressionist/minimalist, often large scaled and Asian inspired pieces (some which incorporate elements of fashion design through their inventive use of fabrics) have been on display this past month at the famed Serge Sorokko Gallery ([www.sorokko.com](http://www.sorokko.com)) in San Francisco. They have been described as "simultaneously imposing and understated" much like the artist himself. The exhibition, 'Ralph Rucci: Recent Paintings and Works on Paper' is also notable in that it marks the first formal gallery show of the designer's artwork that ran from May 30 through June 26th.

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RALPH RUCCI'S WALL OF INSPIRATION

Even though I have had the pleasure of interviewing Ralph before, each time I learn something new (about him and about many other topics). And it's always a joy because he is candid, verbal, vocal and forthcoming (as he was for this session, which took place in the midst of his busily working on resort 2005, spring 2006, and his couture line for fall 2005). He spoke energetically about a wide range of subjects including the people and places that inspire and motivate him, what he loves the most about designing clothes, the design process itself, the fashion press, youth and age (he will turn 48 later this year), what he considers to be the most invaluable lessons he's learned along the way, and most importantly, where he's heading in the future.

### Inspirations, Muses, Design 'Heroes'

MK: Why are you doing this (fashion design)? What is your biggest motivation? Is it the ability to beautify women? Is it that you're creative- an artist- and your art is fashion design?

RR: "All of that...everything you just mentioned...is the criteria by which I become motivated and its part of the normal process of living. It's all a truism, and it's all a part of my life. Just this morning, as I was getting dressed, I realized that after almost 2 1/2 - 3 decades of working, I am a very conscious that all my research, all the work that I do, is SO important, it's SO stimulating and it's personally allowing me to evolve even further".

And he excitedly rattled off the list of things that constantly serve as inspiration for him, including places he's traveled to or wish to travel to: "The images from Moorish architecture, the palaces from India, Buddhist temples, images and bits and pieces of Orientalism in art, statuary, the wonderful ropes and jewelry ornamentation from the Masai, ceremonial robes from Japan, rock crystal, the wonderful use of gold leaf, and also I apply my own art to it..."

"This morning I thought about my bookcases which are filled with things and references- they all figure into an evolution, a research, a study, so I can pull out extraordinary elements of beauty, spiritual references, and then begin to fit into the psyche of a woman. What then happens is they become elegant, beautiful elements. But if I approach it just as a fashion design rigor, I'm bored stiff! I'm bored stiff to design a garment. It has to be part of the totality and that's why I've pushed myself more into the fine arts."



RALPH RUCCI SWATCHES ON WALL-FUTURECOLLECTIONS

And then of course there are those wonderful serendipitous moments when he happens upon those "undiscovered points" as he phrases it . . . . This was exemplified soon after he started to talk about the couture collection he's currently working on (fall 2005) and his collaboration with jeweler Dean Harris who had just left his studio. Mr. Rucci explained, "The cost of embroidery in couture is so expensive in Paris, I thought, let's look at real jewels". And he then marveled out loud at his latest 'jewel' (literally) of a design: "44,900 carats, 49 strands of cut rubies that we're using to make the back of a dress.....it is so MINDBOGGLING! You're going to look at this dress and it's going to look almost 'The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie'- boring and then- bam!" I began to visualize this creation and the woman who would be wearing it...

MK "Do you have the vision of a woman in mind when you design"?

RR "Yes, always". First of all, I surround myself with women- there are only four men who work in this firm".

MK: "Do you care to name names?"

RR: "Yes, and I love to rattle them off. There's Elsa Peretti, Diana Vreeland, Tatiana Sorokko, Tina Chow, Pauline de Rothschild...all these women fit into my psyche."

When I noted that some are living, some are deceased, Ralph admitted, "I'm more inspired by those who are dead because unfortunately we're in a period of fashion for the last 7 years that's put a vice on individuality." Speaking of individuality, it is precisely this quality that is of utmost importance to this man, and a quality that always attracts him. When the subject of Miuccia Prada came up, he called her a "genius", describing her aesthetic as the "Milanese spinster look, which is divine" and referred to her own personal look as "a tower of individuality".

MK: What designers inspire you?

RR: "Charles James, Mme. Gres, Cristobel Balenciaga, those are my three touchstones in history. Then you know how I feel about Jimmy Galanos (a dear dear friend), and I happened to witness and work with a genius in our profession (and I am still speechless on the topic of his genius). His name is Halston and he gave careers to this industry."

#### **'Meet the Press'**

RR: "There are certain members of the press who think that talking about what's YOUNG is what's NEW. You cannot arrive at what's NEW unless you have experience and the intelligence of age. We need to learn from those who have age, and I'm so sick of 'young' equating with 'new' because it is a damn bore!"

"There's only one publication in New York that touts that kind of thought and I think that it's appalling." He wouldn't name it but said, "you know who it is. Vivian (Vivian VanNatta is Vice President of Ralph Rucci) has a word for all of it and it's sort of seeped into our profession: "trash". I just simply don't understand what happened, where the intelligence and experience of age is a detrimental factor in terms of style as seen in the interpretations of some young editors who don't know anything past three seasons ago at Gucci." What happened to the process of education and refinement in our profession?"

Perhaps the most important editor in terms of his career has been 'The New York Times' fashion critic, Cathy Horyn, for whom he obviously holds a sentimental, special place in his heart. Ms. Horyn not only devoted an entire article in the 'Style' section of The New York Times to the designer in May 2002 (bringing him long overdue, well deserved worldwide attention), but she was also the first editor to ever write about him, period! It was back in 1985 when Cathy was at the Detroit Free Press and Mr. Rucci was in Michigan for a trunk show.

Ms. Horyn also has gone through a major and very public physical transformation, having lost over 30 pounds, and served as the subject of a recent article she wrote for the Times. When I asked how he felt about this 'new' Cathy, he said (like a proud papa), "I'm so proud of her. I've always known how beautiful she is on the inside and it's wonderful that other people are seeing her in a light they never expected before." He considers this to be all about "the totality of transformation of self" and referred to her as "an extraordinary human being: a single woman who has raised an incredible young man who's going to college... and she did it without compromise. She's gone through many years of sorrow and long periods of self discovery."

"Taking myself out of the personal, sentimental mode, I view her as a brilliant author first and then a brilliant journalist, second. I can't wait until she starts writing. She 'gets' fashion and her observations are original and based upon her knowledge of fashion. Her newfound possibility of experiencing the clothes in a different manner is just another exercise within her knowledge of fashion".

What other member of the press does he admire?

RR: "I love Suzy Menkes (the fashion editor of 'The International Herald Tribune'), and Pamela Fiori at 'Town and Country' because she's the epitome of grace and she is almost the headmistress of a finishing school that has no age... not to mention her brilliance, her humanitarian efforts". When I asked what he thought about the Hearst owned 'Town and Country', he said "it has evolved."

"And I also happen to adore Glenda Bailey (the editor in chief of 'Harper's Bazaar') because she is an incredible woman of strength she has the most incredible sense of humor". When I questioned him about Anna Wintour, he said he really did not know her and also added that Glenda does not see Anna as any sort of 'threat'. On the subject of Vogue, he added, "I also adore Andre Leon Talley just because he's sort of a male Vreeland. He has a core that is so so so kind and good (which is sometimes confused by the façade and persona). He is a sweet man. I'm lucky enough to know that side."

### **Defining Terms, Defining Moments**

MK: "How do you define 'Modern'?"

RR: "The rigor of taking our profession further through cut and non-ornamentation- the ornamentation should be the intelligence and the research that the clothes begin with. But what stimulates me both when I do it and when I see it is clothes that are taken through another realm through cut. At the same time, don't have the woman look like a silly character or a victim to the fashion she's wearing."

MK: "Is there anything you see on the street that you think, oh my gosh..?"

RR: "I'm appalled that in our society Lycra is worn by people who have no business wearing it. I don't understand this gross disfiguration of the population. And if indeed someone has a physical problem then there are beautiful cotton shirts and beautiful garments one can wear and still look attractive. The magnification of distortion in our species is appalling."

MK: How do you feel about all the bareness and nudity around?

RR: "I love bareness. When you see young people or when you see people with beautiful bodies and they're bare, that's divine, that's sexual, sensual, erotic." But more than the problem of tight clothes on big figures, what truly bothers him is "the impropriety of not presenting yourself properly. And it has become second nature and taken for granted that people can go to airports and fly on airplanes dressed the way they do. It is disrespectful to yourself when you don't present yourself in a certain manner and it has nothing to do with one's financial opportunity".

MK: How do you define 'Chic'?

RR: "One thing stands out in my mind forever. Years ago I was at an event in New York filled with women in couture and jewels, and Elsa Peretti walks in wearing a black cashmere toga and a jumpsuit, carrying a small brown paper bag as an evening bag (and wearing, of course, 85 carats of 'diamonds by the yard'). But the brown paper bag stands out as a symbol of individuality."

Though I knew the answer, I asked him how he feels about the much touted painted, jeweled, glitized, and almost vulgar 'bags du jour' from houses like Vuitton, Dior, Fendi, Gucci, etc.

RR: "They are perfect for what they are and who they're for".

MK: Knowing what you know NOW, would you do anything differently in terms of your career?

RR: "Yes....I struggled many years before I got 'It'. The 'It' that I got was that 'it' doesn't matter ..there's one way to do 'it'..your own way, because life is too short. I showed an enormous amount of respect for people who were in positions of power, people who I thought were worthy and I wasted time thinking they had to grant me the possibility of moving forward in this life. And I was very wrong and I wish that I had known because I wasted years showing the wrong respect to the wrong people."

MK: When did you finally come to this realization?

RR: "In 1993 I had an epiphany, an awakening, and I said, basta! It's one way- the way I want to do it".

When I asked what lead to this "awakening", his answer was quick and candid: "Utter poverty. When you're at that point your perceptions are completely clear because you have nothing to lose. I decided that I was going to take my name off the label and changed the label to 'Chado' (which is the name of an ancient, deliberate, ritualized Japanese tea ceremony comprised of 331 steps). I was completely disgusted with our profession and the way people were making names for themselves- (for their own sake- while the product was being ignored...and I focused on that and I gave myself a small office and I just began in a different manner. The collections were exactly as I wanted them to be (as they had always been) but I experimented more with individuality and thinking about more eccentric women.... And thinking about bridging fashion with spirituality and intelligence. I found an audience and then I was lucky enough to have people who help me to be noticed (like Cathy Horyn and Neiman Marcus's Joan Kaner whom he met in 1987 when she was at Macys).

He clearly remembers those "years I would have shows and invite everyone and no one would attend...and that's okay because all of that is sort of a pastry of layers and layers of thickness you achieve. So now, when I say, 'no thank you', it's 'no thank you'. And I don't have the threat that the person I say 'no thank you' to will hurt my career because I've already been that route. But that's the past and it's more important to focus on the present and how lucky and privileged I am to be able to do this with my life".

Nominated two years in a row for the CFDA Award for Women's Designer of the Year, (the most recent event took place on June 6th at the New York Public Library), the statue has thus far eluded him but he says it's "an honor to be nominated for the scope of my profession and that's all I can say about it."

Ralph Rucci is moving from his longtime show room located conveniently smack dab in the middle of the garment center downtown to Soho. His current building (552 7th avenue) is right next door to the famed 550 7th avenue address that houses such legendary labels as Oscar de la Renta, Donna Karan, and Bill Blass.

MK: What does this move symbolize?

RR: "It doesn't symbolize anything, but 7th Avenue has changed, the fashion industry has changed and we need to move on. My place in American fashion has changed and I'd like to be a little more invisible in a certain way. Plus we've taken a great space so we can have presentations in our own space and control the way I'm perceived and how we work...which is crucial"

MK: So- does that mean an end to showing in Bryant Park in conjunction with IMG's 7th on Sixth?

RR: "Yes. It's taken a direction which is redefining itself and I don't feel comfortable going in that direction. Our space will be also be a gallery not just for my work but for things that I collect...which is so stimulating. We spend our lives in our office and so our office will have regular stimulation. Even the bathrooms will reflect this." Just a note, when I asked what categories he would like to perhaps design in the future, he noted, "home design and menswear".



RALPH RUCCI SKETCHES FOR COUTURE FALL 2005 AND SPRING READY TO WEAR 2006

Indeed, it was just confirmed that Mr. Rucci will forego showing couture in Paris this coming July, and instead, this coming September, during New York Fashion Week, he will celebrate his new space by using it as the venue where he will present both fall 2005 couture and spring 2006 ready to wear.

It's obvious that his college education and years of studying literature and philosophy have helped this living legend cope with both the early difficulties of the past as well as his current and future successes. But what was most illustrative and indicative of his multifaceted, diverse background, and immersion in this admittedly crazy world of fashion, was when I asked, "If you were not designing clothes, what would you be doing"? His response was, "a psychiatrist". This says it all.

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