

Anna Piaggi's 'Hat-ology'



Catwalking

The milliner Stephen Jones has created an exhibition to showcase the hundreds of hats collected by the legendary Italian Vogue editor Anna Piaggi.

By SUZY MENKES

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MILAN — “My hat is personal. It is what contains the soul, the feeling, the sensation that moves this little world around,” the legendary Italian Vogue editor Anna Piaggi said in 2011, the year before she died at age 81.

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Catwalking

The display rooms, at the Palazzo Morando in Milan, include styles by Chanel and John Galiano.

Now there is a chance to see the 804 hats that filled her Milan home, hanging on racks, spilling drunkenly over a shelf and on the table beside her 1969 scarlet Olivetti “Valentine” typewriter. She never gave the manual typewriter up, clicking out to the end her stories of fashions quirky and unexpected.

That spirit was put back together again by Stephen Jones, her favorite milliner and a personal friend. He has created “Hat-ology,” an exhibition at Milan’s Palazzo Morando (until Nov. 30). The exhibit has four rooms representing her work space, filled with vintage furniture as a backdrop to the hats, and her bathroom, where a series of hats make a digital journey through a make-believe washing machine and where glass-front cabinets are filled with hats from designers like Chanel and John Galiano (both favorites of hers).

In the show, a Galiano structure made of whale bones, a Chanel creation out of wire or even Prada baseball cap show just how fearless Ms. Piaggi was.

“Most clients sit patiently while I place a hat on their heads,” says Mr. Jones. “Anna would take it into her hands, try it on back-to-front, upside down, pin on a jewel, add a veil — make it her own. Then she would turn to me with a pout and say, ‘You see.’”

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Considering that the pouting mouth was covered in scarlet lipstick to match rouged cheeks and compete with her bright blue hair, the effect was always striking — even if the hat were not a Union Jack, a giant white woolly top hat worn with a snowy fur coat or the miniature sky-blue hat, worn in her earliest years of collaboration with Mr. Jones.

But the eccentric Ms. Piaggi was as far as can be imagined from the show-off clothes pegs who cluster at the entrance to current fashion shows. She not only had a unique and personal vision, but, as the exhibition shows, was involved with the press all her life, first at Arianna, as a writer to transfer the art of Missoni into words; then Vanity magazine, and finally at Italian Vogue.

The hats, carried from place to place in Louis Vuitton box trunks, always by train, were part of her persona and now her heritage. A cultural association formed by Ms. Piaggi's family and especially her brother, Alberto, is working with the London College of Fashion to catalog her collection of vintage clothes, her hats and her written and visual work, with a view to creating the basis of a traveling exhibition.

But the hats will remain at the heart of her story, in museums as in her life.

"Hats gave Anna a point of stability," said her long-term assistant, Moreno Fardin. "The hat came first — then the clothes."

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