

## ELAINE GROSS: A FASHION INSIDER SHARES HER INSIGHT

Elaine Gross's nearly thirty years of experience in the fashion industry has ranged from craft editor at *Seventeen* magazine, to menswear fashion coordinator for the International Wool Secretariat in Paris, to promotion and fashion director for the American Wool Council. For many years she has also directed Elaine Gross International (EGI), a marketing and fashion consultancy. She is the author of *Halston: An American Original* (HarperCollins, 1999). And, of course, she is an avid knitter. We spoke to Elaine about her fascination with fashion, the art of trend forecasting, and the recent resurgence of interest in knitting.



V. Rose

**IWP:** How did you decide to enter the fashion industry?

**EG:** After graduating from Brooklyn College, where I majored in French, I decided to turn my hobbies—knitting and sewing—into my career. So I went to F.I.T. (Fashion Institute of Technology).

**IWP:** What has kept you in the industry for so long?

**EG:** I like the sociology of it, delving into the psyche of people's behavior and observing the interrelationship of all the aspects of our lives that affect what we want to wear. I am interested in why people buy what they buy, when they buy it, and being able to anticipate that need at least two years before they see the merchandise in stores.

**IWP:** How do you respond to people who think fashion is trivial?

**EG:** Fashion is big business. Also, what you wear is crucial to your self-esteem and to your state of mind as well as the impression you make on other people.

**IWP:** What are the key elements you need to watch in order to forecast trends?

**EG:** To predict trends, you need to absorb all the influences you see happen-

ing literally around the world, and especially in cities where fashion is designed and worn, mainly New York, Paris, London, and Milan. You have to be an information sponge—read everything, see everything, go everywhere. You have to walk the streets, especially where you find the artsy crowds and the wealthy, because they are the ones who generally wear the newest looks. You have to be alert to changes in lifestyles, economics, politics, and international relations, and you have to understand how those changes affect what people wear. You have to be a fashion historian and understand the fashion cycles. Most importantly, you have to use your own intuition and eyes to determine what feels right and new.

**IWP:** What is an example of a change in lifestyle that has affected fashion?

**EG:** More people, like me, are working at home, which totally changes clothing needs. Unless I have an appointment out, I wear jeans and a T-shirt. Now I only need three to four good work outfits instead of the ten or so I needed when I went to an office everyday.

**IWP:** How does the economy affect fashion?

**EG:** It sets a mood. The old saying—when the stock market is down, skirt lengths are down—is true if charted over time. In the same way, when the economy is doing poorly, people tend to wear dark colors. Right now, the U.S. economy is strong so people feel secure wearing color. The international economy affects what's available and at what price. When the Japanese economy collapsed, all of Asia was affected because they lost a large market for their products. To make up the difference, prices were lowered so more could be sold to the United

States and Europe. So we saw a lot of Asian cashmere and silk. Now that the Japanese market is improving, Asian prices are rising.

**IWP:** How does politics affect fashion?

**EG:** First, political relationships with other countries affect manufacturing and trade. Also, consciously or not, a tone is set by the people who are most visible to us. President Clinton has unknowingly promoted designer suits and casual fashions. When Reagan was president, he was always impeccably dressed, as was Nancy, and that uppercrust yuppie look infiltrated the country. Whoever is the most visible to the greatest number of people is definitely subliminally, if not overtly, going to have an effect on how people look. In the same way, Hollywood influences fashion today more than ever.

**IWP:** You have worked as a color forecaster. How does that part of the fashion industry work?

**EG:** There are professional color groups that meet seasonally around the world. At each, a consortium of forecasters discusses what they think the future trends will be. It's not a science. It's a combination of intuition and knowing where we are in the fashion cycle. To do it, you have to be an historian, a sociologist, and a marketer—all at the same time. The forecasters at these meetings come from all over and work in totally different markets, yet, amazingly, everyone always present similar palettes. Sixty percent of each person's presentation relates to the other presentations.

**IWP:** What do you see as the next trends in handknits?

**EG:** Comfort and easy care are the future of all fashion, and stretch will continue to be a large part of it. The more development that's done with commercial yarns containing spandex, the more you're going to see it in handknitting. Spandex not only allows sweaters to be

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body-fitting, it also provides a different kind of body and drape to loose-fitting garments and prevents them from bagging and growing after wearing. We'll also be seeing more multifiber blends, both mixing natural fibers together, such as wool with cotton or silk, and mixing naturals with synthetics, and more ribbon yarns, which feed into the current fascination with texture. Chunky sweaters made from soft, lightweight bulky yarns are at the forefront of fashion for this year and next. Because these chunkies work up so fast, they should encourage more people to handknit.

**IWP:** Are you surprised by the current resurgence of interest in knitting?

**EG:** No. Knitting is part of the cocooning trend that started about ten years ago and it is also a low-tech reaction to all the technology in our lives.

**IWP:** What can we do to make knitting more than a passing trend?

**EG:** The key is reaching the younger generation. Ready-to-wear fashion trends have to be translated faster into the handknitting market and patterns need to be simplified. The industry needs to do a better job at conveying the message that you don't knit to save money, but to make something special.

**IWP:** Why do so many people in the American fashion industry look to Europe for inspiration?

**EG:** Europeans are more creative and independent in the way they dress. Although Europeans tend to have smaller wardrobes than Americans, they are better at developing individual looks and styles.

**IWP:** You lived in Paris for six years. Did you find any great yarn shops there?

**EG:** La Droguerie on rue du Jour is a must-see for every fashion director who visits

Paris. They dye their own yarns and their colors are always right in step with current trends and are sometimes ahead of ready-to-wear. They also have an archive of years of knitting patterns and sell an array of interesting trimmings.

**IWP:** How did you learn to knit and what do you like to make?

**EG:** I taught myself from a pamphlet when I was about twelve years old. The first thing I made was an outfit for my Barbie doll. Now, because of my interest in Native American crafts and culture, I mainly knit sweaters with Native American motifs.

**IWP:** Do you find much time to knit?

**EG:** I knit mostly when I am on vacation. One of my goals is to make time to knit and needlepoint. I miss it. I find it very calming.