

Kitsch as a Manifesto of individuality: Iris Apfel and Anna Piaggi between fashion, aesthetics and subcultures

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Abstract: Fashion has always been a battleground between conformism and uniqueness, between the socially shared ideal of beauty and individual freedom of expression. The concept of *kitsch*, explored by Umberto Eco in his essay *Apocalittici e integrati*, is particularly fascinating and offers an effective key to understanding the fashion approach of two style icons like Iris Apfel and Anna Piaggi. Both, with their eccentric and bold aesthetic choices, embody the vision of *kitsch* as excess, "blatant disproportion," and "a form of measurelessness," but transform it into a manifesto of ironic and provocative individuality. This paper analyzes the role that irony and excess play in their approach to fashion, to understand how these women have turned *kitsch* into a statement of authenticity and aesthetic freedom. Therefore, the aim of this contribution is to explore how these two figures, in a similar manner yet with distinct visual styles, have used *kitsch* as a tool for self-affirmation, a means to express a vision of fashion that challenges conventions and celebrates originality.

Keywords: fashion; kitsch; aesthetics; subcultures; body.

1. *Kitsch* as a fashion subculture: a theoretical premise

Starting from the imitation-distinction model proposed, from the 1890s onwards, by Simmel and Veblen, it has been possible to identify fashion as a cultural phenomenon that has been transformed over the decades and has given rise to several specific categories, including the dimension of kitsch, which is the one we intend to analyse in this contribution.

If Simmel and Veblen (1895; 1899; 1904) maintain that on one hand fashion favours social homogeneity, they show how it accentuates differentiation in some cases. Veblen (1899) argues that fashions originate within the affluent class - the most economically favoured social group - and their attractiveness derives from the fact that they involve very expensive consumer goods that are soon adopted by the middle classes with ambitions of upward social mobility. In this way, fashion 'trickles down', gradually becoming mass consumption of products that are inexpensive imitations. For Sumner (1906), the distinguishing feature of the fashion phenomenon is the manifestation of a kind of imposition in adhering to certain canons dictated by the dominant society. The rest of the community, which could be defined as marginal,



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lacks the necessary tools to be able to counter it. However, Sapir (1931), following this line of reasoning, argues that the choice of whether to adhere to the canons imposed by society belongs to individuals. If most of them tend towards a certain choice, it becomes the dominant fashion and leads to the exclusion of those who do not adhere to it. A concept taken up years later by Bordieu (1979) who defines taste as an element of social distinction, inherited through superstructures that condition our lives. We act according to what the sociologist calls 'habitus', an element that depends on the social structures in which we are embedded. The individual maintains a certain freedom within these 'cages', He is, in fact, continuously conditioned by the social environment in which he lives. The individual's choices are influenced by the conditioning he has received, based on the social class to which he belongs.

In his essay *Apocalypitics and the Integrated* (1964), Umberto Eco starts from an analysis of the complex concept of bad taste in the sphere of art and then converges in the sub-category - untranslatable and therefore shared, universal - of kitsch and argues that, although it is easily recognisable by all, it is difficult to precisely define its characteristics and requirements. A gaffe, a lack of tact, an emphatic expression that is out of proportion, unjustified or out of context: Eco identifies kitsch as an absence of measure, even though he is aware that the rules of such 'measure' are subject to continuous variation over time and among different civilisations. Eco starts from the analyses of Walther Killy (1961), who describes kitsch as an attitude typical of the petty bourgeoisie and a means of easily gaining visibility, addressing a public that is under the illusion of enjoying an original representation of the world while being content with a simple imitation. The German literary scholar defines kitsch as a form of popular aesthetics, characterised by a certain redundancy and mixture of symbols and styles. At the same time, he sees it as a response to the dynamics of mass and consumer culture. In this sense, kitsch can be interpreted as a reflection of a culture that seeks to simplify, sometimes trivialising, the aesthetic sense to make it accessible to a wider audience. Thus, Eco writes that 'if we highlight the definition of kitsch, as communication that tends towards the provocation of effect, we can then understand how spontaneous it has come to identify kitsch and mass culture: seeing the relationship between "superior" culture and mass culture as a dialectic between avant-garde and kitsch' (Eco, 1964: p. 53)

Following this line and leaving aside for a moment the process of homologation to focus on that of differentiation, it is possible to interpret the category of kitsch as a subculture within which to trace some important identifying elements (Hebdige, 1979; Guarnaccia, 2009; Muggleton, 2000; Pedretti, 2020; Attimonelli, 2020; Cristante et alii, 2021). Subcultures, as well as fashion in general, represent real languages through which to convey and communicate messages. Choosing certain garments, but above all adhering to specific aesthetic and cultural - or subcultural - models means not only communicating one's belonging but also constructing one's identity and relating it to an external world that can be excluded or incorporated into one's group (Barthes, 1970).

Perfectly balanced between the superior and mass culture mentioned by Eco, and between the dimension of kitsch and haute couture, are the two emblematic figures analysed in this work: Iris Apfel and Anna Piaggi. Both have made a style statement out of kitsch, skillfully mixing elements that are overloaded with meaning and seemingly discordant with each other but, in reality, set in a haute couture context. From the use of colour to fabrics and accessories, both Apfel and Piaggi were able to

make their bodies and their individuality a true performance, responding to that concept of everyday life as representation theorised by Goffman from the 1950s onwards. Through a theoretical-dramaturgical approach, the Canadian sociologist compares society to a theatre and defines people's social life as a performance on a stage where interaction takes place according to well-defined rules. Such interactions are not only entrusted to verbal language, but also to aesthetic elements that are part of the modal and behavioural dimension. Clothing, gestures, postures and objects: each individual plays himself or herself within that actor-stage-audience triangle that makes everyday life an incessant and inescapable performance (Goffman, 1959).

2. Iris Apfel and the conscious use of *kitsch*

Iris Apfel, model, interior designer, entrepreneur and influencer, was an example of how kitsch, understood precisely as excess and excessiveness, can become the hallmark of a unique and unmistakable style. That 'absence of measure', of which Eco speaks, in Apfel's case is directly proportional to her uniqueness. The round, thick-rimmed glasses, the ever-present flamboyant lipstick, the fancy print dresses, the oversized accessories, are just some of the elements that have made Apfel an international icon. With her overwhelming charisma and spontaneity, she has succeeded in creating her own aesthetic, defying beauty stereotypes and conventional fashion canons. Born in New York in 1921 into a family of Jewish descent, from a young age she developed a strong passion for textiles and spent a lot of time in her mother's boutique, which soon became her favourite place to play. In 1950, she founded the textile company 'Old World Weavers' with her husband, achieving significant milestones in the industry. As an interior designer, she worked for nine US presidents, from Harry Truman to John F. Kennedy, from Jimmy Carter to Bill Clinton, contributing to the interior design of the White House.

In 2005, The Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art dedicated the exhibition 'Rara Avis: The irreverent Iris Apfel' to her, in which her eccentric looks were exhibited. Apfel was indeed of rare quality, one of the fashion world's most vivacious personalities, who challenged minimalism with graceful and irreverent exuberance, irony and genius. A free spirit of inexhaustible power, in 2018, at the age of ninety-six, she also became a Mattel Barbie; in 2019, at the age of ninety-seven, she signed a contract with IMG Models, defying the ageist prejudice that associates beauty and femininity with youth, becoming the world's oldest model.

With her creative and ironic approach to life, she not only embodied the self-conscious use of kitsch, but helped subvert traditional fashion conventions, creating a mix of high culture, popular aesthetics and irony and transcending the rigid classifications of 'beautiful' and 'ugly'. In the 2014 documentary, 'Iris', directed by director Albert Maysles, she stated 'I'm not beautiful, and I never will be. But it doesn't matter. I possess something much better: style'. In her style, the result of complex research, the signs of popular culture and craft traditions are recognisable: her collection of enormous jewellery and eccentric accessories (created by small artisans or found on the stalls in street markets), of fine fabrics bought from around the world, is mixed with haute couture garments from the most fashionable designers. She never worried about appearing excessive or not following the imposed canons of elegance: her looks are the expression of personal beauty, of a disruptive non-conformism that has left an indelible mark on history.

As Eco suggests in his essay, kitsch is a form of aesthetics that can reach everyone, without the need for intellectual elaboration, and Iris Apfel has shown that it can be an expression of immediate and accessible beauty, while not renouncing originality and authenticity. The multiplicity of colours, accessories and daring and 'outsized' combinations made her unique and this is precisely the splendid oxymoron.

Even today, her character continues to live in the collective imagination and fuels a merchandising that is also part of the discourse on kitsch. Kitsch, in fact, as an aesthetic that appeals to popular taste, which focuses on visual appeal and immediate emotion, is intrinsically linked to the logic of consumption and mass reproducibility, therefore, objects that reproduce the faces of famous people (actors, singers, comic book heroes, politicians, etc.) fall perfectly within this logic.

Iris Apfel's image has become a timeless style icon, recognisable globally. Consumer goods, which reproduce her image and looks, are not just accessories but true cult objects, allowing consumers to delude themselves that they 'own' a part, albeit infinitesimal, of her spirit and genius, paradoxically enhancing her uniqueness and making her memory immortal.

3. Anna Piaggi and *kitsch* as provocation

Anna Piaggi, Italian journalist, fashion collector and style icon, embodied the idea of kitsch as provocation. She was a unique figure in the fashion world and stood out for her ability to create multiple aesthetic universes by not only defying conventions but reworking them in innovative ways. Her haphazard and eccentric style is characterised by the fusion of elements from different eras and seemingly incompatible cultural references: vintage, baroque, folk and modern come together to create a highly personal and irreverent visual language.

Born in Milan, in 1931, into a middle-class family, she graduated and travelled alone around Europe, working as an au pair to learn English. Back in Italy, she worked with her husband for the magazines Arianna (the first women's magazine, of which she was editor), Vanity, Linea Italiana and Vogue Italia. She was the muse of Karl Lagerfeld, who also dedicated a book to her, entitled 'Anna-chronique: a fashion diary', containing sketches and watercolours inspired by her looks, and of other stylists such as Stephen Jones and Manolo Blahnik.

With her lock of blue hair, her orange-tinted cheeks, her red heart-shaped mouth and her ever-present hats, she was among the most important voices of the international fashion system, from the 1960s to the 2000s. She not only narrated style through the pages of magazines, but reinterpreted and embodied it through her theatrical, unique and inimitable looks. For Vogue Italia she signed, from 1988 until her death, the 'D.P. Doppie Pagine di Anna Piaggi', a four-page illustrated column, which she created together with Franca Sozzani, in which she created original collages of words, ideas and images illustrating the connections between the most disparate stylistic creations, influences and inspirations. Until 2012, it was one of the best-known columns in the fashion industry and, in 1999, became a book entitled 'Fashion Algebra'.

Fundamental in her career path was her meeting, in London in the 1960s, with Vern Lambert, a great connoisseur of fashion history and owner of a small vintage clothes shop, a reference point for bands such as the Beatles and Jimi Hendrix. It was also thanks to him that Piaggi gave shape to her style, developing all her creativity. Flea markets and auction houses became the reservoir from which she drew her looks.

Edwardian jackets, Belle Epoque coats, Russian Ballet costumes, French haute couture dresses, such as Callot-Sœurs, Lanvin, Doucet, Chanel, became her fetish garments, skillfully combined with brands of the moment such as Walter Albini, Fendi, Missoni, Chloé, Dolce & Gabbana, Dior, Galliano, Chanel, Lagerfeld.

In 2006, the Victoria & Albert Museum in London dedicated the exhibition 'Anna Piaggi Fashion-ology' to her. In 2012, at the age of eighty-one, she passed away. The year before, in 2011, interviewed by Antonello Aglioti for the TV programme 'Incontri Ravvicinati', Piaggi said: 'I change [outfits] according to a perennial inclination to have points of reference that are never gratuitous, there is always a conceptual story'. Her words highlight the care and commitment she put into creating her paradoxical combinations, never the result of improvisation but of rare sensitivity and inventiveness combined with a great knowledge of fashion history and visual culture.

The journalist was the inventor of a new language, both in her articles and through her body, which she used as a sort of showcase, reinterpreting styles, fashions, eras and objects, in a miscellany of elements in which lettering and graphics play an important role. In this radical and acronological creative action, the watchword is 'contamination'. Just as for Iris Apfel, who prefers excess and abundance, also for Anna Piaggi, accessories play an important role in the creation of her outfits, although she wears them in an absolutely non-conformist and decontextualised manner: leg-warmers become gloves, bras become belts, belts become headbands, instead of spectacles, she uses pince-nez (nose clips, a type of spectacles, particularly popular in the 19th century) and, with advancing age, she begins to sport canes like a 19th-century lady.

4. Conclusions

While, as Eco points out, the dimension of kitsch is often lacking in originality, Iris Apfel and Anna Piaggi have shown that it can be used consciously, turning it into a clear aesthetic statement. In their vision of fashion, the juxtaposition of elements, handcrafted accessories or costume jewellery and haute couture or second-hand clothes bought at flea markets, is by no means synonymous with banality, but becomes a way of playing with contrasts and experimenting with visual communication. The membership of Iris Apfel and Anna Piaggi in what has previously been defined as the kitsch subculture has made it possible for certain fundamental and distinctive elements to emerge that make it a true aesthetic and cultural category, even in contemporary times. As Codeluppi (2015) argues, «one might think that today, in an era dominated by the Internet and social networks, the concept of kitsch is no longer able to account for the new forms that have been assumed by the structure of society. The motivations that guide consumption behaviour are still those that derive from the search for social differentiation. They are, that is, those that derive from the need of individuals to believe themselves different from what they are¹».

Therefore, based exactly on the principles of those models elaborated, first, by Simmel and Veblen, Apfel and Piaggi represent their contemporary expression in the aesthetic sphere. Their non-conformist and irreverent approach to fashion, their use of kitsch as a language of expression and their detachment from aesthetic conventions unite these two figures. Although they both love eccentricity, their cultural background, style and intentions are, however, different. Iris Apfel comes from the

¹ [Kitsch | Vanni Codeluppi](#)

American world and her aesthetic has been influenced by her extensive travels, art, interior design and her involvement in textile restoration. Her style encompasses eccentricity, folklore, global influences and a passion for vintage, with a strong emphasis on customisation. Anna Piaggi, on the other hand, is deeply rooted in Italian fashion culture, where art and tradition have always been central, and influenced by her travels around Europe, particularly London and Paris. Her style is more related to fashion history, the evolution of trends and a deep knowledge of visual culture and costume history. Iris Apfel tends to be more balanced in her choice of combinations, creating looks that are overdone but still characterised by organicity and harmony. Her aesthetics are reminiscent of Pop Art, characterised by the many colours and repeated elements, and recall that concept of 'consumer neo-kitsch' defined by Moles from 1979 onwards. In contrast, Anna Piaggi creates a more theatrical and radical visual composition, where the combination of colours and shapes is extremely sophisticated and daring, almost like a disguise to be shown on an ideal stage. Mixing period clothing with uniforms and outfits borrowed from the most varied contexts and contemporary fashion, she decontextualises the various elements in an imaginative and refined reinterpretation of fashion, which often refers to Baroque suggestions and European folklore. For Anna Piaggi, therefore, kitsch appears more in a performative dimension and opens, perhaps, the way to that vision of fashion and fashion shows as true performances (Linfa, 2024).

In conclusion - and to recall the title of this essay - for both of them, kitsch represented a true manifesto of individuality. Iris Apfel was never overly concerned with the communicative dimension in the strict sense, her intention was rather to express herself without filters and restrictions. Her style is not an explicit criticism of society, but an act of aesthetic autonomy that aims more at personal freedom than at a public discourse on fashion. Anna Piaggi, on the other hand, has always had a more theoretical-ideological approach. Her style is a constant reflection on the relationship between costume, culture and society. Each outfit is not only a way of expressing herself, but also a critical reflection on the social and cultural dynamics of her own country. Fashion is a means of interpreting and commenting on the social phenomena of her time, and her stylistic choices often encapsulate more complex meanings. Hers is a more intellectual and reflective aesthetic.

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