

How did *Vogue Japan's* editor-at-large become the high priestess of maximalist style? *Stylist* profiles the industry's latest power player – Anna Dello Russo

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**A**nna Dello Russo is dressed as the Pope. Resplendent in black velvet, she has accessorised her outfit with lashings of gold jewellery, cross-shaped sunglasses and what is possibly the largest papal tiara you've ever likely to see. It's Halloween. The outfit's by designer Fausto Puglisi and this is nothing but a day at the office for the Italian fashion editor-at-large, whose take on 'daywear' makes Lady Gaga look low key.

This is a woman who can cause mass hysteria with one outfit. Every fashion season she's mobbed by television crews and throngs of photographers, desperate to capture one of the *hundreds* of looks she will appear in over the four-week period. And she's so dedicated to her role as fashion's most versatile clothes horse, during Milan Fashion Week she's been known to change outfits in the back of her chauffeur-driven car up to five times a day. "You will never have to search for Anna Dello Russo," says Susie Lau, creator of cult fashion blog Style Bubble. "As soon as she's near, you hear calls of 'Anna! Anna!' and she'll walk into a show with a circle of about 50 photographers following her."

Having spent over two decades working behind the scenes at *Vogue Italia*, Dello Russo is currently editor-at-large of its Japanese edition (based in Milan). But with her outrageously hyperbolic style (a circus-like explosion of brocade, couture, feathers and sequins) she is a far cry from the classic, black-clad vision of your 'typical' Italian.

Although her aesthetic may be as unique as she is, she has no qualms citing Milan, and her mother country in general, as her main sartorial influence. "Where I'm from, eccentricity is alive," she told *The Guardian*. "People have great taste and love colour. They dress for life. When I was young [in Bari], there were religious parades in the streets, like carnivals. Everyone



The inimitable  
ANNA DELLO RUSSO

🔗 dressed in heavy jewellery, bright colours and extravagant fabrics. The powerful expression impressed me. My style has been contaminated by international travel, but Italy is still the biggest influence."

And her outlandish take on style is certainly shaking things up for the Italian fashion pack. "Paris has always been seen as *the* home of fashion. Now, Milan is where the crazy, outlandish and opinion-forming stuff is happening," says *Stylist's* fashion director Alexandra Fullerton. "Milan's aesthetic has transformed from sexy and glamorous to quirky and intelligent and Anna Dello Russo is either conveniently concomitant with that or she's having a direct impact on the way designers think."

These days you need only switch on your computer and you'll spot the maverick fashion editor. She's a permanent fixture on street style blogs such as *The Sartorialist* and *Jak & Jil*; her own website ([annadellorusso.com](http://annadellorusso.com)) courts over 20,000 visitors daily, and she's followed by more than 131,000 Twitter devotees who hang on her every supersized accessory. "[My followers] want to choose my outfit, to dress me like a doll," she says of her fans. "I'm a Barbie of the internet."

On the high street, too, she was emblazoned across the windows of H&M in October for the campaign for her accessories line (a collection of over-the-top turquoise, gold and coral statement pieces which sold out online in less than three hours) and she's regularly pictured in fashion magazines under suitably adoring headlines.

## PASSION & POWER

Dello Russo is a strange combination. Although one of a group of enormously powerful and influential stylists like Kate Lanphear, Miroslava Duma and Caroline Issa, she remains smiling and effusive. She may have graced magazine covers and walked runways for top fashion brands, but she is not traditionally beautiful (she herself famously remarked, "In my pictures I look like a transvestite"). In fact, the 50 year old is the sheer antithesis to every *Devil Wears Prada* fashion world cliché you could possibly imagine. Not that her power should be underestimated. "People forget that she really *knows* what she's talking about," says Lau. "She's a true lover of fashion and she's not ashamed of it. She just doesn't hide behind a façade of faux nonchalance."

The clothes, granted, are outrageously over-the-top. Favouring embellishment-laden designs by the likes of Pucci and Balmain, and

daring labels like Mary Katrantzou, Dello Russo's trademark straight-off-the-runway looks – huge shoulders, heaving furs, lampshade miniskirts and clatterings of jewellery – are a tribute to her aversion to the mundane. That's not to mention the hats: crystal-encrusted watermelons, huge porcelain ostrich eggs, gargantuan Stephen Jones swans; she's the personification of the idea that more is, well, more – a very Italian trait. "Minimal or whatever you want to call it, that's the worst for me. Awful," she has said. "I want to scream 'Bella!' when I see something on the runway. I do not want to sit and show no emotion. I shout 'Ooh la la!'"

## "MY MOTHER SAID, 'YOU WANT A PAIR OF JEANS?' AND I SAID, 'NO, MOTHER, I WANT A COUTURE DRESS!'"

Such is her multi-faceted approach to fashion; she's even been known to factor an outfit change into a media interview. Katie Baron, author of *Stylists: New Fashion Visionaries*, recounts: "I flew to Milan to interview Anna for my book and felt like a peasant when she descended the stairs wearing the YSL strawberry print dress and white patent heels, carrying her dog [Cucciolina] under her arm. The interview went on all day, and halfway through she popped out, only to return in a completely different outfit (a luxe jersey sundress with flat Prada sandals). I just thought, 'how brilliant!'"

It's this inimitable theatricality

that not only gets Dello Russo noticed by those behind the lens (she previously admitted that if she doesn't get photographed in a new outfit, she becomes "very miserable"), but also means that she'll join the likes of Isabella Blow, Anna Piaggi and Lynn Yaeger (each known for treading the fine line between the sublime and the ridiculous) as some of fashion's greatest eccentrics.

"Anna's living proof that high fashion really can exist beyond the relative bubble of the catwalk," says Baron. "Her influence is compounded by the fact that we live in a visual world so anyone so inherently visual is bound to make a big impact."

This fascination with extravagance began with Dello Russo's idyllic Italian childhood. Born in 1962 in Bari, southern Italy, to a naturalist mother and a psychiatrist father, she is the middle of three children. Her siblings had no interest in fashion, but before a confessedly "spoilt" Dello Russo had even reached her teens, it was clear she had it coursing through her veins.

For her 13th birthday, her father took her on a shopping spree. Given her pick of anything, she carefully selected a Fendi logo handbag, matching umbrella, tissue-holder, wallet and key chain, which she would carry round all at once. "My father



DELLO RUSSO AT THE LANVIN FOR H&M SHOW IN NOVEMBER 2010

couldn't understand why, since we lived in Bari where it never rained, I would want an umbrella," said Dello Russo of the event. "I said, 'But, Father; it's part of the *look*.'"

"Anna is fearless. It's impossible not to admire that," says Alex Fury, editor of *Love* magazine, who has profiled Dello Russo on a number of occasions. "Her extravagance began when she was a teenager – she said to me that her style of dress now is basically how she used to dress then. She used to wear head-to-toe pink or yellow, with matching hats. She was born this way. In her own words, she is the Lady Gaga of fashion, after all."

She may have been a precocious child who dressed "like a Christmas tree", but Dello Russo was serious about her craft. After studying Italian literature and art history at university, she moved to Milan to take her masters in fashion at the prestigious Domus Academy, where she studied under pioneering Italian designer Gianfranco Ferré.

Her first job was at Italian women's title *Donna* magazine, (although she lasted only a month). There, she met Annalisa Milella, a journalist who then worked for Condé Nast. The two began

## ANNA DELLO RUSSO'S 10 FASHION COMMANDMENTS

The effusive fashion editor-at-large is certainly not shy about sharing her style mantras

1 "Choose between hat and make-up, if you wear a hat keep a fresh face otherwise you will look like a transvestite."

2 "If you're not that important, you cannot be wearing sunglasses inside."

3 "Wear lots of jewellery. The sound of jewellery banish [sic] bad thoughts and bad ghosts."

4 "Your dressing cabinet must be like geology: older on the bottom, younger on top. You can read your history of fashion."

5 "When you don't feel to dress [sic]. You need a fashion shower."

6 "Don't get duped by sales: they are like mermaids who first seduce you then drag you to the bottom of the sea."

7 "Fashion is uncomfortable; if you feel comfortable you never get the look."

8 "Be bold. Have the philosophy of children. They don't put limits on their fantasy."

9 "Organise your closet like an old library, but instead of books have shoes."

10 "A faux pas is not a negative thing, it's a positive. Sometimes I feel ridiculous but it's in a good way."

collaborating and after eight months Anna landed a job at *Vogue Italia* where she was to stay for 25 years. It was here she made her name as a stylist and creative visionary, dressing some of our era's most enduring style icons including Catherine Deneuve, Sophia Loren and Chloë Sevigny and creating some of the most memorable celebrity portraits ever (such as Kate Moss in a white top hat and tuxedo and Brad Pitt in full gladiatorial garb).

In 2000 she became editor at its male counterpart *L'Uomo Vogue* before finally moving to *Vogue Japan* as editor-at-large and creative consultant in 2006. Not that she has your normal nine-to-five office job. "I don't have this routine life. I don't go into the office," she told *Fury* in 2011. "I'm travelling around the world. I'm lucky. But I never liked easy clothes in my life. My mother said, 'You want a pair of jeans?' and I said, 'No, Mother, I want a couture dress!'"

If Dello Russo's meteoric rise can be credited to anything, though, it is the evolution of the blogger. Although she's been a fixture on the front row for over two decades, her fame is relatively new, and her transformation from editor to world-renowned

## "SHE HAS TWO APARTMENTS: ONE JUST FOR HER CLOTHES"

fashion tastemaker is down in no small part to the rise of the street style photographers who have spent the past decade taking her picture.

This revolution is not lost on Anna, who has practically monopolised the screens of fashion-lovers' laptops, riding the blogging wave and launching what she calls her "second career" as a street style icon. "Bloggers were a revolution because they started to tell the truth about fashion," she has said of the movement. "When Scott Schuman [of *The Sartorialist*] asks me to go to a special spot to take a picture, I leap to attention like a little soldier."

Her approach to being photographed is undoubtedly shrewd. "Anna's driver will drop her as far away from the shows as possible so she walks for some distance before she arrives," says *Stylist's* fashion director Alexandra Fullerton. "She knows people will have more time to take photos of her that way. She's very savvy and very intelligent, there's definitely a strategy."

## FASHION HOUSE

Currently, Dello Russo owns two neighbouring apartments in a mansion block in Milan; one for her

and one solely for her clothes. Apartment one serves as Dello Russo's living quarters, decked out with leopard-print Roberto Cavalli wallpaper, fin de siècle chandeliers, Chanel doormats, and animal furs ("It's been a bloodbath – furs are my weakness"). It is here that she practises the three hours of Ashtanga yoga she undertakes every morning, and where she keeps the several double-height walk-in wardrobes that contain the entirety of her 'current' collection.

The rest (ie last season's outfits) are neatly folded away, filed and stored "Barney's-style" in the giant, cavernous fashion graveyard basement of apartment number two. This archive (kept at a constant temperature of 15°C) contains 4,000 pairs of shoes, 250 black tuxedos and endless bounties of jewels, opulent gowns, audacious headpieces and more coats than you would ever be able to count. And there's certainly no room for basics. "I try to imagine if I died, my clothing could go on show in a museum," she told *The Telegraph* in 2010. "Who would want to see a plain white shirt? So I always think, 'Is this something people will want to see in the future?'"

This mammoth collection is also widely reported as the reason for the breakdown of her brief six-month marriage in 1996. "I did an incredible party and my clothes were unbelievable," she says of the wedding dress designed by her good friend Stefano Gabbana. But the marriage was a disaster. "I lost my husband because he said: 'Too much clothes, in your house!' He said to me: 'Where is the space for me?' I said: 'There is no space for you.' He says: 'Where is the space in the closet?' He says: 'Are you crazy?' Then he left."

She got divorced shortly afterwards in a funereal Balenciaga suit and turned the wedding dress into curtains. "It was perfect!" she's said of the divorce outfit. "I looked sad, grieving."

Can she ever be accused, then, of taking things too far? "Yes," she says, revealing that children are her way of establishing whether or not her outfits have veered into the grotesque. "Sometimes I see mothers and children on the streets at show time. If the kids like you, that's great as they don't lie or disguise their feelings. I love seeing their wonderment. If I ask, 'How do I look?' they often say, 'Like a princess.' The day they say I'm like a witch I will become a minimalist dresser." Now that would be a fashion moment.

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## A WOMAN OF INFLUENCE

Stylist's fashion director Alexandra Fullerton on the power of ADR



COSTUME INSTITUTE GALA, MAY 2011, NEW YORK

Anna owns a reputed 250 different variations of her signature look – monochrome tuxedo.



MARC JACOBS' SHOW, FEBRUARY 2012, NEW YORK

In a voluminous cloud of white marabou, the stylist proves that bigger is always better.



FASHION WEEK, FEBRUARY 2012, MILAN

Anna does minimalism (but always with a twist) as this Jil Sander dress and veiled beanie prove.



MISSONI'S SHOW, FEBRUARY 2012, MILAN

One of the first to try sheer, Anna covers up in thigh-high boots and Dolce & Gabbana dress.



FASHION WEEK, MARCH 2012, PARIS

A Fendi coat, in Anna's Paris Fashion Week wardrobe, set the trend for caveman textures.



STARRING IN A FASHION SHOOT, JULY 2012, PARIS

Anna's outfits are all about stand-out accessories such as her own H&M luggage.



CARINE ROITFELD'S BOOK LAUNCH, SEPTEMBER 2012, NEW YORK

Anna encourages experimenters by using her plain black gown as a blank canvas.



AMFAR EVENT, SEPTEMBER 2012, MILAN

Anna plus hat made the catwalk head-to-toe Vitton look seem bold rather than lazy.



VIKTOR & ROLF'S SHOW, SEPTEMBER 2012, PARIS

Wearing s/s 2013 Jonathan Saunders sunglasses makes them an instant must-have.