

LEADER OF THE PACK



With a new documentary about Iris Apfel coming to the UK, *Stylist* takes a look at the woman who proves that it's not what you wear, it's how you wear it

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Take a minute to think about this: why should it be surprising that a nonagenarian is on our cover? After all, she's alive. She's human. She has something to say. Why does age make her less of a person, someone we'd be less interested in? Unfortunately, if you cast your eye along the newsagents' shelves, you'll see that cover stars are rarely selected from any other box than the one marked 'young and beautiful'.

The (rather depressing) fact is there are many strict rules about what makes a magazine cover, and 93-year-old women – too wrinkly, too rheumy-eyed, too bespeckled with liver spots – don't tick many of the boxes. Or at least they shouldn't. But then Iris Apfel, the New York-based interior designer turned fashion muse, has made a lifetime habit of breaking the rules. Precisely why she appeared on the cover of *Dazed & Confused* in 2012 (wearing head-to-toe Comme des Garçons and drinking squash out of a Tweety Pie glass), not to mention finding her way into the illustrious pages of *Vogue*, *Paper*, *The New York Times*, *Vanity Fair* and now, of course, *Stylist*.

Iris Apfel is an icon. Not the sort of icon that gets a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, but one who is celebrated for living a life unhindered by convention. And she's part of a growing clutch of senior women who are (rightly) being valued by the glossy bibles of fashion and lifestyle, not for their honeyed limbs or geometric bone structure, but because they're fascinating people, have refused to be pushed around by fly-by trends and have trenchantly decided to live life on their own terms. And Apfel is at the vanguard. Already adored by street-style bloggers and the fashion elite, an Albert Maysles documentary, *Iris*, charting her extraordinary life will reach British shores in July, giving us an even deeper insight into her irreverent and witty approach.

While you've probably seen Apfel's bespectacled face – on blogs, blown up to gargantuan proportions on New York City billboards – you may not know much about her. Revered for her



"ALL THE BETTER TO SEE YOU WITH": APFEL'S TRADEMARK GLASSES ARE THE ONLY CONSTANT IN HER EVER-FLUID LOOK

exotic bird-of-paradise style, she only really became a celebrity in 2005, aged 83, after the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York put on *Rara Avis* ('rare bird'), an exhibition of her vast collection of haute couture and elaborate jewellery – which includes pieces by Karl Lagerfeld, Christian Dior and Alexander McQueen. "It was kind of a long-shot," admits Harold Koda, close friend and head of the Met's Costume Institute. "She is such an individualistic dresser; frankly, she's not everybody's cup

of tea." However, the show broke all attendance records (Carla Fendi, Giorgio Armani and Karl Lagerfeld all paid a visit) and toured America to sell-out crowds. Now, Apfel is more visible than ever, thanks to Maysles' documentary (the director is most famous for *Grey Gardens* about reclusive fashion heiresses Edie and Edith Bouvier Beale). In order to make the film, Maysles, who died earlier this year, shadowed Apfel for four years, a process that took him from the front row to dingy market stalls. The resulting

COVETED STYLE

As the documentary reveals, Apfel's eccentric Park Avenue

"WITH IRIS, IT'S LIKE SHE GOT DRESSED BY RUMMAGING THROUGH A DRESSING-UP BOX. IT'S ABOUT TELLING A STORY"

apartment is a fitting reflection of her fashion philosophy: more is more. Stuffed with curiosities she has collected from her travels, it is a treasure trove of the antique, the wincingly valuable and the extraordinarily kitsch. There are soft toys (including Aloysius, her beloved jewellery-wearing bear), waist-height ornamental Buddhas, feathered headdresses, a 'possible' Velázquez on the wall (she doesn't want to know in case she can no longer have it on display) and, in one corner, a Kermit the frog toy – wearing

horn-rimmed glasses – riding an elaborate ostrich statue. Her approach to style is similar to her approach to interior design. "Life is grey and dull," she says. "You might as well have a little fun with your dress and amuse people." Her outfits come together like some sort of visual jazz. Indeed, very few of us could get away with pairing tunics "from the Mao people" with forearms full of clattering 99-cent bracelets picked up at a Harlem flea market. She's been known to wear 19th-century ecclesiastical vestments, heaving jewellery designed for elephants, gold-tipped duck feather jackets and thigh-high fuchsia satin boots. All topped off with her signature Mr Magoo glasses ("The bigger to see you with," she likes to say).

Alexander Fury, *The Independent's* fashion editor, says she has a refreshing knack for looking at something and, no matter how much it costs, thinking it's wonderful. "With Iris, it's like she got dressed by rummaging through a dressing-up box," he explains. "It's not about who made it, it's about telling a story – the idea that by putting all sorts of different things together you can make yourself look, if you feel so inclined, like 'Princess Pocahontas goes to a Las Vegas casino in 1976'. It's all about playfulness."

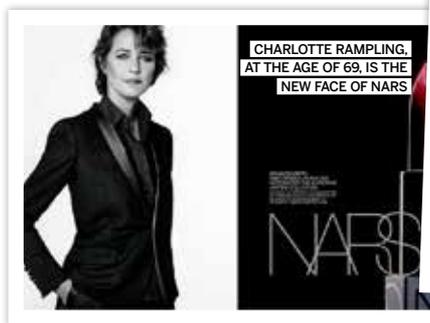
She famously will never buy a \$700 handbag because she doesn't believe handbags should cost that much, and says she doesn't like to spend more than \$15 on a pair of jeans. "What's inspiring about Iris is that she's completely high/low," says Koda. "She's a true forager. She's able to find treasures in the lowest places. I've been to some horrible markets with her and she'll find the one person selling Turkish rugs and under all those rugs she'll find a beautiful Tunisian wedding shirt. It's astonishing."

With Apfel, and with all older women who we admire – Helen Mirren, Jane Birkin, Joan Didion – it's not about fashion; it's about style. And it's something that taps into a change that's taking place in the fashion industry right now. "The new autumn season is less about dictating a slew of new trends and more an ode to personal style, whatever



that may be for you," says *Stylist's* fashion director Alexandra Fullerton. "For once, the looks that appeared on the catwalk were more eclectic. The freshest thing in fashion seems to be celebrating personal style and individualism – and the more eccentric the better."

And with nine decades behind her, Apfel is at the forefront of this trend towards inspirational older women starring in high-end campaigns and appearing in magazines. Since 2008, Apfel has been a mainstay on *Advanced Style*, the street-style blog curated by New York photographer Ari Seth Cohen, which profiles stylish women over 60. "Iris has the most incredible eye," Cohen tells *Stylist*. "Each outfit is like a carefully crafted museum exhibit, imbued with a sense of humour and joy." The blog represents the driving force of this move towards celebrating older icons (UK documentary *Fabulous Fashionistas* did a similar thing in 2013), and the influence of these awe-inspiring women is being felt across the industry. In January, Selfridges unveiled its Bright Old Things series of shop windows, featuring 14 men and women 'of a certain age', and some of the



most influential fashion and beauty houses have selected older models to front their recent campaigns, such as Joan Didion (80) for Céline, Charlotte Rampling (69) for Nars, Joni Mitchell (71) for Saint Laurent and Dolce & Gabbana's trio of Spanish grandmothers.

It is a refreshing turn of events

"PEOPLE ARE SICK OF SEEING UNREALISTIC EXAMPLES OF BEAUTY IN ADVERTISING"

that recognises the appeal of those with wrinkles, rather than 25-year-old models with trust funds. "These older women represent a freedom from fashion, from trends and from the idea of good taste, bad taste or chic – and brands are monopolising on this sort of mentality," says Fury. "The idea that you reach a certain age and don't give a damn about

what anybody else thinks is appealing."

Cohen agrees: "People are sick of seeing unrealistic, unattainable examples of beauty in advertising and brands are realising how powerful an image of an older model can be." It's no surprise we are inspired; as well as providing reassurance that we don't have to lose our identity as we get older,

these women give us something to work towards. Life experience has become one of our most coveted fashion accessories; something Apfel has in droves.

A LIFE LESS ORDINARY

The granddaughter of a Russian master tailor, Iris was born in 1921 and grew up as an only child in

Queens, New York. Her father was an interior designer and her mother owned a fashion boutique. As a young woman, Apfel had a social life lifted from the pages of a Fitzgerald novel. She often tells how, as a young woman, she came to be friends with jazz musician Duke Ellington. One day, she went backstage after a concert and knocked on his dressing room door. Ray Nance, Ellington's trumpet player, opened it and asked, "Lordy, lordy, *who is your tailor?*" From there, a friendship was born.

As a student, Apfel won the *Vogue* essay prize, which led to a job on *Women's Wear Daily*. She married Carl Apfel after meeting him at a resort on Lake George in upstate New York. "He told my friend he thought I was very attractive if only I would go and have my nose fixed. So I said, 'You can tell him to go fly a kite,'" recalls Apfel. However, she had a change of heart a few weeks later, when she came home to find the phone ringing off the hook. Carl was on the line and said, "That was a stunning outfit you were wearing today. I particularly loved your hat" – he had spotted her from a bus he was travelling on along Fifth Avenue.

They were married within a year ("He was cool,

AGE AIN'T NOTHING BUT A NUMBER

These inspiring older women can also teach us a thing or two about life...



JOAN DIDION, 80

The literary legend began her career at *American Vogue*. Since then she has written some of the most celebrated novels, essays and memoirs of our time and she's still going.



AUNG SAN SUU KYI, 69

Suu Kyi is an international symbol of peaceful campaigning against oppression. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 and is now a Burmese opposition politician.



JONI MITCHELL, 71

Through her songs, Mitchell brought to life the overarching themes of love and politics that permeated Sixties and Seventies culture and they are still just as vital today.



DOREEN LAWRENCE, 62

After her son, Stephen, was murdered in a racist attack in 1993, Lawrence fought to bring his killers to justice. She was made a life peer 2013 and still campaigns against racism.



JANE GOODALL, 81

Anthropologist Goodall is one of the world's foremost experts on chimps and has railed against the abuse of animals. She now works to encourage the next generation of conservationists.



ANGELA LANSBURY, 89

Lansbury made her film debut 71 years ago, opposite Ingrid Bergman in *Gaslight*. This April, she won a best supporting actress Olivier award for her role in *Blithe Spirit*.

he was cuddly and he cooked Chinese; I figured I couldn't do any better than that") and went on to set up renowned textiles firm, Old World Weavers. The pair travelled the world, trawling souks in Morocco and flea markets in Paris for design inspiration, worked on restoring interiors in the White House and their reproductions of antique fabrics found pride of place in the most well-to-do households in America (clients included Greta Garbo, Jackie Kennedy and Estée Lauder).

The bond between Apfel and Carl is still an unbreakable one, and their relationship is one of the most touching things about the film (she fondly calls him 'pussycat' throughout). We see her putting a jumper around his shoulders when she thinks he's getting cold, making a speech at his 100th birthday party and slapping him on the wrist when he lets slip about their 'problems' working with Jackie Kennedy.

The overriding message, however, is that Apfel is not just a follower of fashion – in fact she often worries about being

“WE WERE PUT ON THIS EARTH TO DO SOMETHING. DOING NOTHING IS A CURSE”

perceived as an “empty-headed” fashionista (“I love fashion, I think it's wonderful, but it's hardly my life”). On screen she is sharp-witted, dry and more playful than some women half her age, twirling for the camera, offering cups of tea and answering questions with openness and humour. “Iris is a compelling personality,” says Koda. “She’s so smart and has been very open to new things; because of that, she has a rich body of experiences – she can talk about anything, to anyone.”

Apfel has the inimitable knack of making everyone want to learn more, to see more and to wear more interesting things (even if, for you, more interesting means a red jumper instead of a black one). She is not judgmental or elitist, she is the rainbow-coloured manifestation of the idea that playing with fashion and not taking yourself too seriously can be powerful and inspiring. It's no surprise her fan-base extends from 16-year-old style fanatics

to 80-year-old grandmothers. “When I first met her, there were all kinds of people surrounding her,” says fashion photographer Bruce Weber, who shot Apfel for *Vanity Fair*. “She was so engaging to everybody and I could feel the pulse of her life, of her excitement about living.”

Crucially, Apfel possesses the enviable attribute of not worrying about others' opinions – a characteristic many of us would like to possess. “I was never hurt by what anybody said about my clothes,” she has said. “My feeling has always been to dress to please myself. If somebody doesn't like what I'm wearing, it's their problem. Not mine.” Plus she has a straightforward approach to ageing. “Just because you get to a certain number, it doesn't mean you have to roll up into a ball and wait for the Grim Reaper,” she says. “We were put on this earth to do something. If you stop using your brain, it is going to stop working. Doing nothing is a curse.”

The pressures put on young women by the fashion industry and plastic surgery are also subjects she's vocal about

(“Unless god gave you a nose like Pinocchio, or you were in a fire or something, why mess?”) but for her the pursuit of beauty was never a concern. “I've never felt pretty. I'm not a pretty person. But that's OK – I don't like pretty. When you're like myself, in order to get around and be attractive you have to *learn* something and you have to *do* something. That's what makes you interesting.”

We can all learn from Apfel. As well as a sense of freedom and adventure when it comes to fashion, we can perhaps learn to chastise ourselves a little less when it comes to the pursuit of perfection. She has shown us that life is not a relentless quest to be someone else, but a joyous celebration of being *us*, and that individuality should be nourished and cherished. If we all took a leaf out of Apfel's book, if nothing else, we'd certainly have more fun.

Iris is in cinemas from 31 July

A LIFE IN FASHION

In an ever-changing fashion world Apfel has always been right there in the heart of it



BAG FOR (FASHION) LIFE: 2012 AT THE LAUNCH OF HER HANDBAG COLLECTION



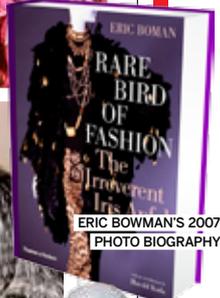
APFEL AND HUSBAND CARL HIT THE SEVENTIES PARTY CIRCUIT



A POSTER FOR THE NEW DOCUMENTARY...



...AND THE MAN WHO MADE IT, ALBERT MAYSLES



ERIC BOWMAN'S 2007 PHOTO BIOGRAPHY



WITH ALEXANDER WANG AT THE 2011 CFDA FASHION AWARDS



MAC'S 2011 RANGE INSPIRED BY THE ICON



WHAT ELSE ARE YOU GOING TO WEAR FOR THE RED CARPET? NEW YORK FASHION WEEK 2014



WITH DRIES VAN NOTEN AT 2012'S FIFA FASHION TALKS



2012'S DAZED & CONFUSED COVER



APFEL NAILS THE EMBELLISHMENT LOOK



DESPITE BEING MARRIED FOR 67 YEARS THE APFELS' LOVE REMAINS UNDIMMED