

Ruth Ansel started out as the youngest ever art director of *Harper's Bazaar*, before going on to create groundbreaking designs for *The New York Times Magazine* and *Vanity Fair*, commissioning photographers such as Richard Avedon and Helmut Newton, and working alongside legendary fashion editor Diana Vreeland. Diane Smyth



THE TIME OF TWEED

The prototype tweed ensemble for the new mood of fashion (frankly feminine and figure-showing). Black and white giant herringbone—the longer cardigan jacket, closely fitted, framed in black leather at the flap pockets and down the front. The short skirt of the sleeveless dress flips into wide pleats. By Helga, in Lesur tweed. About \$315. At Bonwit Teller; Slix, Baer and Fuller, St. Louis; Sakowitz, Houston. Emme hat. Glentex leather neck piece. Calderon belt. Gautier gloves. Round the Clock striped tights. I. Miller shoes.

This spread comes from the September 1968 issue of *Harper's Bazaar*, art directed by Ruth Ansel and Bea Feitler, photograph taken by Neil Barr. It features in *Hall of Femmes: Ruth Ansel*, published by Oyster Press (ISBN: 978-91-978827-0-5), priced SEK150. Photo © Neil Barr.

"I chose to ignore the resistance to women graphic designers in a man's world," says Ruth Ansel in the first *Hall of Femmes* publication, devoted to her pioneering work as an art director in the 1970s and 80s. "You don't win every time, but you can keep trying. I can't change my gender and I refuse to stop being a graphic designer. There should be more women in top positions as art directors – I think there's just not the awareness that it's really possible. It is."

It sure is. Starting out in 1961 as an assistant to acclaimed art director Martin Israel at *Harper's Bazaar*, Ansel was just 24 when she was appointed co-art director of the magazine in 1963. She and Bea Feitler quickly won approval for their clean, contemporary style, working closely with photographers such as Richard Avedon and Helmut Newton, alongside legendary fashion editor Diana Vreeland. In 1974 Ansel was hired to redesign *The New York Times Magazine*, where she continued to work with the giants of fashion photography of the day, and introduced a new wave of photojournalists, including Don McCullin, Mary Ellen Mark and Susan Meiselas. Nine years later, she became art director at another epoch-making title, Tina Brown's *Vanity Fair*, where she stayed until 1988, working with a roster of A-list photographers, and helping make Annie Leibovitz a star. In 1992 she set up her own design studio, Ruth Ansel Studio, creating monographs for photographers such as Leibovitz, Philip Jones Griffiths and Peter Beard.

Hall of Femmes: Ruth Ansel is the first in a series of books celebrating women graphic designers, which Angela Tillman Sperandio and Samira Bouabana – both graphic designers themselves – began as a way of addressing

the lack of female role models in the industry. It includes a lengthy interview as well as reproductions of some of Ansel's most acclaimed spreads, and neither Ansel nor the publishers pull any punches when it comes to the problems she faced.

"Art directors, especially female art directors, were not welcome. Male photo editors who held the power when it came to hiring and assigning photojournalists did everything to keep me in the dark," says Ansel of her first experiences at the *New York Times Magazine*. "There was a definite air of misogyny around the newsroom. Women who worked there were either menial secretaries or copy girls or babes to conquer and bed." Later Ansel touches on the challenges facing women today, under pressure to look fabulous, achieve in the workplace and be perfect mothers and wives. Ansel, who never had children, reflects that doing so would have created a "conflict for my time".

It's a fascinating read, but it's not just for those interested in gender politics. A brief introduction to a living legend, this slim publication celebrates an art director who worked on the key titles of the 1960s, 70s and 80s, and brought a distinctive touch to them all through a mix of talent, luck and sheer hard work. "Vreeland, Avedon and Israel – the holy trinity!" she comments. "No matter how talented they were – and they were enormously talented, obviously – they worked harder than anybody. That was a revelation to me, as I was a pretty lazy kid... I recall a famous line from [American Football hero] Vince Lombardi that says it all: 'Winners never quit, and quitters never win.'" *BJP*

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