

design

THE VISIONARY

Ruth Ansel, the legendary art director, sits down with Carol Kino to discuss her groundbreaking career as one of the first female voices in graphic design. We're all ears.



The April 1965 *Harper's Bazaar* cover of Jean Shrimpton, photographed by Richard Avedon, had a lenticular blinking eye pasted on newsstand copies worldwide.

Point to an iconic magazine cover of the last 40 years, and chances are it was designed by Ruth Ansel. Since 1961, when she talked her way into the art department of *Harper's Bazaar*, Ansel has defined the look of some of America's most visually influential publications. In the 1960s, her work for *Bazaar* captured a transitional moment in fashion and society. In the 1970s, she became the first female art director of *The New York Times Magazine* and in the 1980s, she created the look of *Vanity Fair*. This year saw the publication *Hall of Femmes: Ruth Ansel* by the Swedish design duo Hjërta Smärta, the first book to cover her groundbreaking work. We visited Ansel's minimalist apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side to discuss her life and career.

What led you to become a graphic designer in the first place?

It's a story of chance. I was studying piano and by the time I was 13, my piano teacher had plans for me. But I was rebellious and I hated to practice. I told her I was going to try for Music & Art High School, but I chose art instead of music, and that changed my life. After that I studied fine art at Alfred University, but I graduated with no concept of having a career. In those days, you were educated to prepare yourself for the man you were about to meet—and right out of school I married Bob Gill, who was a very famous and well-known graphic designer. That's how I got introduced to graphic design.

What led to your involvement with magazines?

After my divorce, I escaped to Europe to mend my heart and seek out adventure. My plan was to look for work in different countries and eventually end up at Cinecittà Rome, creating film titles. I was besotted with movies. They are moving images, and moving images are made of photographs. So in the end, when I ran out of money and came home, a magazine was the closest thing I could find to film.

How did you land at *Harper's Bazaar*?

I chose *Bazaar* because I liked it much better than *Vogue*—graphically, it was more sophisticated. I called cold and asked to talk to an editor. It turned out there was an opening in the art department, and Marvin Israel, the director, took a big chance on me. He wanted somebody who didn't have to unlearn graphic design clichés. Bea Feitler, his protégé and star pupil from Parsons, had been hired a month earlier. My first few months were a disaster. The whole art department consisted of only the three of us. I learned everything on that job, from Diana Vreeland, Marvin and Richard Avedon, our chief photographer—the Holy Trinity. They dared each other, they provoked each other, they accepted nothing but the best from one another.

How did you come to run the art department?

In 1962 Marvin was fired, and Bea and I became the art directors. We were pioneers in a way—not only were we young women but we were working as graphic design partners. Then in 1971 a new editor came in to make *Bazaar*

design

“Being a magazine designer is a little bit like being an orchestra conductor.”

more newsy, and we were both fired, almost simultaneously.

What was it like moving from the fashion world to *The New York Times Magazine*, where you spent much of the 1970s?

I thought I would never last there, because of my original flaws—I hate deadlines and I am lazy. The deadlines were so acute that I realized I couldn't possibly give my efforts to both the interior and exterior of the magazine, so I had to put them into the covers! Each week, I had to prepare for three different possibilities, and then I had to come up with the cover between Thursday and Friday. There was no money for a high-level photographer, so that's where I benefited from the good graces of artists who were friends, like Andy Warhol. I could call and say, “We've got to do something on Jimmy Carter. I understand you did a poster of him.” To get it quickly, I had to be tuned in to what was going on. I was hardly ever turned down.

When you became design director of *Vanity Fair* in 1983, much of your work must have focused on choosing the right photographer.

It's like that famous line, “It's all about casting, casting, casting.” Being a magazine designer is a little bit like an orchestra conductor. You are putting together a composition with different elements, like different musical instruments. In one issue you've already assigned a photographer who can take humorous pictures in the studio, and somebody who is great on romantic locations, so you must find somebody whose photographic style is different from those two—someone who has a different visual sound, if you will.

I remember once everybody wanted to photograph Sam Shepard and it was between Annie Leibovitz and Bruce Weber. I just felt at that moment Bruce could capture the mood I wanted in black and white. It turns out the pictures from that shoot turned out so well later on Bruce did a book of pictures dedicated to Sam. But Annie didn't talk to me for months afterwards.

After brief spells at *Vogue* and *HG*, you set up your own shop in 1992. What sorts of projects have you worked on?

Books, fashion campaigns, identities, branding. I have just designed a book on the photographs of Jerry Schatzberg for Rizzoli, and expect to complete a defining monograph

on the work of Elsa Peretti next year. One of my best efforts is Peter Beard's 2006 monograph for Taschen. I was given total freedom, which surprised me, and it sold out pretty instantaneously. I had known Peter at *Bazaar*, when he

was dating all the beautiful models, and I also worked on a book of his in the 1970s when I was at the *Times*. Then, in 1991, when I was at *HG*, we worked together on a project in Africa. I remember saying, “I am going to find housing situations that are totally unique, like people living in tents.” It was one of the magazine's best shoots.

Of all the projects you've worked on, what's the highlight?

I'm most proud of the cover of the *Harper's Bazaar* April 1965 Pop issue with Jean Shrimpton posing as the first woman in space. In fact, I'm proud of the whole issue, which was guest-edited by Dick Avedon. Everything was exploding that year—youth and sex and politics, race relations, the Beatles. A magazine is supposed to reflect, like a mirror, the time we live in, and if it's a good magazine, it reflects it provocatively. That's what we did. But it didn't sell—it was too avant-garde and experimental.

How is that issue viewed today?

As a great moment in magazine history. They used my cover in Dick's 2009 retrospective at the International Center of Photography in New York. When I found out, I thought, “My God, isn't this a great tribute to how something can not only last over time, but also be re-interpreted.”

How did *Hall of Femmes: Ruth Ansel* come about?

It's quite simple. One day, two young Swedish designers in their thirties said to each other: “There don't seem to be women mentors in design.” So they went about finding four or five of us.

They had a mission: to put into print the experiences of women who could have a positive influence on youngwomen designers throughout the world. **You've often said that your name has been a well-kept secret, but now that seems to be changing. Is that because of the book?**

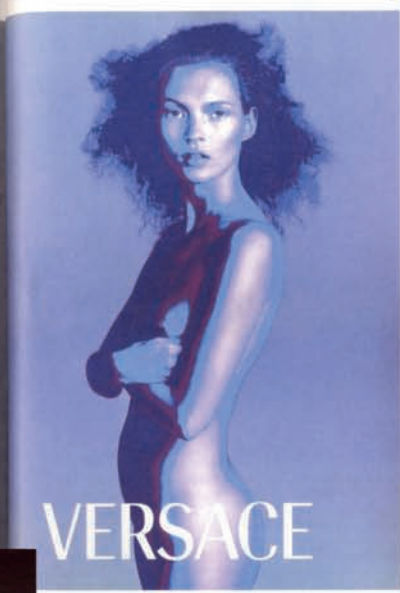
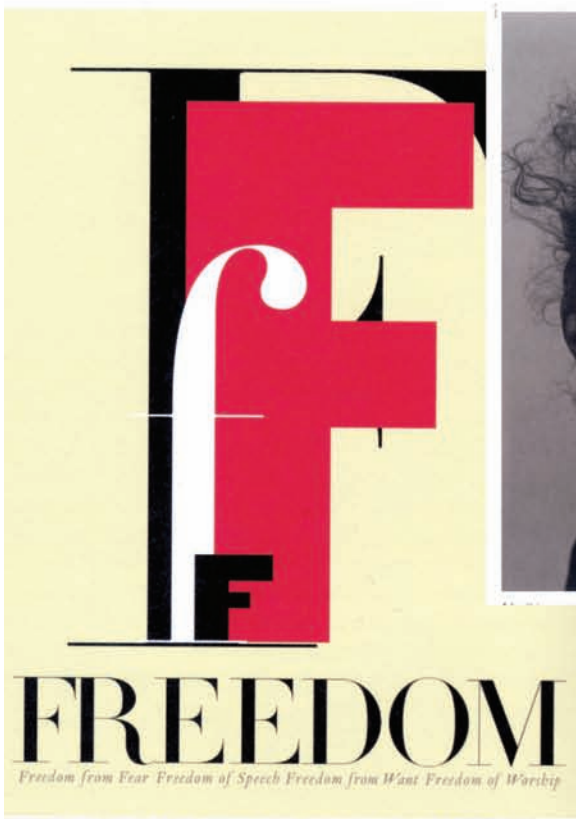
I think so. But nobody could be more surprised than I am about it—first, that the book came about, and second that people were interested. I've always been more interested in attracting attention to the page than bringing attention to myself.



A portrait of Ruth Ansel by Sheila Metzner

**Hall of Femmes:
Ruth Ansel**
»Magpie aesthetic,
shameless borrower,
intuitive,
and deceptively simple.«

Hall of Femmes: Ruth Ansel (Oyster Press) is the first in a series of books on female graphic artists and is available at Books & Books.



HALLELUJAH!
The 1986
Hall of Fame
by Annie Leibovitz
MICHÈLE DUVALIER'S
RIVIERA EXILE
by Marie Brenner

LADY MADONNA: A CHANGE OF FACE

UNDER HER DIRECTION clockwise from top left: Ansel was invited by the Wolfsonian-FIU to create a graphic work based on Norman Rockwell's 1943 series "Four Freedoms" in 2008; Versace advertising campaign by Richard Avedon, 1996/97; a photograph for Harper's Bazaar by Hiro, one of the photographers Ansel often worked with; a collage and cover (left) from "Peter Beard, Collector's Edition," an enormous monograph of the artist's work published by Taschen in 2006; Ansel in 1963; when Ansel put Steve McQueen, photographed by Richard Avedon, on the cover of Harper's Bazaar in 1965, it was the first time a male appeared on the cover of a women's fashion magazine; Ansel with Masai warriors for a House & Garden shoot in Kenya; David Bowie shot by Annie Leibovitz, 1986; Pina Bausch shot by Helmut Newton for Vanity Fair, 1984; Madonna shot by Herb Ritts, 1986.

