Tape Interview: Raymond Pierson with Ira Sommer of Bergdorf-Goodman

P: Good afternoon. This is February the 18th, Monday (1974), sunny and cold, official Washington's Birthday. I'm at the home of Mr. Ira Sommer, former head of the Fabric Department of the custom-made salon of Bergdorf-Goodman, and we are going to commence with a number of questions and answers concerning the operation of that department and specifics to fabrics and the shopping department.

P: Mr. Sommer, please convey again to me all of your personal and business recollections of the house designer Leslie Morris. I'm really at a loss here and need every scrap concerning her. She is a very elusive personage.

S: What you imply in your question, Raymond, is quite true. Leslie was a very rare type of designer. She was extremely modest and reticent in her work and in her relations with other people. She was reluctant to meet customers. She was reluctant to discuss her work, but she had a tremendous flair and talent and immaculate good taste.(1) Actually there are two kinds of designers, really, in the fashion field. Basically, one is the type who will be inspired by a fabric or a picture or something of that sort. The other is the type who gets an idea first, and then seeks the medium, either the fabric or the accessories or whatever in which to carry it out. Leslie had that rare combination of being able to do both. She could be tremendously excited by seeing a certain type of fabric, and have many many ideas as a result. Or she could come in, in the morning, all full of ideas and say "Oh, now I want something to make this and I want something to make that," and she would give me the sketches. I would, from my experience, try to select fabrics

for her. If we didn't have them in our vast stock, to get ones that could execute her own ideas. She was very indifferent to Paris influence, preferred not to be influenced by it, and to be free to express herself in her clothes, which she did beautifully.

Leslie Morris was a very dynamo of energy. Her thoughts followed each other so quickly that she scarcely had time to explain what she wanted done to have them executed, with the result that she had an apparent impatience, which really wasn't so. It was just that she wanted to get back to what she was doing, and to leave the other things to others after she had explained them. She had a great tolerance for accepting little thoughts and ideas. She was not reluctant to have you come over and say "don't you think, Leslie, that instead of the black and orange you might want to use this black and fuchsia because you have that orange, you know, in that dress and then (they) we got one of those models from Dior or something wouldn't you rather," and she was just as amenable to that sort of thing as it is possible to imagine. Many of these designers have a lot of temperament, but I even used to say to her, "you know, Leslie, it's a pleasure to work with you, because while you have temperament, you have what is necessary to go with it, and so few designers who have a lot of temperament have the talent to justify it." She had a very fine relationship with the people with whom she worked. When saleswomen came up to her with problems about a particular customer, she didn't hesitate to take her scratch pad and a pencil and design something particularly for one customer,

because she had a feeling about them, and she had a feeling as to what the saleswomen wanted to show her and it was nothing for her to stop in the middle of something she was doing and draw off three or four sketches to present to the customer. In addition to that she had a fine rapport with all the people who worked with her--the sample hands, her assistant, Rose, was very dear and took her home very often with her for weekends. She lived in Philadelphia in a beautiful apartment near Rittenhouse ~~(sp?)~~ Square. She was married to a most wonderful person for too short a span. She married him later in life, he was an older man and he unfortunately died before she did. Personally, Leslie was a most dainty, feminine type of person. She always looked fresh, alert. Her eyes sparkled. It was a delight just to see her. It was actually a refreshing experience merely to be in her company. It was very interesting to see Leslie at the height of her activity, which really started at the beginning of a collection. Each collection had to be anticipated by about five, six, seven or eight months, so you can immediately realize the traumatic experience that it must be for a designer who has to create a line that may cost a hundred thousand dollars even ten months before it is to be shown, and the vagaries of fashion are such that Paris might change its mind six times in that period, so that it required a tremendous amount of foresight and knowledge to anticipate what fashion would be, say in September, when you were mentally beginning to prepare for it in January, when actually at that time you were in the midst of creating a spring line to be shown in March. Just think of it. Here, you're a designer, you're making spring clothes that have to be ready in a month ~~and~~ a month and a half, and the pressure, just like putting on a show where the actors give you problems and the author gives you problems. The same with a designer, of course.

They are creators in just a different field. Now what Leslie would have to do, for example, in January the lines, the fasion, the fabrics would be shown for the clothes that we were to show in September, and which would not be worn by our clients until November or December of the following year. Now realize what a skill and knowledge is required to be able to aniticipate what your customers are going to wear ten months after you've decided on what you're going to make for them. That alone is a traumatic experience that is enough to unsettle anybody all day and night long, and at the same time she would be preparing a line of new spring clothes and again having to anticipate on the basis of the fabrics she bought eight months before what the people would be wearing two months, three months, and four months hence.

Another one of Bergdorf's more famous designers was Mark MOORING. Mark was a man who was a very antithesis of Leslie Morris, and sought as much exposure and publicity as possible. He was very friendly with the news media. He saw as much of his customers as he possibly could, and in this way he was able better to reflect the pace of the individual customer. His clothes were very often extravagant, very very elaborate, both in fabric and in ornamentation (?). A great source of ideas for him was the Brooklyn Museum as well as the Metropolitan Museum of Costume Art, and he spent a great deal of his time researching for his ideas. He made large collections. He was influenced by what and he had and he would use the most extravagantly expensive embroideries and ornamentations. He was not capable of anitcipating the mood of the times, and as people became less and less interested in extravagant apparel his effectiveness declined, so that over the years his value depreciated as a designer.

The Fabric Department of Bergdorf-Goodman was, I think, outstanding in its policy of using the finest fabrics made and encouraging the manufacturer ever of better and better quality in that area. It also used perforce the most extravagant and expensive fabrics made. Because, since a large part of its operation consisted in copying French models, and Italian models, and imported models in general, it was also necessary to use the same fabrics that was used in those models, and very often these fabrics were manufactured in very, very small quantities so that they might cost as high as seventy, eighty, ninety or a hundred dollars a yard for fabrics which, if made in quantity, might have been available at twenty dollars or less a yard. It was also necessary to use elaborate and magnificent embroidered fabrics in which the cost really, uh, uh, there was really no sky to what these things might cost, cause they were all handmade. We used some of the most beautiful fabrics, and most of them no longer exist. One of the great fabrics was what was called velour decoupé (sp?), cut velvet. Cut velvet actually was a satin; it was a satin woven with a long lote (?), that is to say, the face of the satin was made by having the filling cover' a greater number of warp threads than is usual in a satin, with the result that those threads could be broken. And the way a velour decoupé was made, and incidentally was often more a home manufacturing process. The satin fabric would be sent to the homes of artisans who made it, and very often these were women who with little sharp knives cut the satin, which had been pre-printed, and in cutting the satin it raised a nap, so that you would have the black part of the fabric appearing as a satin with the flow or whatever decoration raised with a nap as velvet or the entire fabric might just be cut in that fashion. So you had what appeared to be a velvet, but it required the most meticulous kind of craftsmanship to execute this.

And considering that the prices, which at that time ran in the area of thirty or thirty-five dollars a yard, were not really extravagant.

then she would see them again finally on the model, and then the difficulty of making sure that her ideas were exactly what she wanted, not something that merely simulated them, but which could not pass her very strict feeling about the accuracy of reproduction.

S: Designers, like any great artist in any field, have their own fingerprints and trademarks, so to speak. It was said of Leslie that basically she made clothes for herself. And it was true. She was, as I have said, a very dainty, feminine person, rather smallish, small-boned very delicate features, and her clothes really looked like Leslie. However, they were so subtle that it was possible to alter them and get the basic feeling of the clothes and yet put them on women of many different shapes, sizes and tastes. But, as I say, just as with any artist--Cezanne, Van Gogh, or any body who recognized a work of theirs, not because it's stylized particularly, but because it expresses a personality of the artist--and so it was with Leslie. One characteristic of Leslie's use of fabric was that she preferred simple fabrics. She didn't like anything over-ornate, over-patterned because she felt that this factor in making clothes really was the function of the designer and not the fabric manufacturer. She felt that she could take a simple fabric and give it the ornateness or the elaborateness by the manner in which she handled it, rather than by pictures stamped on its surface or textures which were not necessarily relevant to the product for which it was going to be used. She was quite able to take the characteristics

of a particular fabric, say stiffness, or striped feeling, either in its weave or in its pattern and utilize that, but only as a functional part of the overall creation which was going to result from its use. She did like lighter weight fabrics. She liked, as was her own personality, fabrics of delicacy, sometimes/very often gossamer in weight, but she also was able to handle heavier, tailored-type things, and her suits and coats had lines that were classic, or ~~was~~ as classic as a Chanel or a ~~Mabochet (sp?)~~ MAINBOCHER. Sophie of ~~Sachs~~ SAKS, Sophie Gimbel (?), had a very fine attitude toward light weight fabrics. She could use a chiffon or almost a _____ de soit that/just would float away when you touched it, and use it when making even a two-piece outfit that looked absolutely heavy because she would take these delicate things and cover them with heavy beads and embroideries and use a fabric in that case merely as a support for these externals. Leslie, on the other hand, preferred to use the nature of the fabric as a function of the ultimate design, rather than by heavily ornamenting it, although she did like to a great extent embroidery/ies, but she used them delicately. She would use a heavy embroidery merely for a hem and cuffs on a two-piece evening outfit, for example, the way you might use a collar, or the way you might use fur. But she rarely cared for all over embroideries, or all over textured things, and perhaps this was again a reflection of her own physical makeup, which was small. However, as I have previously said, her clothes somehow were adaptable to various types and sizes of figures.

P: I would like to interject one thing here concerning our discussion of fabric and the way Leslie Morris used it. My impression of her designs and the fact that she used shimmering, large pools of light and she sculpted them in such a way, draped them in such a way that they just were cool and/they rolled, they, uh, they just shimmered. They were gossamer, but more

more than that. They had a certain substance to them, and I can just in my mind go through and see sketches and photographs, and, um, just. . . not only the tailoring and the exquisite fit, but it was. . . it just flowed; flowed and flowed, and yet it had great symmetry and um, uh, function. That's I think all I'd like to say right now.

S: Another factor which works, because if every department, every business, every area of government that works in the home and every place else, there is never a complete unanimity of an operation. Now, Leslie, of course, was one designer in a group of designers that was designing for the Customs Department. Her, uh, superior, uh, uh, aegis was Ethel FRANKAU Franco, whose responsibility was the Customs Department. It was her entire responsibility--the results, the bottom line figures, everything became and was Ethel FRANKAU's concern. So it was inevitable that she had to have some basic control of what Leslie and, of course, the other designers made. I never heard Leslie express any kind of objection to this sort of thing. Now whether she followed out what she was asked to do, I don't really know. But I know I never heard her complain about it except when it came to things like the choice of fabrics and such, and Leslie would say, "Well, who's making the collection, she or I?" or "I'm going to make the clothes, let her sell them," or something of that sort. But inevitably, ETHEL FRANKAU had to say occasionally, "Now look Leslie, we had some lovely coats last year, but you know, I don't think they're going to be as good this year because people are just not wearing this kind of coat anymore. They're travelling and they're wearing lighter clothes and they don't like these heavy things, so try and work a little bit in that direction. Or you know, last season

my ~~Miss Grace~~ MRS GRACE was in and we just couldn't find a cocktail dress for her so, do have something that, you know, ~~Miss~~ MRS Grace, perhaps even something for Miss L or something, these larger women. Try and get something like that." To that extent, Miss ~~Franco~~ FRANKAU influenced the, uh, Leslie's work, and of course she had to do it. And of course Leslie, uh, uh, I'm sure tried to follow it to a great extent. But there was one real dichotomous situation (in the fabrics) in the Customs Department, and that was the basic conflict between the foreign imports and between Leslie's collection, because Leslie would make, for example, ~~between~~ fifty to sixty pieces as part of a collection. And Miss ~~Franco~~ FRANKAU, when she went to Europe, would come back with sixty, sixty-five or seventy pieces. Now obviously it was necessary for Miss ~~Franco~~ FRANKAU when it came time to show and sell the clothes, to push the clothes that she had bought, even unconsciously you might say, in preference to Leslie's. And Leslie always felt sensitive about this because she felt that her collection was her responsibility and that Miss ~~Franco~~ FRANKAU was more interested in selling her clothes. Now this is an inevitable thought, uh, it's bound to arise. And there was the tendency on the part of Miss ~~Franco~~ FRANCO, as was necessary, to make sure that the things for which she was responsible were sold in preference to any others, or at least at first at the beginning of the season, to make sure that those things were in early. In the first place because the mechanics of it - the mechanics of reordering on fabrics if necessary on foreign clothes with the attendant delays and heartaches that went into getting them, whereas with Leslie we generally had enough in stock to cover the models that she would show, because I would be sure to buy enough in advance to make what we anticipated she would sell. So that there was a bit of a conflict, or an area prone to be, uh, to tempt

to have a conflict in it in the presentation of the collections.

S: Another noteworthy designer at Bergdorf-Goodman's was Bernard Newman. He was the brother of ODNA BRANDEIS ~~Brandeis~~, who was one of the managers of the ~~xxxx~~ millinery department, a very talented, knowledgeable woman in the fashion field. Bernard did not make customs clothes most of the time he was at Bergdorf. He had spent a number of years in Hollywood where he made clothes for some of the greatest actresses in some of the finest moving pictures. But at Bergdorf-Goodman his job was making clothes for the ready-to-wear, a much more demanding and responsible kind of operation because his clothes, being ready-to-wear, did not have the markup or margin on which customs clothes might be able to operate, so that his clothes had to sell in great volume in order to be profitable. To this end, he had to be very practical, and he was not essentially a creator or an originator of fashion, but he had marvelous taste. He had the perception to see what was good, what made a good dress or a good suit or a good coat. And he was wise enough and talented enough to be able to adapt and composite, so to speak, various ideas into one particular outfit. This was his forte. His taste was very simple but really exquisite. In fabrics he chose the simplest kind of fabrics in which to execute his thoughts, possibly because he was not up to handling very elaborate things which required original designs for those particular fabrics. But all over, his clothes were tasteful, they defeated the inroads of time so that a woman who bought his clothes could wear them for a number of seasons. And for many, many years his part in the ready-to-wear operation was very, very important.

He made no pretense of being original. Often I would hear Andrew say to him, "You know, Bernard, you got, uh, that dress in the brown woolen was very, very lovely." And Bernard would say, "Oh, well, Andy, you know, that was that Dior skirt that, uh, from last season, and the sleeves I got from Leslie's, uh, blue dress. I think it turned out nicely, don't you?" That was Bernie. He was very, very modest and unpretentious. Incidentally, Ray, you're going to have to cut this tape up into little pieces because I have to throw in ideas as they come to me. For example, with the Customs Department, I neglected to mention anything at all about the economics of this operation. I think it had the distinction in the first, twenty-five or twenty-seven years with which I was associated of losing about a hundred thousand dollars a year and possibly another fifty or hundred thousand dollars a year in the workrooms.that were required to maintain it, so that even though it was necessary to get twelve to fifteen hundred dollars in the later years for a simple dress, we didn't make any money. In fact, it would have been cheaper to ask the customer not to buy anything and to give her a hundred dollar gift. On second thought, make it two hundred. The workrooms to which I referred consisted of a whole floor at Bergdorf-Goodman's. It involved at times as many as twelve individual fitters. The fitters, each of whom had her own workroom, also had her own group of customers on whom she fitted exclusively. Each fitter, some more ? than the others, might have on the average a dozen or fifteen customers, some fewer and some more. Each fitter had a workroom, with possibly twenty, twenty-five women working. There were drapers, assistant fitters, operators, finishers. In addition to that there were four or five islands throughout the workroom, of pressers, possibly, with five or six pressers in each aisle. The cost of maintaining such an establishment was enormous,

and actually it is true that the more clothes we made and sold, the more money we lost. But this was held necessary as representing the quality and the caliber of a specialty shop such as Bergdorf-Goodman. And the theory was that if we lost $25,000 on any one particular customer in the Customs Department we made it up on purchases in other departments. Apparently this was economically sound for a few periods, but in other periods it really did not compensate for the losses that were taken. The same thing applied to customs departments elsewhere. Saks Fifth Avenue with Sophie at the head in her custom department had exactly the same problem. The board of directors I'm sure must have from time to time said "What do we need this for, we lose a fortune in it?" And of course, Adam Gimbel would have to come back and say "Well now, here are figures. These customers bought so much. According to our figures that means we lost so much on them in the Customs Department, but here's what they bought in the Fur Department and the Shoe Department and the Ready-to-Wear Department and this more than makes up for what really could be charged to advertising." Now Raymond, I'm not going to put anything on the other side of this tape

S: Still another designer in the Customs Department was Mary Gleason, who was one of the first designers in that department. Her clothes were basically and essentially for the older and larger woman. She herself was a bosomy person and this was the kind of clothes she made. They were very saleable; they combined the elegance required by the larger wealthy woman with good taste and with a necessary amount of conservatism, of course.