

Lifestyles | Fashion Culture Podcast

Debra Rapoport Transcript

[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES IN]

[DR. VALERIE STEELE]

Hi, I'm Valerie Steele, Director and Chief Curator of The Museum at FIT, the most fashionable museum in New York City.

[UPBEAT MUSIC CONTINUES]

[DR. VALERIE STEELE]

Welcome to our Fashion Culture Podcast Series, featuring lectures and conversations about fashion.

[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES OUT WHILE GROOVY MUSIC FADES IN]

I'm Tamsen Young, digital media manager at The Museum at FIT, and this is our special podcast series, Lifestyles. In this series of interviews, I am speaking with people whose distinct expression of style is outside conventional fashion trends.

[GROOVY MUSIC FADES OUT]

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

We dress every day and I don't necessarily have outfits. I may wear something else with the jacket. I may turn the jacket the other way. I have another jacket that I wear upside down and sometimes I'll do it right side. So, it's not-- nothing is fixed and concrete because it's a creative process and it comes from within. That's why I say style is healing. Because if we use it to express ourselves, then there's nothing healthier than that.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Today, I welcome Debra Rapoport, whose fashion philosophies such as "Style is Healing" and "Frugality is Fun" guide her style of dress and creativity. Debra embraces a playful exploration of beauty and ingenuity in her fashion creations and in her life. She loves working with sustainable materials as well as keeping things out of landfills, both of which she's been doing for more than 55 years. She's not a shopper, but rather a searcher for everyday things that can have another life through transformation. Debra studied weaving in Stockholm, Sweden, holds a BFA from Carnegie Mellon University and an MA from UC Berkeley where she graduated in 1970. She taught throughout the 1970s at UC Davis and continued teaching here in New York City, including at the Museum of Modern Art, MAD Museum, and NYU, just to name a few. Debra's work has been featured in numerous art museums around the world, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg,

The Museum at **FIT**

Russia, and the National Museum of Sweden. Debra was featured in *Advanced Style*, a film about the style of people over the age of 60, as well as in the three *Advanced Style* books that followed. Thank you for joining me, Debra. We have so much to talk about.

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

A pleasure to be here. I'm delighted.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

So, can you start by describing the outfit you're wearing today?

[DEBRA LAUGHS]

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

Well, one of my philosophies, if you can't wear it inside out and backwards, it's not worth owning. So, what I'm wearing today is a rather traditional brown wool jacket, but I'm wearing it inside out, and it happens to be the designer Gaultier. And I just love all the labels and tags are here. And the back is a drawing of his. And I love it better inside out than right side.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

It's a wonderful lining. It's uh two-toned, isn't it? It's a rust and a copper color.

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

And a bit of the brown detail on the edges from the right side of the fabric. And the pants are just a generic pair of pants, but they're black. But the inside was this fabulous purple. So, I turned them inside out. And I love the fact that I have the black seams just as an accent. And that's what I'm wearing.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

And tell me about the wonderful hat you're wearing and this jewelry.

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

And I'm wearing a felt hat that I made in 2019 when this Italian company sent me fabric that I chose. And this is a wool and polyester blend. And I'm wearing a necklace from found metal, which I've been doing since the late '70s when it was very easy to find patina'd metal all over the streets. And now I hunt for it and every now and then I find a good piece. And I have friends and my husband doing the search. And this one's from 1983.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

And the earrings and the cuff?

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

And the earrings are made from toilet paper rolls, just three slices of the roll put together almost like a three-ring circus, a three-ring thing and embellished. And first they were for a ring show that was at the metal museum in Memphis. And my gallerist Helen Drutt commissioned me to

do two rings for the show. And then after I made them, she loved them so much she ordered 50 of them for every curator and every museum director she knew. And as I'm making all of these, I said, "Well, you know what? If I put backs on them, they're going to be earrings." And you know, they're as basic as you can get. And the rings are just a collection of well, one was my mother's. And so, and the others are just, you know, collectible vintage. And the bracelets are made from cardboard. Basically toilet paper rolls and then it's really like a collage on a cylinder with an image and then ribbon or twisted fabric to embellish it and I spray paint them first so that they become impervious and then I embellish them with acrylic and nail polish. Because you know it's only paper so it's very wabi sabi. So you put on a coat, you have a handbag – of course, it's going to rub on it and make indentations or little tears, but so what? You know, we're not perfect either. And in our imperfection, we're perfect.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Did you take any jewelry classes or did you teach yourself how to make these cardboard jewelry items or working with metal?

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

Well, coming from textiles, you work with materials all the time. So my hands do the walking. And it's just like, well, what do I want? I want to be embellished. So the first cuff I made was way back in the '80s. I had a beautiful silver cuff that I got when I was in Peru in 1969, and it was pre-Colombian, so I was told. And just a very thin sliver. And so the first cuff I made, I used that as the structure and I did papier-mâché over it. But it took so long to dry and I got impatient. And then one day I'm holding up a toilet paper roll. And I said, "Look it! The form is already here. The cardboard's here. I don't have to put it in the landfill." So I started making them. And I must have done 100 workshops. And the beauty of it is the variety is so great. And depending on what materials are available... and I say it's like doing a collage on a cylinder, that's all. And you can do whatever you want and go wherever you want. You can add as much to it or as little. So it's-- you know my philosophy is, where there's creativity there are no rules. Where there are no rules there is no fear. And I grew up in college, Carnegie Mellon. I was so intimidated. First I was in painting classes and I said this isn't for me because I was intimidated. A lot of the students had come from music and art here in New York. So I switched to design and I felt much more comfortable.

But when I got to UC Berkeley and my professor Ed Rossbach everything I would show him he'd say, "Yes, and!"

And I'd say, "Really? Are you kidding? It's not a piece of garbage?"

"No! Come on, what else?"

And that, at age-- I still get for verklempt talking about it. At age 22, he changed my life. And that's what West Coast can do from East Coast. I'm sorry. Even though I'm an East Coaster and I love it here, but dot dot dot.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Your look today... you mentioned the jacket and the pants you're wearing inside out. Is that something you wear every day or is this look typical of how you might look most days?

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

Yeah, I mean, you know, it's very simple. It's pants and a jacket, but it's what I do with it. And like I say, it's "dressing up over and over again" because we dress every day and I don't necessarily have outfits. I may wear something else with the jacket. I may turn the jacket the other way. I have another jacket that I wear upside down and sometimes I'll do it right side. So it's not-- nothing is fixed and concrete, because it's a creative process and it comes from within. That's why I say "style is healing" because if we use it to express ourselves then there's nothing healthier than that. I think our culture is so ill because we're always trying to be a square peg in a round hole and be something else or, you know, we're looking at some role models and we're trying to imitate them. But we all know our truth, but our culture pushes it so far down. So, I have something called the four T's, and that's a mantra. The first T is truth. And we all know our Truth. We just have to really dig down and find it and pull it up. And then we have to Trust it because it's too easy to ridicule it and criticize it. And then we have to be Tolerant of it and wrap the whole package in Tenderness and put it out there in the world and give everybody the space to have their four T's.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

That's very powerful and very inspiring and very easy to follow.

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

Easy to follow. Yep. "Keep it simple, stupid." The old K.I.S.S. adage.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

So, you both make things. Yeah. And you style things. Do you think of yourself more as a maker or a stylist?

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

Oh, definitely a maker. Definitely a maker. If my hands aren't busy, I'm like, where am I? Who am I? And I don't really sew. I love to mend and maybe put things together, but I'm not starting with pattern and fabric and zippers and pockets and, you know, that's, you know... And I used to knit a lot. You know, grandma taught me to knit. And when I was younger, she was teaching my sister who's older and I said, "Nana, teach me to knit."

She said, "But you're left-handed."

I said, "Yeah, but Nana, they're two hands."

And so I just picked up my sister's knitting and I said, "Okay, I can figure this out." And Nana was a great inspiration. My sister and I would go and spend the weekend and we go to the old

The Museum at **FIT**

sewing machine and we'd pull out the button drawer and we'd dump it on the living room floor to play. And grandpa in his Russian voice would say, "Oh, you're making a mess."
And grandma would say, "Be quiet. They're being creative."

And that runs through every cell in my body. There's no such thing as making a mess, you know, it's all part of the process and and play. And I don't think we play enough. And dressing really is a process of play. You know, I'm not doing surgery. You know, I tell people, so put on three scarves, put on four scarves, look in the mirror. If you think you look like a clown, take the red nose off or take one scarf off. Big deal, big deal. And it's the best way to make friends. I think having grown up so shy that I think I started dressing up and especially wearing hats so that I could start a conversation with people. And in New York, you talk to everyone. And I've made more friends on the bus, at the bus stop, at the crosswalk. I just, you know, met a guy who used to work here. Christopher, his name was on the subway. He said, "I follow you. Let's take our picture." Just as I'm two stops away.

[DEBRA LAUGHS]

But that's what I love about New York. We're not, we're not so reserved like the Brits or, you know...

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Or even the Californians.

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

Yeah. Yeah. Could be. Yeah.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

How long have you been dressing in this style and what shaped its trajectory?

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

Well, I always say I started dressing up at age three with my older sister. And my mother did not think it was a waste of time because it wasn't about consumption. It was about draping fabrics, putting on music, dancing around the house, dressing the puppy dog, and just really-- 'cause my mother was very creative. She didn't have the opportunities like I had, but it was in her. And she would even keep us home from school for wellness days and go antiquing and go to museums and maybe shopping because she said, you know, we were never sick. We were healthy kids. We grew up as vegetarians since the late '40s. Nobody could even spell the word. So she said, "So, you know, why shouldn't you have a day off? Let's go do something that's different. You know, you're good in school. You'll catch up. You'll do the homework."

So my mother encouraged it. She was like a third sister and we all played together. And we were always allowed to choose our own clothes and design our rooms. I mean, my room was pink and orange and I just loved that! Nobody said "Oh no, you know, it needs to be, you know, pink and cute or whatever."

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

So what does having this distinct style mean for you?

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

Well it's my meditation. It's my way of checking in with myself. And it's a creative art form, only I use my body as the armature and that's why I call it my ABCs, because I Assemble, I Build, and I Construct using color, texture, and layering on my body. So to me that's my sculpture, you know. Or my painting, 'cause I'm working with all of that every day. Because we dress every day, sometimes three times a day! So why not enjoy it? Let it feed you, you know?

And I say "Curate your Closet" 'cause we all have so much stuff that we probably haven't worn or touched in years and we have to rotate it forward and play with it. I mean, just this morning I was pulling stuff out and I said, "Oh my god, really? I forgot about that. How could I forget? That's so fabulous."

And I really do use it as a process of play because I can get very depressed with the state of the world. So, I have to find the simple things that are gonna just keep the creative energy up. And it's all, you know, people say, "Oh, I'm not an artist. I can't paint the Mona Lisa." I say, "The Mona Lisa has been painted already! Doesn't matter. It's coming from your inside. What do you have to say?"

And my husband, who's a songwriter and a wordsmith, says "We're closest to the creator when we create." Doesn't matter if you're gardening, cooking, fingerpainting, playing in the sandbox. And I think we have to get back to playing in the sandbox. The kids are too busy on the phone. It's too serious. It's too dangerous. Let's get our hands dirty, you know, let's bake bread! Let's play with clay, you know, anything! Just...and this is the most powerful exercise you can do to keep the brain stimulated, right? Between that and the toes going... the feet?

[DEBRA LAUGHS]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Two of your aphorisms struck me in particular and I was hoping you could explain them a little deeper. So, one is "Frame the Face."

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

Mhmm.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

What does this mean?

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

Well, like I say, "If you walk into a party and you have a pair of \$2,000 shoes on, no one's going to see 'em." But if you wear a gorgeous necklace or a boa or a hat, you know, people-- what's

The Museum at **FIT**

the most important thing? You smile in your eyes. So, you want to frame that, embellish it. So a hat does it.

And I have another friend, Tziporah Salamon, who's a fashionista. She says, "Forget tits and ass. Wear a hat. You'll get noticed." And that's so true when I watch the Oscars and all that, it's like, how deep can this décolleté go? And how tight can this silver dress-- you know, it's like enough already. You know, let's be sculpture and let's make it more interesting and dynamic.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

And another one is--and maybe a little more prophetic is--"Style is Healing." We are in clearly difficult times post-COVID, a lot of people hurting. What is style is healing for you?

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

Well, because if you're doing personal style and it's not about fashion, following the magazines, then you're going inside and finding your truth and dressing accordingly. Who am I today? That's my morning mantra. Who am I today? Am I happy? Am I sad? Is it cold? What am I doing? And it's not even an intellectual process. It's like, "Okay, that's what I want to put on: those kinds of textures and colors and layers and that's who I want to be today."

Self-expression and that's all it is. I don't care whether it's fashionable. I don't care if it looks old hat. I don't care if I look like an old lady or whatever. It's what I want to express today. And so that keeps me healthy and happy and grounded.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Final question for today. Do you have any thoughts on personal presentation about being fashionable, about a life of making things that you'd like to share with our audience of creative people?

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

Well, of course, the word maker and we're all makers and I think we have to get... Now we have to get back to it, but I think it would be important to get back to it and address it and embrace it. And again, like we did in the sandbox. It's a process of play. How much damage can you do taking a toilet paper roll and trying to embellish it? And if it's no good, throw it away and start another one.

I often will start a workshop with a little piece of paper and some cutout magazine pages and do a quick collage in ten minutes and then I say, "Okay, now take that collage and tear it in half."

[DEBRA GASPS]

"Tear it in half?! My chef d'oeuvre! Oh!"

"And give half to your neighbor and take a half from them. And now put that together and see what happens."

Okay, now we're ready to start. We broke the ice. We're having a good time. We're not worried about things being super valuable and precious. It's all about the energy and that's it. And it is a process of play. It's enough already with everything being so serious.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

You bring a lot of delight and joy to people that you don't even know on the street because your looks are marvelous and they're uplifting and they're colorful and they're a delight.

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

And I think that's partially why I do it. Because if I can bring joy and happiness or a smile to a bus driver, somebody on the street, why not? Why not? Doesn't cost me anything. I have joy out of it. And again, it's not brain surgery, so I'm not doing harm. If we can get smiles on people's faces, I think that's worth a lot of whatever.

[DEBRA CHUCKLES]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Well, thank you so much for joining us today, Debra.

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

Thank you. This was a pleasure. I'm delighted to share this with you, and I'm sure you've got fabulous stories to tell, too.

[DEBRA CHUCKLES]

[MELLOW ATMOSPHERIC SONG QUICKLY FADES IN FOR A COUPLE SECONDS AND FADES OUT]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

So, I think today's energy should be, "Be the sloth."

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

I hate to tell you, but that's my favorite animal.

[SUZIE BAER]

Amazing!

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

And I always say people think I'm so animated and all that, but I'm really a sloth.

[TAMSEN LAUGHS]

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

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I'm a Cancerian. I love being home on the sofa. And I think they're absolutely so freaking cute, aren't they?

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Aren't they?

[TAMSEN CHUCKLES]

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

You know, they're just so relaxed.

[SUZIE BAER]

They are.

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

We gotta learn from them to just hang there, you know?

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Yeah.

[DEBRA RAPOPORT]

We're so driven in our culture. It's just...

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Exactly.

[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES IN]

[DR. VALERIE STEELE]

If you like what you hear, please share your thoughts on social media using the hashtag fashion culture.

[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES OUT]