

Lifestyles | Fashion Culture Podcast

ELENA KANAGY-LOUX 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. Welcome to our Fashion Culture Podcast Series, featuring lectures and conversations about fashion.

[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES OUT]

[ELENA KANAGY-LOUX]

When I was at Concordia University, where I studied painting before moving to New York, I had a dream that I wore all these colors, and I lived in a pink apartment and I had pink hair and I wore all these vibrant colors. And at the time I had black hair and I only wore black. I did live in a pink apartment, though, so there was like, there was a little bit of it. And I decided when I woke up that I would challenge myself not to wear black for a whole week. And I've never worn all black since. I never returned from that.

[GROOVY MUSIC FADES IN]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

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.

We have images of our guests on our website. Follow the link in the show notes.

[GROOVY MUSIC FADES OUT]

[CALM, STRING MUSIC FADES IN AND OUT]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Today I am speaking with lacemaker and textile historian Elena Kanagy-Loux, whose research into global lace history and the lives of lacemakers is grounded in her own experience as a maker. Elena descends from the Amish and grew up in both the United States and Japan, where she was immersed in traditional Mennonite crafts as well as the DIY fashion scene in Tokyo's Harajuku neighborhood. In 2007, she moved to New York City to work in fashion, and was hired as the costume designer for the rock musician Courtney Love and worked for the independent fashion brand Electric Feathers.

In 2015, Elena won a grant which funded a four-month trip to study lacemaking in over a dozen European countries. Upon returning to New York, she co-founded Brooklyn Lace Guild, an organization dedicated to the preservation of making lace by hand. Elena holds a BFA in Textile Design from FIT, an MA in Costume Studies from NYU, and is now a PhD candidate at Bard Graduate Center. So, thank you for joining me.

[ELENA KANAGY-LOUX]

Thank you so much for having me.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Could you describe the outfit you're wearing today?

[ELENA KANAGY-LOUX]

Yeah, absolutely. I admit, it was difficult to choose something that I really felt would exemplify all my interests, but this was just what I was in the mood for today. So I'm wearing a blouse that is-- it's a vintage, embroidered Hungarian blouse from the 1930s with really beautiful sleeves that I bought from my friend Siri, who deals some vintage. And this skirt is a really beautiful story. It was actually given to me by my lace teacher, Bistra Pisancheva, who I took a workshop from in Bulgaria last year. And, you know, throughout the course of this workshop, she noticed that I was wearing vintage clothing every day. And she said, "You know, I have some clothes for you that I... I think they're for you. I think you should have them." And so she-- I met her in her studio in Sofia, and she pulled out all of these bags of these incredible dresses, all in silk, mostly all in white or cream. And all of these many of them still had tags on from sort of Soviet Bulgaria, like in the '80s. So, such a cool-- like the designs on the tags are so cool. I mean, just incredible. But I was so moved, I was so touched that I couldn't help but shed tears when she was pulling these dresses out. I was like, "Oh my God, amazing." So it's really a treasure and I, and I love it.

Then, you'll notice a lot of my clothes come from my travels. So this beret I actually bought in Venice, not Paris, as you might expect, but I was there for an archaeological textiles workshop and I bought this beret last year, and then my shoes were a gift from my husband. I don't remember from when exactly. We celebrated 19 years, so it's hard to keep track. But they're from Fluevog. They're just, I love them, they're my favorite. You can see I've worn them a lot. So....

[ELENA CHUCKLES]

[ELENA KANAGY-LOUX]

And then these tights are from a Japanese brand called Tabbi [sic], and they actually reprint art and textiles from museum collections onto tights. So I think these are like 18th-century English Spitalfields silk, maybe French, actually, I'm not sure, but printed onto tights. So even though they're not woven silk, they're still textile-related. And then jewellery, of course, my earrings are these little hands, cut out of like mother-of-pearl or shell or something from my husband for Christmas from Grainne Morton. And then all my rings are all like, vintage and from all over the place, but I am actually wearing some lace, which is this ring from Monika Knutsson, who's a

Swedish jewellery designer, and she uses real lace. In this case, it's like, I think, French bobbin lace from the twenties, and she electroplates it in gold. So this is actually real lace.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

It's such a beautiful ring.

[ELENA KANAGY-LOUX]

Thank you.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

So what do you think it was in your style that the woman in Bulgaria saw that inspired her to pull out these clothes from the '80s, these vintage clothes.

[ELENA KANAGY-LOUX]

You know, she has such a great sense of style herself. She wears a lot of white. So a lot of the garments she gave me were white. And she wears a lot of flowing head to toe beautiful ensembles. And she had these that were maybe a little bit more tailored and were not necessarily her style, but she saw that I wore a lot of vintage clothing while I was there, and that I was interested in not just the history of textiles, but in kind of incorporating that into how I dressed and that she knew that I would appreciate these. I think also the fact that I wear a lot of natural fibers, so I tend... and I also tend to wear wovens a lot, which I think, um, these days a lot of people wear knits a lot more than wovens and I prefer to wear-- not that I don't have knits, but I prefer to wear wovens. So I think she saw all of that in me and, and thought, "These would be a good fit for Elena." And she was right, I love them.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Would you say that this look today that you're wearing is similar to an average day's look, or is it wildly different from how you look?

[ELENA KANAGY-LOUX]

Ah. I think this is pretty typical of me. I wear a lot of vintage and, as may be clear, I also collect vintage from different places when I travel. I think maybe what's less usual is that I'm not wearing anything made by a friend currently. I have a lot of clothes made by friends who are designers or even made by myself. Although these days with my PhD and all the work that I do, I don't have time to make things. But yeah, I think definitely the color palette. I love to wear lots of florals. I love lots of light colors and pastels and lots of pink. So I think this is typical of me.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

So how do you describe your style or do you have a name for it?

[ELENA KANAGY-LOUX]

You know, that's a question that I've gotten a lot, and it took me many years before I could arrive at a good answer. I've even had people compliment me on the street and then say, "What do you call your style?" And I'm like, you know, "I don't know."

So people like to know like a name for a thing that they can look up or something like that, but I've never really fit into any one category. But over the years, you know, definitely I'm hugely influenced by my own upbringing. So I started to joke to people that my style was called "Amish in Tokyo" because I sort of have a mixture of this very traditional type of styling and tends to be modest, although not for any religious reasons, just my preference. And also that's as I've gotten older because I used to wear a lot of mini skirts.

[ELENA CHUCKLES]

[ELENA KANAGY-LOUX]

But just that I had these influences that I really liked traditional craft in my clothing like hand embroidery. But also that it was very colorful and bright in this way that was very Harajuku-influenced. So after a while, my husband coined the term "Harajuku Rumspringa" for my style.

[TAMSEN CHUCKLES]

[ELENA KANAGY-LOUX]

And so I think that that is so apt.

[ELENA LAUGHS]

[ELENA KANAGY-LOUX]

So that is what I call it, my style.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Adorable. So it doesn't sound like you're wearing anything today that you actually made? But you do wear things that you make. And I was wondering if you could tell us about how you came about your dressmaking skills and crafting skills, lace making, and so forth.

[ELENA KANAGY-LOUX]

Yeah, absolutely. For me, they really all stem from kind of one and the same in that I was very lucky to grow up in a time where it was still, at least in our family, normal for young girls in particular to learn to embroider and crochet. And so from a pattern and all of this sort of thing. So I learned to embroider from my grandma and I learned to quilt from my other grandma, and I learned to sew and crochet and knit from my mom.

So I just grew up making things. I didn't know it was something you could study in school. That was not an option that was presented to me because it was just a thing you did at home, for yourself. So I've been sewing from a pattern since I was, you know, single digits, I think. Not necessarily well, but that was just something that I learned how to do for [sic] my mom. She made her own wedding dress and my dad's wedding suit and things like that. But it wasn't until I went to school for painting, actually, and realized that fiber arts and textiles was something you

could study that that sort of took over my life. And I thought, “Oh my gosh, of course, let me study this.”

So that's how I ended up getting jobs in fashion, because I had all of this past experience and I was working in custom draping and drafting. So everything that I was making was very one of a kind, often using vintage and antique materials like upcycling and things like that. So it was, it was very customized and it was very much drawn from my aesthetic background, my background in Japanese fashion and things like that. So I really drew a lot from that. And that's part of how I got a job for Courtney because she really liked that about my style.

And, you know, I think the typical problem is, unfortunately, that when you make a career doing these things and now, as in my career, on the academic side of these same kinds of things, you don't have much time to make yourself clothing anymore. So while I do have lots of things that I've made for myself, often I have the least amount of time to make myself things, so they tend to be more slapdash than what I make for other people.

[ELENA LAUGHS]

[ELENA KANAGY-LOUX]

But I would love to get back into that more. Maybe after my PhD, I will get to make myself some clothes again.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

So how long have you been dressing like this and what shaped its trajectory?

[ELENA KANAGY-LOUX]

Um, but so my first ever vintage dress was bought from Nobody's Baby, actually in Eugene. And I think I was in seventh grade. There were two dresses. There was a pink 1950s prom dress that I wore to my winter dance. And I still have it. And then another one, which I don't have, which was like a cotton day dress, both like fit and flare kind of A-line, '50s dresses that was polka dots with stars that I wore for my seventh grade school pictures, but unfortunately I also wore it with red lipstick. And I smeared in the photo so they wouldn't print it. So I don't have this photo, which is really disappointing, but alas, I tried. I was very into Courtney at the time, as you can imagine. So I was really influenced from that. But I think I always drew from all of these different influences. And of course, Japan was a big influence, but I didn't always wear light colors.

Like in high school, I was super goth, like black hair, V bangs wore like Morticia Addams black dresses all the time. My dad had to bribe me to wear color when he remarried. I had to wear color to his wedding.

[ELENA LAUGHS]

[ELENA KANAGY-LOUX]

But okay. Very weird, but very specific. When I was at Concordia University where I studied painting before moving to New York, I had a dream that I wore all these colors and I lived in a pink apartment and I had pink hair and I wore all these vibrant colors. And at the time I had black hair and I only wore black. I did live in a pink apartment though. So there was like, there was a little bit of it. And I decided when I woke up that I would challenge myself not to wear black for a whole week. And I've never worn all black since. I never returned from that. So I dyed my hair pink. Now it's my natural color. But for twenty years it was bleached. And so I've just worn like sort of pastels and vintage ever since.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Amazing.

[ELENA LAUGHS]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

All stemmed from a dream.

[ELENA KANAGY-LOUX]

Right!

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

What relationship does your style have to your creativity, to your work, to your lace making, or any other aspect of your life?

[ELENA KANAGY-LOUX]

Yeah, that's such a great question and I'm so glad you asked because genuinely, for me, it's so hard to separate myself into these categories, like academic and personal style and maker and all of these, you know... you're sort of forced to pick a path in the traditional career trajectory. And, "Are you going to work in fashion? Are you going to be an academic? Are you gonna to be an artist and a craftsperson or whatever?" And for me, they all stem from the same thing.

So this I will say, one of my... I forget which professor this was, but one of my art teachers at Concordia said this to me years ago. This was in like 2004 or 5, before social media, before fashion blogs, like none of that existed yet. And she said, "You know, you should really take a photo of your outfit every day, because I can tell it's part of your work like this. The drive that you have to dress up is one and the same as your creative drive to make art." And she was so right and I felt so seen, but I didn't have access to, frankly, a digital camera or a disposable camera. It was not cheap to take photos at that time. It wasn't as accessible to document your outfits every day. And I lived alone, so I didn't have someone to take photos of me.

So yeah, so I didn't, I've never really done that, which I sort of lament now, but she was right. I should have, I should have made it happen. But it is true that I think, you know, my work in

fashion history, my work in textiles, my work as a lace maker and as a designer, they really are all coming from the same place for me.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

The point you made earlier is interesting, the one that there are often pressures to conform to an industry that you want to go into.

[ELENA KANAGY-LOUX]

Right.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

What do you think it is that kept you in tune with your own visual identity and not be swayed to look a certain way to go in a particular path?

[ELENA KANAGY-LOUX]

Yeah, absolutely. I actually get asked a lot, or I have been asked a lot throughout my life, “How do you have the confidence to dress like that,” or “I wish I could dress like that and things like that.”

And the reality is that genuinely, I've just had the-- I've just been embarrassed so many times in my life that I just don't care anymore. And a lot of that was living in Tokyo as a as a tween, as an adolescent, when you're so already sensitive and vulnerable in the world and it's so hard to just be a middle schooler anywhere, and then to be in a public school where I was such an outsider, even though I spoke the language and I lived there and my mom grew up there, I was still an outsider, and I got stared at everywhere that I went. And I had a period when I was about 14 where I wore hoodies and tried to hide myself because I just didn't want to stand out anymore. And I hated the feeling of being looked at, but eventually, you know, I wished--I would draw these outfits. I had dreams of dressing up. I, you know, it felt so deeply inherent to me that I wanted to dress up. And eventually I just got so used to being stared at that I just don't notice it anymore.

So sometimes when I'll make a friend, a new friend, and we'll walk around the city. This was more true when I had pastel hair. But you know, they'll say, “Wow, people look at you a lot.” And I'm like, “Oh, I don't notice.”

So I think part of it is really just letting go. You know, other people might be looking, but most people are so focused on their own lives, they're not thinking about you. So my advice is just, you know, wear what you want to wear because as far as we know, we only have this one life. So we might as well be true to ourselves and our vision for ourselves. And of course, I've had jobs and things where I couldn't dress like myself, but that only drove me to express myself more! Like I had uniforms in school, so on the weekends I would go extra crazy. And that's sort of how the whole Harajuku street culture began in the first place, 'cause when I went to middle school in Tokyo or junior high, we had school Monday through Saturday. So Sunday was the

only day that you could wear your own clothes. So you had to make it count. And I, and I really did.

I think the other misconception about--of course, I can't speak for everyone, but for many people that dress up is that it's somehow a call for attention. Like you want attention. But actually, I've spoken to many, many people. Many of my friends love to dress up as well or dress outside of typical fashion or things like that. It sort of is the opposite. When I get dressed, I think about, "How much attention can I stand today?"

And, you know, there are certain things that I know will get a lot of attention and I have to be in a mood where I'm comfortable getting comments from people all day if I wear that. And mostly they're positive, but even that can feel intense if you're not accustomed to it. Especially, you know, back in my teens and 20s when I was wearing Japanese Lolita fashion that got so much attention and so, so much commentary. And you really had to be courageous to wear it. So it was really like on days when I didn't have, I was maybe feeling stressed or tired or something, I would wear something more toned down because I knew I couldn't handle the attention that day. So it's not to say it's always easy, but it's certainly been worth it for me when I have the opportunity to wear the clothes that I want to wear, which isn't always, to take advantage of that because, this is who I am.

[ELENA CHUCKLES]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

And as you said, life is short.

[ELENA KANAGY-LOUX]

Exactly, exactly.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Well, I think that's a wonderful place to stop.

[TAMSEN CHUCKLES]

[ELENA KANAGY-LOUX]

So nice to talk about, honestly. Yeah.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Lovely. Thank you.

[ELENA KANAGY-LOUX]

Yeah. Thank you. This was wonderful.

[GROOVY, UPBEAT MUSIC FADES IN]

[VALERIE STEELE]

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[GROOVY, UPBEAT MUSIC FADES OUT]