

PHOTOGRAPH BY JONATHAN FRANTINI

The socialite Iris Apfel has always dressed on the eccentric side of showy. Now that she's 90, isn't she tempted to tone it down just a little? Go fly a kite, she tells **HELENA DE BERTODANO**

One-woman spectacle

She may be 90 but Iris Apfel is busier than most people a quarter of her age. 'I'm a geriatric starlet,' says the woman whose exuberant outfits and flying-saucer glasses have turned her into a style icon, with major art galleries frequently given over to shows of her clothes.

It takes six months of negotiations just to organise a meeting with her. 'I keep saying I'll get less busy, but I'm crazy,' she says in one of our countless phone conversations. 'I just do too many things. Let me look at my diary - I have a Japanese magazine coming this week, then Martha Stewart wants me on her show next week. Then I have trips to Texas and Boston - I can't possibly arrange anything at the moment, call me back next month.'

When we finally seem to have a firm date and I arrive in New York she makes me ring her at two-hour intervals throughout the day, pushing the time later and later. Finally, at 6pm, she says that she cannot meet me 'because the weather is

so disgusting'. This argument is somewhat illogical as she has no plans to leave her apartment anyway, and fortunately she relents when I tell her I am not going to be back in New York for a while.

When Apfel opens the door to her apartment in a beautiful Park Avenue building she is wearing an unremarkable outfit of jeans and a grey sweater: 'The jeans are from - what's that cheap store? Old Navy - but the sweater is cashmere.' The clothes serve as little more than a palette for her extraordinary jewellery - this week yoox.com launches its Iris Apfel collection of jewellery; some inspired and designed by Apfel, some from her personal treasure-trove. Today she is wearing a big-beaded Afghan crimson and silver necklace and huge hand-painted wooden lacquered square bracelets that look so heavy I wonder how she can lift her arms. 'Understated jewellery is not for me. It's too itsy-bitsy. My husband is lucky as I've never had a yen for real jewels.'



She leads the way through the apartment, which is like a museum stuffed with beautiful old Venetian chairs and paintings, including a possible Velázquez ('I don't want to find out if it's really a Velázquez because then I'll just be nervous about it'). But mixed with the English needlepoint and the imposing chandelier from Naples are elements of kitsch such as a turquoise stuffed parrot and a bowl of fake fruit. 'I mix everything up. A museum curator once said to me that there is a great jazz component to the way I do things because good jazz is improvisation and draws elements from all different cultures. And that's the way I do everything – the way I dress and decorate.'

Although she is hailed as one of the hippest women, with a sense of style to which many younger celebrities aspire, in many ways Apfel harks back to a lost era. 'I live in the Dark Ages, the 17th century. Actually, I would have loved to be in Paris in the early 20th century when the Ballets Russes were there and Chanel was designing.'

Yet when people ask her for style tips she is flummoxed. Lindsay Lohan once asked Apfel to be her fashion guru – Apfel declined. 'I can't tell people how to have style. No amount of money can buy you style. It's just instinctive. You can't try to be somebody you're not; that's not style. If someone says, "Buy this, you'll be stylish," you won't be stylish because you won't be you. You have to learn who you are first and that's painful.'

When I ask her if she has learnt who she is, she answers enigmatically. 'I don't try to intellectualise about it because it tightens you up. I think you have to be loose as a goose.'

Apfel misses the New York of the 1950s. 'It was fabulous then, everyone looked beautiful,' she says in her low drawing voice that sounds like it comes out of a 1950s Hollywood film. 'Now when I walk down Fifth Avenue in the summertime I just want to throw up. It seems that the fatter and uglier people are, the fewer clothes they wear. The shorts and flip-flops and tight jeans on butts that go from here to Poughkeepsie.' She shudders. 'I always say they should put people in jail for wearing clothes like that. Especially stretch jeans over size 10 [a UK size 14] – they should be outlawed. Ten years ago people were starting to look like slobs in New York, now it's an epidemic.'

If this is what she thinks of people in New York, I wonder what opinion she has of street fashion in

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From top: Apfel on a Middle Eastern cruise in the 1970s; wearing Gucci trousers at home in New York in the 1980s

London. 'I haven't been in London for some years but the last time I was there they looked fuddy-duddy and school-marmish, yes, but not sloppy. And then there are the wonderful eccentrics like the kids on Carnaby Street or the punks or whatever the heck they are.' Nevertheless, her heart is in New York City. 'I love London and Paris; they're very sophisticated, but not like New York. If you can't find it in New York, it doesn't exist.'

Born Iris Barrel, she grew up in Queens. She was an only child, her father a decorator and her

mother the owner of a fashion boutique. 'My mother was quite a clothes-horse and she loved to dress me up so I became rather enamoured of clothes.' She describes an occasion when her mother arranged for her to have a formal portrait taken. 'I had all these romantic ideas but the truth is I looked like a piece of clay that had to be sculpted.'

Her father was a maverick. 'He didn't care what anyone thought and he didn't care about clothes. My mother would have to drag him into a shop. He'd put one

leg in a suit and say, "I'll take it." She'd get crazy and say, "You don't even know if it fits." He'd say, "Oh, it will be all right, let's go." I sometimes do the same. If I see something that I like and the price is good and the fabric is beautiful I say, "Oh, well, if it doesn't fit I can make pillows out of it."

As a teenager, says Apfel, she was fat. 'I was very unhappy so I ate and ate and ate and no clothes would fit me. My mother used to tear her hair out when she took me shopping. I used to die because my mother had a gorgeous figure and the salesgirl would always say to me, "Why don't you be slim like your mother?"'

She started smoking, which helped her lose weight. 'I used to smoke like a fiend. I smoked four packs a day. I never do anything half-arsed, shall we say, but I stopped because I felt I was getting to be an addict. I've got very good willpower.'

She became friends with Duke Ellington, whom she first met when she was writing a paper on jazz. Hearing he was in town, she went to see him. 'I got

all dressed up; I think I had more nerve than brains. I went backstage and knocked on the door and Ray Nance [Ellington's trumpeter] came out and said, "Lordy, lordy, who's your tailor?" I explained my mission and he said he was sure the Duke would see me. The Duke couldn't have been nicer and said he'd introduce me to all the greats in Chicago. My mother was very dubious, so I told her, "He's the most elegant gentleman." She said, "I don't give a damn how elegant he is, you're not going to Chicago." But I did.'

Her first job was as a copywriter for *Women's Wear Daily*. 'I was a copy girl and I made the magnificent sum of \$15 a week. Eventually I worked out that I would never get anywhere

'Only Helen Mirren was wearing a beautiful necklace, but even she got it wrong because the necklace ruined the dress'

there. All the women who worked there were middle-aged and I said to myself, "They're too old to have babies and go on maternity leave and too young to die, so you'd better get your butt out of here." So she quit and started work for the illustrator Bob Goodman. 'He paid me \$35 a week, which was more than all the different boys I went out with.'

Iris played the field until she met Carl Apfel at a resort on Lake George in upstate New York. 'He told my friend that he thought I was very attractive if only I would go and have my nose fixed. So I said, "You can tell him to go fly a kite." Anyway, some weeks later I came home from work and the phone was ringing off the hook. He said, "That was a stunning outfit you were wearing today and I particularly loved your hat" – he had been on a bus on Fifth Avenue and had seen me on the sidewalk. Anyway, I was very busy and the first date I could give him was about six weeks later on Columbus Day.' After that, things moved quickly. 'Thanksgiving he proposed, Christmas I got my ring, Washington's birthday we married and our honeymoon was over on St Patrick's Day.'

I ask what it was about him that made him different from her other boyfriends. 'He was very easy and very funny and we just hit it off. First of all he ordered my dinner. I have so many decisions to make all day long that I really don't want to decide what I have to eat, too. So it was perfect.'

Together they launched a textile firm, Old World Weavers, which designed fabrics for the White House and clients such as Estée Lauder, and Iris became a fixture on the New York social scene, often photographed in the style section of the *New York Times*. Her outrageous outfits and huge glasses made her instantly recognisable. 'When

I needed to wear glasses, I decided I'd wear glasses. All the better to see you with.'

She and Carl ran their company until they retired in 1992. Then in 2005 Harold Koda, the curator of the Costume Institute in New York, asked if she would agree to an exhibition of her jewellery and accessories. 'It didn't start out as a fashion show,' says Apfel, 'but he decided that to show accessories out of context didn't make much sense so he asked if I could spare maybe five outfits...'

I said yes, so they went through all my closets, all the drawers, all the boxes, all the armoires, under the bed, everywhere and they go woowoowooo [she flaps her arms up and down]. Finally they ended up with 82 outfits. It was insanity but the show was such a big smash.'

The exhibition transformed her from a quirky eccentric into a fashion paragon. Since then versions of the show have appeared at museums around America and Apfel's life has changed utterly: 'I've always been well known in my field but since the first show it's gotten insane. I'm very grateful at my stage of the game to have all this happen. It makes me laugh and laugh; it's ridiculous, because underneath I'm the same person I've always been.'

Certainly she remains as outspoken as ever: 'Most of the young people today look dreadful. And celebrities look even worse. They don't know what to do with themselves. At the Golden Globes and Oscars they all look alike – it seems like they're all wearing the same nightgown and this year nobody had any jewellery at all. Only Helen Mirren was wearing a beautiful necklace, but even she got it wrong because the necklace just ruined the dress. I think the designer must have wanted to kill himself when he saw her.'

I ask if she is ever tempted to say something to someone who she thinks looks dreadful. 'Oh, now that would be horrible. It's a free country – if you want to look like a freak, that's your problem.' ●



From top: Apfel's mother on a European cruise in the 1970s; Apfel with her husband, Carl, at a gala dinner in Miami, 2008