

THE NORMAN CONQUEST

ACADEMY GRADUATE AMBROSE COMBINES HOLLYWOOD GLAMOUR WITH *CONTEMPORARY CHIC*...

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Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week—a grueling haul for all involved. Stylists running around with pins and needles in their aprons, designers placing finishing touches on their collections, photographers vying for a good spot on the platform at the end of the runway. Even the attendees prance around in their most fashion-forward outfits waiting for the chance to be photographed by Bill Cunningham.

Yet as I made my way up the ramp to the backstage entrance to *The Stage* at the Lincoln Center, before me stood a man dapperly dressed in a navy blue tailored blazer, collared shirt—no tie—perfectly fitting off-white pants and smoothly slicked back hair.

With a calm, quiet demeanor, he seemed to be simply enjoying the fresh air. There was no question as to his identity: the man was undoubtedly Norman Ambrose.

As he stood outside *The Stage* waiting to introduce his spring 2012 collection to the world in his first-ever runway show, Ambrose, a budding designer on the rise in the fashion industry, was the coolest customer in the red-hot scene.

Enrolling in Academy of Art University's fashion program in 1999, studying fashion design abroad at the I.E.D. (Istituto Europeo di Design) in Milan, launching his own eponymously named clothing label in 2006



at age 25 in New York and showcasing his fall 2011 collection at the Lincoln Center in New York for the first time last spring all led to the culmination of this exact moment.

After months of phone conversations and emails I finally introduced myself in person, interrupting the quietness.

"It's so nice to finally meet you," said Ambrose. "Please feel free to go on inside. I'm just waiting for someone. I'll be in in a minute."

I made my way through the tent entrance unsure of what to expect and nervous—not for myself but for the seemingly relaxed young designer. After debuting his fall 2011 collection, the press dubbed Ambrose one to watch. Two separate lines—one of daytime looks and the other of glistening, exquisite evening wear, showcasing his hand-stitched, delicate beadwork—won plaudits from the press. As

Socially Superlative blogger Dara Senders put it after viewing his fall presentation at *The Box*, a smaller presentation room at the Lincoln Center: "I want everything!" And blogger and New York events guru John Simon predicted that Ambrose will become "a giant in the making." This time around, all eyes were definitely watching.

Yet, amidst the buzz and excitement, Ambrose eventually made his way back inside and proceeded to take the time carefully to explain the mechanics of each outfit to his dressers individually—how to fasten and style it—between smiling and joking with staff.

"My job is done," he said plainly. "I'm here to enjoy myself."

Ambrose even spent several moments conversing with his mother—the guest of honor whom he was waiting outside earlier. His mother,

chicly dressed in a simple pale pink shift dress, has had a profound influence on Norman's aesthetic. Growing up in Tiburon, California, Norman always looked to his mother and grandmother for style and inspiration, which persists in his work today.

His aesthetic reflects the glamorous classics, and dates back to a time when women in Europe "had their clothes custom made until the late 1930s, when ready-to-wear was introduced through department stores in New York," he said.

Such custom-made clothing included his grandmother's 1930s Lanvin wedding dress, Ambrose recalled, adding that his family is of Hungarian descent and owned several factories there.

"My mother and grandmother had a profound influence upon my aesthetic and sensibilities,"



said Ambrose. "Before the Second World War, my grandmother had her clothes made custom, before Communism redistributed the family's wealth. Her level of taste was passed to my mother and so to me..."

Although his grandmother has passed away, Ambrose is now able to design clothes with an aesthetic inspired by these two strong women who shaped his vision.

His adoring mother has her first choice from each collection, of course, remaining "kept in high style" said Ambrose. "She is the best dressed lady I know."

While Ambrose continued to enjoy himself backstage, photographers and press wandered around snapping pictures of everything in sight and makeup artists prepared the models with tightly pulled back hair and bright red lips. I found my way to the clothes.

As I skimmed through rack after rack of carefully organized and outfitted clothes, my nervousness subsided. The collection lavishly displayed, as Norman said, "over-the-top embellishments, fine tailoring and couture inspired by *Gaîté Society*," encompassing the likes of beauty icon Mona Von Bismarck, a friend of Cristóbal Balenciaga who was once named "the best-dressed woman in the world" by Coco Chanel. Other muses included tobacco heiress Doris Duke, whose collection of Islamic art and architecture at her *Shangri-La* house in Honolulu was also an inspiration for the new collection.

One piece especially caught my interest. It was the only item not hanging. I cautiously peered into the bag sitting on the floor examining the glistening gold peeking through.

"What's in the bag?" I asked one of the dressing assistants.

"An all glass jacket," she said excitedly.

"Ohh!" I gasped in awe.

Not to my surprise, the audience had the same gleeful reaction, with whispers breaking out among the crowd, as the glass beaded bolero paired with a gold halter jumpsuit popped out from around the corner and shimmered down the runway.

This piece appeared after a black and gold tailored suit, while the rest of the collection harmoniously flowed from silver and ivory floral chiffon prints into beautiful coral and turquoise outfits and dresses. This congruous flow of color is one thing Ambrose enjoyed most about this collection.

"There are so many different elements that are harmonious once put together," he told me. "When you see them separately they stand very nicely and very strong alone, but put together, they make an extremely powerful impression."

To help aid in making the impression more powerful, Ambrose partnered with Verdura jewelry company in the launch of their new *Hollywoodland Collection*. After viewing

Norman's collection I immediately found myself pulled to the extravagant \$21 million jewelry display like a kid in a candy store. I secretly wished that James Haag, Vice President of Verdura, would slide the chunky gold and diamond "Lily" bracelet he was showing me—originally designed for 1930s Hollywood star Marlene Dietrich—onto my arm.

With no such luck, I stood by admiring the fine collection of timeless jewelry, which complemented Norman's collection so beautifully.

"Verdura is known for being bold, classic and timeless, and with a huge twist of personality to it," said Haag. "And Norman and Verdura are exactly that... and I don't think they'll ever go out of style."

"New York is where one should show and sell a collection. It's an international destination in this industry."

Ambrose and Haag's relationship began over 10 years ago, long before Ambrose even started talking about being a fashion designer and long before Haag became vice president of Verdura. Haag recalled sitting down to dinner at Ambrose's home, knowing from the very beginning that he would be huge. Sitting next to many other budding designers at dinners and parties, Haag knew that none compared to Ambrose.

Recalling their first dinner again, Haag regaled me with Ambrose's fabulousness even down to the china on his table, which had been salvaged from the Titanic.

"When he told me this I said, 'Of course it was,' because I just look at Norman and think everything is going to be fabulous," said Haag. "I get this chill when I'm with him. I know that he's destined 50 years from now to be one of the greats."

Over the years, the two have remained good friends. Haag moved over to Verdura and Ambrose began his journey as a fashion designer. All this led to Ambrose and Haag sitting down at the Verdura boutique on Fifth Avenue for hours, sketches and photographs in hand, matching up pieces of jewelry to clothes.

The jewelry did fit perfectly with each of Ambrose's designs. It was a perfect union. As each piece of jewelry was delicately placed on each model, Ambrose and Haag watched proudly.

I asked Ambrose if he ever imagined this moment. "I began sketching clothes at the age of 12," he replied. "It's been a goal ever since I can remember."

Ambrose reached his goals through hard work and studying fashion after enrolling in

Academy of Art University's fashion program. He credits the school with helping him turn his childhood inspirations into the reality of a full collection by learning "to interpret concepts into focused ideas and execute them."

His studies also took Ambrose to a semester abroad, studying at the I.E.D. where he worked on projects for Versace and Bottega Veneta, experiences which allowed him to "refine and perfect" his own style and hone the skills which he would need to open his own clothing label in New York City.

Which is exactly what Ambrose did in 2006, only a few years after graduating from Academy of Art University in 2003 and completing an apprenticeship in New York City. Moving to the East Coast proved to be a necessary change for Ambrose and his design career.

"New York is a fabulous place to live... but a huge change from San Francisco," he said. "San Francisco is sleepy in comparison. New York is where one should show and sell a collection. It's an international destination in this industry."

Because New York is such an "international destination," he added, Ambrose is able to keep busy all over the world, from Manhattan to Europe and South America.

He says his inspirations are "enhanced through each new client acquired and each destination traveled to."

Yes, Ambrose still takes time for travel and studying history to understand better how to apply "visions of the past" to his current designs, and reading, also in search of material that can be applied to his work.

"I'm actually reading a book titled *Bonanza Inn*, he said. "It's about the Palace Hotel in San Francisco and its storied history as the grandest hotel of its time."

But not all of his dreams have yet come true.

The little 12-year-old boy, dreaming up rough sketches of glamorous designs, has created a successful name for himself and is making his way up the industry ladder. His next ambition? Conquering Europe. Well, at least as far as fashion is concerned. Ambrose would love to be able to distribute his clothes overseas.

Whatever Ambrose's next steps, his current success serves as a reminder to never give up.

Before leaving the show that night I peeked backstage one last time to bid a farewell to Ambrose. He inquired with true sincerity as to the success of his own fellow alumnae's runway show, the Academy of Art University show, which took place only days earlier.

Happy to hear that everything went well, he also left me with his own advice to young students seeking to find their way in the competitive field of fashion design: "You fall down a lot but you get up and dust yourself off... The University will give you the tools to perform. The rest is up to you and the calculated risks you take. So go forth and do your absolute best—always."