

Anna Sui, the high priestess of downtown style, talks to Executive Editor **Maryann LoRusso** about runway shows, fashion rebels and her lifetime fascination with rock 'n' roll.

When you walk into Anna Sui's Manhattan showroom, you understand immediately what she's all about. Reflecting her good girl/bad girl personality, the boudoir-like space includes a full-length wrought-iron mirror, a collection of doe-eyed papier-mâché mannequins and a black vanity strewn with bottles of glittery nail polish and a purple feather boa. As the designer poses on a curvy velvet sofa waiting to be photographed, she comes across as part downtown diva, part sophisticated entrepreneur — her long, jet-black hair and hippie-chick outfit intriguingly contrasts to her firm handshake and businesslike demeanor.

Since she launched her women's ready-to-wear collection in 1980, Sui has been all about stirring things up. A vintage junkie and a rock-star wannabe, she has clothed such fashion rebels as Courtney Love, Lisa Marie Presley and Cher with her glam-rock fashions. Like her ready-to-wear, the designer's signature shoes — manufactured by Venetian company Ballin and now in their seventh season — are as inspired by the past as they are by the present, as tomboyish as they are feminine.

Sui now manages a business as diverse as her design influences. Besides overseeing an Anna Sui retail store in New York's SoHo and two freestanding boutiques in Tokyo and Osaka, Japan, she recently launched a denim line and is expanding her fragrance and cosmetics collection. In the tradition of her past ready-to-wear collections, Sui's fall 2000 line is a sexy statement that pairs wild colors and geometric cuts with unexpected materials and bold details — from knit ruffles and fringe to metal studs and metallic scales. The shoes, which include patchwork-suede knee-high boots and silver-studded high-heel pumps, follow suit in rich hues, lush fabrics and art-inspired patterns.

Here, Sui talks not only about her funky fashion sensibility, but also about her childhood career aspirations, her favorite celebrity mannequins and her frustrated inner musician. ▶

THE SUI AND LOWDOWN





Sui Inspiration: The designer's fall collection includes '40s-inspired, feminine touches (here) and carefree bohemian looks (below).



THE SUI AND LOWDOWN

Q: The rock 'n' roll theme has stayed with you through your career. Why is that?

A: Rock 'n' roll has been the thread through the 10 years I've been doing shows. I use it to create moods, hipness. It was the initial idea behind my collection. I originally wanted to design clothes for people who went to rock concerts. That idea has always been a big part of my collections.

Q: Does that mean you're harboring a secret desire to be a rock star?

A: That would have been great! But unfortunately, I didn't wake up one morning and become Mick Jagger.

Q: No, but you get to do the next best thing: dress celebrities. How hard do you work to keep up with Hollywood's elite?

A: We don't [actively go after celebrities] like a lot of designers do. That's really not my style. I have a lot of famous friends whom I love to dress, but we don't have the staffing or the wherewithal to throw stuff at everyone. If the person is a friend and [his or her fashion sensibility matches] my style, then it works.

Q: Who has been the most fun to dress?

A: One of the most fun was Marilyn Manson. It's always exciting to get a phone call from Lisa Marie Presley, because, well, she's the King's daughter. Cher was always exciting, because she was an idol, and I think Madonna was very responsible for giving me the confidence for doing my first fashion show in [fall 1991]. Madonna, Linda Evangelista and Naomi Campbell were the ones who first made my clothes so visible.

Q: When you were growing up outside Detroit, did you know you wanted to design?

A: Apparently, I made that decision when I was only 4 years old. Not so long ago, a [childhood friend] told me that when I was about that age, I used to talk about becoming a designer. When I was 5, I came to New York to be a flower girl in a wedding, and I loved the city so much that I decided my goal was to move here. When I got older, I read an article about two girls who graduated from Parsons [School of Design in New York] and then moved to Paris, [where] Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton opened a boutique for them. I told myself, I'm going to do that. Well, it turned out that one of those girls was Irving Penn's stepdaughter. As a kid, you don't realize you need connections. Still, I decided I was going to Parsons.

Q: Armed with this grand plan for your future, you must have stood apart, fashionwise, from your classmates.

A: When I was young, I didn't realize I was so different in the way I dressed, but actually I was purposely different. I went to West Bloomfield, a very conservative high school [in West Bloomfield, Michigan]. I wore glitter on my eyelids and feather boas to school, but I didn't think that was very unusual.

Q: With the number of products in your repertoire — including perfume and makeup — you must be a pretty accomplished juggler. How do you prioritize?

A: Usually the shoes are the first thing I focus on each season, because of the lead time involved [with shoe production]. It's all a process. You just have to do what you have time to do. Producing the shoes is difficult, because [while I'm sketching them], I'm never quite sure what the clothing silhouettes are going to be...But it all comes together on the runway. That's where I get to express everything in its total mood, look, color, inspiration. I get to put it all out there.

Q: Your runway shows are so much fun to watch. Pulling them off can't be as easy as you make it look.

A: I think the most challenging and fun aspect of my job is the runway shows. That's what I put the most effort into. But I'm usually pretty calm during the show. At that point, there's not much I can do. I almost never get to see the complete show, because I'm backstage helping the girls get dressed. So during the event, I never can tell if it's really working. But it's not the crazy scene [many people imagine] it is.

THE SUI AND LOWDOWN

Q: When it's all over, how much attention do you pay to the reviews?

A: I do read the reviews, and I can get obsessive about them. At that point, when I see [the reviewers' comments in print], their words take on a different meaning for me. But I've been lucky, because so far no one has been very brutal.

Q: Who is the typical Anna Sui customer?

A: I have my own store, so I have a good idea who my customer is. She's somebody who loves fashion, who loves to have the latest things, to follow the trends. She is probably a career woman, and she could be married with children. She may also end up collecting my stuff. Many people tell me they have a certain Anna Sui piece, a favorite dress they wear to parties.

Q: Speaking of collecting, are you a shoe junkie?

A: Oh, I'm obsessed with shoes. I think an outfit is just not complete without the right ones. I have probably as many pairs as Imelda did. Two of my favorite designers — who are also my friends — are Marc Jacobs and Martine Sitbon. I also like Prada.

Q: Your designs are influenced by a variety of sources. From where do you draw your inspiration?

A: I'm really lucky because everything I do in my life I can use in my work. I travel a lot. I love art exhibits, film, history. I do a lot of research and build a whole folder of inspiration. Last season [I was fascinated by] nomads and gypsies.

My designs are a combination of nostalgia and trendiness and rock 'n' roll and flea markets. And fantasy and dress-up. I'm a product of American pop culture, and my designs really show that. I play around with many [themes] — rebellion against suburbia, for example — and make lots of tongue-in-cheek references. As with my folk collection and preppy collection, I try to make things more ironic than they are.

Q: How do you like living in New York?

A: The energy here is just so incredible. The city is such a gathering place. No matter where you travel, all you hear from people is, 'I'm going to New York.' Everyone is either passing through or stopping by. You can walk down the street for a half-hour and not hear an American accent. It's my favorite city to live in, but London is my favorite to visit. I love to travel. I just spent a week in India — it was just so inspirational, it was another dimension.



Q: Besides traveling, what do you do in your spare time?

A: I love reading. Right now I'm into [Fyodor] Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* — Prince Myshkin is probably one of the most beautiful characters ever written. I also love shopping flea markets, and as I said, I like watching films and visiting museums. I really like aesthetic art. That's prob-

Runway Rewards: Sui enjoys the accolades following her New York show this past spring.

ably my favorite period...The other thing I love to do is have friends over. I love to order in and entertain.

Q: Is it difficult to be both designer and entrepreneur?

A: You learn early on how to [wear both hats]...But each day, I probably spend only three or four minutes designing. The only way to make things work is if you understand the rest of your business. You have to realize that you're not an artist, you're a business person.

Q: Your business is headed in many new directions. What's next?

A: We just introduced a jeans collection. Denim is hot, especially this season. In general, we want to branch out into the junior market. The shoes we do in Japan are a little more juniory than the ones we do [for the U.S. market]; we want to expand on that. With our cosmetics and perfume, we have become a truly global brand. We have been opening new accounts in Europe, and we're [experiencing] growth in Asia. We [recently] launched a second signature fragrance and a skincare line, and we're setting up a Web site.

Q: Does that mean the Internet will play a bigger role in your business?

A: I already sell our cosmetics and perfume online, and I see my designs being sold [through various sites]. I think the best thing [the Internet] has going for it is research and shopping. To me, it's more satisfying to buy clothes in a store. It's about discovery and taking the item home. I've purchased CDs and books online, but not clothing.

Q: From what I've read about you, you'd much rather shop vintage stores.

A: Yes, but vintage is not as much fun anymore. There are no more bargains. To collect something is now an investment, and it's hard to invest in a vintage designer dress at \$1,500. I like to collect handbags by Roberta di Camerino, but the prices are five times what they used to be...You have to really love the stuff to spend a lot of money on it.

Q: In terms of design, where is fashion headed?

A: I think we're finished with folkloric and ethnic themes. Everyone is talking about ladylike and status and the 1980s — none of which is my favorite. But those all seem to be the new catchwords.

Q: Do you have any advice for aspiring designers?

A: The key is to attend a good design school...and then it's about soul searching, figuring out what you're really good at and what you want to do. And learning the craft. I [talk] to a lot of students, and this is always the advice I give them: It doesn't happen overnight, and you have to be really focused. For example, I knew [from the start] that I wanted to make a certain type of clothing; I was never interested in couture.

Q: What's the one shoe fashionable women should buy for fall?

A: Oh, I'm not the right person to answer that. I mean, when I love a pair of shoes, I don't pay attention to price...Basically, the only reason to buy a pair of shoes is that you simply have to have them. ■