

**Book Review: A Tantalizing Glimpse into Diana Vreeland's
Shaping of *Vogue***

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Diana Vreeland Memos: The *Vogue* Years. Alexander Vreeland (editor). New York, NY: Rizzoli, 2013. 288 pp. \$55 hardback.

Reading Diana Vreeland's *The Vogue Years* is a little like a time travel trip to the 1960s and 1970s. The book, edited by Diana Vreeland's grandson Alexander Vreeland, compiles 250 pieces of the *Vogue* editor-in-chief's personal correspondence. The memos and letters offer a glimpse into the personality of Diana Vreeland and into the workings of the magazine from her time as editor in chief from 1962 to 1971. To introduce each chapter, Alexander Vreeland also includes some snippets about his grandmother's working style from those who worked with her.

The time-travel vibe is intensified because the memos and letters — some with Diana Vreeland's handwritten notes — are reproductions interspersed with pages from *Vogue*, magazine covers, and legendary photographs. There's Richard Avedon's epic photo of dancer Rudolph Nureyev and Cecil Beaton's portrait of Pablo Picasso in a sweater. Famous models Twiggy, Jean Shrimpton, and Veruschka appear in the pages, along with young Lauren Hutton, Candace Bergen and Anjelica Huston.

In his introduction, Alexander Vreeland described his grandmother's style in dictating many of the memos from a chair near a big window in the bathroom of her Park Avenue apartment. The memos were transcribed by secretaries onto onionskin paper with multiple copies made with carbon paper.

Next to her, on a small folding table, she had several essentials, including a few boxes of matches, an ashtray, and a small water-glass-sized vase full of cigarettes. Nonina would sit there for hours, dressed in a bathrobe, chain-smoking Lucky Strikes while she dictated memos and letters to her secretaries at *Vogue*. By the time Nonina arrived in the office, which was never before noon, she had already finished her daily correspondence.

Alexander Vreeland divides the book into nine sections: Show Them Direction, Please Get Organized, Talking to Creative People, Finding the *Vogue* Woman, Beauty is Within, No Limits, Objects and Inspiration, Mind the Details, and Create the Future.

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chapter—Show Them Direction—is the longest and one of the most interesting. In *Talking to Creative People*, Diana Vreeland’s letters show how she cajoled and complimented star photographers and models.

The memos often illustrate what she saw as fashion emergencies—as in a call to bring knee socks into the pages of *Vogue*. There was an exhortation about hair: “I assure you this association with broken hair, no hairdresser, no money, no vitality—and the will to live is gone.”

I reviewed an online version, which—while still beautiful—does not offer the same experience as paging through the oversized book’s reproductions and beautiful visuals. I wanted to see more of what she wrote about in the memos. Reading the book with access to copies of *Vogue* at that time would have helped to bring the memos to life.

The memos touch on designers, accessories, color, photo shoots, interviewing and her views about women, but any insights are fleeting. Alexander Vreeland explains in his introduction that the memos are not organized in a linear fashion. Rather, he wanted the book to be “first and foremost a collection of my grandmother’s words, which tend to carry the reader along and pique his or her inner playfulness, creativity, and sense of fashion.”

For magazine historians and researchers interested in the time period and Diana Vreeland’s shaping of *Vogue*, the result is tantalizing, but lacking structure and depth. An index of sorts at the end identifies each person listed in the distribution list of the memos, but the index is without page numbers for easy reference. The glimpse into what Vreeland was thinking and reacting to as she helped shape fashion, culture and the influential magazine is worth a look, but the feeling as one closes the book is much like finishing an issue of a fashion magazine: striking, often beautiful, but ephemeral.