

A Colorful Yarn: Angela Missoni on the Iconic Brand

[Joan Juliet Buck](#)



Her earlobes weighed down by enough charms to fill two bracelets, her hair in a topknot, Angela Missoni is claustrophobic in cities, alive with enthusiasm, lit by clarity. For 20 years the creative director of Missoni, she's turned the family-owned company into a global luxury brand without forfeiting its intimate authenticity. "I'm not looking for perfection," she says, "but harmony."

I've been in thrall to her family from the first time I saw a Missoni pullover in a magazine in 1967. Every possible color was joined into a lacy motif of faintly heraldic points as scalloped as fish scales, as feathered as bird wings. The

colors said everything was possible, the lacy scales suggested that one could transcend human form, the pullover proved that fashion could bend toward joy. I was a goner. I never owned that pullover, but it set off a craving for those patterns, those endless colors. When I grew up and got a job, I saved up for a silky Missoni cardigan at Browns in London, and I can still summon the glow set off by its tiny squares, two shades of turquoise dancing with two shades of red. The day the fashion editor Anna Piaggi introduced me to Tai and Rosita Missoni in 1973 in a London coffee shop, I was at first too mesmerized by live Missonis in Missoni, too fixated on the brown, purple, and turquoise of Tai's sweater, the blue, black, and mauve of Rosita's coat, to register how handsome they were, how warm, how lucid. Tai, a former Olympic athlete, was tall, sparkling, full of folk wisdom and Italian jokes I didn't understand; Rosita, short and beautiful with close-cropped hair, had a gentle way of being bluntly honest.

I moved to Italy as *Women's Wear Daily's* correspondent to get closer to them, and, I admit, to gain admittance to their factory at Sumirago, in the Varese countryside north of Milan, and root around their stockroom, where the magical patterns were folded on shelves in plastic bags stamped this bag is not a toy. I saw the looms that wove space-dyed thread into sunsets, other machines that created intricately varied stitches or raised stripes or wandering clusters of

medallions, and the one that produced the scales and feathers of the original raschel lace. I watched Tai align dots of color into patterns on graph paper, and began to understand the skill that went into such protean magic.

It was no surprise that their house was in the woods next door to the factory, nor that it was full of bright Clarice Cliff pottery, Venetian glass, tribal textiles, jars of rare jams made by friends, modern sculpture, flea market paintings and pottery, bamboo sofas covered in Missoni fabrics and occupied by men in Missoni discussing football and art. On one wall hung a dazzling color wheel executed on a plate, a sample from an old porcelain manufacturer. Rosita swam every day in the pool beneath their terrace, and foraged for mushrooms in the woods below the sloping lawn. I met their three teenagers, Luca and Vittorio, and Angela, a shy 15-year-old, who one evening handed me a gift, a brooch of an iris in smoky mauves and greens.

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Illustration By Iza Kaczmarek-Szurek/Formallina.

Iza Kaczmarek Szurek

In 1975, when their collections earned wild raves from the international press, I asked if they would expand the factory to meet the new demand. "Why do that?" Rosita asked. "What if next season we're not so popular? We're staying just as we are." The friendship anchored my life in Milan; grew and endured, in Varese; in Paris, where Rosita was the only witness to my ghost of the Rue Jacob; in New York, where I sat by an East Village fire pit with Angela; in Los Angeles or Venice, where they loaned me their apartment by the Bridge of Sighs. They gave me blue cardigans to match the color of one man's eyes, and then another's. I still have the white Missoni camisole that started a romance in 1974, the scarves and shawls I shared with my mother, the bright stripes I wore when I edited French *Vogue*, the coats that Rosita took off her back to give me after a lunch, all touchstones.

The children married and had children—three for Luca, three for Vittorio, three for Angela. She'd started helping in the factory at 18 to earn money, and promptly moved out and into a nearby house that Vittorio had just vacated. "I remember thinking when I was 19 that, wherever I landed, I could find a fiancé, so a fiancé from Varese was perfect. My first priority was to become a mother." She married Marco Maccapani, an events producer, and at 24 gave birth to Margherita, then Francesco, then Teresa.

"I was very introverted until I had my children. All that love that you can't keep inside, all of a sudden it's flowing out, and it changes you. That's when I opened up to the world. Everything was related to the well-being of my kids, so I made a playground for the local children, and started an organic chicken farm for a while because I wanted them to have healthy food."

When Angela was pregnant with her youngest, Teresa, she began her own projects for Missoni, particularly children's clothes, and notes that Rosita was impressed that she'd mastered every stage in the process, from color cards on. "I'd been with my parents at every show from the age of 10, observing, observing, observing, and I have a visual memory of everything—clothes, details, a scarf, a button, heels, studs, makeup, hair, accessories." I reminded her of the iris pin she'd given me. "It was from the spring 1974 show at the Hotel Diana in Milan, when we showed volumes that were slightly Poiret."

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In 1997, Rosita handed over the fashion duties to Angela, and turned her attention to MissoniHome. Angela was 38, divorced, tall and voluptuous, with a mane of dark hair and the confident sensuality of a mid-century European movie star—Anna Magnani, Simone Signoret. She introduced tight fits and deep cleavage to bring a bad-girl insouciance to

what had become perceived as clothes for rich intellectuals, and hired Mario Testino, Juergen Teller, and Mert & Marcus for ad campaigns that added heat and a hint of menace to the wholesome Missoni image of family happiness.

"I have a cool head, I never panic; I'm the one with the Band-Aids."

It was a charmed life, until January 2013. Vittorio and his wife were returning from a holiday off the coast of Venezuela when the small plane they were in vanished. Before it was clear what had happened, Tai, who was 92 and in bad health, died. Angela kept everyone going. "I have a cool head, I never panic; I'm the one with the Band-Aids," she says. She also has rare talents: the capacity to be at once intuitive and strategic, run her fashion team, gauge proportions to a millimeter, put her models in pink pussy hats, indulge her appetites for fine art and flea-market kitsch, and still remain the steady hub of a family business, where children, grandchildren, and gardens carry as much daily weight as next season's styles.

At the show that marked her 20 years as Missoni's creative head, the outdoor runway in the courtyard of a former industrial space in Milan felt like a playground, shaded from the September sun by vast striped canopies in pink, turquoise, red, chartreuse, mauve, and aquamarine,

commissioned from an artist Angela had found on Instagram, the American Rachel Hayes.

The rented warehouse was calm before the show, each look planned well beforehand. Angela likes to say, "I have a mathematician's mind." Makeup artists painted the 69 models, girls and boys, as she told a TV crew, "Next year is our 65th anniversary; this show is my 20th-birthday party."

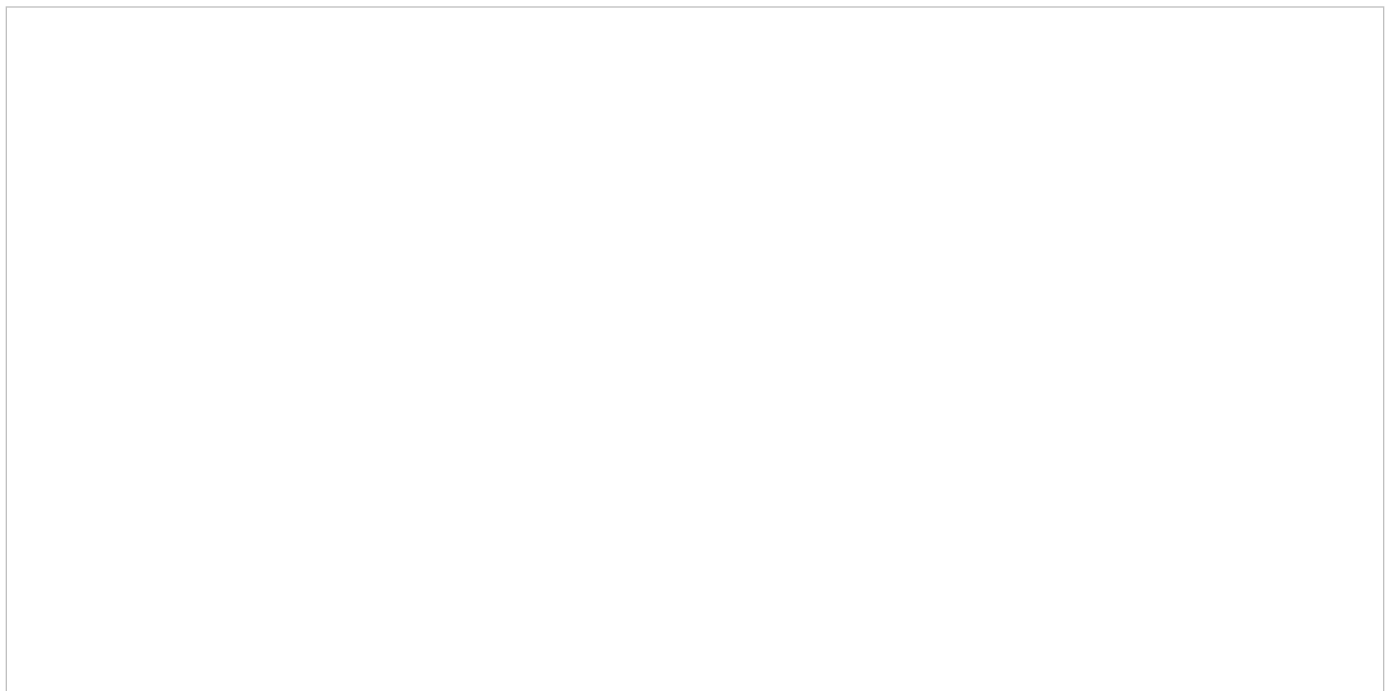
Backstage in the warehouse, her daughter Margherita, who returned from her New York It-girl time to marry Eugenio Amos, a race-car driver from Varese, kept an eye on her boys, Otto, four, and Augusto, two, while Teresa wheeled her six-month-old, Zeno, past a wandering Siberian model in platform sneakers. Angela's brother Luca, the company's historian, was outside with Vittorio's three sons, as Rosita, radiant and vital at almost 86, faced a wall of photographers in her inimitable combination of polka-dotted Missoni sneakers, a black T-shirt painted with white zigzags, and a kimono jacket in blocks of pink, purple, green, yellow, blue, and rust. Chunky colored cubes on her long vintage necklace played off the hues of the coat.

Angela's 20th-anniversary collection for Spring 2018 was as light as a mousse, with raschel lace in shades of sugared almonds, pastel Lurex, floating cloud skirts with bunched hems, and weightless candy-colored court coats. The fashion audience of almost a thousand cheered as Angela

took her victory lap, a plain 15-year-old trench coat of many colors thrown over her black pants.

After the show came a dinner in another barely reconfigured industrial space. And when her 200 friends, her longtime partner, Bruno Ragazzi, and her family had drunk the wine and the amaretto and eaten the Northern Italian feast of squash, porchetta, brasato, and lemon cream puffs, they joined some 700 more guests for a huge party under the Rachel Hayes canopies; the runway had become a dance floor, surrounded by chairs and sofas from Angela's house and Rosita's garden.

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From left: Spring 1998; Fall 2000; Spring 2005; Spring 2013.

Dancing among skinny girls in Lurex and fashion freaks in giant hats, the New York interior designer Ricky Clifton declared: "I'm here because I want to work for Angela. I want to get out of America." His savior, Angela, patrolled the party on sheepdog duty, herding groups, making sure that hosts didn't mislay houseguests, and that everyone had a drink. And then she danced.

"Did you dance all night?" I asked the next day.

"Not all night," she said. "I got a few hours of sleep, because there's a local swap meet that only happens once a month, and I didn't want to miss it—and I found treasures. Wait till you see the Fornasetti box I bought for three euros!"

We were at her house above a sloping meadow in Brunello with a mountain in the distance, down the road from Tai and Rosita's house and the factory. Her daughter Teresa lives behind the hedge with her partner, Giovanni, and baby Zeno. The pool is enclosed in a glass room alive with chirps from birds gathered on a table, the birds battery-driven, street-market plastic. A long table was waiting to be set up for the weekend party to celebrate Zeno's christening, a lunch for 97 adults and 13 children. There would be much talk of sugared almonds.

The house's hard mid-century right angles can barely contain Angela's profusion. Her collection of sculpted hands

spills over the windowsills in her bedroom, which opens onto a terrace covered in wild grasses. The lower steps of the austere elegant new staircase she designed have silted up with books and catalogues.

Her taste ranges from high art to jokes. There's a Kusama in one of the bathrooms; a framed suite of hardware made from green organza by Do Ho Suh; and a neon word portrait of Ragazzi by Tracey Emin that spells out crimson sky the mirror glows i can still love you over the couch, but much of the loot is wonderfully bizarre: Afghani carpets patterned with tanks and automatic weapons, woven plastic flowers, ceramics—ceramic dancers, ceramic baskets, ceramic Bambis, ceramic monsters, a ceramic Godzilla cut into ceramic sushi pieces by a little ceramic girl.

From left: Rosita and Angela in Dalmatia, 1968; Angela with daughter Teresa (left) and models at the Fall 2017 show; At the Spring 2018 show.

Courtesy Missoni/WireImage/Dan & Corina Lecca

She rooted through her fresh swap-meet haul in the laundry room, set aside newly purchased antique dolls ("You clean them when you get them home, take their clothes off, wash them, wipe their bodies") to find—between Madonnas for Teresa, butterflies for Margherita, new Bambi statuettes and a rough metal music box—the 1950s Fornasetti box

decorated with three pipes that had cost all of three euros. It was, I must admit, in very good shape. Before going down into Milan to run through marketing details with her team in the showroom, she crossed the meadow full of dandelions, her white smock billowing, to fill a basket with mushrooms that had been left unpicked under the hornbeams during the collections. Some specimens were as perfect as drawings, the older mushrooms blackened by the wait, but still edible. She knelt by the strawberry patch to show me how she teaches her grandsons to tell them apart.

“The bad strawberries, they’re not poisonous, but you don’t eat them, they’re not good, and you can tell which ones they are because they have their heads up,” she said. “But the good ones—look, they have their heads down.”

Joan Juliet Buck’s memoir, [The Price of Illusion](#), is out in paperback.

This article originally appeared in the December 2017/January 2018 issue of Harper's Bazaar.