

Prue Acton: Youth fashion and the Emergence of the Celebrity Designer Brand, 1964-1972

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*Prue Acton on route for discussions with Hoechst Germany. c.1970. Press Photograph.
Prue Acton Archives, FBTRC.*

Fashion and business entrepreneur Prue Acton established her signature label in the 1960s. She was one of the new wave of designers who, in shaping the new youth fashion market, led the democratisation of fashion and laid the foundations for today's fashion industry.

This case study focuses on the early years of Prue Acton's career from 1964-1972 when she established herself as Australia's leading celebrity designer, in the process converting her young girl's fashion label into a national and international brand enterprise with an annual turnover of around \$6 million. (1) Remarkably Acton and her family built this pioneer fashion brand in the short span of eight years by promoting the idea of the Total Look as the key to the fashion game, designing and producing not only a constantly changing range of clothes but also a wide range of brand extension products including hosiery, underwear and cosmetics. By 1972 Acton was recognised not only as a fashion leader but also an astute businesswoman as evident in the following headline in Melbourne's Sun newspaper: "The Australian Woman as Business Tycoon: Pert and Petty, Prue Acton, fashion and cosmetic leader stands alone as one of the few women who made it to the top of the business ladder in Australia". (2)

Prue Acton is one of the more famous names of the Australian fashion industry. A member of the baby boomer generation Acton was one of the new creative professionals who, emerging in the 1960s, exploited the rhetoric of youth to position their products strategically within the mass media. Together with Norma Tullo and Trent Nathan she was one of the first mainstream 'fashion' designers to create signature collections for an emergent young, middle class, mass market. Acton's and Nathan's arrival as the top young creatives was heralded by the then temple of youth culture *Sportsgirl* in 1966, with the launch of its boutique *Bigi* in which their work featured as cutting edge. Together this generation of young fashion designers would dramatically change the nature of the clothing industry by appropriating the high fashion rhetoric of haute couture and boutique culture to shape the youth fashion market with its own culture, designer labels, boutiques stores and style games.

As the trend setter for youth fashion and culture, Prue Acton was often described by the press as Australia's Mary Quant. (3) Like Quant, who is credited with popularising the 'mod' look in the 1950s and 60s London, Acton was media savvy, launching herself as a celebrity brand in what has to be one of the most astute, public relations exercises in Australian fashion history. From day one, in 1964, when as a 19 year old she launched her business with the help of her mother Gwen, Acton attracted extensive coverage in the daily press, with her 'infectious smile', 'giggle and curly blond hair' becoming the trademark of a promotional rhetoric that positioned her as a leader of youth fashion. (4) The media relished and repeated the story of a girl fresh out of art school (RMIT Textiles) who establishes a business in the centre of the old rag trade district, Flinders Lane, designing and manufacturing clothes that she and her girlfriends want to wear.

Knowing that 'young ladies' of the day did not want to emulate their mothers' lack of fashion, Acton promoted the idea that her designs were for 'young thinking people' who wanted fun clothes to express their personalities and identity. (5) Acton's little A-line 'shift' dresses, hipster skirts, culottes and coats featuring short hemlines, peter pan collars, pretty prints, bold colours, and connotations of cute, modern school/business girl sexuality, were a response to young women's greater freedom of choice in virtually all aspects of their lives including education, employment, travel, sex and marriage. With her mother as her public relations agent, Acton played out these youth identity politics in the press, beginning in the early days when she was strategically photographed as the creative teenager with note pad and pencil sketching ideas, or engrossed working on the floor of her fashion studio.



Prue Acton, young creative, c.1964-5, Photographers unknown, FBTRC Acton Archives.

Playing out the milestones of her life and career in the media spotlight, Acton made fashion and design part of everyday culture; part of what it meant to be a baby boomer. As the media reported, this meant successfully juggling her marriage to fellow designer Mike Treloar, motherhood and home making, and being the liberated business woman who regularly travelled abroad establishing outlets and licensees in New York, Singapore, Japan, London and New Zealand. Greeted by the press on her return from overseas, her predictions about the next fashion trend were quickly reported, drawing attention to the importance of youth fashion to the national economy. Amazingly she was given front page status as a commentator on issues ranging from the plight of the fashion industry to women's liberation and national identity. Always wearing meticulously coordinated and constantly changing looks, with matching everything – outfit, hair style, makeup, shoes, stockings, colours, fabric – she became the personification of both the 1960s ideal Total Look and the young, educated woman's entry into the business sector.

Part of Acton's success was timing, emerging as she did in the 1964-1966 period when British pop culture, Beatlemania, Twiggy, Carnaby Street and boutique culture were at their peak. Australian interest in the 'teenager' market began to surface in the early 1960s amid concern about the decline in clothing purchases as consumers were increasingly spending their disposable income on cars, homes and holidays. The one sector experiencing success was the Young Look fashion market with its speciality stores and boutiques. Statistically the 15-24 year age group was an expanding market, with the potential to grow from 12.9 % of the retail market to 15.5 % by the 1970s, with its female sector being expected to grow by 250% between 1950 and 1970. This group had disposable income to spend on themselves. The catch was that they were resistant to traditional marketing with its focus on department stores and their production of one mass produced summer and winter range a year. (6) Young people wanted constant variety and new types of 'gear' like Acton's mini skirts and hotpants in unheard of colour and fabric combinations that signalled their individuality and rebellion against the conformity of their parents' generation.

Young designers like Acton, knew how to speak for and to the youth market and in driving its development changed the nature of clothing manufacture and retailing. Old timers of the ragtrade accused them of destroying the high fashion industry by encouraging a fun based, 'throw away' attitude to clothing. With the emphasis on the next new look be it mod, military, dolly girl, mini, maxi, vamp, the youth market was based on fast turnover which, as Acton reported in the press, saw British girls buying a new dress every ten days. (7) The obsession with style and look was fostered by the expansion of the youth media as young people had not only their own television programs and music but also their own press in the form of magazines like *Flair* and *GoSet* which kept them up to date with trends. A role of the youth media was to foster a distinctive visual and material language (design) that identified youth as a sub-culture with its own aesthetics, values and rituals.

An astute reader of the market Acton kept a close eye on the media and surrounded herself with a team of young creatives many of whom would, like Jill Clegg (1971-1978) and Rae Ganim (1975-1976), become fashion designers in their own right. (8) With success dependent on being up to the minute, Acton and her staff studied air-freighted overseas magazines for inspiration. They also frequently travelled overseas sending back detailed reports and sketches of the latest styles for fast adaptation into the Acton range. This process ensured that the latest Courreges or youth couture styles would hit the racks in record speed, transformed by Acton to suit Australian tastes. This game of appropriation and adaptation was a widely accepted practice and integral to the internationalisation and democratisation of fashion in the 1960s. For Acton, as an Australian designer developing a significant export market into America and Asia, the process was not about imitation but being a player in the international game of trendsetting.

Acton's creative input within this process of adaptation was manifested primarily through her instinct for what young women would follow, and more importantly through her development of original colour and fabric ranges which she had manufactured locally giving support to the textile and wool industries. The fabric of her 1966 Courreges-inspired dress and coat ensemble for example was a double face reversible 'pure new wool' cheviot- the pale grey side being used for the coat, and the pale camellia pink side for the dress. An artist at heart, Acton was passionate that the key to an Australian fashion vernacular was colour, light, pattern and texture and she infused her garments with these values. As Fraser McEwing, of the trade publication *Ragtrader*, recalled her determined requests for strikingly different, colour combinations raised more than a few eyebrows amongst the old boys of industry who were sure she was doomed to failure. (9)

But by 1966, 21 year old Prue Acton was turning over 350 designs a year and selling an average of 1000 dresses a week through eighty outlets in Australia and New Zealand and was about to launch her label at Lord and Taylor's store in New York. (10) With speed and variety paramount for the youth market she developed a flexible manufacturing and distribution system that could respond

quickly if not instantly to market demand, as for example when hemlines went mini overnight in November 1965 after British celebrity Jean Shrimpton created controversy by appearing mini-skirted at the Melbourne Cup. She also followed the lead of the pioneers of boutique culture, Mary Quant and Barbara Hulanicki the founder of London's *Biba*, opening her own signature store, *Prue and Sue*, in the Block Arcade, Collins Street.

With its fine mosaic floors, vaulted ceilings, decorative coloured glass and extravagant plaster ornament, the Block Arcade had been built in the Victorian era as a tiny homage to Milan's Galleria Vittorio Emmanuele 111. By the 1960s its golden era had long passed. The Block was rundown but it was affordable. It was ideally positioned as other youth fashion entrepreneurs, including Sportsgirl and Mr John and Merivale, were converting the old buildings of Collins Street into a groovy, old world, luxury-in-decay boutiques where young women and men wanted to gather and be seen. With the names of Prue and her sister Sue written in girlish script on its huge Victorian windows, Acton's store sparkled with playful irreverence as its ornate interior, painted white with primary colour ribbon trims, resembled a nursery-room or girl's bedroom. In the manner of youth boutiques, the *Prue and Sue* consumer experience was about play and theatre, about creating a fun scene that welcomed your friends but not your parents, and allowed you to play dress ups while searching for that different look that expressed your individual personality.

Acton's move into retail and merchandising marked an important shift within her business from a label to a brand mentality. The boutique not only demanded the development of a cogent visual identity- store and window display, swing labels, shopping bags, logo, it also offered the opportunity to create a retail experience around the Acton Total Look. Largely the invention of Quant, the Total Look was about brand extension, about offering a whole range of custom designed accessories – underwear, socks, stocking, shoes, knitwear – that could be coordinated with main garments designer gear to create a look. Acton was the first Australian designer to follow Quant's lead, working with manufacturers such as Kayser and Patons to produce a range of accessories including knitwear and 'sleep gear', the colours and patterns of which co-ordinated with her clothing range. Acton's celebrity status carried enormous selling power and joint ventures that showcased her design talent were attractive for manufacturers trying to access the lucrative youth sector. For Acton, these ventures meant her store could become a one stop shopping experience as she offered her customers a total product range that from 1968 included cosmetics and perfume.

Prue Acton's venture into cosmetics was a first for the Australian fashion industry. It was a bold venture to set up a factory and a team of chemists to develop a product and market it, let alone take on the international cosmetic giants like Revlon and Helen Rubinstein. But Acton was an astute businesswoman and understood that young women and the market were looking for something different. Exploiting her gift for colour, she gave them difference with startling new lipstick and eye makeup ranges presented in bold, bright plastic yellow containers that screamed

pop culture. The packaging design with its play of rectangle and square containers encased in shiny yellow and black was radical. With Acton's daisy logo featuring prominently, the packaging and promotional design introduced an entirely new look to cosmetic counters and the advertising pages of women's magazines such as *Woman's Day*, *Women's Weekly*, *Vogue* and *Flair*, and created a new brand presence and identity for Prue Acton.

The move into brand extension and more specifically cosmetics production demanded that Acton make greater use of advertising and design to position her products in the marketplace. Prior to this Acton did not have a strong visual and brand identity in the strict advertising sense of the term. Rather, as her signature logo indicated Prue Acton, the designer, was the brand, the personality and the style. She clearly had given some thought to brand identity when combining the daisy, Picasso's flower of peace, with her open childlike script signature to create a logo that spoke eloquently of youthful simplicity, creativity and hope. But the most significant factor in building her identity as a designer celebrity brand was her media presence. The press loved Acton: she was always news, always a good public interest story. Her mother who was skilled in public relations carefully orchestrated Acton's appearance in the newspapers, fashion and women's magazines, and industry publications, to attract interest in her latest range or business venture. This eliminated the need for expensive advertising. In practice this media exposure worked as an ongoing visual identity campaign that built Acton's brand credibility and recognition, which she astutely reinforced by wearing her daisy logo in a form of pendant, thus directly linking herself with her brand logo. Moreover, when Acton redesigned the daisy into a more formal and geometric logo for cosmetic marketing, the pendant she wore daily changed to reinforce the promotion of her now more mature brand identity and design. This was an unusually smart use of the logo design and public relations in an era when fashion branding and advertising were still in their infancy.



Left: Photographer unknown, Prue Acton, c1968-1970 with Daisy logo pendant. Prue Acton Archive FBTRC.

Right: Prue Acton c.1966. Prue Acton Archive FBTRC.

Acton's move into cosmetics manufacture marked her emergence as a prominent young business woman whose ventures were closely watched by the financial world, especially when she worked her way through financial difficulties to convince the German international corporation Hoechst to take over the production of her cosmetics in 1970-1971. By the early 1970s the press was promoting her as the exemplar of the liberated 'woman who is breaking out and flourishing' in the move to equality. While winning the Australian Wool Board's Lyrebird Awards for her fashion design, Acton was also winning awards for her business acumen, with the International Sales Promotion Executives Association's naming her their Man of the Year in 1970 for her cosmetics enterprise which had seen her sales jump to \$6 million.

Acton did not achieve her success on her own. Her fashion label was originally launched with a gift of 300 pounds from her parents who were both experienced in marketing. As Acton recalled in a 2004 television interview, it was her mother Gwen who was the entrepreneurial driver. She who took Prue's little dresses to New York and knocked on doors and won the contract with Lord and Taylor that saw Prue Acton become the leading youth label in United States of America for 3 years (1966-1969). It was also her mother who supported her father John Acton in establishing the first supermarket in Melbourne. Under her parents leadership, Acton always employed the expert managerial staff, including her father as managing director (1967+), Bettye Harrison (1965+) general manager and marketing director, Leonard Legge, Head of Design (1969-75) and Mick Hull formerly of *Sportscraft* and *Sportsgirl* as business director. (11) Like many creative entrepreneurs, Acton gathered the best creative people around her and provided a training ground for the industry with her high standards and demanding expectations. What stands out about Prue Acton is the dual nature of her talents - her gift for fashion, colour and style and her business acumen.



Left: Prue Acton Window Display, Lord and Taylor. New York. Newspaper Clipping Bound Volume Prue Acton Archive. FBTRC.

Right: "Lord and Taylor loves Prue Acton, unnamed American newspaper, Newspaper Clipping Bound Volume Prue Acton Archive. FBTRC.

Despite rag trade slumps and the deregulation of the industry in the 1970s, Acton grew the company so that in 1982 its estimated worldwide sales amounted to \$11 million. In process she helped change the nature of fashion manufacture and retailing, forcing department stores such as Melbourne's retailing stalwart *Myer* to be more responsive to market diversity and demand, and to open in-store designer boutiques, including one for Prue Acton. As a 'pert and pretty' celebrity designer with an international profile and business standing she helped create the desire and market for quality Australian fashion. Most importantly, she proved that young Australians could be a major fashion force.

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Reference List

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