

# *Leading Ladies*

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By Nancy Honey

*Interviews by Hattie Garlick*

**Wendy Dagworthy:** *Fashion Designer and Head of Fashion and Textiles  
Royal College of Art*

**1950: Born in Gravesend, Kent**

**1972: Opened her own fashion business in London, Wendy**

**Dagworthy Ltd**

**1982: Became director of London Designer Collections**

**1989: Appointed director of the B.A. Fashion course at Central St.  
Martins College**

**1998: Appointed Professor of Fashion at the Royal College of Art  
(RCA)**

**2000: Became Head of the RCA's School of Fashion and Textiles**

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**I don't think fashion and feminism should be enemies.** Coco Chanel was brilliant; she really changed what fashion meant for women: trousers, no frilly clothes, a slightly masculine look that I still love today. It's a look that freed women, really.

**I think the size zero thing does influence girls negatively.** But then some models are naturally thin. And in the end, that's how designers want to show their clothes. There are some larger models, like Sophie Dahl, who are more realistic and still look beautiful. But then she's very slim now, too, isn't she?

**When I was growing up in the sixties, fashion was really exciting.** I came from Gravesend in Kent, and I'd come up to London to visit Biba and Carnaby Street. It was really exciting. London meant anonymity; you could look at clothes and be whoever you wanted to be.

**I fell into making my own clothes as a way of looking different and individual.** It's so much cheaper, now, to experiment by buying things on the high street. When I was growing up, Gravesend had the odd boutique but mostly we'd see clothes in magazines and mock them up ourselves or adapt things we owned.

**I think it's a huge loss that they've stopping teaching sewing in schools now.** We learnt it there when I was growing up, and there's nothing anti-feminist about being able to make your own version of a Vogue pattern. I suppose it comes from the idea that it was old fashioned - that boys were taught woodwork and girls did domestic science. But those were really useful skills. Both sexes should be taught both skills, just like a lot of men can cook now.

**I was twenty-two when I started my own business.** I didn't think about it, it just gradually happened. I'd been making clothes for myself and for friends, and one day the owner of a boutique on the Kings Road, called Countdown, saw my friend in one of my jackets and commented on it. They

ended up putting in an order. Then I started taking a few jackets around the boutiques, made a slightly bigger collection next time, and it just gradually grew.

**I knew nothing about business and I just learnt on the job.** My mother lent me three hundred pounds, and the first bank I went to weren't interested so I moved on to another and they lent me eight hundred more. Maybe I should have planned the whole thing a bit more, but I think if I had, it might have been too daunting. I'm a doer, and I just got on with it.

**The toughest lesson I've learnt is how to run a business.** I tried to do everything myself, when actually I think I should have had a business partner and delegated a little. It's easier said than done because obviously it means putting your faith in someone else. But business brains are different, and yes, I think I could have used a business partner.

**Eventually, we ran out of money in the [1980s] recession and I had to close the business.** I fought the closure for a long time but in the end, when it came, I was relieved. I thought, *what was I so worried about?*

**I think it's always good to be flexible.** I didn't know what I was going to do after my business ended, but things come up. It's best to put a positive spin on the stuff that life throws at you and then let things happen as they come.

**I am a great believer in fate.** I happened to be an external examiner at Saint Martins at the time, and they offered me a job. Again, it just sort of happened naturally. I had a young son and it turned out that teaching was easier than running a business as a mother. There were the long holidays, for one.

**I had to work hard at St Martins,** it was a big course. But I had been travelling so much before – we were showing in Milan then London, then Paris, then New York... Having children brings you down to earth a bit. I loved running the business but it made me ask, *is it worth it?*

**I suppose I do mother my students a bit.** They come with personal problems as well as creative ones. But I'm always trying to encourage them to have confidence in themselves and to do what they really believe in. I have two sons and it's a similar thing, you have to let them go whatever direction they want to go in.

**I suppose I am ambitious.** But not in a pushy way, it's more because I want to do myself justice. For me, it's always been more about job satisfaction and loving what you're doing in the moment than about putting money away in the bank. Though that's always good when you need it.

**I'd advise a young woman who wanted to get into fashion that they should always have a job first.** Work for someone else for a while. You'll learn a lot working for a big company, watching how it's run. And believe in yourself. If you're enjoying what you're doing, it always shows through in the collection.