

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/iris-apfel-is-almost-100-and-as-busy-as-ever-11629518436>

BUSINESS

Iris Apfel Is Almost 100, and as Busy as Ever

Known for her signature glasses, the ‘geriatric starlet’ has her own eyewear line. ‘I’m told that the sunsets from 100 stories up are spectacular.’

By [Suzanne Kapner](#)

Aug. 21, 2021 12:00 am ET

On the eve of her 100th birthday, style icon Iris Apfel is finding new ways to express herself—and, she hopes, to encourage others to do the same.

This year alone, the self-proclaimed “geriatric starlet,” known for her owl glasses, bold colors and oversize jewelry, curated a line of home products for [Lowe’s Cos.](#), teamed with [Etsy Inc.](#) on a selection of her favorite items sold by the online marketplace and is designing eyewear collections for Zenni Optical, part of a four-year-deal with the company.

Why does she continue to work so feverishly? “I want to stay alive,” said Ms. Apfel, who will become a centenarian on Aug. 29, in a recent interview. “If I stopped working, I’d be gone.”

Ms. Apfel started her career as an interior designer when the Cold War was in its infancy. A lifelong acquirer of couture clothes and costume jewelry, gathered from her travels around the world, she launched into stardom at the age of 84, when the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art [held an exhibition](#) featuring items from her vast collection.

Since then, her influence has only grown. She has 1.6 million Instagram followers. [Pinterest](#) boards showcase toddlers dressed as Ms. Apfel for Halloween. In 2018, [Mattel Inc.](#) created an Iris Apfel Barbie, making her the oldest person to have one of the dolls made in her image. For her coming birthday, Bergdorf Goodman will dedicate a window that celebrates her maximalist style.

“More is more and less is a bore,” Ms. Apfel likes to say.

“Her appeal is so cross-generational,” said Marisa Thalberg, the chief brand and marketing officer for Lowe’s. “In a culture that still tends to celebrate youth, there is something remarkable about how Iris’s appeal has intensified in her 90s.”

Ms. Apfel was born in Astoria, Queens. Her father, Samuel Barrel, imported toys, musical instruments and antiques from Germany. Her mother, Sadye Barrel, dropped out of law school when she became pregnant with Ms. Apfel. Ms. Barrel later owned a fashion boutique. Ms. Apfel decided at a young age that if she couldn’t devote herself full-time to motherhood she wouldn’t have children.

“She had tremendous style,” Ms. Apfel said of her mother. “It was during the Depression and there wasn’t much money. I think that’s a good thing sometimes not to have too much money, because you learn how to do things with less.”



Ms. Apfel models part of the eyewear collection she designed for Zenni.

PHOTO: ZENNI

That notion still underpins Ms. Apfel’s fashion philosophy. She’ll pair a couture jacket that she bought at a flea market with bangle bracelets stacked to her elbow. “She looks like a million—but on \$20,” said Linda Fargo, Bergdorf’s senior vice president of the fashion office and store presentation.

“I’m always interested in combining the high with the low,” Ms. Apfel said. “I think that just because people spend a lot of money doesn’t mean that they’re going to be well dressed and elegant.”

As a teenager, Ms. Apfel browsed the Greenwich Village antique shops. In one, she bought her first piece of jewelry—a brooch—for 65 cents. “I just thought it was the cat’s

pajamas,” she said in the 2014 documentary “Iris,” by the filmmaker Albert Maysles. She recalled that she “haggled a little” with the proprietor over the price, something that would become a lifelong habit.

She studied art education at the University of Wisconsin. Determined to become a fashion editor, she took a job as a copy girl at Women’s Wear Daily. She then worked for fashion illustrator Robert Goodman and interior designer Elinor Johnson.



Eye catching: Ms. Apfel with her late husband, Carl Apfel.

PHOTO: IRIS APFEL

In 1950, Ms. Apfel and her husband, Carl Apfel, started Old World Weavers, which sold replicas of historic fabrics. They worked on restoration projects for the White House for nine presidents, starting with Harry Truman. The couple sold the company in 1992, but continued working for it for 13 years after the sale. Carl died in 2015, at age 100.

The Met show created an avalanche of public attention for Ms. Apfel. “People kept telling me I was an overnight sensation,” Ms. Apfel wrote in her 2018 book, “Iris Apfel: Accidental Icon.” “ ‘You’re right,’ I would reply. ‘Except my overnight was seventy years!’ ”

Brands from MAC Cosmetics to HSN came calling. Known for her indefatigable work ethic, Ms. Apfel once joined an HSN show by phone from her hospital bed, a day after having hip surgery. She doesn’t have an entourage. Until recently, she said, she negotiated all her deals herself. At age 97, she finally got an agent, signing with talent management agency IMG. She is now represented by Artist & Brand Management.

“She’s a total workhorse,” said Michelle Ticknor, the head of lifestyle partnerships for Zenni, the eyewear company. “It would be 9 p.m. and we’d say ‘we’re good,’ and she’d say: ‘No, let’s keep going. Let’s get this done.’ ”



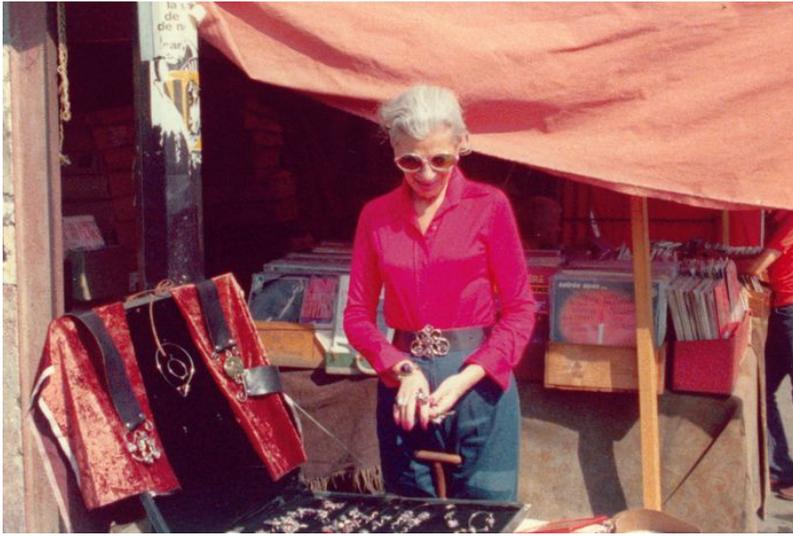
Items from Ms. Apfel’s home-decor collection for Lowe’s
PHOTO: LOWE’S COMPANIES|, INC.

The work helped Ms. Apfel get through the height of the pandemic, when she was holed up in her Palm Beach, Fla., apartment. (She also has an apartment in Manhattan.) Before she set about designing frames herself for Zenni, she curated 100 pairs of glasses from the company’s existing collection, which went on sale May 5. Ms. Ticknor said that once the glasses were packaged into an “Iris edit” sales increased 25% compared with the same period a year ago.

The “Iris Apfel Zentennial Collection” that Ms. Apfel designed from scratch comprises 12 frames and will go on sale Aug. 24. Ms Apfel also designed the accompanying cases and cloth cleaners that will be sold separately. The frames will sell for \$45.95 to \$49.95, compared with \$6.95 to \$35.95 for Zenni’s regular line.

The next eyeglass collection will go on sale for the holiday season. Ms. Apfel is Jewish, but she loves Christmas. “Her home is filled with holiday décor all year round,” Ms. Ticknor said.

Ms. Apfel's love of glasses started long before she needed to wear them. As a young girl, she collected frames that she found at flea markets or yard sales. Then she started wearing them without lenses as a fashion accessory.



Thanks to Ms. Apfel's flea-market habit, according to a Bergdorf executive, 'she looks like a million—but on \$20.'

PHOTO: IRIS APFEL

"People thought I was a little cuckoo, which maybe I was, but it was the beginning of it all," she said. "I still believe that glasses can change your entire look, your mood, your personality. You can express some originality. People are so much the same today. I think it's awful. I think God made everybody so different. And why everybody wants to look alike, I cannot imagine."

"She represents what many of us aspire to," said Ms. Thalberg of Lowe's. "Age doesn't become a barrier to living life in full color in a funky, cool individualistic way."

Ms. Apfel still has a few projects on her wish list. One is to work with Levi Strauss & Co.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What do you view as essential for a long and satisfying life? Join the conversation below.

She was one of the first women to start wearing jeans as a fashion statement back in the 1940s. When she went to buy her first pair at an Army-Navy store, the shopkeeper told her he had nothing that would fit her, adding that young ladies don't wear jeans. She returned to the store regularly for several weeks, pleading with him to size down a larger pair. He

finally relented and ordered her a pair of boys' jeans. "When I want something," she said, "I'm like a dog with a bone."

Ms. Apfel plans to celebrate her birthday at the 131-story Central Park Tower in Manhattan. The festivities will start in the lobby and progress to the 100th floor, where there is a private restaurant. "I'm told that the sunsets from 100 stories up are spectacular," Ms. Apfel said.

Write to Suzanne Kapner at Suzanne.Kapner@wsj.com

Copyright © 2021 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.