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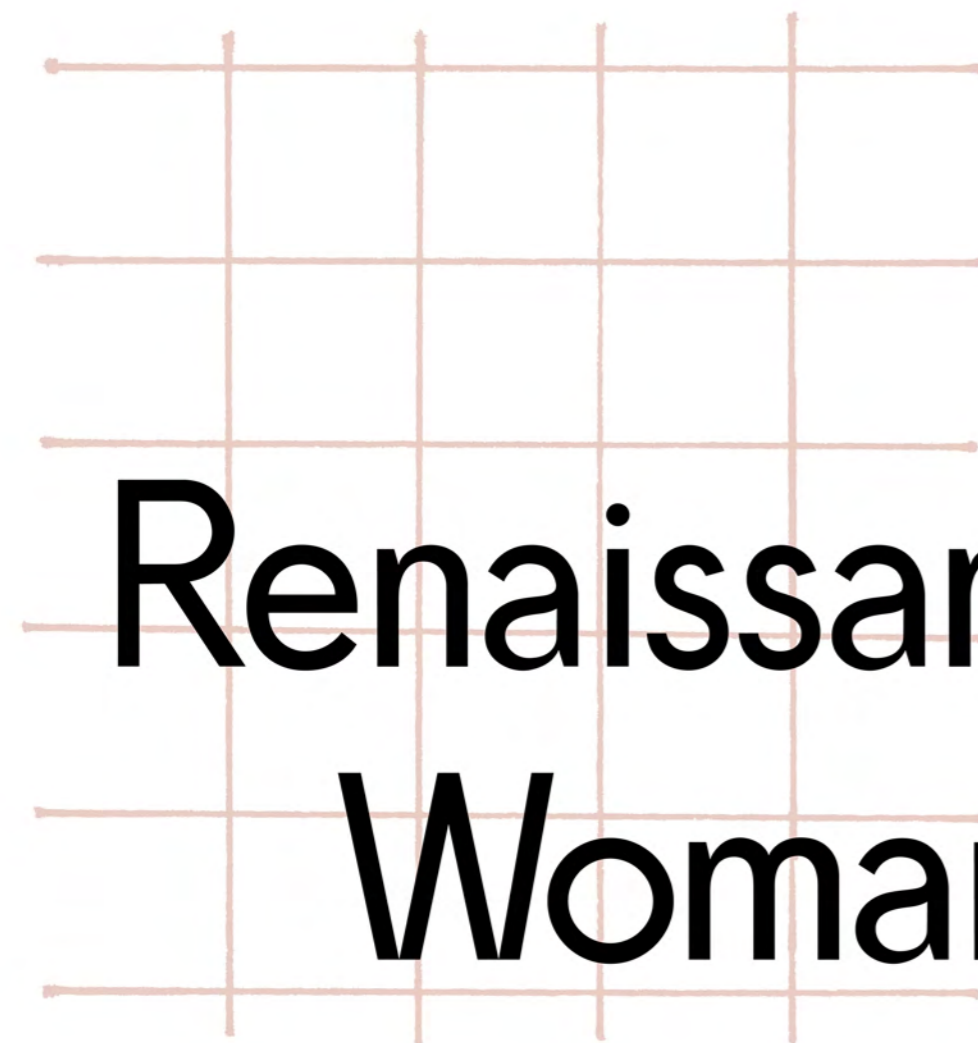


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Renaissance Woman

PHOTOGRAPHER: ALASDAIR MCLELLAN



Astute, ambitious, and admirably frank –
there's only one Sophie Hicks

WORDS: OSMAN AHMED

“Cold but warm,” is how stylist-turned-architect Sophie Hicks describes her taste in buildings. It’s an apt reflection that also applies to the woman herself. On one hand, her scalpel-sharp cheekbones and glacial blue eyes give her a refined but resolute quality – further heightened by her ice-white office space and predilection for androgynous tailoring. In person, however, Hicks couldn’t be warmer, wittier or more inclined to pep up our conversation with amusing anecdotes.

Based in West London’s Notting Hill, Hicks has enjoyed more than a few lives. To date, she’s held prestigious roles at *Tatler* and British *Vogue*; had a brief dalliance as a model; acted in a Fellini film; and become an in-house stylist for Azzedine Alaïa. Not to mention launched an architectural practice that creates intuitive modern spaces for fashion pioneers such as Yohji Yamamoto, Paul Smith, and Phoebe Philo, all while raising three children. The list really does go on.

Today, Hicks works in an office that is adjoined to her home in a Notting Hill mews. It’s notably quiet and she’s joined by her business partner Tom Hopes. Her desk is stacked with folders, paperwork, and parts of small architectural models. “At one point there were about 25 people in here,” she says. “We were doing about 25 stores a season, churning them out.” These days, she’s her own boss, working on her own projects.

But that’s been a long time coming. Hicks kick-started her career by working as a fashion assistant at *Harper’s Bazaar* and *Vogue*. For the latter, she assisted the legendary Grace Coddington, who taught her about the art of refinement and how to edit. She took to styling like a duck to water and soon became a fashion editor herself – first at *Tatler* and then *Vogue*, which she remembers fondly. “It was before the advertisers had so much clout, when editorial was

strictly editorial in the big magazines. When I was working at *Vogue*, you weren’t obliged to shoot the clothes of various designers just because they advertised. Whereas, when Anna Wintour arrived, it was, ‘They take ten pages – you shoot an outfit’ and that changed everything.”

She regularly worked with visionary photographers such as Arthur Elgort, Paolo Roversi, Bruce Weber, and David Bailey, and travelled as far as South America, Oceania, India and North Africa. “They should have done *Carry On Fashion* because it would be hilarious,” she says, recalling the moment she had to herd grumpy models across deserts. “When I was working at *Vogue*, I used to think, ‘I must write a diary. There’s so much humour here,’ but I never did.”

At one point, a surreal encounter in Rome led to an acting opportunity in Federico Fellini’s fictional 1986 documentary film *Intervista*. “I had gone to him to ask if I could assist,” she explains. “And then he told me that I should be in the film.” This experience was promptly followed by a phone call from none other than Azzedine Alaïa, who asked Hicks to come and work for him. So, she parted ways with *Vogue* and jumped on the first plane to Paris to help the designer create a book of fashion photography featuring his archive. It was around that time that Alaïa had taken a young Naomi Campbell under his wing, which meant that both Hicks and Campbell lived with him. “We would sleep on mattresses on the first floor, which was meant to be some kind of small sitting room but was in fact a room for racks of clothes,” says Hicks. “It was incredibly exciting; we’d have dinners in the kitchen every night.”

The shoots were spontaneous and Alaïa was always involved, but never imposing – Hicks remembers watching Arthur Elgort photograph models on the snow-lined streets of Paris, dressed in Alaïa. Looking at those pictures, what stands out is the diversity











of the models, many of whom are women of colour. "He felt very strongly that all the girls of colour should be given a chance," she notes. "Also, his clothes were all about bodies, so it would be crazy if he shunned [models of colour] for the pear-shaped white girls. Obviously not – he'd go for the sporty Americans and the sexy black girls who had incredible figures and could walk like anything."

A few years later, after exiting the fashion world, Hicks styled a Paul Smith show and was surprised to see the change in the industry. "When I saw the models walk, I thought, what is wrong with them? I'd been used to models with character enhancing the clothes and making a statement. These girls walked like robots and they did a very strange high-stepped walk." It was a signifier of a different era. "Fashion shows used to be really uplifting. They'd raise the hairs on the back of your neck – Jean Paul Gaultier's shows were unbelievable. They had timing, they had momentum, they communicated with the audience. Models spoke with their eyes – now they're all like zombies."

When, at the tender age of 26, she realised that fashion had already come full circle since she first started out, Hicks knew it was time for a change. She had met her husband-to-be, Roddy Campbell, and wanted to spend more time in London. So, she dialled up the Architectural Association School of Architecture and secured an interview – only to turn up in head-to-toe Alaïa without a portfolio. Instead, she came armed with her fashion week sketchbooks, which were filled with quick impressions of runway looks. "You can only imagine when I said, 'Well, I'm terribly sorry, I don't have a portfolio. This was Versace last spring, and that's Iman's outfit. I know it's only sketches but you have to do them very fast, because the girls walk so quickly!'"

As a student with bags more life experience than the rest of the class, Hicks quickly learnt to be discreet. Her tailored Alaïa uniform was cast aside, to say the least. "I was like their mother," she roars. "Even though I was only seven years older – at that age, it's a huge difference." She also embarked on projects (and nurtured several pregnancies) while still studying, designing exhibitions for the Royal Academy and picking up other jobs along the way. "It was really tough, actually, but when you're offered jobs, and you can't really turn them down – you don't. What was not fine for me was knowing that I couldn't really admit when I had a client. You couldn't really admit that you had a three-week-old baby at home, which you had to run home to breast feed."

Hicks speaks candidly about the gender imbalance in the architectural world, pointing out that you can count the number of female 'starchitects' on one hand. "It's very hard to get commissions as a woman architect, certainly to do a new build," she says. "The vast

majority of architects and property developers are men and they all work together. There is a bias against women in architecture. We're wrongly perceived as not being able to do it or something. I've been very lucky, because I have my connection with fashion."

This connection has proved particularly useful when working with designers to develop their retail spaces. "They know I understand," she says matter-of-factly. "Whereas if you take an architect that doesn't understand fashion, it's a risk. I speak their language and they can talk in shorthand and know that I'll get it. I know them, I know their character, and their thoughts without having to be told." When tasked with designing Yohji Yamamoto's flagship in Paris, for example, Hicks knew exactly what he would want – she had already attended his runway shows.

After a significant pause, she expands on her earlier comments about the gender imbalance within architecture. She adds, "I also want to say that women are really suited to architecture, because they are so good at seeing a project from all sides, from all angles. Architecture is partly artistic, partly business, and partly technical, and you have to marry all of those things. In my experience, women are quite good at doing all of that."

As a woman in a man's world, Hicks favours an androgynous look. She began wearing her signature two-piece suits on 29th July 1981 – the day when HRH The Prince of Wales married Lady Diana Spencer. A friend of Hicks' had a press pass to cover the wedding as a journalist and she immediately offered to drive him. "I borrowed a grey flannel two-piece suit from a friend and a chauffeur's cap from a friend of a friend, and so I drove him there and it was such fun," she recalls. Later on, during various celebratory parties, her look gained more compliments than she could count. "I thought, 'This is so much more successful!'" It also helped in the office at *Vogue*, which was predominantly staffed by women who treated dressing as a competition. "It was much easier to go in a man's suit," she says smiling.

Right now, Hicks is on a one-woman mission to design and craft modern buildings in her native borough of Kensington and Chelsea. "When you look around, there are almost no contemporary-looking buildings that are visible from the street," she says. "I think it will take a long time for the attitude to change. The government is trying to change the planning policy, but it's very difficult when people on the planning committee are elected by residents, who tend not to want any change whatsoever." Having bought land in both Holland Park and Earl's Court, Hicks has been battling the local nimbys to obtain the permission she needs. "It is hard," she sighs. "But that's my goal."

If her track record is anything to go by, it certainly won't be the last.