

*Past and Present: The Constant
Influences on My Life*

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Over the years I have faced many adversities, mainly due to familial dilemmas. There are discrepancies in my memory and my ideas of family members have changed and shifted. Despite the inconsistencies, a constant in my life has always been fashion. For example, I might not be able to tell you who I was within a specific memory, but I can without a doubt tell you what I was wearing. I love fashion and don't really know who I would be without it. So, what if I had never cultivated my love for fashion? I largely attribute my love of fashion to my past experiences; I would not have been searching so hard for something to love if love was always given to me. I have begun to question how our past experiences shape our present passions and who and where we would be in this world without these experiences. My life is not the only example of how past experiences affect present passions. Fashion designer Hussein Chalayan, renowned painters Frida Kahlo and Hung Liu, and Grace Coddington, the creative director of *Vogue US* have all followed their passions based on what they experienced in their pasts. Everyone's present passions, good or bad, can be traced back to their past experiences.

Hussein Chalayan is one of the fashion industry's most innovative designers who continually produces collections more diverse than the former. According to *Vogue UK*, Chalayan's collections are often deemed "not commercially viable;" this is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the criticism he receives. Because of his avant-garde approach to fashion, Chalayan has been penalized when attempting to collaborate with more marketable designers, like Tom Ford. At age eight, Chalayan and his family were forced to move to the UK because of cultural conflict and ethnic cleansing in Cyprus. He later studied at the Warwickshire College of Arts and graduated the same year as Alexander McQueen. Upon being asked how his cultural background and past have translated into his work, Chalayan responded; "My work reflects a relationship between rural and urban culture, movements of people and the ideas of migration, anthropology, history, cultural prejudice, a relationship with earth. My work is a constant state of discourse" (Chalayan 1). A collection of his work that effectively demonstrates this is titled, "The Tangent Flows" (pictured on the right) Chalayan buried silk dresses in his garden and then dug them up again, high end fashion retailer Browns bought up the collection in its entirety (*Vogue UK*). This collection is raw; it documents a time in Chalayan's career when everything became connected. His past experiences with conflict and destruction are exemplified and embodied in these silk dresses which also portray his future experimental intentions in the fashion industry. Diversity can be experienced in many ways; Chalayan experienced a multitude of cultures growing up which influence his design process. Whereas I too have experienced many different types of influential people in my life.





It was my best friend Laura's thirteenth birthday party; you could tell who was or was not invested in fashion by what they were wearing. I stood out from the crowd in my yellow spaghetti strap sundress—with black lace tights, a leather jacket, black ankle booties and a gaudy layered necklace. Laura wore a glamorous dress that rested just above the knee, pink, ruffled and sparkling like fireflies sometimes do on hot summer nights like these. I looked around the cozy, suburban home at the other girls' outfits. They were also dressed in similar style to Laura. Not a single person, other than myself, had taken a fashion risk. Instead, they fully committed to dressing in something sweet, stylish, and girly. I have always reached out to a

diverse group of people, all of whom have varying ways of dress. A few hours prior to this party, I had been with my other friends who dressed edgier than Laura's sweet style. I loved the idea of mixing the sweet dresses some of my friends wore with the leather my other friends styled so coherently. I could never make the commitment to their thoroughly skimpy and edgy style. But I also couldn't fully commit to Laura's sweet and sparkly style. Having such a multitude of friends gave me so many outfit ideas to draw from. As we grew together, our styles did the same. I never fully fit in with everyone. I like the idea of collecting people, friends who truly reflect me. This diversity in style has always been beneficial in my life, and despite the drawbacks or conflicts surrounding such a myriad of people, I have drawn from these infrequent interests and created my own style, much like artists do with their work.

For some artists, like Frida Kahlo and Hung Liu, their most traumatic experiences serve as the primary fuel for their art. I first learned about Kahlo at age twelve when watching Julie Taymor's 2002 film, *Frida*. Kahlo was born in Coayacan Mexico and she met her husband, Diego Rivera, when she was a student at Escuela Nacional Preparatoria School. Kahlo suffered a miscarriage early on in her marriage and being a candid painter, channeled these feelings into many self-portraits. In part because of these tragedies, Kahlo had a troubling marriage that was filled with infidelity. This ultimately led to her divorce in 1939. A specific piece of art which reflects this time in her life is the painting, The Two Fridas (pictured on the left) which is assumed to be a reflection of her feelings. Many of Kahlo's experiences were translated into paintings. For example, during her marriage Kahlo painted a Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States in 1932. This work was created when Rivera was commissioned to paint a mural in New York and Kahlo was torn between traveling with Rivera or remaining in Mexico (PBS). All of these experiences heavily attributed to the quality, ideas, and feelings being conveyed in Kahlo's work. Recognizing and experiencing Kahlo's work as a reflection of her past has allowed me to look at my past experiences in a similar way. I can now use my personal history to look inward and from these events I can create art.

Another artist who conveys their past experiences through painting is Hung Liu. Born in Changchung, Manchuria in 1948 during the Chinese communist revolution, Liu earned her way into a renowned school in Beijing. However, she was forced to leave and work in the fields due to the Revolution. Liu eventually found her way back into academia and graduated as a mural

painter. Liu is often referred to as a “social realistic artist;” this is essentially a realistic depiction of contemporary life as a social and political commentary through art (Learner). Liu fell in love with taking photographs of prostitutes for, “the photos mixed documentary truth with the artificiality of the pose, and Liu was fascinated by the questions of freedom and constraint that the images provoked” (Learner 1). Eventually, Chinese history became the essence of her work, with the 1949 propaganda film, *Daughters of China* serving as a basis for most of her paintings. Liu feels that the film exemplifies; “the revolutionary sincerity which permeated her childhood” (Liu 1). Liu and Kahlo both experienced tragedy in their lives, but rather than dwell on the past, they create new art from it. By drawing inspiration from these experiences, they fully form their present beings. For some, massive life-events such as political conflict or near death experiences define their emotional strife. For me, it is the build-up of several benign experiences that create intense emotions surrounding certain events; specifically, family gatherings.

Every year before Christmas, each of my grandmas would take me shopping to buy a new Christmas dress; I could never wear the same dress to each event because both parents wanted to feel special and independent. They wanted me to get used to the idea that Christmas was separate and having photos of us in the same outfits at different events was not an option. Grandma Linda takes my sister and me shopping for new Christmas dresses. She says it’s our tradition. The fluorescent lighting makes me look pale as I try on dress after dress and eventually I choose a black velvet, pilgrim styled dress, complete with an underlying silver shimmer, white faux-fur cuffs around each sleeve, matching shimmery tights, and chunky silver heels. At the Carry family Christmas party, guilt begins to sink in before I even open the giant white door leading into a distant relative’s house. I am soon overwhelmed with questions like, “Hey, Liv where have you been lately?” “How is your mother? You look and sound so much like her,” and the worst question, “Why don’t you come around more?” I choke on bites of my decadent hot-dish as I blurt out apologetic, monotone responses. The Carry side of my family is composed of mostly small-town people, convinced everyone should want to live in the same state and town, forever doing the same job, because that’s how it should be. In order to show their love, my relatives give us gift after gift. But the worst part was doing it all again the next weekend. Fast forward a week and it is the Murphy family Christmas. I am in Grandma Trish’s warm kitchen, helping myself to a second serving of pie, ignoring the Holy Trinity’s occurring around me. I make my way to the Heat-N-Glow electric fireplace, watching my gold, maroon, taupe and tulle Christmas dress swish back and forth. The dress itches progressively with every step I take. At this age, I dress for two things: to please others and to blend in. I want to make everyone happy, but because my parents’ divorce was the epicenter of my life, I can only achieve this by dressing the way others want me to. I always felt there was never another option, no third choice. I had to blend, because if I stood out I feared that both sides of my family would feel I didn’t belong with them. Now, I strive to contrast; I hate the idea of conformity. I dress beautifully for the Carry’s because I need to prove to them I will not be stuck simply existing like they do; I want to become someone. I dress more rebellious for the Murphy side of my family; I can’t deal with the hyper-Catholic ideologies that diffuse seamlessly into every conversation. Ultimately, I hope to become successful and different from my family members. In order to be influential I am beginning to understand that one must find who she is and if one stays true to this no matter the condition, she will find success. I hope to one day find this success in the fashion industry, like one of my personal idols, Grace Coddington.

Coddington's humble beginnings and dreamy childhood has largely attributed to why she is currently one of the most influential and successful women in fashion. Coddington had a unique childhood and grew up in Whales at a family-owned inn. She spent her early days, sailing, daydreaming, and flipping through as many *Vogue's* as she could get her hands on. Coddington rarely went shopping, as her mother always sewed dresses for her. Because of this, fashion had a certain unattainable feel to it as she grew up in such a rural setting (Coddington). Coddington entered the fashion industry when she submitted a photo to *Vogue UK* and won a modeling competition. She moved to London to begin a career in modeling. Currently, Coddington is the creative director of *Vogue US* and has been since 1988. Many of the outfits she styles for fashion shoots can be traced back to her imaginative childhood. Her most notable shoot is one where she recreated Lewis Carroll's, *Alice in Wonderland* (pictured on the right). It is such a whimsical book, which fits in perfectly with the theme of her capricious childhood experiences. Coddington has been involved in creating some of the most essential decades in fashion. Fashion has certain predictability to it, we draw from past trends. Some trends succeed and have the potential to be reinvented, while others fail. Coddington has an "instinct for the next thing" due to her experience with past trends in the industry (Voguepedia). I have found much inspiration from Coddington's career in fashion. I believe it underscores the fact that in the fashion industry, you need to stand by what you believe in because otherwise you lose your ideas and join the masses. After learning about Coddington's fashion career I began to style in a new light and became locally inspired by the women in my immediate life.



I walk into the warm, clean smelling salon like I own the place, making my way to the back to set up my homework while mom finishes with her last client. I watch as the pretty women walk in and out of the breakroom, eating their quinoa this and kale that. They all dress differently, experimenting with color, print, style, and size. They know how to make themselves look good, how to dress for themselves while still pushing the boundaries of fashion. I have taken on the eclectic style of my mom and her co-workers, the sparkly style of my aunt, and the outgoing style of the editorials in teen vogue that have plastered my bedroom walls since I was ten. It is from these women that I entered the world of fashion. I had never heard of brands like "H&M," "Forever21," and "Nordstroms" until I began asking questions about where they got their clothing. I was always a stylish child, thanks to my mother, but I have begun to find clothing for myself. Which brands do I align with? How can I experiment? I made many mistakes before I began to find my own style. I make a lot of mistakes still, but I learn and adapt, sometimes they are the source of my best outfits. Influence from women in my life has helped me to learn more about myself, where I align on the spectrum, who I am, and what I want to eventually achieve. Finding my style has been challenging mostly due to the unpleasant dress code I have been forced to abide by during most of my schooling.

Until high school, I never really experienced a teacher who made me feel good about myself and what I was learning; they were all too stern and restricting by not encouraging me to be myself. The year was 2007 and undershirts (tank tops in a range of bright colors that “pop out” against the bland navy, white, and red uniforms) were all the rage. We sit in stiff navy plastic chairs during morning meeting, most of us looking vacantly past the teachers to the clock, counting the seconds until lunch. Ms. Bond looks at the girls with a harsh eye, telling us we are not allowed to wear undershirts because they are not in the dress code and do not follow the parameters of our uniforms. Ms. Bond likes sameness, she teaches grammar, she has a wrinkly face but no laugh lines. She doesn’t like it much when girls wear pants instead of skirts either. In lower school, the largest message conveyed to us is that sameness is good. In middle school, they take away the uniforms we wore for the first five years of our schooling and tell us to find who we are. But nobody knows, because we experiment with clothing at a later age than most other children do. I hate uniforms, the stiff skirts and financial burden of buying new ones every year. They drain personality, I never felt like myself when wearing one. Shoes were even restricted; we were only allowed Ugg boots, mary janes, or tennis shoes. They restricted who we were and who we wanted to become. How is someone supposed to focus on their future when they don’t even know who they are?

Past experiences may not always be enjoyable, but they create our present personalities and passions. Upon exploring the histories of others, I am beginning to think that our passions lay where they do because we have a need to fulfill ourselves. When something holds us back, like an accident, we can cope by doing things that makes us happy, whether that happiness resides in fashion or art making. However, sometimes past experiences can leave us with a poor impression of something due to the conditions under which the experience occurred; therefore affecting what we love in the future. Through past experiences we find out what we love and what we dislike. Ultimately, our past likes and dislikes affect what we love presently. We make the best of situations, pursuing our passions and what makes us happy. Hussein Chalayan and Hung Liu turned their histories with cultural and political conflict into the study of culture and diversity. This translated into Hung Liu’s beautiful paintings and Hussein Chalayan’s avant-garde, fashion collections. We are all driven by different forces to evolve and love new things. Like Grace Coddington, the mystery of fashion drove her to want it and she has gone on to become one of the most influential women in fashion. Because of the diversity of the human condition, I have come to the understanding that past is just as essential as present. We are who we are because of who we once were.

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