



**Beyond Biba**  
Barbara Hulanicki, now 75,  
in her studio in Miami, where  
she styles everything from  
homeware to swanky hotels

# The brand that fell to Earth

For an all too short time Biba was *the* star-bright, must-have brand in the UK, before crashing spectacularly in 1975. Its creator, **Barbara Hulanicki**, reveals the inside story of the iconic label as a major exhibition starts coming together. Could your Biba piece be there too?

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WO SEMINAL TEEN EXPERIENCES: buying my first LP – David Bowie's *Hunky Dory* – and daring to shop at Biba, that impossibly hip boutique in High Street Kensington. This was the early Seventies and the T-shirt has long since worn out, but, even now, I find I sometimes wear it in my dreams. Made from soft brown cotton, it was a perfect cut; so flattering, with a wide scoop neck, long flared sleeves that came tight to the wrist and the row of little buttons all the way down the front. I had never owned anything so lovely.

'That was made in a factory in Leicester that used to make underwear and long Johns,' says Barbara Hulanicki, founder of Biba, on the phone from Miami where she runs her design studio. I had been not a little nervy about this interview. I picture her in statutory black tailored trouser suit with that famously sharp blonde fringe and had it in my head that she was going to be brusque, someone not to suffer fools. How could you not, given the life she's lived?

BARBARA LAUNCHED THE FIRST mail-order youth fashion catalogue in Britain in 1963, enabling girls everywhere to buy clothes that until then could be found only in London. She started Biba in 1964, the coolest, grooviest, sexiest clothes shop the world had – and, perhaps without exaggeration, has – ever seen. Mick Jagger came to ogle the panda-eyed girls, the décor was dark, decadent and delicious, the goings-on were legendary and the clothes so hip it hurt. She came up with the smoky



**'We were designing for just one type, the wonderful English girl with pale white skin and long, long legs'**

**The hip parade**  
From left: Biba began with a gingham dress featured in the *Daily Mirror*; the first shop, London, 1964; trademark skinny tailoring in Biba's mail-order catalogue. Below: Barbara at home with husband Fitz

business types, to put it mildly, but they were very much of their era. The point about Biba, she wrote in her autobiography *From A to Biba* (V&A Publishing, £8.99), was making beautiful clothes as affordable as possible. It was never about profit. They started selling from home, turning their bedroom into a changing room. Three shops followed. Then, in 1972, they opened the vast Biba department store in the old seven-storey Derry & Toms building in Kensington.

THE COUPLE TRANSFORMED THIS ART DECO CAVERN into a kind of hippy Harrods that sold everything from leopard-print underpants to dog food. Penguins and flamingos wandered the famous roof gardens where Tony Curtis came for tea. The Rainbow Room was the place to eat (and be seen eating) and the outrageous New York Dolls made their UK debut there in November 1973. To cut a long story very short, in 1975 Biba went bust because it expanded too quickly, had to sell

kohl and neon lipstick Biba make-up range that defined the era.

Then, in 1975, she went magnificently bust, closed the store and threw all the Biba memorabilia (or at least most of it) off a mountain in Brazil, before reinventing herself as a commercial hotel and club designer in Miami – Ronnie Wood and Gloria Estefan are clients. Not bad for a Polish-born refugee who arrived in England in 1948 following the assassination of her father, the Polish Consul General in Palestine.

This autumn, Barbara, who grew up in Brighton, will be the subject of a major exhibition in the city. Yet, here she is, clearly thrilled by her newly awarded OBE for services to fashion, and not snubbing my fashion moment. Rather, she seems

touched by my loyalty to a simple cotton top. After all these years, she remembers the jibes she used to get at parties: 'Everybody was so rude at the time. People would complain about some button falling off.'

In the past couple of years she's had a solo show of her illustrations, overseen projects on two private residences, designed collections for an international homeware business and the women's fashion for George at Asda. Next year there's another hotel project. All this at 75.

'I'm very fast-paced,' she laughs. 'It's the Polish gene.' Only shingles prevented her taking up a recent request to teach illustration in Poland.

Barbara and her late husband and business partner Fitz (Stephen Fitz-Simon) were not typical

### Barbara's fashion rules

- 'There are two types of clothes. Clothes for other people and clothes for yourself. Just because something looks good on someone else doesn't mean you've got to wear it. The sooner you learn that the better.'
- 'Most people suit certain colours and they should stick with them. Fashion changes all the time, but ignore other colours.'
- 'If you have great legs, wear fabulous tights and fabulous shoes. If you don't, wear boots.'
- 'Older people make the terrible mistake of buying clothes only for an occasion. You should buy clothes when you find something that speaks to you (assuming you can afford it) and then find an occasion to wear it.'





< 75% of its shares and lost control of the business.

But the early days were a ball. Top photographer Helmut Newton and models such as Stephanie Farrow (younger sister of Mia) worked for nothing and you never knew who might drop by, from Brigitte Bardot to Princess Anne, all attracted by the sheer glamour of the clothes.

'We were so lucky,' Barbara says. 'We were designing for just one type, the wonderful English girl with pale white skin and long, long legs.' And she cut the clothes to accentuate that elegance.

'I'm very short everywhere,' she explains. 'Short arms, short legs. When I design I try to make people look very long and skinny. I cut the sleeves high and the legs very long. We spent hours fitting and refitting.'

AND IT SHOWS. Everyone who ever owned a piece of Biba goes dewy-eyed at the recollection. 'It's amazing,' says Martin Pel, curator of the forthcoming exhibition. 'They all become so passionate. These were special clothes. Look at this.' He produces a fake fur-trimmed jacket with Hulanicki's hallmark long arms and skinny torso. Unlike a couture item, it's not lined, which kept prices down, but the seams are perfect. This is the magic that made women feel and look so special.

I comment on Barbara's famously all-black outfits. 'You should have seen me this morning. In Miami you can slob around in T-shirts. But I crisp up when I go to London. I have various well-tried jackets that cover a multitude of sins.' If she weren't in the fashion business, she says she would dress like a hippy.

What look inspires her now? Street fashion, she replies. 'Runway fashion is an art form, a visual excitement for the bored fashion press. It's very exotic and the girls are so skinny they look good in any old thing, and these days it is any old thing – but it's disastrous for the public. It has terrified them back to T-shirts.' ◆

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Biba and Beyond: Barbara Hulanicki at Brighton Museum & Art Gallery, Sept 22, 2012–Apr 14, 2013 (03000 290900; [brighton-hove-museums.org.uk](http://brighton-hove-museums.org.uk))

## Two BIBA wedding moments remembered

**Margaret Howe**, retired teacher and company secretary, wore Biba at her wedding in Grimsby, 1969

'I first saw my wedding dress (below) on the cover of *The Telegraph Magazine* and straight away rang up and ordered it. I think it cost six guineas, which was relatively cheap even then. It was beautifully made and fitted me perfectly though I had to make a full-length undergarment as it was completely see through.

'I insisted on wearing a cameo at the neck like the model in the magazine. My husband

**Jill Richter**, writer and artist, married in London, 1965

'I wore a Biba jumpsuit (below) at my wedding to Daniel Richter, an American mime artist who later played the lead ape man in *2001 A Space Odyssey*. He also worked with John and Yoko and directed the *Imagine* video.

'We were living in London and, one day, as we were walking past Harrods, we saw a girl wearing a black trouser suit with tiny flowers on it, so I went up and asked her where she had got it. I went round to Barbara Hulanicki's house off Kensington



wore a yellow shirt. My two nieces were bridesmaids and I made them orange and cream dresses with Victorian sleeves that went with those of the Biba dress.

'I also bought myself a pink going-away Biba trouser suit. I chose the fine needlecord jacket and the jumbo cord coat and butcher's boy cap. I did wear some strange clothes then, but I had been at London College of Fashion.

'My sister and I loved the mail-order Biba catalogue. It was high fashion that was accessible to the masses.'

High Street to get myself one. When it came to the wedding I had to go and see what Barbara had. I thought the jumpsuit was so beautiful and it was terribly unusual at that time. I had a matching cloche hat and two strings of Biba ebony beads.

'Our photograph was published on the front page of the *Evening Standard* not just because of the way we looked – at that time we were also involved in putting on the first Beat Poetry conference at the Royal Albert Hall.'

## Bring out your Biba

**Have you got Biba memories?** Did you get the catalogues or visit the shop? Have you any photos of yourself in Biba? Do you still have any items tucked away? If so, the Brighton Museum & Art Gallery would like to hear from you and may even include your story in its forthcoming major exhibition, opening in September. Contact [helen.grundy@brighton-hove.gov.uk](mailto:helen.grundy@brighton-hove.gov.uk); 01273 292850. Or write to Helen Grundy, Keeper of Exhibitions, Royal Pavilion & Museums, 4-5 Pavilion Buildings, Brighton, BN1 1EE