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Babs Simpson, Taste-Making Fashion Editor at Vogue, Is Dead at 105

By **Matthew Schneier**

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Babs Simpson, a fashion editor and swan of a bygone era whose unfailingly correct taste informed the pages of *Vogue*, died on Monday in Rye, N.Y. She was 105.

Her nephew George Wallace de Menocal confirmed her death.

Small, fierce and forever in a strand of pearls — real ones, naturally — Mrs. Simpson, as she preferred to be known, worked with many of the titans of fashion photography over her 25 years at *Vogue*.

She searched out Hemingway in Cuba (he had an eye for the model she brought along, Jean Patchett), dressed Marilyn Monroe for her final sitting with Bert Stern and tromped through Ireland with Anjelica Huston and Richard Avedon. She sat for Horst P. Horst and worked with Irving Penn, but even collaboration with the greats neither cowed her nor cracked her witty, no-nonsense mien.

“I used to sit in the corner and do needlework,” she said in a documentary about *Vogue*’s editors that was filmed as she was nearing 100. “Otherwise you’d go crazy with boredom. Some photographers took forever.”

Anna Wintour, the editor of *Vogue* and the artistic director of Condé Nast, said in a telephone interview: “What she was accomplishing during her time working in magazines was groundbreaking. While she was shooting Ernest Hemingway and Marilyn Monroe, she was also shooting a very simple black dress or a simple suit to give them personality as much as any public figure.”

Beatrice Crosby de Menocal was born into a family of privilege on April 9, 1913, in Beijing (known then as Peking). Her father, Daniel Ammen de Menocal, descended from an aristocratic Cuban family; her mother, Beatrice (Crosby) de Menocal, was a New York society beauty with a Washington Square address.

Beatrice was the oldest of four — Richard, Esmee and Daniel followed — and the family moved to South America before eventually settling in Boston. They lived the kind of life indexed in *The Social Register*: summers in Nantucket and debutante comings-out, all documented by an

affectionate press. Mr. de Menocal settled into a banker's life, rising to become vice president of the First National Bank of Boston.

In 1935, the young Miss de Menocal married William Simpson of Chicago, a Harvard man, in what The Boston Globe called "one of the most important weddings of the June season." But the marriage was not to be a long one. Though the newlyweds set up house in Locust Valley, on Long Island's North Shore — where they lived with an English butler and three maids, according to the 1940 census — after seven years of marriage they divorced and Mrs. Simpson made for New York City.

She dabbled in low culture as well as high — she remembered celebrating the end of Prohibition with a group of boys by heading down to Boston's tattoo parlors — but fell in with a glamorous crowd in New York, befriending the likes of the jewelry designer Fulco di Verdura and the hairdresser Kenneth. She was a regular at Café Nicholson, the Midtown Manhattan haunt of Tennessee Williams and Gore Vidal that put the cafe in cafe society in the postwar years.

After securing, through a friend, a position in the studio of a photographer for Harper's Bazaar (she had gone to secretarial school but did not complete it, nor any other higher education, as far as her family was aware), Mrs. Simpson was eventually tapped by Carmel Snow, the editor in chief, to work at the magazine itself. In 1947, at the urging of her friend Barbara Cushing Mortimer, known as Babe — who was leaving the magazine to marry William S. Paley, the builder of CBS — she moved to Vogue.

Mrs. Simpson remained with the magazine until 1972, working with a succession of its grandes dames, including Diana Vreeland, who called her "the most marvelous editor." She flew to Paris to see the collections (Dior had shown his New Look the season before her first) and traveled around the world on assignment.



Mrs. Simpson, seated at right and wearing a beret, at a fashion show at Bergdorf Goodman in Manhattan in 1967. "Nobody had any better taste," said Polly Mellen, another longtime Vogue editor. Robert Walker/The New York Times

“Nobody had any better taste,” Polly Mellen, another longtime Vogue editor, who overlapped with Mrs. Simpson there, said in an interview. She wasn’t lordly or haughty, Ms. Mellen said; she didn’t name-drop or lean on her connections. “She didn’t have to,” she said. “Those things were not important to her. She just went about being Babs. She went to work — I’m not sure she had to go to work — to do a job that appealed to her.”

Mrs. Simpson lived a richly cultured life outside the magazine, though friends said she was generally private about it. “She gave me the best books, important things to know and read,” said Phyllis Posnick, her assistant for a time, who went on to become a senior fashion editor at Vogue herself. “She went to the theater all the time. She went to ballet. She’d say to me, ‘You should really see this, dear.’ ”

Mrs. Simpson never remarried (and kept her married name to the end of her life) but found a bohemian companionship with Paul Magriel, an art collector and writer. They lived in the same Manhattan apartment building, on East End Avenue, though they maintained their own apartments on different floors. He died in 1990.

In 1972, Mrs. Simpson joined House & Garden magazine, where she remained until it closed in 1993. (She kept a beautiful modernist house, designed by Paul Lester Weiner, in Amagansett, on the East End of Long Island, and a garden designed by Bunny Mellon. Oscar de la Renta, a friend, credited her with a lot of his initial garden ideas, his wife, Annette de la Renta, recalled.)

“Her chic was understated and completely authoritative,” said Wendy Goodman, the design writer, who met Mrs. Simpson at House & Garden. (By then the magazine’s name had been changed to HG.) She was similarly understated about her exploits.

“A lot of people who have very grand lives bring them up a lot,” said Ms. Goodman, now the design editor of New York magazine. “And with Babs, she absolutely never ever did. The only thing I knew was because of the bird. She said, ‘Oh, the bird just hated all my lovers. The bird would attack So-and-So.’ ”

The bird was her pet troupial, Tico, which would often perch on top of her head.

In her later years, Mrs. Simpson sold the Amagansett house and moved into a retirement community in Rye, where her brother, Daniel Crosby de Menocal, lives.

In addition to him and her nephew George, she is survived by three other nephews, a niece and several great-nephews and great-nieces.

Never forgotten at the magazine — “She is a legend, as she should be, in the halls of Vogue,” Ms. Wintour said — Mrs. Simpson had a brief return to the spotlight in 2012, when she was included in the documentary “In Vogue: The Editor’s Eye,” about the fashion editors who have passed through the magazine, and an accompanying book. (Annie Leibovitz photographed the editors for a group portrait, and amid a sea of basic black Mrs. Simpson wears pink jeans.)

“I think that fashion is important because it revives one,” Mrs. Simpson said on camera. “I don’t think it’s just frivolous. Because I think it’s very depressing if one wore the same skirt and shirt forever.”

She remained tart even as she tilted toward her centenary. Shown a recent Vogue cover of Lady Gaga, she panned it.

Ms. Mellen said, “No one ever came before Babs, and no one will ever come after.”

Doris Burke contributed research.

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