

A black and white portrait of Iris von Arnim, an elderly woman with long, wavy, light-colored hair. She is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. Her right hand is resting near her face, with a ring visible on her finger. She is wearing a thick, textured knit sweater. The background is a plain, light color.

NADJA SCHAER

Iris von Arnim

QUEEN OF CASHMERE

CALLWEY

by Nadja Schaer

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CONTENTS

10	INTRODUCTION	128	The Jeans
12	THE BEGINNINGS	136	The Blazer
16	SEARCHING (1960)	144	The Turtleneck Sweater
24	The Rainbow Sweater	152	The Leather Favorites
34	FINDING HER OWN PATH (1970)	158	STRONGER TOGETHER (2000)
46	The Intarsia Sweater	170	On the Road
54	The Hand-Knit Cardigan	176	The Doubleface Coat
64	CASHMERE—THE ROAD TO SUCCESS (1980)	184	The Knit Dress
70	The Material	190	The Accessories
76	The Expertise	198	At Home
84	The Design	206	Sources and Image Credits
96	The Cardigan stitch Sweater	208	Imprint
100	The Cashmere Sets		
108	The Superfine Cashmere Sweater		
118	NEW HORIZONS (1990)		

“Good style comes
from taking an honest
look within.”

“To me, cashmere is
a feeling. It is like a
friend who knows exactly
what you need at any
given time. Rather subtle,
with this unique touch—
flattering without being
overpowering.”

Iris von Arnim

Charisma paired with nonchalant chic: Iris von Arnim is the undisputed master of understated luxury and a timeless, unpretentious style that nonetheless leaves a lasting impression. The designer was already carving out her own aesthetic in the 1970s, with her eponymous label that defied the spirit of the times and still endures to this day for that very reason. Her strength lies in an almost stoic clarity, knowing precisely what she wants and blocking out everything else. Her clean, minimalist look has evolved from a life that taught her what truly matters at an early stage. “From the very beginning, my designs were closely interwoven with me, my needs and desires, and my life story,” explains the designer. To understand her personal style and her unique approach to fashion, it is necessary to step back into the past. Monika-Iris von Arnim was born on January 25, 1945, in Berbisdorf, then Silesia, the daughter of estate owner and military officer Hans Joachim von Arnim and his wife, Ursula Fenner von Fenneberg, 20 years his junior. It was the last winter of World War II. As the Russian army drew ever closer, her mother decided to flee westward with her two-week-old daughter and her two older sons. They made their way to relatives near Magdeburg, traveling on a tractor. Hans followed two years later, scarred by the war and blinded in one eye. He was faced with the news that one of his sons had died shortly before from scarlet fever and diphtheria. Ursula, too, was already seriously ill at that time, and succumbed to cancer when Iris was just three years old. Hans, now a broken man who had lost a child, his wife, and all his worldly possessions, found shelter with Iris and her brother Hans-Gerd in a public housing block in Hanover. “After my mother’s death, my father had nothing but his distinguished name—no possessions, no courage left. With ruins all around us, we lived in a hastily erected apartment block,” recalls Iris von Arnim. “He constantly told us children, ‘We Arnims are something special.’ But in reality, we were just poor wretches.” Iris’s father finally died when she was 16. She only came to understand his pride in his family lineage years later, as she delved more deeply into the aristocratic family with over 800 years of history and scions including brilliant personalities such as the poets Bettina and Achim von Arnim. “I see it as my duty to live up to this name. For me, that includes impeccable behavior and a certain style; not banal, cheap, or low-budget, but timeless.” This aspiration combined with her longing for security and stability, which had

accompanied her since her mother’s death, and ultimately culminated in her love for cashmere. The luxurious material became a means of creative expression for her, embodying warmth, protection, and reliability—everything she had so deeply yearned for as a child and young woman. In the 1980s, Iris von Arnim was the first to bring this fine knitwear to Germany. Her simple, yet flawlessly designed styles offer a counterpoint to the loud, flashy, fast-paced fashion of the time. Her creations are made for a wardrobe that eschews constant change in favor of enduring value; favorite pieces for a lifetime, not a single season. Her personal style, too, has hardly changed over the years. While trends come and go, she remains true to herself. “I’ve always created fashion for myself. And from the very beginning, I have only designed what I myself wanted to wear. Nothing artificial, nothing hidden. Just honesty,” she affirms. This authenticity and down-to-earthness define Iris von Arnim’s designs, but also her own image. She is often seen in flowing silhouettes and soft knits combined with clean, minimalist lines. Her color choices underscore her personality instead of overshadowing it: classic black, nautical navy, elegant gray, soft ecru. A style strategy that skillfully combines nonchalance with elegance. Sometimes she pairs a loose-fitting cashmere sweater with casual jeans, other times with a glamorous sequined skirt. “Some knitwear pieces always make you feel comfortable, whether you’re heading to the bakery, meeting for lunch, or going out in the evening. You can always feel at home in them, and for me, that’s pure luxury,” says the designer. From the very beginning, Iris von Arnim saw fashion not as a sign of status or trend-awareness, but as an expression of individual values and personality. She has always lived and breathed ideas such as sustainability, conscious consumption, and timeless design—all at the heart of today’s zeitgeist—in a perfectly natural way, demonstrating that true luxury lies not in excess, but in focusing on essentials.



THE BEGINNINGS

GROWTH THROUGH ADVERSITY

As a child, Iris von Arnim never learnt what style was, but she certainly realized what it meant to have strength. Her experience of poverty and her father's strict Prussian upbringing developed a resilience that never let her give up, whatever the setbacks she encountered. "Many people learn about style because they grow up in families where it is valued. They basically absorb it with their mother's milk. I had none of that. Today I create luxury fashion, but I definitely did not grow up with luxury," she says. "We were refugees, like millions of others who had nothing. As children, we never thought it was a big deal. But we were always told to pull ourselves together, because soldiers' children don't cry!"

"Of course, I had to wear braids because that was what my Prussian father wanted."

Iris von Arnim



THE BEGINNINGS



A PICTURE THAT SHAPED IRIS'S IDENTITY

Although Iris had no memories of her mother Ursula, she was nevertheless the greatest role model for the girl. Iris was desperate to be as stylish, free, and effortlessly nonchalant as her mother looked in her favorite photo. That picture, which is still displayed in Iris's office today, shows 19-year-old Ursula at the beach with her best friend (who later became Iris' godmother). She has short hair and is wearing a casual jersey top. "I idealized her and longed to be worthy of her style," Iris says. "Maybe what I wanted was to spend my whole life trying to live up to the beautiful fantasy that was my mother."



1960

Searching

Aged 16, Iris von Arnim embarked on a search for herself and her true calling. After her father died, relatives invited her to join them in America. She lived with her aunt and uncle in the New York suburb of Scarsdale, attended the local high school in 11th grade, and lived the carefree American way of life to the full.

After a year, however, she felt a pull to return to Germany. Her guardian—her mother's brother, ten years younger—insisted that Iris should gain some qualifications, ideally as a secretary. But her American aunt stepped in and wrote to him: “You would rather make a belly dancer out of Iris than a secretary.” She realized that this young, adventurous woman would never be happy in a desk job. A traineeship in a travel agency was decided upon. “I thought that would mean the world would be open to me,” Iris says. “But actually, I only really learned how to sell a bag of tomatoes.” After qualifying, she continued to search for her true calling. In Frankfurt, she landed a job through friends as a copywriter at the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency—but was quickly fired for extending her vacation in the Seychelles without permission. While she was there, she developed a passion for photography and decided to pursue it as a career, attending a private photo school in Stuttgart and becoming an assistant to Munich photographer Tassilo Trost. “I drove him to desperation because I had none of the necessary technical know-how and couldn’t adjust the aperture fast enough,” Iris admits. She moved on, tried her hand as a reporter at Bild newspaper, worked in the PR department at United Artists Records ... and dropped out of everything after a short spell. “Everyone gave me a chance because they thought I was interesting; I had a whole fund of anecdotes, had a classy name, looked nice, and was neither too shy nor too pushy,” she reminisces. “But to be honest, I was terrible at everything. Talent is something you either have or you don’t.”

Iris had also not yet found her own style. At work, she embraced respectability in a blouse, knee-length skirt, and neat scarf. In her free time, she was a full-on hippie with flared pants, embroidered tops, and huge sunglasses.

“Back then, I was looking for something—interested in everything, but never really belonging anywhere,” recalls Iris von Arnim. “I had no money and I was not politically active, glamorous, or chic: not an intellectual, not an artist. I wanted to go to every cool party, every club, and joined in wherever I could. But I remember being often frustrated because it never really worked out; I was no Uschi Obermaier or Iris Berben. To gain entry to the inner circle of the rich and famous, it was essential to belong, and I didn’t. I still had to find my place in the world.”

STYLE ICON



ON THE WAY TO NEW HORIZONS

In 1961, Iris von Arnim set out into the world. Even as a teenager, her sense of style was plainly expressed in her casually elegant travel look. “I headed to the USA for a year,” the designer recounts. “That was extremely unusual in those times. All alone on an ocean liner to New York! Living with my aunt and uncle in the suburbs, I had my own room for the first time ever, plus unlimited ice cream. Paradise!”



STYLE ICON



THINGS JUST CLICKED

During Iris's vacation in the Seychelles, her youthful charm and style won the hearts of the islanders and she found a new passion. "Back then, I bought myself a Nikon and started snapping photos. Tourism was still in its infancy and the Creole islanders had never seen anyone take pictures before, so there was enormous curiosity," she says. Her photos were technically flawed, but highly expressive: "Sometimes out of focus, sometimes extreme close-ups. Here's a sunset. Africa! I thought 'OK then, if you're so talented, go off and learn it properly.'"



For more than five decades,
Iris von Arnim has shaped the world of
cashmere with a signature all her own.

Long before “quiet luxury” became a defining concept in fashion, she stood for timeless elegance, exceptional materials, and an attitude that outlasts trends. This Callwey book invites readers on a journey through her life, her inspirations, and her work. Through a rich selection of archival images—some published here for the first time—alongside private photographs and selected designs, it creates an intimate portrait of a woman who redefined luxury knitwear in Germany.

Iconic sweaters, cardigans, and coats tell a story of creativity, craftsmanship, and the courage to follow one’s own path. A book about style—and about how true elegance only grows more beautiful with time.

CALLWEY



SEARCHING



INITIAL PROFESSIONAL APPEARANCES

As a job-seeker, Iris von Arnim had to confront numerous setbacks. “I longed to be creative, and I was searching for something I was really good at,” she recalls. But whether as a PR consultant or reporter, she quickly reached her limits and realized that judgment was directed not just at her work, but also at her appearance. “I had an unusual name. If I showed up twice in the same blouse, I would be singled out right away,” she remembers. But her budget only stretched to a few simple tops, skirts, jeans, and little scarves as accessories: “I was always broke and desperately needed money. My most lucrative job was at the Oktoberfest.”