

Thomas Ruggiero is a designer and artist. "Ever since I was a child I was interested in clothes, what people wore, and what my mom was wearing." He started putting together outfits in high school, photographing and customizing his looks. TV was a big influence, "I watched MTV and saw young energetic people in their 20s and 30s wearing really fun clothes." Thomas says "that was the magic age, that group of people to aspire to." Thomas was also drawn to fashion on reality television, such as Project Runway and America's Next Top Model.

Thomas Ruggiero

"Those shows were centered around competition. I would prefer if there was more emphasis on learning and less on competition. Competition has an age bias, it's hard to judge based on the skills."

"We would go out on the weekends and first stop would be Forever-21 so the girls could buy a new \$20 outfit. That is unsustainable."

"The internet was slower and less powerful then", Thomas says. "There were a lot of webpages offering step-by-step tutorials, and forums where people shared ideas and techniques they had discovered, and there would be conversations in the vein of sharing, 'We tried this and found...'. Discussions were not critical. Now it is a business, and creators take comments as criticisms of their business. There's less space to be imperfect now." Thomas says with the rise of YouTube more often than not we are just watching someone do something. "It's not a conversation, not a community. When a person posts something they are making a claim of authority, and they can't handle criticism, they cannot be vulnerable because it is a business, not a community."

Thomas' maternal grandmother was into sewing but she died when he was young. "My mom was

not interested, and I feel that I missed having a sewing role model in my sphere. But my parents were not trepidatious; they were role models as entrepreneurs. They always had a business going on, there was never a thought that I couldn't do something."

His original goal was to be an artist. Thomas studied art on his own, seeking out art groups and mentors. He says he didn't feel the need for a degree in art. "I can always make art, no matter what. You look around and artists all have other

jobs. I did want to pursue something with long term business potential, that had measurable achievements. I want to do something creative and enjoy the process."

At WVU Thomas took a production sewing class and discovered that "I enjoy the process, the craft. I love to learn, and there was so much opportunity for that in fashion design." Thomas graduated with a BS in in Fashion Design from the WVU Davis College of Forestry, Agriculture, and Design. "I had wonderful teachers there." Thomas also spent time in the Costume department getting hands-on experience, and taking business courses, although he says what he studied is "not the same kind of business as is run today." He notes that the prominence of social media influencers was not explored as a separate idea from print media.

"I don't ever want to be at a point where I am not making the clothing, that's the thing I love the most."

"In the design program at WVU we were responsible for supplying all the fabric for our projects," Thomas says. The costume department had a materials budget, but no fabric was available to the design students. "I used to go to the antique

malls and search for table linens, and I enjoyed those materials. They were really good quality." Later on when he worked in NY fashion houses he saw how wasteful the process of making clothes can be, "even the waste on samples is high. I have always loved getting secondhand fabrics and using them. Now I make what I can out of 'what is left'. I often have to buy new for dressmaking," he says, "but sometimes I can find vintage lining material." He chooses natural fibers when he can.

His appreciation for environmental responsibility was nurtured in elementary school. "We always had projects—planting trees or picking up trash 'if you see it, get it.' We were taught to be responsible and take care of our own stuff, to be a part of a community. It was fun and we were outside."

He shares that a footwear design teacher told him "'Design a Ferrari piece, then you make the sedan or minivan in gray, white, and black.' I have to be concerned with what people will buy. In fashion you have to be selling, you have to think about what others will love. So I take the basis of my idea, and then make it more commercial."



As much as television, social media, and the internet have given Thomas ideas and direction, these influences offer challenges. "People want a deal. They are accustomed to getting things priced too low for what they are." When he was a student, Thomas says "We would go out on the weekends and our first stop would be Forever-21 so the girls

"What I make is something I want you to have for the rest of your life."

could buy a new \$20 outfit. That is unsustainable. I want people to look at a garment and think about 'price per wear'." Thomas says that people expect things not to last, but he notes that some large manufacturers demonstrate that a repairable model works. "Both Pendleton and Woolrich will take back their garments and repair them. What I make is something I want you to have for the rest of your life."

Thomas nodded when asked if he makes a living from his work. "I design staple pieces that can be worn season after season." Recently, a coat client of Thomas approached him about needing a dress for a special occasion. That occasion ended up being the inauguration of WV Gov. Patrick Morrisey.

While he enjoyed working in design houses he doesn't want that for himself. "Having a 'brand' is wasteful. I like clothes to not be trendy, but to last." "I don't ever want to be at a point where I am not making the clothing, that's the thing I love the most."

Collaborating with Toni Ogden

"Toni brought me two blankets she dyed and wove that had been sitting in her home unused for sometime. One blanket was used off and on, but ultimately they became pieces that didn't serve a full purpose anymore. So we collaborated on turning those fantastic pieces she originally made into a whole new piece. I showed her layouts of patterns, buttons, and tailored the coat to her liking."