

# BIBA



Biba—it was an experience, not just a label and a place to shop, but a concept store, original to its time, a place to be seen and escape into a magical world of flamingo rooftop tea rooms, and a neon lit Rainbow Restaurant, giant toadstool chairs and tables.....

When I first told my husband I was writing an article on Biba, he said “What’s Justin Bieber got to do with Vintage fashion?” I explained not Bieber, but Biba the fashion label, and he looked at me blankly. For such an amazing business success of its time, it is now sadly unknown to many.

Biba the fashion label started as a home shopping catalogue, the brain child of Barbara Hulanicki and husband Stephen Fitz-Simon (known as Fitz) in 1963. After Barbara had spent four years working as a fashion illustrator, she wanted to design clothes of her own. With Fitz’s encouragement the mail order company was forged, a business model with little risk and minimal overheads. The business was a joint project, with Fitz handling the production and manufacturing and Barbara the visual design. Their early pieces were sewn up by fashion students and materials were bought as they were needed. To brand their new venture, they went through a list of names with emotional connections and came up with ‘Biba’, the nickname of Barbara’s youngest sister, Biruta—and Biba was born!

After much persistence, they finally got their lucky break in May 1964, with a fashion feature in the Daily Mail showcasing a pink gingham dress and head scarf, inspired by a look worn by Brigitte Bardot. Differing historical reports credit 10,000 to 17,000 dresses produced to meet the orders. Whatever the number, it set Biba up for success.

I was lucky enough during my auction career in England to view a private collection of Biba, with the prospect of selling it. However, the sale never took place, but my eyes were opened to the sheer scale of the world of Biba. I was able to see production design files, giving me a glimpse of the magnitude that Biba was pumping out. It was fast fashion, like never seen before. Cheaply made, affordable to a wide demographic, and



**Photographs**

Left: Authentic Biba outfit, courtesy of Angie Smith  
 Top right: Barbara Hulanicki’s illustration for Le-Roy patterns, before she started Biba, 1963. Courtesy of Etsy shop Eleanor Meriwether Dresses  
 Bottom right: Biba Fashion Boutique in Kensington Church Street, London, in 1965. Photo from Pictorial Press Ltd / Alamy





youthful. Fast it was, production was regularly turned around in three weeks from design to shop floor.

Biba opened their first shop in September 1964 in Kensington off the success of the gingham dress. Not equipped for the mad rush of their first day of opening, it's said that they sold out of dresses within their first hour! They moved shops three times, up-scaling with their success until they opened the famous 'Big Biba' department store in September 1973. Its interiors were a mix of Art Nouveau meets art Art Deco, with a glamorous dark gothic atmosphere. The old department store building of the former Derry & Tom offered visitors seven floors of shopping experience, with a roof top garden. As Biba grew, so did their range, and they diversified into men's and children's wear, along with make-up, and homewares, to everyday household goods from shampoo to dog food! The 'Big Biba' in its prime is reputed to have received over a hundred thousand visitors a day.

Barbara's designs for Biba plucked from aspects of history, romanticising the past, soft fashions of the Edwardian era, with 30s Hollywood glam meets 40s utilitarian shirt-dresses and structured shoulder pads. Culotte pants were another Biba look. One would assume this fashion was inspired by a photograph of Barbara's mother wearing a pair on her honeymoon trek in the 1930s.

Biba was about simple, comfortable nostalgia with a modern edge. Colours were predominantly earthy and muted. The same garment was often made up in a number of colours. Plain fabrics were popular, but Biba was also known for their 'Granny' floral fabrics, along with chevrons, checks and leopard prints. Much of the early fashion was cheaply produced out of basic cheap fabrics—it was fast disposable fashion aimed at the teenage and early 20s market. As the brand developed, so did its level of sophistication targeted at a slightly older market, although always designed to suit a young waif-like female, a look the sales staff also personified.

Biba was very innovative with their product labelling and branding, creating a repetitive and iconic label and signage which could be seen on everything from clothing labels and hangers, to playing cards and everyday food items. A concept not common at the time but comparable to the mass branding seen at present in the famous department store Harrods. Each department in the Big Biba store had its own theme and label, but all reflecting the style of iconic interlocking Art Nouveau logo and type face of the mother label.

Although Biba created a strong brand profile, it went further than just being a product, Biba was a destination, and as such became equally fashionable. Barbara states "It isn't just dresses, but a whole way of life". The experience was shared by many from rock stars like Mick Jagger & David Bowie, to the working shop girl.

Barbara and Fitz disliked the feeling given from some other retailers, of being looked down on, or made to feel uncomfortable entering a shop. They despised pushy sales people, and Fitz is heard saying on a documentary, somewhat jokingly, that he would fire anyone if heard to say "Can I help you" to a person entering their shop. They set out to create a utopian shopping experience, with a laid back and friendly approach to 'sales'. Barbara goes on to say in the same documentary, that they aspire to create "a make-believe atmosphere, everything is so terribly serious... .. people need somewhere to go, where it is not down to earth,

don't have to buy, get an atmosphere, go away and hopefully feel happier for it".

Unfortunately, the experience and public footprint didn't add up to high sales. Young women would regularly come in and do their daily make-up on their way to work using the free make up trial stands, and I have heard many accounts of the high levels of thieving. It was not unheard of for people to come in, change into a new Biba outfit, walk out of the shop with it on, unpaid, and their old clothes left on the dressing room floor. It's my understanding that this massive level of Biba abuse helped bring on its demise.

In 1969 Biba started to partner with other companies to fund their development and expansion, notably the Dorothy Perkins group—Fitz and Barbara now only owning 25% of the company. In 1975 financial pressures and creative differences caused Barbara to leave, and within months the business closed. It wasn't Biba without Barbara.

The Biba label has been revived a number of times, with little success, none including collaboration with Barbara. In 2014 House of Frazer (UK) relaunched it again, using a savvy advertising campaign, with model Daisy Lowe. To begin with Barbara was not involved, but has since signed a contract to work with House of Frazer. Biba, like its early days of mail order catalogues, can now be purchased globally over the internet. However successful the current fashion reincarnation is, the magical and now almost mythical experience of Biba as a destination has never been recreated.

With recent public interest in the UK, the Biba and Beyond exhibition was held at the Brighton Museum in 2012/13—the seaside city where Barbara spent much of her youth, after spending her early years in Palestine.

*Note to collectors: Be careful of labels when buying vintage. The rival labels look very like the originals.*

**Article by Eleanor Keene**

**References**

'The Biba Experience', A. W Turner, 2004 Antique Collectors Club.

'From A to Biba', Barbara Hulanicki, 1984 Comet books, recently re-published by the V&A.

'Biba 1970', published on You Tube by SherlockRokandRadio, 25 Dec 2014.

**Photographs**

Left: Authentic Biba outfits, courtesy of fashion historian and curator Angie Smith

Above left: Original Biba label, courtesy of Angie Smith

Bottom right: **Dresses from the Biba and Beyond exhibition**, courtesy of Angie Smith

