

THIS PAGE A sample suit hangs in Anna Valentine's London showroom, off Marylebone High Street. OPPOSITE Anna pins a sample to model Angie Hsu



lifestyle
**The fabric
of society**

Her eponymous clothing label is desired for the quality of its designs and the attention to detail - attributes that couturier **Anna Valentine** has also employed in the renovation of her London flat





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Anna holds a breakfast for clients at her Marylebone atelier. The exterior of the atelier, a converted nineteenth-century grain store. Samples hang in the bright, white-walled showroom. Anna has a team of 12, including Donna Twigg, the workroom manager, and Felicia Shaw, a pattern cutter, both pictured here

On meeting couturier Anna Valentine, you are struck not only by her huge eyes, petite frame and gamine blonde haircut, but also by her perfectly cut, understated clothes, which exude the kind of *je ne sais quoi* that marks them out to the envious onlooker. This is what she is known for, but it could have been so different, as Anna initially trained to be a dancer. 'My parents must have worn out several sets of tyres in that pursuit,' she recalls. When she didn't get into the Royal Ballet School, she turned to her other passion – making clothes. Ballet's loss, therefore, was couture's gain.

Anna has designed clothes for a select few since 1986 – the year she met Antonia Robinson while studying couture tailoring in London. The pair established Robinson Valentine and watched their client list slowly grow. They designed Serena Stanhope's going-away outfit for her 1993 marriage to Viscount Linley, which attracted publicity and encouraged more clients. In 2000, however, Antonia decided to move to Cornwall, and the partnership was later dissolved. The Anna Valentine label was born and has gone from strength to strength. Now, those who value chic and beautifully made clothes, with attention to detail, will be happy to hear that Anna is branching out to produce two annual ready-to-wear collections, alongside her existing couture business.

Today, the Anna Valentine atelier is housed in a light-filled, pared-back nineteenth-century former grain store just off London's Marylebone High Street, an ideal location given its proximity to V V Rouleaux for trimmings, The Button Queen and John Lewis's haberdashery. Each year, Anna and a staff of 12 designers, pattern cutters, seamstresses and fitters produce two couture collections. 'I want the clothes to have an easy luxury. I hope they are timeless classics, but with a modern twist – you know, all those clichés,' she says and laughs. Clichés they may be, though for her clients they are anything but. What her customers, many of whom ▷



are professional, do want is a perfectly tailored and flattering wardrobe of contemporary pieces they can add to each season. When worn, they give them the confidence of knowing that they look good, allowing them to concentrate on their work or other interests.

Anna has an exceptional attention to detail and a keen eye for colour – ranging from bluey-greys ‘a colour that seems to repeat itself’ throughout my life’ to deep olive greens and magentas that are almost black. Each piece of fabric – double duchesse satin, for example, which has become something of a trademark – is dyed to specification. To achieve the required depths is challenging to any dyer, but Anna has found one or two specialists outside London who are able to achieve the finish she wants. >

THIS PAGE The sitting room of the London flat Anna lives in with her husband Jonathan, which they transformed with the help of architects RDH. **OPPOSITE** Anna in her kitchen, which has vintage powder-coated wall lights from Skinflint Design, a dining table made by Vincent Van Duysen and chairs bought in France



*‘The flat hadn’t been touched for 30 years.
It had a pale-yellow Formica kitchen
and a plastic floor that crunched underfoot’*





Her clothing is carefully constructed at the early toile stage, when the design is tested. 'I like ease of movement in a garment but, although it might be loose, a lot of thought has gone into where it fits on the body and where it doesn't.' Anna demonstrates this principle by holding up a sweater. 'It is loose-fitting, but it has skinny sleeves and the collar is high. You have to have it fitting somewhere and then it will not look too big.'

Ten years ago, Anna received her most extensive press coverage to date when she was asked to design the wedding outfit for Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall. 'We were given six weeks to make it, and I was panic stricken,' she admits. 'We took inspiration for the colour from a pale-blue chair in Clarence House and the detailing from a piece of jewellery belonging to her mother. Since everyone knew that we had been commissioned, we could not – for security reasons – call our normal >



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The main bedroom has a run of bespoke cupboards, which divide the bedroom from the hallway. Anna with her lurcher Genghis in the atelier. A set of Japanese spoons in the bathroom. Bespoke kitchen units. The bedroom has french windows onto a balcony; the table - the top of which is made from an old piece of machinery - is from Stephen Sprake Antiques, while the chairs were bought in France and the drawer unit in Japan





suppliers to ask if they had any blue fabric, so we ended up using a furnishing fabric from Bruno Triplet at Sahco in Chelsea Harbour Design Centre. It was a heavy silk shantung that we washed continually to remove all the starch. When the coat was finished, the design was hand-painted.' It was universally felt the result was just right.

Anna is married to Jonathan Berger, an entertainment lawyer. The couple were introduced 23 years ago by Anna's cousin, who was a work colleague of Jonathan and felt he needed a distraction from the office. Today, they live with their lurcher Ghengis in an airy first-floor flat near the atelier. 'When we moved in, it was ghastly, having not been touched for 30 years. It had a pale-yellow Formica kitchen, a plastic floor that crunched underfoot and everything was painted magnolia. The bedroom cabinets looked as if they were for a Sindy doll, and we ripped down the curtains and pelmets as soon as we arrived. It was exactly what we wanted as we could start from scratch,' Anna says with a laugh.

It took them three years to decide what they wanted to do. Being east-west facing, the flat got morning and evening light, but they could not capitalise on this as there were two rooms at the front and a corridor through to the bedrooms at the back. With the help of architects DRDH, all the partitions were removed, flooding the flat with light from front to back. A long, freestanding run of cupboards provides privacy in the bedroom and has created a corridor to the rear.

The open-plan kitchen is calmingly minimal and the whole interior is painted in Farrow & Ball's 'Old White'. Outside, in the shared areas, Anna has persuaded the owners of the other flats to strip back the communal stairs and hall to the original stone, transforming the stuffy interior into a clean, bright and welcoming space they all love. There is, however, one fly in the ointment of this pale tranquillity. 'I used to drive Jonathan mad saying I had nothing to wear, which was true, since the workroom was always busy making clothes for clients. Now I have a ready-to-wear range, I can order pieces and get them made somewhere else. Jonathan is concerned that we don't have enough space and he will have to give up one of his wardrobes!' □

Anna Valentine: 020-7935 2050; annavalentine.com

ANTICLOCKWISE FROM TOP Anna and Jonathan walk Ghengis in Hyde Park. Lunching with photographer Jonathan Glynn-Smith and PR Charlotte Meyer at Donostia. Having trained as a dancer, Anna has retained her interest in ballet and is a patron of Sadler's Wells, where she is pictured. With Rachel Vosper at her Belgravia boutique, discussing candles for the showroom. Talking furniture with her friend Faye Toogood

