

**EPIC ELEGANCE**  
HORST PHOTOGRAPHED  
BERNIER IN HER PARIS  
APARTMENT, WEARING  
A MADAME GRÈS  
GOWN, IN 1968.



## THE FLAMING DEBUTANTE

Rosamond Bernier shares her colorful 94-year history as an art impresario and a social dynamo in an enchanting new memoir. **Leslie Camhi** reports.

The world's most glamorous art lecturer turned memoirist, Rosamond Bernier, who will be 95 in October, has tamed wild animals, flown her own plane, and befriended the likes of Henri Matisse, Leonard Bernstein, and Frida Kahlo. As an expatriate American in Mexico during the 1940s, she presided over a menagerie that included an ocelot, an anteater, spider monkeys, various tropical birds, and (most incongruously) a small penguin, which she took swimming off the coast of a then largely undiscovered Acapulco.

As the first-ever European Features Editor for *Vogue* in postwar Paris, she lived at the Hôtel Crillon—where, in a city

still recovering from wartime deprivations, she had the benefit of hot water—and charmed Picasso with her Mexican-accented Spanish. (“He had just started his love affair with Françoise Gilot,” she recalled recently, “so he didn’t give me any trouble on that score.”) Equally at home in bohemian artists’ studios and amid the otherworldly extravagance of her friend the American-born Baroness Pauline de Rothschild’s wine estate, Château Mouton Rothschild, Bernier stepped lightly across continents and over social conventions. Possessed of a furious work ethic, she nevertheless claims a lifelong habit of breakfasting in bed. When she *lives* >400

cofounded the popularly priced yet top-quality French art magazine *L'OEIL*, which she ran from 1955 to 1970, its motto was “All the arts, from all countries, and from all times,” and her great ambition, she said, was “to see it read in the *Métro*.” (She did.)

If F. Scott Fitzgerald famously claimed that there were no second acts in American lives, it was only because he hadn't met Rosamond. In 1970, after 20 years of marriage, finding herself suddenly divorced and jobless, she moved to New York, embraced a new career as a “professional talker” (her description), and soon married the love of her life, *New York Times* art critic John Russell. Her uncannily vivid lectures on art and artists, stunningly delivered from the stage of the Metropolitan Museum at 8:00 P.M., with impeccable diction, without notes, and in full eveningwear, sold out months in advance.

After some 250 performances, Bernier gave up lecturing in 2008, the year Russell died. Having lovingly nursed him through his final illness, she sat down a year later to write “not at all a chronological memoir,” she says. “I would write something about Fernand Léger, then something about Mexico, then something about Paris. After a while, I had quite a lot of material, and my friend the agent Lynn Nesbit asked to see it.”

*Some of My Lives: A Scrapbook Memoir* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), animated by Bernier's inimitable voice and charm, includes encounters with countless luminaries from the worlds of art and style. Written in short, elliptical chapters, it chronicles everything from her solo crossing of the Atlantic on an ocean liner at age ten to attend a dreaded British boarding school to clear-eyed appraisals of Alberto Giacometti (intensely modest but with “violently ambivalent” feelings toward women) and Karl Lagerfeld (a man of princely generosity and a certain inevitable ruthlessness). Sometimes, in reading it, I

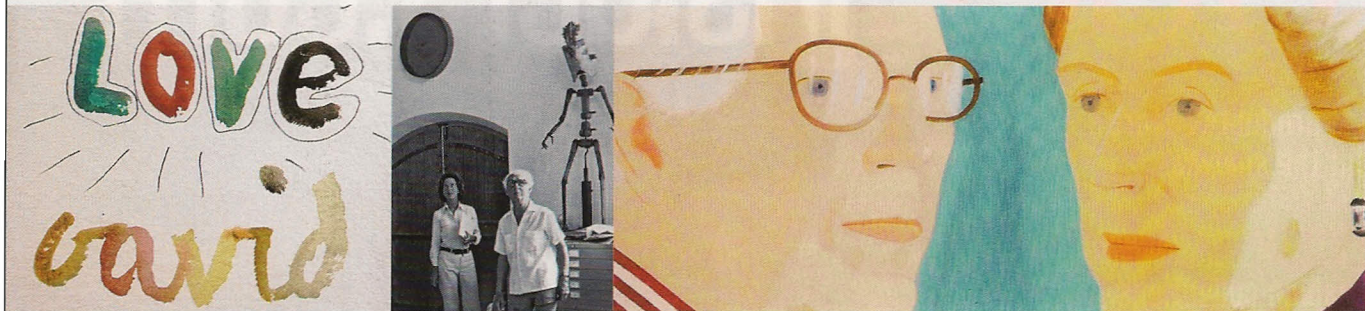
give way, when traveling, to irritation or misery or anything like that,” says the British painter Howard Hodgkin, who spent a month in India with Bernier and Russell in 1984. “She has the most amazing ability to make the best of any situation.”

Hodgkin's partner, Antony Peattie, recalls, on the same trip, a visit to the nature reserve at Bharatpur. “We were driven out into the countryside in bicycle rickshaws—gradually night fell and we couldn't see anything,” he says. “And then we were made to sit through a wildlife film in the cold, which basically consisted of animals killing each other. Well, Rosamond not only had brought along the appropriate shawl, but she also brought out a flask of alcohol.”

*Some of My Lives* tells the story of a shy little girl, born in Philadelphia to an English mother, who died when Rosamond was eight, and an American father, an accomplished lawyer and the son of Hungarian Jewish immigrants. Early on she learned to negotiate the big personalities surrounding her. Her father's support of the Philadelphia Orchestra meant that, during a childhood steeped in music, Rosamond witnessed the conductor Otto Klemperer, a frequent houseguest, throwing butter balls at his wife across the dinner table.

Composer Aaron Copland, resolutely homosexual, fell under her spell and remained a lifelong friend, as did Leonard Bernstein, who later joined her in exploring the flamenco bars of Barcelona's *barrio chino* and galloping wildly across deserted Dutch beaches. It was through music, too, that she first met Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, while on summer holiday from Sarah Lawrence College, at an orchestra rehearsal in Mexico City. Looking askance at her student wardrobe, Kahlo took her aside and fixed her up with a

**BRIGHT LIGHTS**  
FROM LEFT: A 90TH-BIRTHDAY CARD FROM DAVID HOCKNEY. WITH MAX ERNST IN HIS STUDIO. DOUBLE PORTRAIT WITH JOHN RUSSELL, BY ALEX KATZ.



wished she'd included more about herself, a figure at once elusive and possessing alarming vitality, peeking out from behind the portraits of the great and the famous. Self-effacement is not an aid to the memoirist's art, nor does it seem in keeping with her character. But her razor-sharp insights, playful humor, and deep humility throw the colorful personalities surrounding her into high relief.

“I don't consider myself exceptional in any way. I think I've had exceptional good luck,” Bernier says on the telephone from New York, where she lives in an apartment scattered with treasures connected to her life in the arts—a Picasso collage, a gouache Miró made for her, casts of her own and John Russell's hands by the sculptor Louise Bourgeois. Yet those who know her well describe a woman of seemingly boundless resilience, iron self-discipline, and an optimistic nature. “She would never

multicolored swaying skirt, an embroidered huipil (traditional overshirt), piles of pre-Columbian necklaces, and an elaborate hairstyle woven with flowers and ribbons. Decades later, she wore a gift from the painter, a bright-blue rebozo, or scarf, while lecturing on Kahlo's art at the Metropolitan Museum.

Mexico, where she settled as a young newlywed with her still younger husband, Lewis Riley, Jr., “was a place where you felt that everything could still be invented,” Bernier recalls. “It was extraordinarily vibrant—architecture was booming; there was wonderful folk art. And of course the colors and nature were wonderful.” There were also colorful houseguests, such as the writers Jane and Paul Bowles, before they discovered Tangier, and the English novelist Malcolm Lowry, author of *Under the Volcano*, whom Bernier failed to redeem from alcohol.

*lives* >420

Having amicably dissolved her first marriage—her husband went on to marry Dolores Del Río—she was newly single and visiting New York from Mexico in 1945 when she encountered the entire high command of *Vogue* in a single afternoon. “She charmed my mother, who was a fierce, powerful woman and not easily charmed,” recalls the author Francine du Plessix Gray, daughter of Tatiana du Plessix Liberman and stepdaughter of Alexander Liberman, who would remain a legendary presence at Condé Nast for some half-century. “Alex saw all the qualities she had,” du Plessix Gray continued, citing Bernier’s “charisma, intelligence, sex appeal, amazing ability to draw people out, and brilliant mastery of the art of conversation.”

She was also capable of great kindness, especially to children, although she had none of her own. “She used to take me to lunch when I was thirteen or fourteen, and she was the first adult who made me feel interesting as a child,” du Plessix Gray remembers. Lavinia, Lady Grimshaw, Bernier’s stepdaughter from her marriage to Russell, recalls her younger daughter learning a Viennese waltz from Bernier at age five.

*Vogue*, where Bernier began as a fashion editor, sent her to Paris in 1947 to report on the arts. Fashion was a happy by-product of this endeavor. “A *Vogue* salary, at the time, could feed a mouse,” says Bernier, “but the couturiers were all extraordinarily nice to me.” She was wearing Schiaparelli and photographed by Brassai when she interviewed Miró for *Vogue* in Barcelona; on a visit to Matisse, the master himself suggested a yellow scarf to go with her full-length orange coat by Balenciaga. (The motherly Madame Maria, her vendeuse at Balenciaga, “would call me up when there was going to be a sale,” Bernier says by way of explanation, “and she knew what fitted me.”) After she founded *L’OËIL*

Aaron Copland gave the bride away; Leonard Bernstein was the groom’s witness; the art dealer Pierre Matisse, son of Henri, was his best man; and Johnson himself planned the party “with the attention to detail given to the designing of a skyscraper,” Bernier writes.

A lifetime member of the International Best-Dressed List, Bernier has style that extends “to the rhythm of her sentences,” says her friend the painter Alex Katz. “It’s in the way she looks, the way she lives, the way she talks. She’d never settle for anything pedestrian.” Katz’s 2007 double portrait of Bernier and Russell is destined for the Metropolitan Museum. (In 2002, David Hockney painted the couple in watercolor, lavishing attention on Bernier’s gold slippers and Russell’s signature red socks.)

The Met is also the repository of some nineteen couture outfits donated by Bernier to the Costume Institute. Six mannequins, arrayed in her clothing, joined her onstage, as the museum’s surprise, for her last lecture there. Titled, like her memoir, “Some of My Lives,” it looked at the history of fashion, a subject that she’d never touched before. For the lecture, a bejeweled Bernier swanned across the stage in a flowing print gown that looked like Poiret but was something Halston made for her when she returned to Paris in 1970 to lecture at the Grand Palais. “Through the clothes,” Bernier says, “you could tell the story of the people, the times, of what was going on in theater, and the music being played. John used to say that you can make the history of art into the history of everything, and that you should just amuse yourself.”

When we spoke, Bernier had recently returned from visiting temples

### THE EXCLUSIVE

FROM LEFT: A SKETCH OF BERNIER INTERVIEWING COCO CHANEL FOR *VOGUE*, 1954. COVER OF *L’OËIL*, WITH LÉGER’S *LA GRANDE PARADE*, WITH HENRI MATISSE, 1948.



with her second husband, French journalist Georges Bernier, “as there is great respect for the arts in France, someone like Madame Grès made me at least nine outfits,” Bernier recalls. Husband number two is pointedly absent from her memoir; but Bernier says her stepson from the marriage, art historian and lecturer Olivier Bernier, whom she raised from the age of seven, remains her closest friend.

Championed by Picasso, Braque, and Léger, *L’OËIL*, which sold for the equivalent of 48 cents today, included full-color reproductions and essays on subjects ranging from Bavarian rococo churches to the School of Paris to the latest developments in architecture, Abstract Expressionism, and Pop Art. Bernier covered Philip Johnson’s Glass House in Connecticut—little imagining that, in 1975, she and John Russell, an early contributor to the magazine, would be married there.

in Southern India. (This time, when the staircases proved too daunting, people carried her.) She had been to see Derek Jacobi in *King Lear* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and James Levine conducting *Wozzeck* at the Metropolitan Opera, and she was busy planning her birthday party at the Century Club, to coincide with her book’s publication. “She has a more hectic social life than any 94-year-old I know,” du Plessix Gray remarks. “She’s still a kind of flaming debutante.” In an e-mail, her friend the French writer Anka Muhlstein, wife of the novelist Louis Begley, cites Bernier’s indomitable creative instinct as part of what keeps her going.

I mention that one day, I’d like to be an older person enjoying New York’s cultural treasures. “Well, come and give me a ring!” Bernier says. □