

# LIVES

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### Defining a New ART FORM

By Bill Ibelle

**R**ALPH PUCCI, AS'76, HAS never been one to follow the crowd. Over the past 39 years, he has transformed mannequin design into high art, gaining international acclaim for his unique combination of business savvy, artistic vision, and genre-bending collaborations. His designs have consistently anticipated and defined society's perception of female beauty, and for the past five months, his work has been the subject of an exhibit at Manhattan's Museum of Arts and Design.

"When everyone else zigs, Ralph zags," says exhibit curator Barbara Gifford. "His decision to collaborate with artists from other disciplines throughout his career was a vintage Ralph move."

Back in the 1980s, at a time when mannequins functioned as glorified clothes hangers, Pucci began working with top illustrators, muralists, interior decorators, and fashion designers to transform mannequins into his own brand of avant-garde sculpture.

In 1993, he teamed up with fashion designer Ruben Toledo to create Zen Zen, a graceful but rail-thin mannequin that captured the cultural shift from statuesque supermodels, to the waif-like zeitgeist embodied by the model Kate Moss. Seven years later, he collaborated with muralist Kenny Scharf to create Swirly, a one-eyed mannequin with a pointy curl of hair that captured a playfulness that had been absent in the fashion world. **CONTINUED ►**

“My parents ran a mannequin company that was very safe. They weren’t trying to blow the world off its feet. But maybe I was.”

Pucci is credited with redefining mannequin design worldwide, but to fully appreciate his iconoclastic career, you have to understand the state of the mannequin business when he arrived on the scene in 1976.



Pucci mannequins on display at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City

### PUSHING BOUNDARIES

Ralph Pucci International—which now occupies three floors and 48,000 square feet of prime Manhattan real estate—began as a mannequin-repair business run out of the basement of his parents’ New York home. The year was 1954—the year Ralph was born—and his father was looking for a business to replace his night-shift job at the post office.

“My father would drive his Pucci Mannequin Repair truck from department store to department store picking up broken mannequins. He’d fix them at my grandfather’s plaster shop and my mother, who was a very fashionable lady, would do all the wigs and makeup in the basement,” says Pucci.

During the next 20 years, his parents built the business, moved to the suburbs, and eventually opened their own small mannequin factory in Manhattan. In 1972, Pucci left his suburban New York home for Northeastern and got his first real taste of city life.

“In my first week on campus, I saw Charlie Mingus at a jazz workshop and Lou Reed at Symphony Hall. The whole artistic world was exploding right in front of me.”

When Pucci returned home in 1976 after graduation with a journalism degree, he helped out in the family business while he looked for a job in advertis-

ing. It didn’t take long for the creative, ambitious son to begin pushing the boundaries of the industry.

“My parents ran a mannequin company that was very safe,” he says. “They weren’t trying to blow the world off its feet. But maybe I was.”

In 1979, frustrated by the stiffness of typical department-store mannequins, Pucci, an accomplished high school athlete, developed and marketed a line of action mannequins for the new trend toward active wear. In a move that he would repeat dozens of times over the years, Pucci captured the mood of the times. His mannequins became a sensation at Macy’s in San Francisco, a city that was the hotbed of the cultural revolution.

“People were walking off the street to see the mannequins,” recalls Pucci. “That had never happened before.”

“All the other mannequin houses were making these elegant, ladylike mannequins with wigs and makeup. I have always believed that you need to do something different—you have to go your own way. That success in San Francisco gave me the courage to try different things,” he says.

### THE OLYMPIAN GODDESS

Five years later, when Barney’s New York wanted a new mannequin for the opening of its new Manhattan department store, Pucci teamed up with Andrée Putman, one of the hottest interior designers in Paris. The result was the Olympian Goddess, a stunning gold mannequin of Amazonian proportions with broad



Swirly (left)

shoulders, a powerful stance, and an art deco face. While mannequins of the time were a size 2, the Olympian Goddess was a statuesque 4/6.

“Andrée didn’t know anything about the mannequin industry. She didn’t know anything about the rules, so she broke all the rules,” says Pucci. “She was free and uninhibited.”

The Olympian Goddess, which captured the essence of the 1980s movement toward more confident and empowered women, debuted at a party in Pucci’s SoHo loft attended by more than 1,000 fashion designers, artists, and department store bigwigs. Andy Warhol showed up unexpectedly with several of his artist friends and created a sensation by signing T-shirts and body parts of the star-struck guests.

The party made Page 6 of the *New York Post*, and the Olympian Goddess was the talk of the town. Ralph Pucci was a New York sensation.

“This made the picture very clear to me—I was always going to work with new, fresh talent. I loved working with these people because they were very creative, they were willing to take chances, and they weren’t afraid to fail,” he says.

### THE BIRTH OF ADA

The list of trend-setting mannequins goes on and on, including a size 16 mannequin named Birdie. But one of Pucci’s favorites is an eccentric specimen named Ada, inspired by the playful children’s book illustrations of Maira Kalman.

“I read Kalman’s children’s books to my kids over and over again, and then one day the light bulb went off,” says Pucci. “I called Maira and asked if she wanted to turn her characters into a line of mannequins.”



Olympian Goddess



Ada

“I loved working with young talent because they were very creative, they were willing to take chances, and they weren’t afraid to fail.”

Pucci is proud of this series because it went so strongly against the minimalist trend that dominated department store displays in the mid-1990s. Following the lead of designer Calvin Klein, department stores had adopted stark and intimidating displays intended to appeal to wealthy customers.

“It struck me as all wrong—maybe not for Calvin Klein, but certainly for department stores,” says Pucci. “The message was ‘do not touch me, do not enter—how dare you?’ Maira’s designs were the opposite. She made people smile with her quirky characters. She was fun. She made people want to go in and touch things.”

Pucci recalls being warned over and over that his unusual line of new mannequins would never sell. The naysayers couldn’t have been more wrong.

“The whole world bought them,” he says. “Ada was in stores across the U.S., in Europe, and in Australia. It was a gigantic success. It reinvented the mannequin world for the next three or four years. We really went where everyone wasn’t.”

“That’s my philosophy—go where people are not going.”



Mannequins in Pucci’s 48,000-square-foot Manhattan studio