

PROFILE

*Seeing bodies as art,
women can find their
own personal style*

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HELEN Villa Connor stands before her mirrored reflection in her hilltop San Carlos home, demonstrating with her own petite, well-dressed body the basic elements of the book she has co-written with Menlo Park image consultant Carla Mason Mathis.

Called "The Triumph of Individual Style," the book's subtitle is "A guide to dressing *your* body, *your* beauty, *your* self." The italics are there to emphasize the book's main message to women.

"We are individuals and we are individually beautiful," says Connor, 50, a personal design consultant, educator and writer.

Connor's efforts to bring this message to women earned her the prestigious Image Makers Merit of Industry Excellence Award (or IMMIE) in the categories of innovation and education last July from the Association of Image Consultants International in Washington D.C.

"If you can make women see beauty where they didn't see it before in themselves, then any woman can experience beauty," Connor says. "How can women access their beauty? Through the language of art and aesthetics."

Bodies as art

"Triumph" uses works of art throughout the ages and from around the world to illustrate timeless beauty, and its absence of photographs of contemporary fashion models and movie stars is refreshing. Connor and Mathis want women to see their bodies as art, and set their own standards of beauty. To that end, the book is richly illustrated with pictures of second-century B.C. Greek statuary, thousand-year-old South Indian bronzes, Renoirs and Picassos, all depicting the female form in its many variations.

Learning to see yourself as an artist sees the world requires "a paradigm shift that consists of separating the body from the clothes and looking at the body through the elements of art," says Connor, "then selecting the clothing that relates to that body's design. What this creates is a way for women to bridge the world of fashion, which is simply about clothes, and the world of individual style.



ageless
beauty

"By looking at the human form the way an artist does," she continues, "we're able to turn off the negative terminology about our bodies. Picasso said you have to learn to undraw the drawing toward a new way of seeing. This is a new notion of beauty that liberates women from the trap of judging themselves against a single standard of beauty, such as tall and thin."

Paradigm shift

Connor, who entered the personal design field in 1982 after 15 years in educational publishing, multimedia development and design, has helped numerous corporate and individual clients on the Peninsula and nationally experience that paradigm shift.

Amy Levine of the Women's Resource Center at the University of California, San Francisco has sponsored presentations by Connor twice.

"We promote feminist ideas," says Levine, 42. "A presentation based on 'dress for success' is not something that would attract us. But Helen offers a different point of view: that women — no matter what size, shape, ethnicity, age or disability — are beautiful."

Connor initially presented a brown-bag seminar and workshop at the campus center and then was invited back with co-author Mathis for a presentation to women faculty.

"Who decides what's beautiful?" asks Levine rhetorically. "Now, Helen and Carla are saying, 'You do.' I find their message very appealing."

Innate design patterns

The book, which is used as a textbook at New York's Parsons School of Design and other schools, is designed and colorfully illustrated as a workbook to help the reader discover her own body's design pattern in terms of line, shape, proportion, body particulars (features), scale, color and texture. Then it leads the reader to select clothes that will be in harmony with this design pattern.

Another benefit, co-author Mathis says, is that "it saves money, time and anguish."

Women felt less anguish, says Mathis, 55, who heads the Color-Style Institute in Menlo Park, when clothes were custom-made. "Now clothes are mass-produced. When they don't fit well, we think it's our bodies that are all wrong."

"It's now clear to me why I'd always felt uncomfortable with some of my clothes," says Susan, a Menlo Park client and former student of Connor's who declined

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Book shows women they are innately beautiful

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to give her last name. "Now I'm able to choose the clothes and accessories that harmonize with my features."

Choice is part of what it's all about.

"I love the section in the book that talked about having a large derriere," Levine says. "One side of the page talks about what to do to camouflage it — and the other side on how to *enhance* it. I love that. Whatever you have, you have a choice."

Getting in balance

Back at home, in front of a mirror, Connor points out her options. "Again, you have a choice," she says. "I have sloping shoulders — I can camouflage them or highlight them. Hillary (Clinton) has narrower shoulders than hips and thighs. For balance and camouflage, she wears shoulder pads in her jackets. She also has medium-large scale ankles, so she doesn't wear narrow heels that would accentuate them. She tends to wear moderate heels, which are more in balance."

"You'll notice that pictures of Jackie Kennedy in profile showed her neck slanting forward, so she wore her pillbox hat slanted back on her head for balance. Jackie used her body's design pattern to create her own unique style."

Filipino culture

Born in the Philippines, Connor says her parents and her culture emphasized achievement over appearance. She earned bachelor's degree in French from the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 1968, and studied piano and art.

"My art and music background gave me a background for creating my philosophy," says Connor. "In writing promotional materials



“Helen offers . . . that women — no matter what size, shape, ethnicity, age or disability — are beautiful.”

— Amy Levine

Helen Villa Connor hopes “Triumph” will help women learn to see themselves as an artist sees the world. To help, she illustrates the book with pictures ancient art depicting the female form in its many variations.

With Mathis, Connor established Timeless Editions, which published “Triumph” in 1994. In addition to her consulting business, she also writes for Extra magazine and Face magazine, while juggling the demands of marriage and raising two children.

Connor cites her interest in women's issues, as well as her innate design sense, as influencing her decision to move into personal design. “I really (want to) help women develop a sense of self esteem,” she says. “Since the women's movement, women have come into their own. We have more clout. Fashion is just a tool to create, to express yourself and to empower yourself. When you allow trends to dictate to you, that's when fashion is frivolous.”

“What's important is personal style, and that comes from your own self-acceptance and self-actualization. Put your clothes on. Then forget about them. What's most important is to know that you really are beautiful.”

for others in the image industry, I found a lot of stuff that didn't work for me — for example, that petite women can't wear long

hair or must always wear one color.

“I have long hair and that worked for me. So i had to find

another theory of proportion. I used myself and the way I was already dressing as a starting point.”



TOM VAN DYKE — MERCURY NEWS

Helen Villa Connor is a personal design consultant, educator and writer who lives in San Carlos.