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Yukon-bred designer Catherine Regehr on environmental inspiration

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NORTHERN HAUTE COUTURE

**Designer Catherine Regehr
juxtaposes her Yukon roots
with high fashion**

Story by Tara McCarthy

Catherine Regehr's central desire is balance in her life. Thus she has an established equilibrium between the practicality of her northern roots and the drama and prestige of her career as a fashion designer.

"I'm basically hair in a ponytail, no makeup, in my rubber boots all summer long, out hiking," she says of seasons spent in the North. "Then when I'm in Paris, I'm not all dolled up because I'm not that kind of person. I think the North influences that—I just wear black pants, a black turtleneck, and black, men's loafers. That's it."

Initially, the great outdoors seems to starkly contrast the Vancouver-based designer's haute couture collections that feature rich, luxurious fabrics with elegant structure. Celebrities like Kim Basinger, Sarah McLachlan, Angelica Huston, and Bianca Jagger have worn her gowns. And earlier this year, Regehr exhibited in both New York City and Paris.

Beyond all the glamour is that same girl who grew up in Whitehorse, at the top of Main Street, sliding down the clay cliffs on a large piece of plywood and spending weekends along the shoreline in Atlin, B.C. Regehr admits her childhood hardwired her to love the outdoors.

"My dad had mining interests, so he would take me in old jeeps up creeks with him," she

Designer Catherine Regehr hiking in Atlin, B.C.

Photo: Jennifer Houshram

Regehr evokes textures from the northern environment in her fashion and home collections.



says. "I remember sleeping in an old hayloft with a bunch of other kids way out in the bush."

This dichotomy between elegance and environment has not only shaped Regehr as a person, it has also informed her artistic sensibilities and influenced her successful fashion and home collections.

A number of forces urged her on this path, including the mentorship and friendship of Liliias Farley, her art teacher at F.H. Collins Secondary School, in Whitehorse.

"She showed me my first *Vogue* magazine, and she really encouraged me. I was always very interested in sculpting and painting, but I would say she was the one that got me interested in fashion."

Regehr inevitably pursued visual art, but after four years at Vancouver's Emily Carr College, she found herself searching for what was next. Three things sent her in a new direction: a trip to Paris, a film-shoot wrap party, and Yves Saint Laurent.

While travelling to Vienna, her sister insisted the pair visit Paris. Although Regehr thought she'd find the city too stereotypical, it got under her skin.

"I took one look around and said, 'Oh my God. Ok, that's it. I'm living here.' I'm a very willful type, so I thought I would find a way to live in that city."

Soon after, she was back in the Yukon and her boyfriend invited her to the wrap party for a National Geographic film he was working on. Wives of the crew had flown in from New York City and were suddenly fawning over Regehr's homemade outfit.

"I had always sewn my own clothes. Growing up in the Yukon there was really nothing other than the Sears and Eaton's catalogues," she says. "People always wanted what I did, but I never took them seriously. But these women said, 'No, you don't understand. We shop at Bergdorf Goodman. This is a great, simple little dress. We'd love to have a dress like that.'"

As for the last piece of the puzzle, it was 1976 and Yves Saint Laurent was producing his highly acclaimed Russian collection. That cemented Regehr's foray into fashion.

"I put it altogether and decided I wanted to go to the school that Yves Saint Laurent went to. That's what I wanted."

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Photos: Jennifer Houghton

She applied and was accepted to *École de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne*, paying for it with the money she'd earned as a waitress and working for the City of Whitehorse. Regehr was thrust into France's major fashion houses, like Dior and Lanvin, and quickly developed a deep adoration for couture and detail.

Eventually, she moved on to New York City, working with prominent designers Anne Klein and Bill Atkinson. Although the experience was essential for her career, Regehr didn't like the cutthroat atmosphere of metropolitan life.

"I always enjoyed the designing of fashion, but I wasn't remotely interested in the lifestyle of fashion," she explains. "I did go out though. I went to Studio 54. I saw Calvin Klein, and Diana Ross rode in on a white horse on her birthday one night. I saw a lot in New York and Paris that appealed to my sense

of drama, but I really wanted to be close to the Yukon."

Connections to the North often existed in her life in unexpected ways. A couple her sister met kayaking the Yukon's Deza-deash River let Regehr stay at their Westchester County home during her time in New York. They've gone on to become a second family to her.

However, Regehr craved being geographically closer to her roots, so she returned to Canada and compromised by settling in Vancouver for business sake. She teamed up with a friend who was a pattern maker and launched a fashion line, in 1986. The business didn't boom as hoped, the partners parted ways, and Regehr took a year off to reassess by surveying for a Yukon engineering firm.

"It was really good to clear my head because I find nature to be the most wonderful thing for me," Regehr says. "I always say



Regehr in her house in Atlin, B.C.

if I had a choice between New York, Paris, and the North, and I had to pick one, I'd pick the North without even hesitating."

After her hiatus, she went back to business in Vancouver, determined never to lose money again—and she hasn't. Her collections are available from North America to Europe, the Middle East, China, and Japan. In 2009, *Western Living* magazine listed Regehr as the industrial designer to watch in its "Designers of the Year" feature. Then, in 2012, she received the British Columbia Creative Achievement Award of Distinction.

But the attention hasn't changed her. Regehr mentions selling hundreds of thousands of dollars in caftans to a Saudi Arabian princess and in the same breath alludes to the three times she's been charged by a grizzly bear. Regardless of her status in the fashion world, it always comes back to the outdoors, especially in her design aesthetic.

"I keep things very simple and I'm very influenced by repetitive form, especially repetitive form found in nature," she explains. "Like, if you go to the south end of Atlin Lake, there are a couple of bays where this shale in the water has broken off and it's all the same size—almost. There are thousands and thousands of pieces kind of leaning up against each other. Another example is the indentations in the clay cliffs or ripples in the water when just a little wind blows."

Photo: Merrin Keeghenhoff

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A blanket from Regehr's home collection.

Regehr says she's never been interested in trends, but found her place in the fashion world by creating collections that embrace her innate northern practicality.

"I have a tiny wardrobe. I have very few clothes, which people are always shocked and amazed by," she says with a laugh. "Who needs all that? When you have a beautiful gown that you spend a lot of money on, you want something you're going to have for a long, long time."

Around 2009, Regehr also began channelling her timeless style into a home collection. The concept came to her during a trip to India, where she noticed the incredible linens and reminisced about Yukon First Nation artist Annie Smith's beadwork from the moccasins and mukluks she grew up with.

The home collection combines northern materials and craft with luxurious fabrics. The line originally started with cushions and bedding and expanded to furniture,

such as stools, benches, and wall art. Items feature caribou tufting, beading, and porcupine quillwork by northern artists like Dianne Smith and Faye Chamberlin. And the home collection is now becoming Regehr's main focus as her daughter Eva collaborates more on the fashion collections, which she is poised to take over in the future.

Another priority for Regehr: devoting as much time as possible to life at her house in Atlin, B.C. She returns at least once a year for about two months and is adamant that grow to four.

"It probably means more than I fully understand," Regehr says of each visit back to the North. "I usually do a canoe or a climbing trip every summer and it's integral to my sense of well-being. It has made me a much happier person and given me wonderful, deep relationships. It really gives me a lot of the peace that I have in my life and certainly the balance." **Y**

Photo: Jennifer Houghton

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