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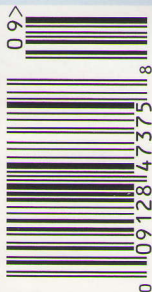
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Behind the Flawless Face



LAURA MERCIER. The name is synonymous with the makeup, fragrance and skin-care line that every beauty junkie covets. So it goes without saying that I jumped at the chance to interview the beauty genius. Sure to have my mascara and lip gloss smudge-free and intact, I became giddy as I walked into the interview room at Neiman Marcus, where a coffee table was awash in Laura Mercier cosmetics.

The makeup master who has worked with celebrities like Madonna, Julia Roberts and Sarah Jessica Parker; made up models for the covers of *Vogue*, *Elle* and *Marie Claire*; and published two books breaking beauty secrets to beauty geeks who eat them up like a last meal was preparing for an exclusive makeup session for V.I.P. clients when I met with her on a May afternoon. "It's been kind of a recent format, extremely successful," she said of the event. "[The customers] really love the opportunity, outside something too commercial, to really be one on one."

Even though she has experienced wild success in creating "the flawless face," it is this approachability—a surprising characteristic for a successful French woman—and determination to enhance women's natural beauty (she actually embraces women's imperfections and aging faces) that makes Mercier a hot commodity.

The youngest of three daughters, née Michèle Mercier in Marseille, France, Mercier embarked on her journey in the cosmetology industry after leaving art school, a career path she abandoned because she didn't want to be a "starving artist."

"It was very important at the time that I get my independence for many personal reasons," Mercier says. "I decided that I will never count on a rich husband to take care of me, and I would have to take care of myself... obviously makeup just happened to be the answer because it is completely artsy, and it is like painting—just on a different canvas."

By the suggestion of her mother whose makeup she often did, Mercier enrolled at Caritas Institute, an upscale salon and beauty school in Paris where she ended up assisting Thibault Vabre, a famous French makeup artist and teacher at the school. "It really just happened," she says. "I learned the job [on the spot] for magazines—for the ads—because really, that part is a very special business—you don't learn it at any school; you basically assist and learn that way."

Caritas Institute was a favorite of high-profile clientele, frequented by celebrities like Catherine Deneuve, British heiresses and socialites, to name a few. When Mercier was hired on as a makeup artist, she was asked to drop 20 pounds, cut her unruly dark hair and change her name. (The name Michèle Mercier also belonged to a famous French actress who was a client at the salon.) Jessica and Aurelia were tossed around as options, but it was Laura that stuck.

In 1985, Mercier came to the states as a freelance makeup artist. As she took on projects working with the country's leading magazines, photographers, models and celebrities, her career flourished.

Her own internal struggles with confidence and appearance have kept her grounded and helped shape her career as a makeup artist whose mantra is all about bringing out the natural beauty in women. "I know today that appreciating your own beauty does not come solely from therapy, makeup application or plastic surgery—although these things can help. Rather, it comes from a little door that opens in our minds and helps us celebrate our differences and find pride in our uniqueness," she writes in her book "The New Beauty Secrets: Your Ultimate Guide to a Flawless Face."

"I've always been more interested in making women look as beautiful as possible while making them look like themselves," she writes.

Although Mercier says she intends to take things a bit slower, her track record has proven otherwise. She's been actively involved in the creation of each product in her line while still maintaining an A-list roster of clientele.

"One day, Steven Meisel, the brilliant fashion photographer and a good friend, finally convinced me to work with Madonna," Mercier recounts in her book. "Imagine! The night before I did her makeup, I actually spent hours in my bedroom throwing up. Madonna must have felt my anxieties because she did everything she could to make me feel relaxed. She encouraged me to be creative."

Mercier credits this moment as the turning point where she harnessed her talent and channeled her newfound confidence into her work with all her clients going forth. As to whether she's star-struck now, Mercier is quick to reply, "No, absolutely not. It's even pathetic because it's really the person I connect with. Even if I admire a star, once she is with me and I'm intimately very close to her, it's the person I'm getting. So even if I'm intimidated at first, once I work with a person, she just becomes a regular woman." ■



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