

LAURA MERCIER

A Brush with Depth

By Jill Johnson

Once an aspiring painter from Provence, Laura Mercier never dreamed that her art would earn her world recognition or put her face-to-face with celebrities like Madonna and Meryl Streep. But a practical career move from painting canvases to painting faces did just that for the now 20-year-veteran of the fashion industry and creator of Laura Mercier Cosmetics and Laura Mercier Skincare.

The makeup artist known for mastering the flawless face, Mercier could wallpaper a gallery with her work—numerous Meisel covers for *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Marie Claire*, and *Allure* and award-winning campaigns for Calvin Klein, Donna Karan, Dolce & Gabbana, Versace, Valentino, and Alberta Ferretti, just to name a few—and she could fill it with her high-profile personal clients: Susan Sarandon, Isabella Rossellini, Brooke Shields, Ellen Barkin, Celine Dion, Meg Ryan, Ashley Judd, Jewel, Meryl Streep, Julia Ormond, and Madonna.

In addition to being one of the best makeup artists in the world, Mercier is a smart and personable conversationalist; add an endearing French accent, and, as an interviewee, she is as flawless as the faces she creates.



JJ: What led you to a career in makeup?

LM: Twenty years ago, I wanted to do a career in painting. I studied painting for three years—actually more than that because I started taking classes when I was very young—but it ended up

being not very reasonable. I knew I wanted to do something creative. The drawing part was my sanity. I was totally, you know, allergic to numbers, to mathematics, to corporation[s]. I was a non-conformist girl, very rebellious, but I loved to

study. There were three choices for me: I wanted to be a police inspector (I don't know why), or a psychiatrist nurse (I actually passed my exam for that), or to do a career in creative. But after three years studying painting, I realized that this is not

going to make a career. Either I would be a starving painter, or I would make some money—not even make money, just make a living out of it. Someone proposed me to do aesthetic[s] because I was good at that and very into beauty and

skincare products already. Makeup was the perfect alliance between a job and painting—because it is painting faces—and I fell in love with it. I studied aesthetics at the Carita Institute in Paris, got my diploma, and then became a makeup teacher in that very school. Then I represented Carita in the magazine[s] for three years and I worked another three years for an agent doing freelance work. I worked very closely with my friend Thibault Vabre who represented Carita, and then Lancome, and now he's at Clarins. I learned everything with him. I learned as an assistant right in the studio. It's a very specific job so there is no other way. So altogether I worked for six years in Paris and then moved in '85 to the States. I came with the group that opened the American *Elle*. I worked with them for three months on opening the magazine, testing the girls and doing makeup, and I decided to stay.

JJ: There are so many makeup artists out there, working in department stores and dreaming of working in the industry, how does someone make that jump?

LM: Thibault started that way. He started doing makeup in a store. I never did. But, eventually he was so good that someone hired him, put him under contract, and he became a star in that brand. I think if you really are passionate and

you are really doing a great job, eventually you graduate. I started right away doing photo shoots. I worked for French *Elle* right away, so I was lucky. I was assisting him, and he had a very strong position already. It was fantastic for me, and I guess I did the job well. After a year and a half I was working on my own.

JJ: Do you think seeking out an apprenticeship with someone who is really good is the best route for an aspiring makeup artist who wants to get a foot in the fashion world door?

LM: I don't think there is a rule in this business. My first assistant I pulled out of his desk job. He was working at my agency, but he had done makeup a long time before. One day I needed an assistant and I said, "Come with me, you know makeup." Afterwards I asked him, "What are you doing behind a desk? You're very talented." Since then he has been working and he loves it. I really do strongly believe that if you project what you really want in life, you get it. If you choose to do makeup because you think it's the easiest thing in the world to put concealer and mascara on a model, maybe it will

last and maybe it won't. If you really try to learn as much as you can, try to get better every day, and give as much as you can because that's what you love, you're going to get there.

JJ: Is that the secret to why you moved up so quickly in the field?

LM: I think I'm a little bit of an enigma, because I was always very insecure and self-destructive and so pessimistic that I really don't know how I got there. All I know is that I was so *not* competitive. I never ever tried to get the job of someone else or to attract attention. It just came to me. But no matter what the job, I always gave 100 percent.

JJ: What's it like working with Madonna and your other celebrity clients?

LM: It was very scary to work with Madonna at first. She was an icon, with a reputation for being a perfectionist, very demanding, strong. But it turned out to be fantastic. She's a really nice, great person. I found the real Madonna in the intimacy of the bathroom, when I would do the makeup. We became friends and she gave me enough to make me feel comfortable and



feel stronger and stronger. I think everyone brings you something, especially when it's a challenge. It was a challenge to work with Steven Meisel. I was dying to work with him. I was in love with his work. For three years I was trying to get in his studio, and you can't when you're not part of the team. Finally, I was there, and I worked with him for ten years non-stop and learned my best work. There is always something to learn out of strong people like that.

JJ: A makeup artist really has to have a rapport with the models and with the photographer. Do you think being able to connect with people has a lot to do with success, as well as talent?

LM: Yes, I do. Especially now, a lot of photographers have teams, and they have to be able to rely on the team. The team that works the best together will give the best results.

JJ: Do prefer working with celebrities or models?

LM: I could work with a normal person on the street and they would make me as happy as working with a celebrity. For me the celebrity is a normal person. My approach to a celebrity has



to be on a normal level—I'm in touch with them physically and mentally, I see them naked face, it's like I'm seeing through their soul. There is so much you can see when you are so close to a face. It's more intimate than a hairdresser.

JJ: Are you ever shocked by models' or celebrities' faces when you first see them without makeup?

LM: I am used to seeing models arrive in the studio in the morning and thinking, "My God! What are we going to do?" Not that they look ugly in any way, but you think, "What is so special about them?" But the girl who is not so obviously beautiful can be the most magical in front of the camera. I've learned not to judge too quickly. I remember way back, a girl who is not working anymore, she was a drug addict. She would come with green skin and smoking like a chimney. She had small eyes and a long nose. You would think, "Oh my God!" But, in fact, she would be totally beautiful, totally magical in front of the camera.

JJ: Who is your favorite face?

LM: Linda and Christy are definitely very beautiful even in real life.

JJ: Any nightmare situations you've faced?

LM: Maybe in the beginning of my career. Once I had a girl come with very bad acne. I couldn't cover it, and I did not have my Camouflage at that

time. And then, photographers were not re-touching photos. Or being with celebrities who are not so nice, who are so insecure that they will never be satisfied. I can say I had one really horrible experience with a celebrity, a woman who would blame the world whenever she was in a bad mood. She gave me the worst attitude, humiliating me, and being absolutely unfair on every level. I had to hold back my tears for half an hour to finish the makeup, and when she went to the hairdresser I couldn't hold it, I was literally sobbing. Still she said nothing to me, and I called my agent and cancelled the rest of the booking (we were supposed to work together for three months). She tried to book me again for the next two years, and I finally decided I had to exorcise this, because I was so traumatized that I could not work with any celebrity. So I worked with her again and she was great. Then I worked with Madonna and that was my cure.

JJ: I would imagine that your psychiatry background probably helps a lot in your job!

Now you mentioned your concealer, and the consensus among professional makeup artists is that you have the best concealer in the business. What's the secret?

LM: My Camouflage is a heavy concealer formulated

for acneic skin, so it doesn't make you break out. It's very pigmented and very close to the skin tone; you take it with a brush and it covers everything. There are six colors to mix and match, depending on your tan or what you're covering. It holds for 25 hours if you want. Give this to a makeup artist, and she's hooked—it's like a drug!

JJ: How did you start your makeup and skincare lines?

LM: I had been ready for years because of this technique that I'd been working on—doing the skin as natural as possible, using yellow tones. Makeup artists in the business had been using yellow tones, but big companies were still stuck on pink foundations. I'm a big admirer of Bobbi Brown because she was the first to offer yellow foundation to the public. Of course I was thinking and dreaming of a makeup line, and the Camouflage is the first thing I thought of having on the market—that was still missing. First there was Bobbi Brown, then Nars, and I thought okay no one is going to approach me. Then out of the blue the business person who started Bobbi Brown came to me. She was a big believer that a makeup artist could say something different. She asked me, "Do you have something different to say?" And I said, "Yes!" I don't feel it's a big competition. I think if you have something different to offer, good products, and good management, then you're okay. On skincare, for me the canvas underneath the makeup is very important. I notice that a lot of women abuse their skin now so

they're even more sensitive and allergic, so I wanted to have a soft yet efficient type of skincare—a gentle formulation to moisturize, nourish, and protect the skin, with no irritants.

JJ: What do you think of all these pulse peels and Retin-A products that are becoming so popular?

LM: There is incredible technology these days. Some are good and some are abusive. Retin-A has been successful for years, but it's the way you mix it with other ingredients that can make it an irritant. Preservatives and fragrance are the biggest irritants in a skin care. And it depends if the dosage is right or not. There is abuse from the doctors as well, in giving a high dosage of Retin-A or glycolic acid to all their patients who complain of another fine line to erase or a new wrinkle. I just don't believe you should become coo coo about getting older. The American woman especially wants to feel the burn to feel that it's working, and it doesn't have to burn. There are very efficient products that do the job and you don't feel a thing. I think we need to break the concept of abusing [and being aggressive with] the skin and come back to an equilibrium.

JJ: Do you still travel a lot for work?

LM: Oh God, yes. I do 36 personal appearances a year, which with travel, are three days each. And I travel also doing photo shoots. I work much less, of course—I can not do it all.

JJ: Any travel tips?

LM: I love to be pampered. I choose the nicest hotel where I feel the most com-





portable, and rather than arriving late at night, if I can I try to arrive earlier in the day and try to have a massage, maybe a manicure, take a hot bath with essential oils, a mini-facial, a hair treatment—whatever I can do to feel great. The time on the plane I use to read and to meditate. Since I usually don't talk to anyone on the plane, it's a very soothing time for myself.

JJ: I find that so many makeup artists don't wear makeup; do you?

LM: If I'm going out, definitely. But to go to a studio where you may spend 17 hours and you perspire in the lights, I would hide a pimple always; my Camouflage is my best friend. If I have a little more time, I'll put on mascara. Then a gloss—Just Lips. I try to make time to do a minimum at least because then I feel better the entire day.

JJ: So if you were deserted on an island with two makeup products, what would they be?

LM: Camouflage and something for the lips, a stain which I could also put on my

cheeks.

JJ: And if you could take two people?

LM: My "friend" and my dog.

JJ: Do you have a favorite model, male and female.

LM: Enrique—I love this guy,

he's so charming and cute. I think Giselle at the moment is one of the most beautiful. I also really really adore Linda and Christy. I have cherished them very much because I have worked with

them since they started.

JJ: Anyone you can't stand?

LM: No. Actually I can say I've gotten along with the worst people in the business. There are a few people I don't really enjoy working with, that I can say. There are some celebrities I actually refuse to work with because they have the reputation—and it's not rumors—they're true nightmares. And then I would rather stay home and have a great time with myself.

JJ: Favorite photographer?

LM: Of course Steven Meisel. Patrick DeMarchelier, he's really fun and easy to work with. I love Peter Lindbergh. I love Rocco Laspada. Rocco is one of the most human, gentle people in the world.

JJ: What's more important, lighting or makeup?

LM: I don't think you can say one thing is more important than the other. But now if you do shitty makeup it's more forgiving because of re-touching. When we started 20 years ago, this generation of makeup artists had to be good, or we couldn't survive. It's easier these

days. You know [the photos] are going to be re-touched. I'm not criticizing. It's just the way technology is going; it's just the way the future is going.

JJ: What will be in for the new millennium?

LM: Anything goes, meaning it's a potpourri of very different things: naked, Zen, neutral, cold color, futuristic, metallic, shimmer, shine, or warm and sexy, brick reds, warm browns, pastel colors, a new generation of matte is coming, you can mix matte and shiny, mix textures.

JJ: Are you selling makeup to men?

LM: Men can definitely use the Camouflage and they do. They can use a bronzer powder to emphasize their tan.

JJ: Do you prefer France or the U.S.?

LM: Ummm, that's a tough question. I love the U.S. I feel like a fish in the water in the U.S., but I still adore my country. I think the people are very rude and pretentious and pessimistic, and I can say that because I'm French and I was like that, but I do adore them anyway. And I do adore the quality of life over there. I love living in the U.S. Everything is so easy and professional. Everything is on a different perspective and level. Now when I go to France I go as a tourist almost, so I can see the best out of it.

JJ: Do you prefer French men or American men or no men at all?

LM: I don't have any prejudices against any men at all, as long as they're not macho. As long as they have a good dose of feminine in them. And men who can live on an equal level and can

share anything with a woman.

JJ: Cats or dogs?

LM: I have a tendency to prefer dogs, but I love every animal.

JJ: Beach or mountains?

LM: Oh God! I'm not a black and white person. Equal.

JJ: Combat boots or stilettos?

LM: Probably combat boots.

JJ: Fur coats or pashmina shawls?

LM: Pashmina is when they don't kill the goat, right? As long as they don't kill the goat I'm fine with it.

JJ: Steak or tofu?

LM: Tofu.

JJ: Tear Sheet or W? That, of course, is a trick question, and any answer but Tear Sheet will result in an automatic deletion of the entire story.

LM: I am very excited about the magazine!

JJ: Answer accepted. Merci Ms. Mercier.

To find out more about Laura Mercier cosmetics and skincare, or to have your own "chat" with the artist, visit lauramercier.com. Laura Mercier is represented by Artists by Timothy Priano at Next in New York.