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# Becoming Iris Mittenaere

Interview by Carolina Benjumea

On January 30th, 2017, a 24-year-old Iris Mittenaere was crowned the most beautiful woman on earth. Her charisma, smile, wit, and confidence made her the undeniable winner of the evening. She became the second French woman in history to hold the title of Miss Universe after a hiatus of 64 years. That day, French newspapers proudly titled: La Française Iris Mittenaere remporte la couronne!

Beauty pageants play a complex role in culture and the collective imagination of a nation. They serve as representations of national identity and its beliefs. However, their strength lies in the platform they create to showcase women's talents and amplify their voices. Beauty pageants, as we know them today, can help propel the feminist agenda by generating conversations around empowerment and inclusion. Iris, whose name was inspired by the Greek goddess of the rainbow, initially wanted to be a dentist, but an unexpected message she received through Facebook convinced her otherwise. "It was someone who contacted me on Facebook at the time to propose I take part in the Miss Flandre contest," Iris recalled. Unfamiliar with the world of beauty pageants, she decided to embark on the journey of a lifetime. The following years became a period of discoveries, hard work, and a string of victories. In the span of three years, she went on to win Miss Flandre, Miss Nord-Pas-de-Calais, Miss France,

and finally Miss Universe. "I didn't expect much because I just wanted to have fun and experience a world I knew nothing about. Eventually, I got caught up in everything that was happening, and I loved the atmosphere with the other girls and the whole adventure," she admits.

After her winning streak and spending one year in New York as Miss Universe, Iris left her crown behind, but the world was at her feet. The ball was in her court now—it was up to her to decide the woman she wanted to become. "Those are two years where you don't make any decisions, where your schedule is imposed on you every day (...) After two years of this, I did feel a bit eager to have more freedom." It was around the same time that content creation on social media began gaining recognition as a real career, and a digital presence became essential for virtually every brand and individual in the world. "It really started with a desire to share—sharing my life in New York, showing them restaurants, travels, and the hotels I visited. I always saw Instagram a bit like WhatsApp Family."

As she stepped away from her pageant phase, she began to build the foundation of her future. Social media became the place where she would discover her essence, her career, and herself while sharing her life with others. "Since I love fashion, I appreciate beautiful photos and the aesthetic aspect when I create a nice image. But that's not the main focus of what I share (...) It truly stems from wanting to tell a story, share experiences, offer advice, help, and have fun with others."

On Instagram, we forget about her Miss Universe side. She comes across as the ultimate Parisian girl, but she connects with her followers through her relatability. She currently counts 3.4 million followers on Instagram alone and boasts a portfolio of brands that spans from L'Oréal to Jimmy Choo, The Kooples, Intimissimi, and more. Iris has become the favourite face of both French and international brands—not only for her beauty but also for her spontaneity and authenticity. "When they seek out a content creator, they're not just looking for a TV commercial. They're really looking for the person's DNA, the unique creation of that individual," she explains. "They trust us because they don't just want to see their products being photographed. They want to see how we interpret them."

While scrolling through her Instagram feed, one can discover her funny side through videos, her fashion side through collaborations, and her most intimate side through content featuring friends and family. "I don't hide much; I share moments where I'm cracking up for an hour with Paul, for example, or

moments when I'm not feeling great," she said. Her talent lies in her ability to infuse a human and natural essence into each post, showcasing products in an authentic way. "I love trying to find innovative things, new concepts, different ways of communicating, and having fun with it," she affirmed.

After establishing herself as one of the most beloved influencers in France, Iris has stepped into her most recent project: her brand, Imii. "Creating has always been my passion. I've always loved creating," she affirmed, also sharing that this interest was inherited from her grandmother, who was a seamstress. Imii is a sporty brand that reflects her essence and her love for sports and movement. "I thought, we can be beautiful, we can feel confident, while wearing comfortable clothes that make us feel good. That's really what I wanted to do, what I wanted to share with everyone: clothing where you feel good."

Model, brand ambassador, content creator, and now designer, for Iris, pushing boundaries means not setting herself any boundaries—allowing herself to explore every creative need and every desire for artistic expression. "There are no limits. I think that's what's cool," she says, adding, "In reality, today, we can do anything, and that's what's so great—there are no limits. That's what makes it so exciting: the freedom to push boundaries." As her life is followed by the millions who admire her, and as she steps into her third decade, she reflects on her beginnings, her past, and the person she left behind in her 20s. "I've learned that I'm much stronger than I thought, that I have mental strength (...) I think I've gained a deeper understanding of my worth as a person, of the love I can give to others," she reminisces.

Iris has created a world that reminds us that no dream is too small and no effort is too little when done with passion. Her life has been filled with unexpected moments and sudden opportunities, leading her to find her path and walk her own journey in life. Done from the most genuine place within herself, Iris has built a career of success, driven by her need to connect with those around her and her desire to stay true to herself. From her early days as a beauty queen to working with brands, she continues to deliver performances of a lifetime, all while navigating her own journey of self-discovery. In the end, Iris is just a girl with big dreams and a strong desire to chase them. "I'm an absolutely ordinary person who just got lucky one day to see her life shine with a little extra sparkle," she says. ✨