Creativity cannot be taught. One needs to be born with it. It is a God-given talent, though often it has to be honed and developed by another creative person. This person opens up the way one looks at things, at the world.

In that regard, my mentor was my aunt, the fashion designer Salvacion Lim Higgins, or Slim, as she was more commonly known. I know her in my heart as “Chis Vacion,” my toddler pronunciation of “Tita Vacion” that stuck. Constant exposure to her during my youth formed many of my own perspectives as a designer.

I spent a great deal of my childhood with my Chis Vacion and her sister (and partner) Purificacion, and later would hang around their shop named “Slim’s,” peeking in at clients’ fittings. I was sometimes allowed to thread beads. I would stay up until the wee hours of the morning to quietly watch her drape gowns, play with color and fabric, and create embroidery designs.

Seduced by that whole world of glamor and creativity, at 16 I started modeling for Slim, hoping to wear her more sensuous gowns but much to my young, rebellious self’s dismay, she would give me the baby-doll-look dresses. A perfectionist, she once made me stand still for 5 ½ hours while she draped and shaped a gown on my body.

Slim taught me to find inspiration in everything. She read many books and traveled time and again. She would shut herself up in her room to create for hours, listening to French music—the voice of Edith Piaf floating through the air. She loved the paintings of Paul Gauguin, those of the Samoan women being her favorites.

Although her stimulus came from many sources, she needed the eye and the wild imagination to create something original from a word.
or an image. She certainly had no lack of that. As a couturier, Slim was in my view set apart from the rest by her sense of daring. She took risks and pursued what she wanted. When beginning her process of creation, she would start with the silhouette, play with line and shape to form a bubble or a pear, liquid lines or standing pleats. Her patterns were like origami.

Many of her gowns had a leaning toward asymmetry. She was “allergic” to side seams on a gown. “Seams should be hidden as part of the design,” she would explain to me. The shadow of a Slim’s dress was born before knowledge of its color was even a possibility. She created shape without boundaries, with only the female form as a guideline. She often created drama not through glitter, but through shape and color.

My Chis Vacion once explained to me that there are a myriad different kinds of blue, and each can change the look of a gown instantly, the tone of a woman’s skin, the flush on her cheeks, the light in her eyes. She was partial to uncommon but rich shades of blue, like midnight, teal and peacock blue. I never forgot this simple but important lesson.

Fuchsia she used a lot for clients as it was flattering on them. But her palette was broad. She became known for unusual combinations of color—olive green with mauve, mixing in shades of brown and grey as neutrals. Slim was the only couturier who played with those colors in the 1950s and early 1960s. Her decidedly individual palette has subconsciously been carried down from one generation to the next in our family—from myself, to her son Mark, to my daughter Katrina.

I learned techniques in basic pattern making and draping from my aunt Purificacion but it was my Chis Vacion who taught me to create. She treated the woman’s body as a blank canvas. “You can bring out the personality of a woman through the design she wears. There is a fine line between being elegantly sexy and being vulgar,” my aunt would repeat to me. “Different personalities can handle low cleavage—but if a woman is already voluptuous, there is no point in giving her a low décolleté.”

Context was an important consideration: she was very particular about lighting. She would put spotlights on a gown to see how it would look in the evening, or work with the curtains drawn apart if it was for a daytime event.
Textile played a big role in her creations. She collected and “hoarded” fabrics, which she kept for months or years in a chest or closet, until they were used for a creation.

Even her beadwork was highly distinctive. She did not design flat embroidery or beadwork. For her, every bead on a dress must have a purpose, creating another dimension, bringing her designs to life. She used whatever her whims desired in her symphonies of embellishment, from seeds and raffia to Austrian glass beads and semiprecious stones. Once, she used five shades of one style of bead in a single composition.

Slim’s passion in life was the pure joy of creation—she was totally absorbed in her work. There was for her a constant excitement as creation unfolded in her hands. Sometimes a dress had three pairs of hands—her sister Puring’s, her right hand, and adopted sister Consuelo’s. She would not take a break until the garment was finished, being hands-on until the last stitch was sewn.

She was a workaholic who would not let herself be cornered by time when she was creating a gown for a client, but terribly last-minute for herself—a bad habit I acquired from her—where a gown was sometimes still being sewn onto her body as she was heading out the door.

She was very, very calm when she was working, even before a fashion show began. But if someone did not follow instructions she would lose her temper. Incidences of gowns landing in garbage bags, or being shredded, were few and far between, but they did happen.

Slim shared her knowledge not just with me, but with all those who surrounded her—from her sewers, beaders, finishers, fitting models, to illustrators and countless students who were there observing, learning, dreaming of and eventually becoming artists in their own right.

Jean Margaret Goulbourn

I didn’t turn into Cesar Gaupo, the fashion designer overnight. It wasn’t easy for me to become me. Along the way, I had the opportunity to study and train with the late designer, Salvacion Lim-Higgins of the Slim’s School. I had worked for other designers, it was just work.
But with Slim, it was different. I was inspired by her and when you’re inspired, you try harder and aim higher.

I enrolled in Fashion Design at the Slim’s School. Upon observing my work while I was there, she called me to her office. “Can you teach?” she asked me. I said, “I have no background, I just finished high school.” “We will give you the materials,” she said.

I wasn’t really interested in teaching at the time but she took me under her wing anyway. I can remember my classmates saying that I was even better than some of the teachers because of my colors. Salvacion loved my color sense. Eddie Ocampo, another Slims protégé who ended up working in the U.S., told me, “You are so blessed to be training with her, it’s worth it even if you don’t get paid!” I worked in her shop in the mornings, for a little less than a year.

I was so inspired by the way she dressed, the way she handled herself. Just by watching her alone, there was a lot to learn from her personal style. She was refined, she looked neat and was always dressed in the spirit of high fashion. I have never seen a woman dressed so consistently, whether it was for a party, to go to the school, or to work with her staff in the shop. When she walked along Taft Avenue between the shop and the school, she would wear unusual combinations like fuchsia and green, or purple and yellow. Yet, she was never overdressed. She was different from other designers simply because she had good taste. You don’t study taste and you cannot acquire taste—it is inborn.

Apart from colors, she was very good with fabrics—linen, crepe. Her work was always modern for the times, more daring, even for the Bayanihan dance troupe that toured the world. The idea of creating a black-and-white Maria Clara collection for them in the 1950s had never been done before. The Bayanihan costumes were usually done in bright colors. From Slim, I learned a lot about the importance of understanding fabric. My exposure to her taught me about color and I have come to realize that her colors are actually my favorite colors now. I even use them on the shoes that I make!

Slim was very passionate about her work, whatever she was doing. She wasn’t really talkative, but while she was working, draping, and attending to clients, she pointed things out to me. She would tell me, “This is what you should do… this is what I like.” I picked up some of her traits, such as not allowing a dress to leave my shop unless I’m happy with it. Like her, my work is not so much business as it is a
matter of passion. If you care about making money at the end of the
day, it’s business. But an artist, from the start, would think about what
he or she can do best. From a business angle, it’s all about what will
sell. But artists think differently. They think about what is best, what is
beautiful, without really caring if it sold or not.

Some people think that this kind of work requires a lot of patience
but when I’m working, I don’t need patience. I experience a lot of joy.
You’re trying to make things perfect, make them beautiful; you’re
creating things and you’re enjoying every moment of it.

I follow after Slim, who was always very focused on her work. She
was no socialite and she wasn’t into networking. She didn’t attend
socials for the sake of the publicity. Probably the reason she is more
obscure now, decades later, than some other designers is because
working hard for publicity wasn’t important to her. Her work was. And
so was teaching. When she founded her school, it was the first truly
legitimate one. When young people asked me to recommend a good
school, I could only answer “Slim’s”.

While I wasn’t ready to teach in my youth, I’ve since become very
aware of the importance of teaching. I’ve passed on lessons that I’ve
learned to some of the children of my clients who were interested in
design.

Slim has been admired by many. I think being appreciated by
another designer says a lot. It’s more important to be admired by your
peers more than anyone else, especially by those who were very good.
It’s not so much about being famous. It’s a much deeper kind of respect,
and in a way, a greater achievement. Slim was a designer’s designer.

Cesar Gaupo
Jean Goulbourn is a fashion designer, a health and wellness advocate, and spearheads a foundation for the education on awareness about depression. With a career in fashion that has spanned decades, she is today best known for making a mark on the development of a distinct global look for Philippine handwoven silk, through her fashion boutique and line of interior textiles popularly known under her brand Silk Cocoon.

Cesar Gaupo is a respected couturier, fashion, shoe, and home furnishing designer, in the Philippines and abroad. Identified as a pioneer in the Philippine fashion industry, especially in ready-to-wear, he has been a fashion designer for SM Boutique Square in the Philippines, for the famous Shanghai Tang abroad, a shoe designer for John Kenner and recently, a designer for home furnishings.