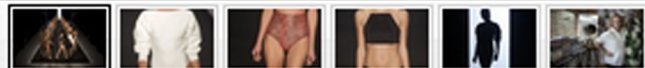


From garage to swimwear empire, the rise of Brazilian designer Lenny Niemeyer



CAPTION



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RIO DE JANEIRO — Before she became Brazil's bikini queen, with an empire of chic boutiques and legions of VIP fans that include Hollywood A-listers and pop royalty, Lenny Niemeyer was locked away in her garage, making swimwear out of old pareos and sliced cow bones.

Sitting before this perfectly coiffed blond businesswoman in a sun-lit corner office in her Rio de Janeiro headquarters, it's hard to picture her hacking though bovine femurs with a surgical saw to make ornamental loops for her first bikini bottoms. But steely determination that propelled Niemeyer from her garage atelier to the summit of the Brazilian fashion industry still glints in her grey eyes.

“It was all improvised. I had no idea what I was doing and one thing just led to another,” said Niemeyer, seated at a desk littered with sketches, heavy art books and a rainbow of spandex swatches — the inspiration for the spring-summer 2013 collection that hits the runway on Wednesday at Fashion Rio, the city's five-day-long fashion extravaganza that began on Monday.