THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

"AMERICAN SPORTSWEAR : CLAIRE McCARDELL"

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By

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INTRODUCTION

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When Sportswear is mentioned what is the first thing one thinks of? *Aerobics, Football, Horse Riding, Gymnastics, Swimming, Baseball etc.* It is much more complicated than that. Sportswear has been taken totally out of context. It can be separated into many different categories. In my analysis of sportswear in the following thesis I will discuss the concept of sportswear, it's origin and progression over the last century. My main interest in "*American Sportswear*" and the so called pioneer of the "*American Look*" Claire McCardell. To discover what the *American Look* is, one has to trace American Sportswear, Fashions, pre World War II and Claire McCardell Sportswear designs post Second World War.

I will discuss McCardell's Inspirations, Fabrics Uses and Innovations. I will examine McCardell's use of humble fabrics, dazzlingly timeless designs and her genius for making clothes, that not only suited women of her own time, but that continued to hold great appeal decades after McCardell's death. In Chapter 1 I will consider the concept of sportswear and it's development over the century. I will discuss such designers as Elsa Schiaparelli, Coco Chanel and Paul Poiret and their influence on sportswear. I will also mention George Brummell, the prototype of the dandy and Suzanne Lenglen, the 1920's tennis champion, both of whom represented the activity and idol elements of sportswear. In Chapter 2, I will consider American Sportswear

and it's origin, pre World War II and the post Second World War. I will consider in depth the designer Claire McCardell, her inspirations, fabrics and pre 1942 fashion designs. In Chapter 3 I will consider McCardell's innovations (1) The Popover Dress (ii) The Diaper Bathing Suit (iii) Ballet Slippers (iv) Double Stitching (v) Mental Fastenings (vi) Shoestring Ties (vii) Leotards (viii) Travel (ix) The Civilian Defense Uniform (x) The Helicopter Dress of Tomorrow (xi) College Girls Designs and finally in Chapter 4 I will consider Claire McCardell's Legacy and the conclusion of my thesis.

CHAPTER 1

(1) The Concept of Sportswear
(2) Sportsfashion is in the making for almost a Century

WHAT IS SPORTSWEAR?

From "*Active Wear*" Clothes worn directly for the purpose of playing sports to so called "*Sporty Wear*", the wearing of a sweat shirt with tuxedo trousers and a jogging suit with a pair of pumps. It's preferring a ski parka to a fur coat. Sports fashion is young modern and comfortable. It's uncomplicated practical and easy to care for. We need a new terminology that is more descriptive for modern apparel than "*Sportswear*". It is only that segment once known as "*Active Wear*" that really constitutes sportswear in the pure sense of the word apparel for participating in the sport. In the United States in particular, what we refer to by an old fashioned term "*Sportswear*" is still in use. They call tailored jackets, separates, trousers, shirts pullovers, sweaters, jackets and tunics sportswear apparel. The terminology has changed so much from it's original format. It has become increasingly difficult to drawn a dividing line between true sportswear and a fashion garment. What I do know is that until I travelled to the United States and worked for Berdorf Goodman in the young sportswear section I had no concept of "*American Sportswear*". European and American sportswear are a world apart. The average European see's sportswear as "*Active Wear*" and the average American see's sportswear in a much larger scale. American "*Sports Wear*" is comfortable clothes with ease, creativity and freedom of expression. American designers have by now a tradition of mixing eclectic elements, a little from here, a little from there, glamorous with sporty, day with night. You'll see this attitude in the pairing of sweater sets with evening skirts, a classic suit with a nylon raincoat or hiking

boots. The integration of athletic wear into mains stream fashion in particular is part of the American way. *American Sportswear* is functional yet sophisticated.

Sports fashion has been in the making for almost a century. Sports clothes introduced by one sport often required several decades and the contributions of several sports to become "*Sports Fashion*". The drastic bloomers of the women cyclists paved the way for the introduction of trousers via skiing, horse riding and outdoor sports. While gymnastics and tennis killed the corset, the combined and gradual efforts of swimming, exercising and roller - skating introduced baiter as outer wear. Swimming familiarised women with body moulding and skin revealing designs. Exercising made the Leotard/Swimsuit a fashion item, and it's natural extension, the long body suit was introduced by roller skating. Thanks to jogging, the modest sweatsuit born in the gym, decades ago, received the attention of *French Couturiers* and *American Designers*.

While fashion fluctuates from flared to pegged, long to short and full to straight, the precise demands of sports makes sports clothes more stable. Styles designed for English and Western riding barely changed in half a century. The red and black plaid hunting coat of today is practically identical to hunting togs of the 1920's. The essential shape of the baseball uniform remains unchanged since the days of Babe Ruth. Sports clothes evolve only when their function can be improved. The silhouette may not change for decades but the fashion is refined from year to year. Riding breeches and sports uniforms of today are made from functional and sturdy stretch fabrics.

Mrs Irene Caste a world famous dancer of the 1917's liked to play dressing up games. We see her as the huntress (figure 1) golfer (figure 2) and horse women (figure 3). The huntress's silhouette is unusually masculine, as she wears breaches without the normal skirt on top

FIGURE 1

FIGURE 2

As the horse woman, she wears white tricotine breeches and a grey tweed jacket with the bottom button left unfastened as a fashion statement.

FIGURE 3

The warm and lightweight down waistcoat replaces the calfskin waistcoat of the western rider and the hunting coat is lined with warm and featherweight urethane. Concerned with fashion, sports clothes manufacturers are always ready to adopt new technology - zippers, snaps and velcro closures caught the attention of the sports world long before fashion designers took notice. Invented in the 1890's by Whitecomb L. Judgeson of Chicago and perfected over the next two decades, the zipper was used for outdoor clothing i.e. ski jackets and other sports clothes.

In Paris *Elsa Schiaparelli* the unconventional couture, was one of the first from French couture to realize the potential of the zip fastener. Pearlised snaps saved the life of many a cowboy by ensuring a quick exit from his shirt if it accidentally caught on the horn of cattle. While American designers concealed zippers, innovative Claire McCardell, whom I will discuss in more detail later, boldly displayed dime - sized brass snaps. The velcro fastener, another revolutionary idea, was inspired by the modest *Burdock Burr* which intrigued inventor *George De Mestral* during a hunting trip in the Swiss Alps in the forties. After eight years of research, he devised a velcro tape now used on knee pads, fishing vests, tennis skirts, sports gloves, ski boots and outdoor jackets. The fast, colourful and easy attachment is also a favourite today of avant garde designers.

The incorporation of comfortable and lightweight fabrics into fashion can be credited to sports and also to *Coco Chanel*. They later changed

the course of fashion when she turned jersey, (a machine - knit fabric) used for golf jumpers and athletic wear into fashionable dresses and suits. Golf was the originator of the first "casual" to filter into mainstream fashion. The sweater first seen in 1919. *Chanel* can also be credited with adapting masculine clothing into wearable feminine clothes. In doing so she developed a style which seemed particularly at the height of her influence in the 1920's, and which expressed the aspirations of early twentieth century women towards independence and mobility. Her use of masculine dress and her approach to style are reflected in her adoption of dandyism, that essentially masculine cult of distinction and ascendency which is crucially mediated through style and dress. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century *George Brummell* , the prototype of the dandy established upper class English country clothes especially riding clothes as the height of men's fashions in the city. In the early 1800's the alterations he made, particularly with regard to fit and cut established these as a critical signifier in men's dress. *Brummells* style particularly for day, was essentially restrained and disciplined and set a standard of sober discretion, appropriateness and taste which governed men's clothing until well into the twentieth century. The style was at once élitist and democratic

> Democratic because it was relatively ordinary and élitist because very few men could get it right, that depended on the co-existence of money, leisure and the odd one out skill. All this in *Brummell* went with a relentless superficiality with regard to the serious things in life and spectacular social climbing. Over the years this kind of cultural and social coup has been played out in different ways but has remained like the twentieth century concept of the avant garde, a fundamentally male preserve.
>
> (Evans, Women and Fashion, 1989, page 123)

FIGURE 4

Bare Arms and Bound Heads make up the tennis look in the twenties.

The nineteenth century ideal of masculine power based on moral strength and energy has been eroded and was subsequently denounced by the avant garde of the 1890's. This left a space for the upwardly mobile New Woman. One could argue that the spirit in which the so called New Woman took up the values of purpose and ambition of self control, inflexibility and even respectability. Her espousal of the rigidities of the male wardrobe (shirts, ties and the tailor made suit) could be entirely reactionary were it not for the progressive politics of women emancipation that went with them. It was due to the identification with women's emancipation that such an anti-decorative uniform began to appeal to women.

In the hands of *Chanel* these anti-decorative clothes were also to look glamorous. In borrowing from the male wardrobe *Chanel* drew upon the way in which men's clothes, within the terms of classical male dandyism incorporating sport elements, and signify personal independence within a rigid order. The associations of women's clothes with feminise beauty and attractions tends to leads to aesthetic meanings supposing social ones.

> Dandyism fused the social and the aesthetic in men's dress in the relation of the individual are the social world one of belonging and not belonging, of conformity and rebellion and the possibility of not being what you seen.
>
> (Evans, Women and Fashion, 1989, page 124)

Chanel designs look sporty tasteful, energetic with that added touch of personal style they call the wearer's status into question and yet give nothing away.

In 1913 there was no sports fashion as such for women and *Chanel's* sporting inclination and desires prompted her to design clothes for her own outdoor pursuits. In the 1920's she was to be much influenced by *Suzanne Lenglen*, a tennis champion, distinctive and idiosyncratic style of dress. Many of the clothes *Chanel* borrowed from the male wardrobe were sporting clothes created from the leisure activities of the upper class and *Chanel* like *Brumnell* before her, saw the potential both of their genuine and practical value and of there aristocratic association and newness. They were attracted to both the activity and idol elements of sportswear. Men's sporting wear had long incorporated elements of working class dress is facilitate ease of movement, durability and perhaps also to ascertain a more "*Elemental*" masculinity. As early as 1913 *Chanel* had made beach wear for herself out of tricot or jersey a soft flexible material then considered suitable for any underwear. The early tricot sport suits were of simple untailored construction, with patch pockets and a version of the sailor collar, all elements which derived from men's work clothes which was also to influence Clair McCardell designs decades after her. *Chanel's* early work tends to exemplify the modernist design to dispenses superfluous details and decoration designs and also to espouse the cause of functionalism. This is evident in her sportswear and becomes institutionalised in the little Black dress. American Vogue predicted in 1926 that the little black dress of the 1920's would become a sort of uniform and concluded "Here is a ford signed *Chanel*".(Evans, Women and Fashion, 1989, page 126) More generally the functionalist or anti decorative move in art and design may indicate a rejection of the feminine in favour of an exclusively masculine model of power. In this context *Chanel's* dandyism and her modernism are interlocked.

FIGURE 5

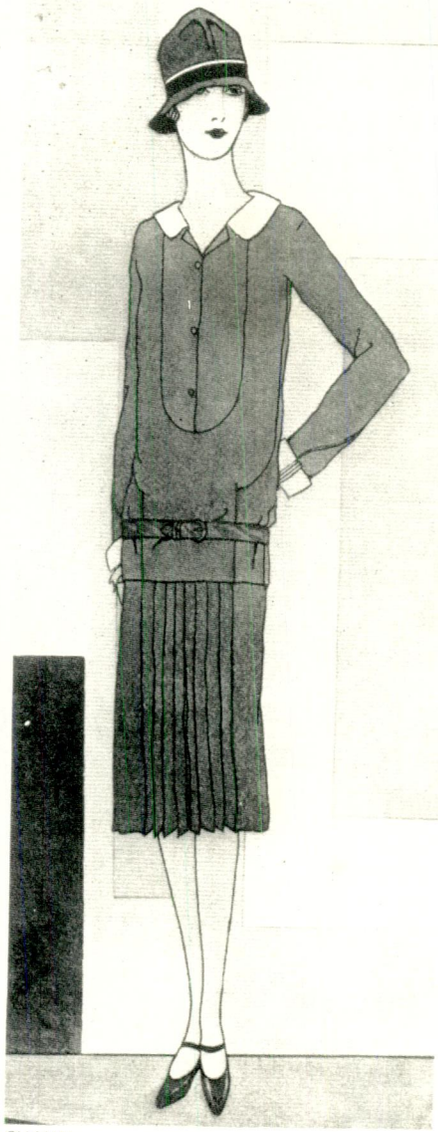

FIGURE 6

The changes in women's fashion represented by *Chanels* early work of 1914-1920 were preceded by the changes associated with the work of designer *Paul Poiret*. In 1907, *Poiret* like *Vionnet*, was designing clothes which dispensed with the nineteenth century restricting corset. *Poiret's* attack on the corset succeeded where others had tended to failed. Dress reform movements and the Aesthetic Movement had challenged the popularity of the corset. *Poiret* insured that it's removal because fashionable by transforming all the other features of women's dress while at the same time, producing a completely new aesthetic of dress. Inspired by the East and Russian Ballet. He combined (exoticism) violent colour with delicacy, exoticism with playfulness, exoticism with light touch. *Poiret's* feminine ideal was decorative and beguiling (Evans, Women and Fashion, 1989, page 128). The *Poiret* woman moved in an interior world. By contrast the woman *Chanel* designed for belonged in an exterior world - a world of an increasingly streamlined modernised. She was anti - decorative and active and fun. *Chanel* approach is heavily associated with the progress of women's emancipation and independence in the early twentieth century and in influencing future Sportswear Designers, *Chanel* is associated with the liberation of women's fashion. Her clothes were comfortable and easy to wear in the literal sense (a similarity she shares with Claire McCardell later designs) yet their definition and simplicity, signified a formal control that derived from a masculine model.

By the mid 1930's Leisure wear had become both practical and chic. Leisure activities had now become an integral part of every day life.

Cycling had now become increasingly popular as a form of transport in preference to the horse. It was in the 1930's that bare legs and sleeveless tops became more acceptable as leisure attire. However in the 1940's sportswear changed dramatically, mainly due to the second World War. There were fabric restrictions in America and Europe, this in turn had a traumatic affect on the production of sportswear. Before the second World War trousers were only respectable for women to wear on the sports field or the beach, but after the war all of this changed. There were many factors that contributed to trousers becoming acceptable for everyday wear. During the war women were working in factories and doing men's jobs, therefore trousers were much more practical. Also due to the rationing throughout the war, stockings were impossible to get and this also contributed to ladies wearing trousers. During the war any excess of fashion was forbidden because of rationing and due to this clothes streamlining became the fashion. This lead to shorter skirts and shorts. By the mid 1940's short skirts, shorts and socks were now acceptable for every leisure activity. Synthetic materials were becoming increasingly popular for sports clothes, because of there hard wearing quick drying qualities.

CHAPTER 2 (A)

American Sportswear Origins

Until the forties, America relied on Paris for fashion direction. The war forced America to trust it's own resource and to create it's "own look" that look was American Sportswear. The war provided American designers with a chance to enjoy the limelight and freed them from having to compete with the French on French terms. Having no choice but to use mostly American fabrics and techniques once considered a liability were turned into an asset. At the same time being given specific limitations spurred them to being inventive with everyone limited in the same way. Competition to solve problems resulted in excellent design. The American woman was ready for this "New Look", the independent spirit of American women who enjoyed novelty put refused to give up practicality and comfort. They were the first to embrace separates in the 19th Century, the shorter skirt before World War I and the very short dresses of the 1920's and as early as the 1930's beach pyjamas and culottes. As the prejudice against women in work and education decreased more and more women sought education and graduates went looking for an occupation. Gradually twentieth century society would come to look down upon women who seemed to lead unproductive lives. American women had long had a reputation for being independently expressed both mentally and physically in their curiosity and athleticism, an it became the hallmark of their fashion style which is predominantly sports wear.

In 1924 designer *Berthe Holley* presented a collection at the Plaza Hotel that featured the new idea of having clothes designed in sets. The dresses composed of tunics and slips were planned so that a group of pieces

could be interchangeable making a few dresses seem like many. This early example of the separates concept was peculiarly American. *American sportswear*, consists of "*separates*" interchangeable clothes that one can mix and match to one own personal style. American women had continued the shirt waist (*a comfortable dress resembling a shirt construction which is usually belted*) tradition into the twentieth century by buying and wearing jumpers and blouses with skirts to make up ensembles. Since the twentieth century evening, day and sports clothes all looked so similar, a skirt and top in a matching or contrasting colour was easy to coordinate. It resembled a dress and was tidy and comfortable. Unlike Paris, entire American manufacturing houses were devoted to separates like blouses and skirts which lead to a swift development in the ready to wear industry and made more clothes valuable to the available American woman. Sport clothes for the style of life and attitudes of free moving American women, clean functional casual, comfortable relaxed sporty clothes, though easy to wear and simple in concept were also glamorous and fashionable. World War II provided American designers with a chance to enjoy the limelight and free them to compete with the French on French terms. Having no chance but to use mostly American fabrics and techniques, once considered a liability they turned it into an asset. At the same time being given specific limitations inspired them to be more inventive and with every one limited in the same way, competition to solve problems resulted in excellent design.

CHAPTER 2 (B)

Claire McCardell Inspirations, Fabrics
and Pre 1942 Fashion Designs

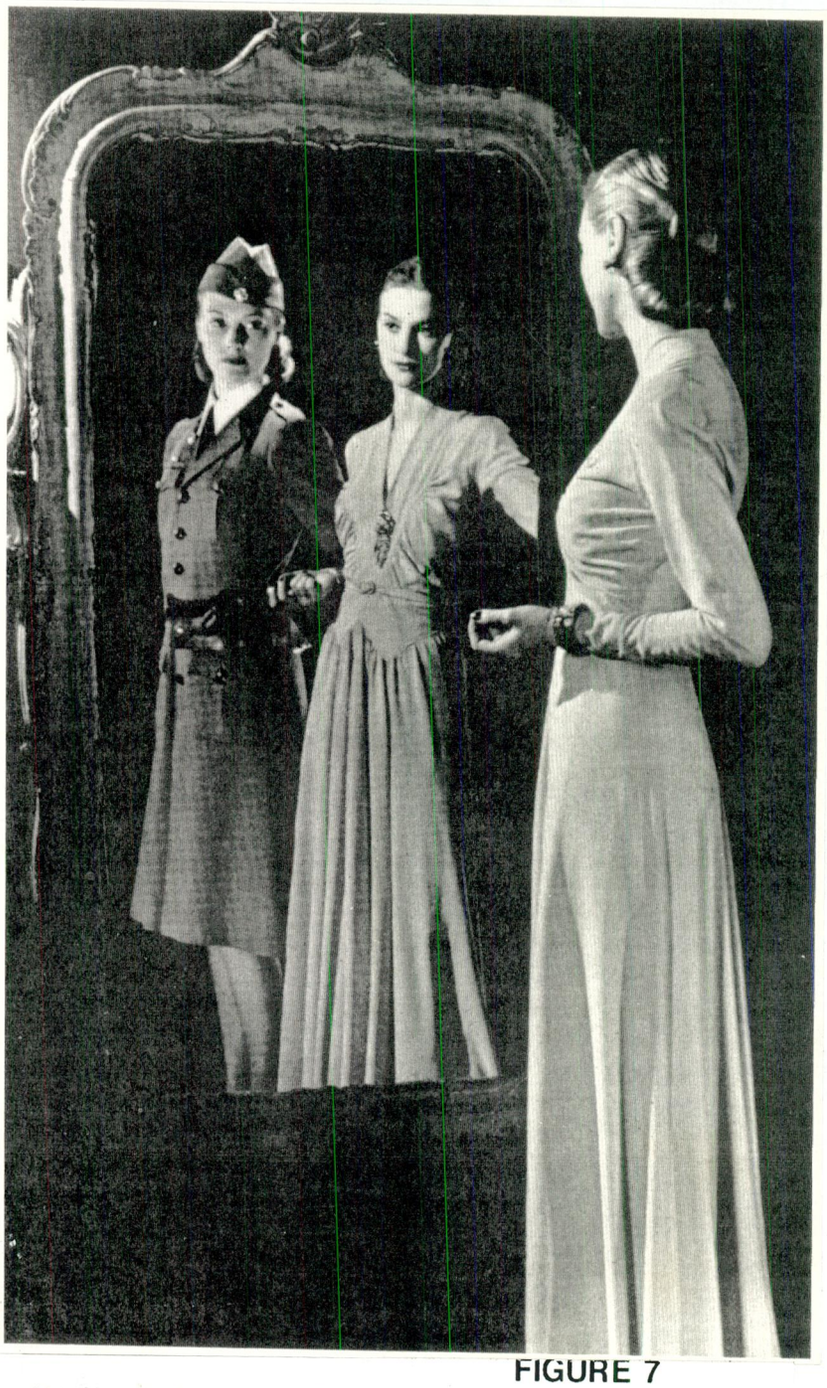

FIGURE 7

Women's Wartime Roles, 1942

Claire McCardell is probably the most important American ready to wear designer in the twentieth Century. It is her name in particular that is associated with the phenomenon known as "*The American Look*". *Paris had Chanel, America had McCardell.* McCardell was born in 1905 in Maryland, the daughter of a banker and a Southern Belle. She studied fashion at the Parsons school of design and spent her sophomore year - 1926 - in Paris. Back in New York she began working for Townley Frocks a Seventh Avenue wholesale manufacturer that specialised in sportswear. Claire's first ambition was to become a fashion illustrator and after Parsons she started her search for a job. Nobody wanted a fashion illustrator, even a good one. Claire McCardell finally landed a job painting rose buds on lamp shades. It was a long hard road to travel, but a break finally came in the person of *Robert Turk*, who was first starting in the dress designing business. McCardell became his assistant and the business grew for several years and was merged with Townley. Work had just begun on a new collection when Mr Turk lost his life in an accident. McCardell was told to finish the collection and thus began her climb to the gallery of *"Greats"* in fashion design.

In the 1930's American fashion was still in an embryonic stage of development McCardell herself admitted she did what everybody else did and that was to copy Paris. Her Sketchbook (now at Parsons) indicate, for example that she copied *Molyneux, Maggy, Rouff and Alix.* But whereas most designers simply copied McCardell also analysed and dissected dresses by *Alix* and *Vionnet*. *"I was learning the way clothes worked, the way they felt"* Like *Vionnet*,

McCardell was attentive to the nature of her materials however humble they were she was sensitive to the three dimensionality of a woman's body. Like *Vionnet*, McCardell may have represented a female design sensibility her intentions and her market (*college girls, young career women and housewives*) were different than *Vionnets* however, and she simplified *Vionnet's* cut, because she was creating ready to wear at reasonable prices not couture. In the February issue of Sportswear 1933, an sample of which is on the following page, we see an example of McCardell's early works. On the left we see a classic three piece suit effectively sponsoring *schiapanelli's* plaid knit in the jacket, chamois crêpe in the skirt and wide wale pique in the tailored blouse, Price $16.75. On the right another chic union of materials is typified in this one-piece frock of *Schiapanelli's* plaid knit with matching scarf and yoke trimmed with chamois crêpe, Price $12.75.

McCardell's dresses were dinner - at - home gowns, designed for women who had homes, they were made to sell at most moderate prices and they were simple enough for anybody. McCardell's simple designs, her ingenious separates, her unpretentious fabrics and her comfortable clothes were the foundation of American Sportswear. This simplicity, the care, the independence of this way of dressing has now come of age and dominates American design. Influenced by *Poiret* and *Chanel* her use of jersey and design approach, McCardell designed clean, functional casual comfortable relaxed sporty clothes. Though her clothes were easy to wear and simple in concept they were also glamorous and fashionable.

FIGURE 8 FIGURE 9

But in 1938 McCardell started to come into her own. The New York Times said it has long been the correct thing among fashion dictators to sneer at American ready to wear or laugh indulgently, or simply to raise an inquiring eyebrow. But a young woman named McCardell, being a free hand in one of the better sportswear houses (*Townley)* has changed all that. With yards and yards of rough exquisitely coloured fabrics and an untarnished belief in the beauty of a women's figure. McCardell has created gowns to make Seventh Avenue to sit up.

FIGURE 10

Changeable silk and rayon taffeta in dark green and wine tones used for the fitted - bodice gathered - skirt frock in this quaint dinner outfit. The waist - length jacket is of wine coloured looped angora studded with green jewels.

Early in 1940 she had been one of the first of the few to oppose the *Schiapanelli* legacy of **padded shoulders**, by then exaggerated both out and up, which so disfigured most of the wartime clothes. McCardell was ready for wartime restrictions. Her taste was for humble fabrics, she was the kind of woman it was said who possessed the ability to use common cotton calico and turn out a dress a smart woman could wear anywhere. As *Vionnet* had brought crêpe out of it's shadow as a lining fabric and as *Chanel* had created her look from cotton and jersey, McCardell used then neglected materials. Material like mattress tacking, cotton voile, seersucker, swiss and cotton georgette. Her designs were all day long. Any occasion clothes which were casual and easy fitting like active sportswear, but elegant and imaginative enough to inspire American women to achieve a look of their own. That look was dubbed "*The American Look*"

Claire McCardell was the European's version of the **Typical American Girl.** McCardell was glowing with health - her tanned skin shone with it. McCardell face was made flippant by a tilted nose enthusiastic eyes. Her figure was long and lean, her legs were long and she was young and fresh. This appearance was particularly interesting since Claire McCardell was too, that other American phenomenon: the chic designer of medium priced, mass produced clothes. She dared to do the unusual at the usual prices. McCardell helped start many fashions which are widely accepted today. Tweed every coats, mens shirting for females. Beige wool jersey for dinner suits. She initiated the famous monastic silhouette, McCardell brought the dirndl in to

dinner. McCardell made the exercise suit for Zorina which exploded into versions of bathing suites. She was the first to use the plastic slide fastener as a decoration she is famous for her use of specially designed stripes and for her use of country materials in town. For the youth and originality which shone out from everyone of her models. Active young Americans loved to wear her fun yet practical clothes. College girls, ambitious young careerists and young married suburban communities knew that her clothes would fit into their busy lifestyles.

A McCardell design is always characteristic and easy to recognise. You will invariably find double stitching, big patch pockets, trick button claspings, drop shoulder seams, taut waistlines and gathered or wraparound skirts. Sturdy cottons, seersucker, rough tweeds, rayon gabardine and wool jersey seem to have been her favourite fabrics. In colour she likes subtle combinations of neutrals, rich dark tones or vibrant shades. But why are her clothes so typical of young American? Because she herself was young, leading an active life in business and understood the clothing needs of her own life which paralleled so many other American women of her time. McCardell liked clothes that were comfortable, uncluttered, yet attractive. So she translated this philosophy into her clothes - her approach was that simple. Unlike a great many designers of her time she depended very little on historic sources of inspiration for her designs. McCardell ideas seemed to spring from the needs of modern women of the day. She noticed that college girls were wearing blue jeans, so her famous double stitching line was adapted from the stitching on those jeans. Men's shirts were popular too, so that her dropped

shoulder line, easy sleeves and turned back cuffs are inspired from shirts. So it went - adapting masculine *(as Chanel had done previously in the 1920's)* into wearable feminine clothes, an obvious need. Fabrics have always inspired her and she became identified with stripes and knitted fabrics. McCardell's fashions have always suggested "**something revolutionary, something new**" and caught on fast in the public fancy because they represented high fashion at moderate cost.

McCardell made no distinction between town and country, day or night themes by making a tweed evening coat, dressing a dinner suit in beige wool jersey, making sports dresses of men's shirting. McCardell civilised the dirndl, injected whimsy and youth into everything she ever designed. The superman hood, the ballerina bathing suit, the pert pedal pusher, the svelte leotard are all eloquent expressions of her pioneer sense. Claire McCardell is credited with having pioneered the so-called "*American Look*" but she was no folk artist of fashion. What inspired her was often humble, a mechanic's jumpsuit, say or an engineer's collar and scarf. McCardell interpretation sophisticated even intellectual. In her youth she bought flea market *Vionnet's,* then took them apart to see how they'd been put together. Like *Vionnet* she cut on the bias and like *Louis Sullivan* she believed that form follows fashions. McCardell inspiration came largely from functional clothes that had been worn for centuries or generations by working people and children. She would not have been surprised by the 1960's fashion for "**ethnic chic**" which derived from peasant and workers costume. In the 1940's she looked at the miners and the ranch

FIGURE 11

Claire McCardell enjoying a Fifth Avenue window.

hands of California and the middle west recognising the durability and design potential of denim which she later used to create fashions for urban woman whose lives were fast active and tough on clothes. More than anyone designer McCardell helped to introduce denim to the urban environment, to fashion it into clothes for working women whose lives were efficient and energetic. Denim wore well and still looked good after washing, cleaning or at the end of a hard day. Denim for the first time achieved both urban chic and an all important cachet among the fashionable cognoscenti at the east coast. Denim and jeans, for all their French origin and Italian name are strictly American in style and tradition.

The fact that America's first real crop of designers was predominately female is important. Typically when designing professionally, women have designed for themselves understanding first hand how clothes move and work and thinking more often of comfort and suitability. Practicality has always been an American trait and as American dress can be considered less a work of art than a solution to a design problem when solved well elegance is the natural result. Using herself as a continuous experiment McCardell began making things with the sportswear feeling of ease, naturalness and youth even for dress up occasions. At first many of her ideas met with closed doors. Then World War II threw *American fashion* out on it's own with a double dilemma to design without the accustomed help of Paris and within the limits of fabric restrictions from that time. McCardell's look became "*The American Look*". It was the easy relaxed look of McCardell day and leisure designs in jersey denim and

cottons that was to have the greatest and longest impact on America's fashion influencing the like's of *Bill Blaus, Calvin Klein and Donna Karen.*

Quite phenomenal among designers McCardell made clothes that looked well on herself and in doing so created the McCardell type of American woman who slung a beach lout around her spare hips and made her legs looked even better that way. The indigenous type is built like a triangle on top, the shoulders a broad straight line, the total effect is that of a stylized young boy. There's a sense of activity about her clothes the deep trouser pleat in her skirts, the way she plays with the fullness in balanced motifs. McCardell's famous stitching theme, which can always be identified uniquely a McCardell black or brown linen have always inspired her and she became identified with stripes and knitted fabrics like many other travellers to Austria in the mid thirties she had fallen for the gathered - all - around dirndl skirts worn by women and children, they were comfortable and young (the name means little girl). McCardell injected whimsy and youth into everything she ever designed. McCardell wanted men's wear devices of function to appear in women's wear and for pockets to become useful features in women's wear. McCardell's work is distinguished by the integrity of these innovations to the functional whole of the garment. More than any other designer in the tradition of *American Sportswear*, McCardell reevaluated dress to the principles of functionality and truth to materials that are the characteristics of modernism in the arts. Keenly aware of the history of costume as well as of contemporary fashion, McCardell created design that is slightly outside of fashion. Even as decoration plays a

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LEE Union-Alls, Overalls and Play Suits are also available in styles having buttons instead of Hookless Fasteners.

This full page advertisement appears in Liberty Magazine, September 10

FIGURE 12

role in McCardell design it is subordinate to function, the draw strings hooks and eyes and related ties and fastening entering new vocabulary into the glossary of fashion, but always within the functional necessities of the garment.

The comfort of the garment became an essential criterion of design and the changes McCardell introduced then became modifications in the way people lived. Like most designers, McCardell was stimulated by the theatre, travel, museums, old costumes, books and whatever past for a flea market. Unlike many however she almost never copied anything whole or designed with a "**theme**". McCardell's number one inspiration was the American woman and the busy life she leads.

McCardell was influenced by the high waisted slim skirted dresses of the empire and regency ease, but she was apt to put their voluptuous necklines and tiny off shoulder sleeves into a dress made of some cotton calico. Then to even things up she would do a version the prim high - wrapped bodices and of full skirts worn by nineteenth - century new England women in the most diaphanous cotton voile or nylon chiffon she could find. *Polaire Weissman*, former curator of the metropolitan museum's costume institute used to call the section with clothes from 1810 to 1830 "**McCardell's Corner**". She remembers that several of the museums children's clothes gave McCardell ideas for grownups. The collarless neck and draw string back of a little girls party outfit turned up in one of McCardell's best coats. A Dutch boys full fold over trousers were inspiration for an excellent wrapped front skirt. An elegant Edwardian lace

trimmed diaper cover, metamorphosed into one of McCardell's most famous jersey bathing suits of the 1940's. The diaper bathing suit. The railroad workers, double stitched and riveted work clothes had led to specific McCardellism. Also the workaday bandanna became one of McCardell's favourite soft necklines. When she stitched it's triangular shape to the back of her dresses and knotted it in front. The right angled pocket flaps of the cow hands frontier trousers turned up in the skirt of a wool street suit and the trousers were reproduced for girls in pink denim. Some of her best selling shirtwaist dresses were apt to show traces of the big sleeved, wasp - waisted ladies in the Charles Dana Gibson drawings she collected. Others had the pleated bosoms and tab collars of contemporary custom made English dress shirts.

Not only did McCardell add a personal dimension to the accepted concept of sportswear but she added something new to her show room presentation. She chose a house model, Connie Polan who was the embodiment of her own unique look. Before this most house models were chosen not for their style or personality but because they had figures which were perfect size, usually 12. It didn't matter that they were apt to be grandmother or bookkeepers sister. But Connie was no bookkeepers sister her measurements were also McCardell's, tall 7" long of waist and limb, with a small high bust, tiny rib cage, small waistline but some hips and even a little tummy, McCardell maintained that "**tummies are beautiful like Botticelli's Venus**" Harpers Bazaar referred to her stomachy skirts as effective camouflage for a bulge.


FAB
Gets Wash
CLEAN CLEAR THRU
and Deodorized Too!
BLUE BELL
Wrangler
this label on; will
not be damaged
by ordinary laun-
dering.

FIGURE 13

McCardell eliminated Connie's bra and girdle, gave her a hairdo like her own, pulled back in a little knot and short bangs and tendrils. She even taught her own slouching lobe of a walk, shoulders sloping, hands deep in the side pockets and hips thrusting a bit forward. That stance is taken for granted now as the models walk.

McCardell's first commercial success in 1938 came from an Algerian costume she had made for herself and did not think anyone wise would like. She had worn it to a Beaux Arts Ball, she liked it's flowing lines and had made a street length version in red wool, cut completely on the bias with no waistline - a tent until belted. When it was belted it did nice things for the figure in an easy dose it sort of way. But no women was likely to know that until she tried ti on. It had no "**hanger appeal**". McCardell's dress was dubbed the "*The Monastic Dress*" she continued the loose silhouette in her next collection cruise wear. But the Monastics enormous unexpected success pointed to a far more casual, easy look for the American woman and it was prime evidence of a new and independent design talent. The Monastic dress was a relaxed adaptable style that contrasted with the late thirties work of structured clothes with fitted bodices and a feminise style that predated the postwar new look. That it was so successful proved that Americans were finally ready to wear totally original designs created by Americans specifically with Americans in mind. According to McCardell's biographer Sally Kirkland the dress caused a sensation:

> **"Drop Everything!"** an agitated dress manufacturer shouted to his designer. **"There's a girl up the street making a dress with no back, no front, no waistline and my good no bust darts."**
>
> (Lee, American Fashion, The Life and Lines of Adrian, Mainbocher, McCardell, Norell, Trigere, 1975, page 220)

Nevertheless the "Mosastic Dress" proved tremendously popular and unfortunately, it was also extremely easy to copy and Townley Frocks went (Temporarily) bankrupt.

Hattie Carnegie recognised McCardell's talent and hired her to create a line called **"work shop originals"**. But Carnegie's customers wanted something fancier for their money so in 1940 McCardell returned to Townley Frocks to design under her own name. Most American designers were anonymous at this time, and it says something about McCardell's strength of character that she was credited for her designs. Even the publicity for the **American Designer Movement** tended to emphasise the name of the store rather than the designer. It is important to note.

> Before and during the war there was a terrific Vogue for what were called, "*The American Designers*" who were being discovered and promoted by **Dorothy Shaver** at Lord and Taylors, recalled fashion editor **Bethina Ballard**. During the war they received an inordinate amount of publicity, what with Paris dead to the press, and also because they represented a good national fashion story.
>
> (Steele, Women of Fashion, 1991, page 106)

World War II undoubtable helped McCardell's career. Cut off from Paris manufacturers and department stores were desperate for home grown design

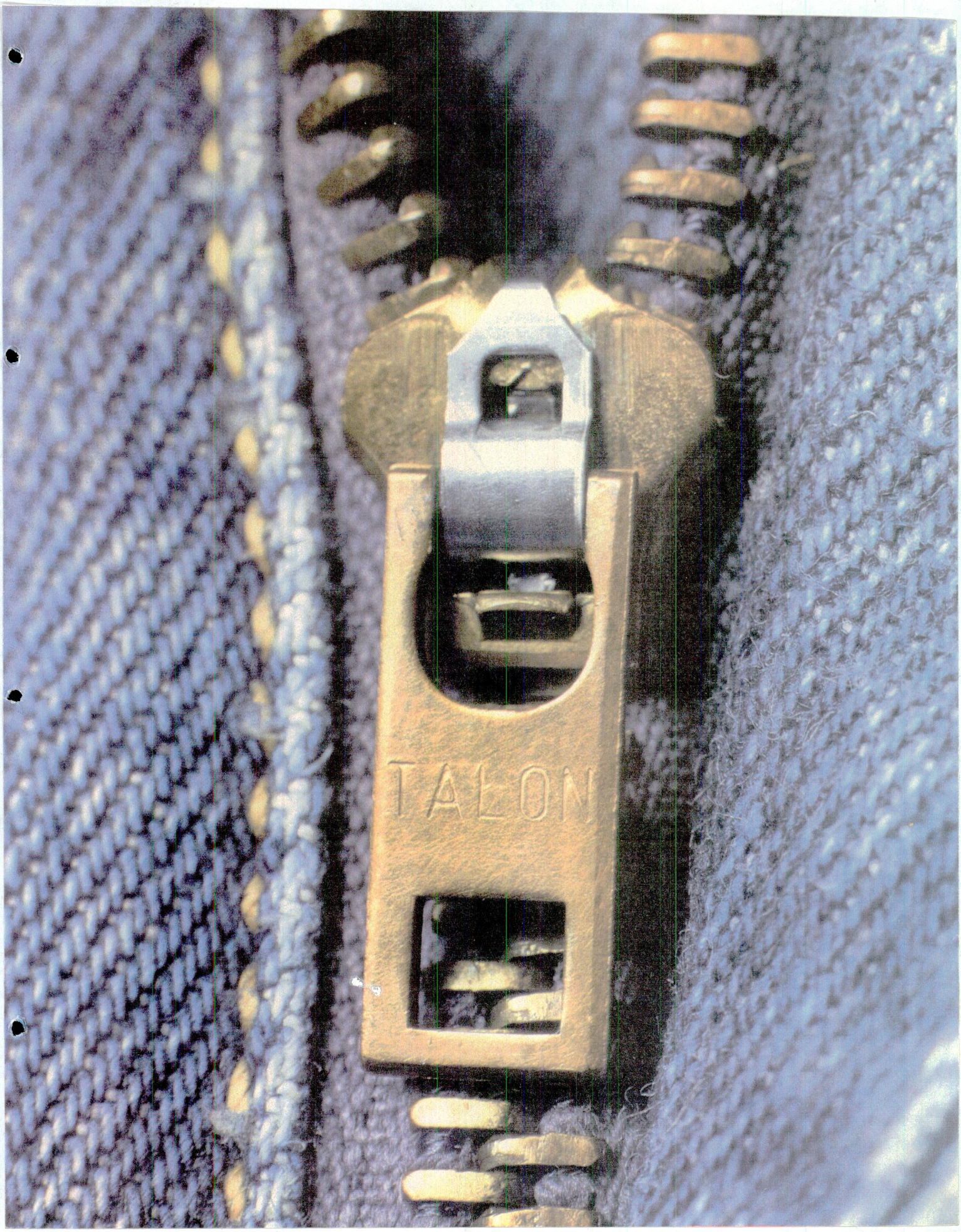


FIGURE 14

talent especially designers who could work within wartime restrictions. Creating simple inexpensive clothes, and McCardell regarded wartime restriction as a welcomed challenge.

From her first collections (1940) for the newly reorganised company Townley Frocks, it was clear that McCardell had crystallised her thinking about how clothes should look and feel on the body, Her dresses were soft rather than strident like some of their contemporary counterparts. During the 1940's her innovations became widely known, beginning spectacularly with her 1940's abandonment of the exaggerated shoulder pad. McCardell wanted to drop the shoulder pads from her first collection. Introduced by *Schiaparelli* in Paris in the late 1930's to give women a broader, slightly squared off shoulder, and to make their hips look slimmer, shoulder pads had grown to grotesque proportions. Shoulder were being built up as well as out. Some designers thinking two layers of pads would be doubly affective were showing padded suits under padded overcoats so that the female shoulder seemed to start right under the ears, McCardell wanted none of this. *Henry Geiss* and *Adolph Klein* who were in control of Townley Co. protested that retailers would not buy paddles dresses. McCardell compromised, she's tack in pads so lightly that a flick of the nail scissors would dislodge them. This was possible because she usually cut her sleeves in one piece with the bodice in a seam extending over the shoulder and down the arm. With the pad out the sleeve did not drop as a sleeve set in separately at the shoulder was apt to do shoulder pads in place. McCardell's bosses let her do what she wanted. McCardell's main ambition was to make

attractive and practical clothes for all American women not just for those who could afford expensive designer prices. "Claire McCardell clothes" which replaced the "**Frocks**" by Townley also came to mean evening separates, ski outfits, rain coats and even wedding dresses. McCardell's ability to design across the board below the couture level had an enormous effect on moderate priced designers who had confined to rigid categories like coats suits or evening dresses.

McCardell's choice of fabric was as down to earth as she was, but in unorthodox and also trendsetting ways, wool, jersey or cotton for a cocktail dress, tweed or camel's hair for an evening wrap, mattress tacking for a town suit, nightgown nylon tricot for a dinner dress. Cotton had played a major role in American history during the war and a panic or two but it was far from a start in ladies fashion of the twenties and thirties. It had been seen only in classic shirtwaist dresses, and active sportswear. McCardell created blowy little printed voile dresses with sexy halter necks and bias wrapped midriffs. She designed clothes for any place and any time of day out of cotton and the humbler their origins the better.

In her first collection for the new Townley McCardell showed an evening dress that she called the "**Kitchen Dinner Dress**", like so many of her best designs, it came from a need in her own life. McCardell liked cooking and she wanted something practical to wear while stirring sauces in the kitchen, yet pretty enough to join the guests in the living room. The solution: long -

skirted washable dresses, often in her favourite bold plaids and stripes, sometimes with a full apron to match. Since the bold patterns were generally not available in the cotton goods market for women's clothes, McCardell went afield to the children's and men's sports skirt market. Soon she was a sort of heroine to the manufacturers of cotton textiles. She encouraged the New England cotton mills to revive their prim little nineteenth century calico patterns. These calicos were symbolic. They had crossed the continent with the pioneers. Even the scraps had been saved and cherished in patchwork quilts. McCardell's adventurous scissors cut the calico's into evening dresses and coat and dress ensembles. She had an eye for the inherent possibilities of a fabric even when at first it seemed a disappointment. One of McCardell's favourite fabrics was wool jersey. Unlike cotton, wool jersey had high fashion acceptance during McCardell's Paris days. But in common with cotton, it was reasonably priced and available in quantity. McCardell used jersey in ways Paris had never dreamed of, from her bias - cut bathing suits to full fledged evening - on - the - town outfits. Rather than use cheaper versions of luxurious satins and brocades, McCardell preferred to switch to make wool jersey an evening fashion in it's own right. The switch to jersey was one of her most successful ploys, lifting her kind of inexpensive dresses into a class of their own. Women who could afford higher prices often preferred the fluid lines, package-ability and versatilely of McCardell's jerseys. Many think that McCardell's faithful use of jersey as a year - round, clock - round fabric had a lot to do with the total acceptance of knitted clothes by women everywhere in the decades since. McCardell was receptive to new ideas from the textile industry and where

McCardell led others soon followed. Among these were the test-tube fabrics which were having a rough time winning high fashions acceptance after the war. In spite of intense promotional effort, including dozens of four - colour ads and lavish fashion shows, most top designers found man made fabrics unappealing. "Drip dry" quickly became a term of fashion opprobrium, no matter how many Dupont salesmen were pushed into swimming pools to demonstrate the virtues of their nylon and/or Dacron shirts.

But she was intrigued with these "miracle" fibres. Instead of treating them as practical but unglamorous substitutes for natural yarns, she went all out to give them fashion acceptance and prestige. For reasons known best to the mill, the first nylons available to dress manufacturers in the late forties were heavy, dark coloured fabrics. At the same time, lovely filmy chiffon - like weaves, in light colours were going to the lingerie manufacturers. McCardell used them for evening dresses. One was cut almost as simply as a nightgown with little spaghetti strings to make a waist line, but it's colours (beige with a small figured print in orange) were very unboudoir. Her thinking about the man-made fabrics was not just confined to the finished products. One day she was seen playing a game of cat's cradle with a flesh-coloured elastic tube. It had been used as a chest bandage in World War II and McCardell saw it's possibilities for a strapless top which would fit anyone and stay up without bones.

FIGURE 4a

CHAPTER 3

Innovations

The "Popover"

a specialty of the house. Ours alone, this celebrated wraparound dress of Claire McCardell, its '55 edition shaped long and slim-bodied in crinkly cotton, with an enormous contrasting sash. 22.95—Sports Floor Lord & Taylor—also Manhasset, Westchester, Millburn, West Hartford, Bala-Cynwyd

FIGURE 15

(I) POPOVER DRESS

One of her most famous, versatile and enduring designs, the popover (1942) had it's origin in the humble house dress made at Harper's Bazaar's request to fit the requirements of wartime ladies, whose servants had gone off to the defense plants, the popover first appeared in the November 1943 issue above a headline, "I'm Doing My Work". Mrs Michael Phipps, the wife of a polo player, was photographed in a doorway of her enormous long island house wearing a wrap around blue denim coverall dress. It had a wide rolled - up sleeves, sturdily stitched dropped shoulders, and a quilted pocked "big enough", according to the caption "for matching" potholder and a quilted mitt hung from the waist band by bright red tapes. Townley had made a special deal with labour, since this was considered a "utility garment", and the popover cost a mere $6.95. Lord and Taylor persuaded Townley to up the original fabric order of 10,000 yards of denim to 75,000 yards, an enormous investment. Townley had used a quarter of a million yards of denim for 75,000 popovers. Moreover McCardell launched denim which had been seen as a doughty fabric on a glamorous career that has continued ever since. The popover was made and remade in many other fabrics and at the regular prices of the Townley line, became a staple in every McCardell collection from 1943 on. It was almost always wrapped around, but sometimes it crossed over in the back instead of the front, or was sashed instead of buttoned. By the fifties the stores were advertising the popover as the answer for every occasion from the beach to an evening out. It was given the name "popover" because you just "pop it over something nicer underneath".

(II) DIAPER BATHING SUIT

McCardell believed that many elements entered into most successful new fashions and that the order of origin was debatable. Even the **Monastic dress** was 2000 years old in principle. But nevertheless, many milestones of social as well as fashion history could be credited to McCardell. Firstly I will discuss the "**Diaper Bathing Suite**" (1942). In it's first and simplest form, the diaper bathing suit was a length of checked cotton, the top bias cut, which hung from the neck in front, went between the legs and came around to tie at the waist in front leaving the back completely bare above the waist. When wet it kept it's figure - hugging shape and since it was just a skimpy piece of unlined cotton it dried on the way back to the beach umbrella. McCardell had made it as an alternative to the full skirted cotton "**dress-maker**" suits which looked perky, while dry but droopy when wet. Even more than droopy cotton bathing suits, she disapproved of the west coast bathing uniform, shiny latex in florescent colours with the over-inflated bosom common to Hollywood starlets riveted right in. In the next few years she turned out some of the most memorable bathing suits of our time. Many incorporated the diaper wrap, all were unlined and unpadded, usually bias cut somewhere for fit. Their top varied from the barest of halters to one with long sleeves and a brass hooked bodice. Most were made in sober black, grey or sand coloured jersey but they looked far sexier in their no-nonsense unselfconscious way than the starlets bright Latex.

FIGURE 16

(III) BALLET SLIPPERS

In (1944) McCardell introduced Ballet Slippers. The shoe industry was mobilised even before the garment industry to provide footwear for the military. Shoes had been strictly rationed, but soft, flimsy playshoes and ballet slippers remained free. McCardell had always liked the look of feet flat on the ground. The shortage gave her an idea. For her "shoeless" collections, she covered ballet slippers in fabrics to match her dresses or used them in the original soft kid in bright colours as a contrast It became a fad - to McCardell and the chiropodist's consideration. "I only meant them for home or the country club, not the subway", she said. Eventually *Capezio*, the ballet shoe maker, found himself in the shoe business with sturdier sales and modest heels, but still keeping the comfort of the soft top.

(IV) DOUBLE STITCHING

There were also certain recurring details - or *McCardellism* which are readily identifiable, such as Double Stitching (sometimes called top or blue - Jean stitching). McCardell used it first as a reinforcement for seams on her heavy cottons, like the workmen's clothes she admired for their "**honest**" look. Soon, she was calling attention to it in various ways - by using contrasting coloured thread and by the architectural look of outlining the important seams, top stitching fabrics as elegant as silk twill or cotton voile.

(V) METAL FASTENINGS

At a time when many designers were fastening dresses with concealed zippers or dozens of hard-to-find tiny snaps and hooks, McCardell preferred the functional appearance of metal fastenings in clear view. She used rivets, grommets, and dime-sized brass snaps like those on a child's wind breaker. But her absolute favourites were the small, sturdy gilt hooks and eyes shaped like those on men's fishing boots. They were ornamental as well as practical, and she put them on everything, from bathing suits to evening dresses. Fastening a snug bodice beneath a low cut neckline in a sort of Nell Gwynn effect, they were surprisingly sexy, "as if inviting a man to unhook them", said an editor who found them all the more provocative, because of their naïvely utilitarian appearance.

(VI) SHOESTRING TIES

Most characteristic of all McCardell's innovations were the bias cords for which she seemed to find a zillion uses. Usually the ties were tacked just below the bust to give a woman a choice of waistlines, a principle tent in McCardell's code of fit. They could be wrapped high in her favourite Empire line or could criss-cross down to a natural waistline, like the classic Greek fillets. McCardell used them for halter necklines, high and low, front and back. She further accented bare skin by trying a bolero with them in back like a too-small hospital gown or winding them around bare midriffs. An example of the "**spaghetti**" or shoestring ties in a halter neck tied and wrapped playsuit. It was seen as a smart and cool answer to heat waves. It was made of three

FIGURE 18

Baby - Doll Dress in Black wool jersey with shoestring ties 1946

triangles which assembled to make a fitted suit. One triangle makes the drawstring halter and the other two make the wrap-around partie.

(VII) LEOTARDS

Among the most discussed and least successful fashions of 1943 were McCardell's leotards. McCardell freely admits that the idea of using dancer's leopards as accompaniment to everyday clothes had come from *Mildred Orrick* originally. *Orrick* had submitted some stitches to *Harper's Bazaar* but *Orrick* had temporarily retired by the time the magazine wanted to merchandise them. McCardell asked to produce some ideas of her own. She designed the tight fitting body suit for college girls in heatless dormitories and classrooms. She made them in wool jersey under wrapped tweed jumpers. Life magazine's editors were stunned and put them right on the cover as a change from that week's war news. But most buyers thought them "**strange looking garments**" and had a high price structure. The tweed jumpers retailed for a moderate price but the leotards would have to cost more than twice that, as since they had feet in them a new sizing problem was created. A direct descendant of the leotard is one of this century's most entrenched ways of dressing the "body suit" a very comfortable and fashionable garment without feet and the sizing problem it caused.

(VIII) TRAVEL

During the war years she took time out to indulge in post war dreaming and designing. With a Pan - American World Airways time-table

in one hand and her pencil in the other, McCardell sketched the ideal air travel wardrobe for the world of tomorrow. The basic wardrobe which she suggested was wearable for an air cruise around South American, or for a trans-Atlantic week-end. Because she believed women were going to continue to want simple, functional clothes, McCardell only eases the silhouette. Using this wool jersey as her main fabric she created an interchangeable wardrobe of six pieces which met all the needs of an extensive trip. She had always liked jersey and she liked it even better for the mobile life, since it's among all fabrics requires the minimum of care and does not wrinkle in packing. The travel suit she suggested has soft lines - the skirt shirred, but not full, the jacket cut with rounded wide shoulders and a flaring peplum over the hipbone. To go with it she suggested a striped crêpe blouse of the same fabric as the jacket lining. To complete the wardrobe there was a dinner skirt and blouse and slacks, the two blouses were to be worn interchangeably with the slacks. These slacks were softened with deep pockets that balanced the shoulder width and emphasized the slim waist. The dinner skirt which was straight and slender was slashed in front and had the same peplum treatment at the hips. Colour was used to emphasise the basic lines - wide shoulders, slim waists and feminine curves. McCardell did not think that victory would bring an accelerated pace in shifting the cycle of fashion, but that women would be more interested in flattering, comfortable clothes then in something completely different. So McCardell looked into the future and created a minimum wardrobe for the air-minded traveller in the post - war world. Designed for a week-end in Paris, or a month's cruise around South American, this interchangeable wardrobe of six pieces met every important travel need. Because it was light in weigh packed without messing, and draped smoothly as

FIGURE 19

OFFICE WORKER'S UNIFORM

The light-weight fabric of rayon and acetate is mixed gray and defense blue. The breast pockets have loose edges and deep flaps. The bodice has a deep pleat at the back. On the shoulder are buttoned - on tabs which would carry the service colour. The Skirt also had seven gores.

McCardell used tissue, thin wool jersey for her fabric. The six pieces included were the travelling suit (skirt, blouse and jacket) slacks, dinner skirt and blouse. McCardell was not the only one indulging in this **"world of tomorrow"** dreaming, the fabric houses, too were busy in their laboratories, promising wonderful improvements in familiar fabrics. Simple functional clothes were to be the fashion designers and fabric makers agreed. McCardell designed for everyone in mind from college girls to fashionable young fashion editors, young married women, for the civilian defense, the first commercial helicopter flight and maternity wear for the expectant mother. The young fashion editors of the forties were among McCardell's most satisfied and stylish customers. Their lives on and off the job were very much like her own, and for solutions to the problems of dressing worked for them too. Importantly, since most of them were underpaid in a business where they were supposed to be well turned out at all times, the no-price look and versatility of their inexpensive, McCardell saved many a day and night. Among the most decorative McCardell fans was young Barbara Cushing, then a junior editor at vogue and now Mrs William Paley, considered one of the best dressed women in the world.

(IX) THE CIVILIAN DEFENSE UNIFORM

In 1941 McCardell designed the civilian defence uniforms. They were snappy, serviceable and adopted to all types of women. The skirt was mid length and trim to assure a neat military look, it was provided with a deep inverted front pleat to ensure walking and action easy. The jackets had comfortable flap pockets, the shoulders were military with fastening at the outer edges and gilt buttons on these was room for insignia's and markings could be

placed. The office workers uniform was a one piece dress. It was a lightweight rayon and acetate mixture. On the bodice were two large pockets, the waistline was lightly cinched with a wide leather backed belt. This was describes as a good looking dress of the kind "American girls liked". The hospital aid costume was designed for efficiency, of blue and white stripe cotton, it had the starched, breezy air that brings good cheer as the New York Times describes it. Blue denim was selected for the canteen worker's uniform. This was a dress with slightly flared and gored skirt.

(X) THE HELICOPTER DRESS OF TOMORROW

In Boston, August 27th 1944, the first commercial helicopter flight ever undertaken in America was staged and McCardell had the task of designing the "Helicopter Dress of Tomorrow", especially designed for this flight. For this event she used her much liked jersey and striped cottons fabrics. She designed pedal pusher, trousers with coordinating jacket in striped cotton with a jersey tunic for underneath. The jersey had her characterise contrasting double stitching around the neck and centre front. She also designed coordinating ballet slipper shoes in striped cotton. The look was functional, comfortable and young.

(XI) MATERNITY FASHIONS

McCardell also decided to design fashions to free women from bulky maternity fashions. So she designed a simply made, shirred top, jersey tube. The jersey tube is a tube made simply by seaming two 40" wide rectangles of wool jersey up the sides. The resulting highly manoeuvrable tube

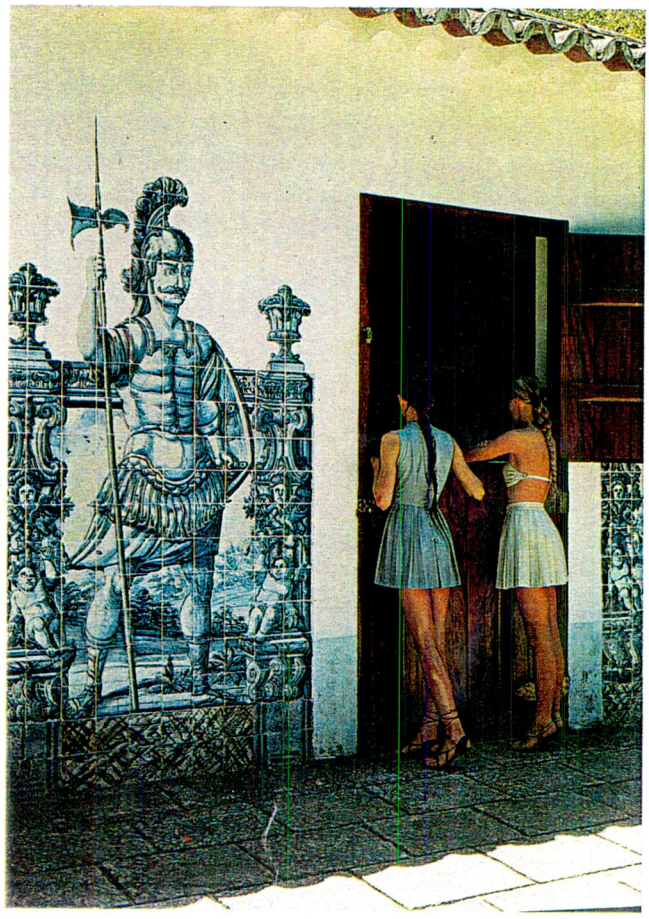


FIGURE 20

The Playsuits 1950

is a dress which is capable of many variations. Her design was successful in concealing the mother's maternity and made the woman feel she could still be beautiful while waiting for the baby. The photographs from "**Look**" magazine illustrated a shirred top strapless dress with taffeta apron, a shirred top skirt, peplum, capelet, shawl and stole camouflage for the basic dress, a ribbon trimmed halter neckline variation and an embroidered organdie all enveloping apron overskirt addition. The result was a dream of a costume any woman would want, pregnant or not and could easily make for herself.

(XII) COLLEGE GIRLS DESIGNS

McCardell also designed with the school girl in mind and created almost exclusively for school girl figures and fancies. McCardell's "**roll-your-own**" tomboyish folded - back sleeves, were among a number of clothes tricks she used to intrigue teenagers. McCardell designed the jumper, date and dress and shorts 'n slacks. She gave the jumpers a new slant by pairing them with striped or polka - dotted turtle neck blouses and long, matching stockings called "**leg sweaters**". McCardell designed surplice, side buttoned bodices and side wrapped skirts that had a young and gay look. Since she believed youth liked surprise and being "different" she designed a new little date costume of gabardine and not of the usual silk or satin. McCardell designed new "**Pedal Pushers**" (long below the knee shorts) and teamed them with Dutch boy bolero costumes. Slacks were worn rolled up around the ankle to match rolled up blouse sleeves. The outfits were shown with matching ballet slippers in plaid, polka dots or bright woolens. These new footlets looked very ration - proof, comfortable and just a little goofy, but they were "**different**" and most importantly young.

CHAPTER 4

Legacy

FIGURE 21

Casual Double Stitching Detail Travel Suit.

By the late 1940's Townley had grown to be the single biggest ready-to-wear account in Lord and Taylor, where the phrase "**The American Look**" was coined in 1945 and was the most exciting store in the country. During this period McCardell's unconstructed, undecorated, uninhibited clothes were no longer consider controversial. McCardell's most productive period during which the McCardell "*American Look*" rained was during the 1940's. Understandably her fans are apt to get annoyed when "**The typical 40's look**" is revived by young designers who have done their research by watching World War II movies on the American Late Late Show. Their 40's girls have padded shoulders, padded bra's and high, high heels. McCardell's girls were padless shoulders, braless and heel less. Their girls are tightly encased in sexy rhinestone trimmed satins for big dates. Her casual jersey dress up clothes were more subtly sexy. And their girls wore hair in a fuzzy pompadour a la Grable, whereas, her girls resembled Lauren Bacall in a freshly washed smooth pageboy bob. McCardell's look had lasted through the years looking marvellous as Bacall herself, while the Grable look winds up as occasional fun in a faddy, campy way that goes back to the archives after a season or two.

In general the typical McCardell girl looked comfortable in her clothes because she was comfortable. McCardell always had deep side pickets even in evening dresses which encouraged a sort of nonchalant astatine - like stance. McCardell dresses were both easy fitting and easy to fit because of their uncut or adjustable waistlines, their sleeves cut in one width, with the bodice or with dropped shoulders and relaxed fit. Because of this McCardell

acquired a number of fashion awards to her credit. These included **The American Fashion Critics Award** for her Popover dress, which was considered an outstanding interpretation of fashion trends under the wartime restrictions of 1942. **The mademoiselle merit Award** of 1943, **The bronze Statuette**, from the American Fashion Critics in 1943 for the most influential designer of the year, and selection by American retailers as the nations best in the **"Ten Best Designers Poll"** of 1946. **The Neiman Marcus Award** for distinguished service in the field of fashion at the annual fall fashion exposition in 1948. In 1950 *The National Women's Press Club and* finally in 1956 **The Parson's Medal** for Distinguished Achievement, she probably would have continued winning awards was it not for her untimely death in 1958.

CHAPTER 4

Conclusion

FIGURE 22

McCardell designed with America constantly in mind, ignoring outside influences. She worked with a free hand in the manner of a young modern artist and her clothes are admirably suited to the modern American figure. They are flattening comfortable to wear and adaptable to any fabric. A McCardell characteristic of the double rows of stitching once seen only on Levis's, is now seen in modern designers work. To McCardell everything was in the cut and the deceptively simple fabrics and nothing of their wit and freshness is revealed, until the human body gives them life. Many of McCardell's dresses had little or no "**hanger appeal**" and depended for their effect on being worn. Often only a belt gave the dress it's shape. She disliked shoulder pads and her dresses were almost the exact opposite of the typical structured forties fashions.

The decade of the 1940's was McCardell's most productive period, the "**Kitchen Dinner Dress**" (1940) in which a woman could both cook and serve her guests.

> "**First of all I am a woman**" insisted McCardell, "**Quite Secondarily, I am a designer. Most of my ideas came from trying to solve my own problems, problems just like yours. I like to be able to zip my own zippers. I need a dress that can cook dinner and then come out and meet the guests**"
>
> (*Steele, Women of Fashion, 1991 Page 113*)

The "Diaper Bathing Suit" (1942), The "Popover Dress" (1942), a silk gingham plaid playsuit with bloomers (1942), A one piece jumpsuit (1943) and the black

wool empire - style "Baby Doll Dress" (1946). As this partial list indicates, McCardell emphasized "**play clothes**" and sports clothes more than formal wear. Even her evening dresses tended to be comfortable "**hostess gowns**" for entertaining at home.

During the 1940's her innovations became widely known, beginning spectacularly with her 1940's abandonment of the exaggerated shoulder pad. No one would prove to be more influential than McCardell in demonstrating that ingenuity could surmount the difficulties of war-time rationing and regulations.

McCardell fastened clothing with brass tubs and hook instead of buttons or zippers, made dresses out of surplus cotton, balloon cloth and designed evening clothes with matching aprons for hostesses who did their own cooking. McCardell was the first designer to take the category of sportswear and make it answer every possible need, golf skirts and bathing suits were just as important to her as evening clothes and she would no sooner have put a sequin on one of the late day dresses, than on a cycling ensemble. All of her designs for whatever purpose, shared certain constants. Bathing suits were made with the same halter necklines and out of the same fabrics as her dresses or with the same hoods she showed on tops to wear with trousers. Wrapped or peasant - inspired tops showed up in bath suits, all kinds of dresses to wear with shorts. With the exception of her long dresses, meant for night-time only, most of McCardell's dresses could have been worn anywhere to any kind of occasion

FIGURE 23

Wool jersey hooded top with contrasting Double Stitching Details, 1944.

and that's the way she wanted it. Jersey, denim, chambray and taffeta were all treated to top stitching, spaghetti ties wrapped around the waists of playclothes as well as party clothes, Bathing Suits, Suit Jackets and the late day dresses, all closed with little brass hooks. Wool was used for everything from jersey leotards to a wedding dress. Bare midriffs made shorts outfits, bathing suits and beach dresses more casual and winter dresses more formal.

The comfort of the garment became an essential criterium of design and the changes introduced then because modifications in the way people lived trousers and dresses with pockets allowed models and wearers to adopt a totally different stance, what had been only a débutante slouch became a casual middle stance. Those women who wore McCardell designs in the 1940's and 1950's evinced style but also a self-conscienceless as undeniable to the designer as to the wearer. McCardell simple use of structure and her comfortable integrity of materials required that the garment be forthright and without pretence. Of course a natural drape at the midriff was built into the design for the easy stance that she encouraged, but the dress served as a simple statement of the wearer and the energetic lifestyles in the 1940's in America

McCardell avoided complications, she sought solutions. Thus she explored the possibilities of man made fibres even while she revered the comfort of cottons and wools. Elastic band, stirrup trousers, dropped armholes, double stitching, deletion of understructure (even in her bathing suits

of the 1940's), the kimono sleeve and trousers full and pleated in the hip tapering down the leg were concepts of structure but also of comfort and suitability to wear. McCardell heeded specific needs of the garment but she also answered the clarion call of modernism requiring designs to speak of it's materials and to address it's specific utility. In doing so, she placed dresses among the designer arts and she gave the modern woman, not only new clothes but a new code and a new confidence.

In retrospect McCardell's jersey bathing suits looked particularly modern without the heavy structural underpinnings that date other bathing suits of the period and equally free of surface decoration they rely on clean, bold lines and unexpected shapes, such as a halter top or a wrapped "**diaper**" bottom. In contrast to the shiny, colourful latex bathing suits coming out of California, McCardell used plain black or beige wool jersey. Her bathing suits bare a recognisable similarity, in fact to her jersey dresses, skimpy jersey jumpers and halter tops.

McCardell was also one of the first to incorporate the leotard look into every day fashion. From 1943 on she used leotards (which life called "**funny tights**") thus anticipating the beatnik or modern dancer styles of the 1950's to say nothing of the aerobic styles of the 1970's and Donna Karen's widely successful bodysuits and leotards of the present day. She also used ballet slippers and other flat shoes which gave the McCardell woman a walk with a youthful stride. McCardell's jersey dresses appealed especially to young

FIGURE 24

Linen suit with shorts, 1950

sophisticated women (**often other designers or fashion editors**), precisely because they recognised how new her unstructured, undecorated, comfortable casual clothes really were. One of the reasons McCardell's clothes still look fresh to-day is that she designed with young women in mind. McCardell said that her number one inspiration was **"The American Woman"**, then came the fabric she would use and what it could **"do"**. In her knowing and uninhibited hands many humble materials wound up **"doing"** things they had never done before. In retrospect the only negative aspect of McCardell's designs are that they had little hanger appeal, often only a belt gave her dresses their shape. Her undecorated, comfortable casual clothes catered mainly only for her ambitious careerist, young married women and college girls all of whom had to be slim to wear her clothes well. She eliminated structural devices created into enhance the female form such as bra's and girdles. She dropped the prevalent shoulder pads for a natural line. She cut sleeves in one piece with the bodice and designed deep side pockets set into seams which would make her clothes slightly more bulky and less flattering to the female form. She preferred flat ballet slippers to stiletto's which elongate and make the leg slender. McCardell's diaper bathing suit contrasted highly with the typical structured lined and padded bathing of the forties. Her designs lacked the elements of escapism and the confidence one feels when their figure is enhanced by these artificial devices. In other word's she tended to design solely for the image of the **"Typical American Girl"**

> **"McCardell looks exactly like... The Typical American Girl"** declared Vogue in 1941, **"just as real as real only prettier. She's glowing with health, her figure is long and lilte and she's young, fresh, full of slang and laughs"**
>
> (Steele, Women of Fashion, 1991, Page 104)

McCardell designed clothes for any place and anytime of day out of cotton and jersey and the humbler their origins the better. Like so many of her best idea's came from a need in her own life and thus she filled a gap for the active young ambitious careerists American Women. She was not only a fashion designer she wrote: "*Sometimes I am a hostess, sometimes I am a guest. I have a job to go to I have a market list to plan. I love Clothes*" She assumed, though that her readers needed help.

> "**Clothes ought to be useful and comfortable**", said McCardell. "**I've always wondered why women's clothes had to be delicate, why they couldn't be practical and sturdy as well as feminine**". She made denim suits, skirts with big pockets, dresses and jumpsuits that a woman could really move in. Her inspiration, she claimed also came from solving problems.
>
> (Steele, Women of Fashion, 1991, Page 104)

McCardell also asked

> "**Are you constantly tormented with the thought; what shall I wear?**" or "**I have nothing to wear**"? your clothes closets are full but somehow have holes in them. No dress that is exactly right for lunch with a sophisticated mother-in-law. Nothing but nothing to wear to your husband's company picnic. This simply means that the clothes you have chosen, beautiful and becoming as they are don't match your life. Your job is not so much tracking down the clothes as tracking down yourself.
>
> (Steele, Women of Fashion, 1991, Page 113)

Which if you think about it is still sound advice to-day

McCardell was one of the first to design for the new suburban "**lifestyle**". Catering for the Americans who enjoyed active leisure in the form of social events such as backyard barbecue parties. Designer *Lee*

FIGURE 25
Halter Bathing Suit

FX13

Evans said in 1972,

> **"When I was a student, she was my inspiration. There were other designers who were important, like Adrian, but I always thought they made clothes for my matter, she made clothes for me"**
>
> (Steele, Women of Fashion, 1991, Page 113)

McCardell designed clothes for any place and any time of day out of cotton and jersey and other humble fabrics. McCardell's clothes are dazzlingly timeless. Like *Chanel* she had a genius for making clothes that not only suited women of her own time but that continued to hold great appeal decades after her death. **"By any yard stick, it was the smash fashion collection of the season"**. Newsweek, June 5th.

"There were cheers inside the auditorium as the clothes appeared on the stage and the fervour grew as the show went on, proving the basic concept: these are styles that can be worn to-day". The New York Times, May 24th

These reviews of Claire McCardell's clothes were not written at the height of her fame in the late 1940's, but in 1972, fourteen years after her death, they were occasioned by two big retrospective shows entirely devoted to McCardell designs show as live models, the first at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, the second at the Los Angeles County Museum, with commentary by *Rudi Genreich*, a leading McCardell disciple.

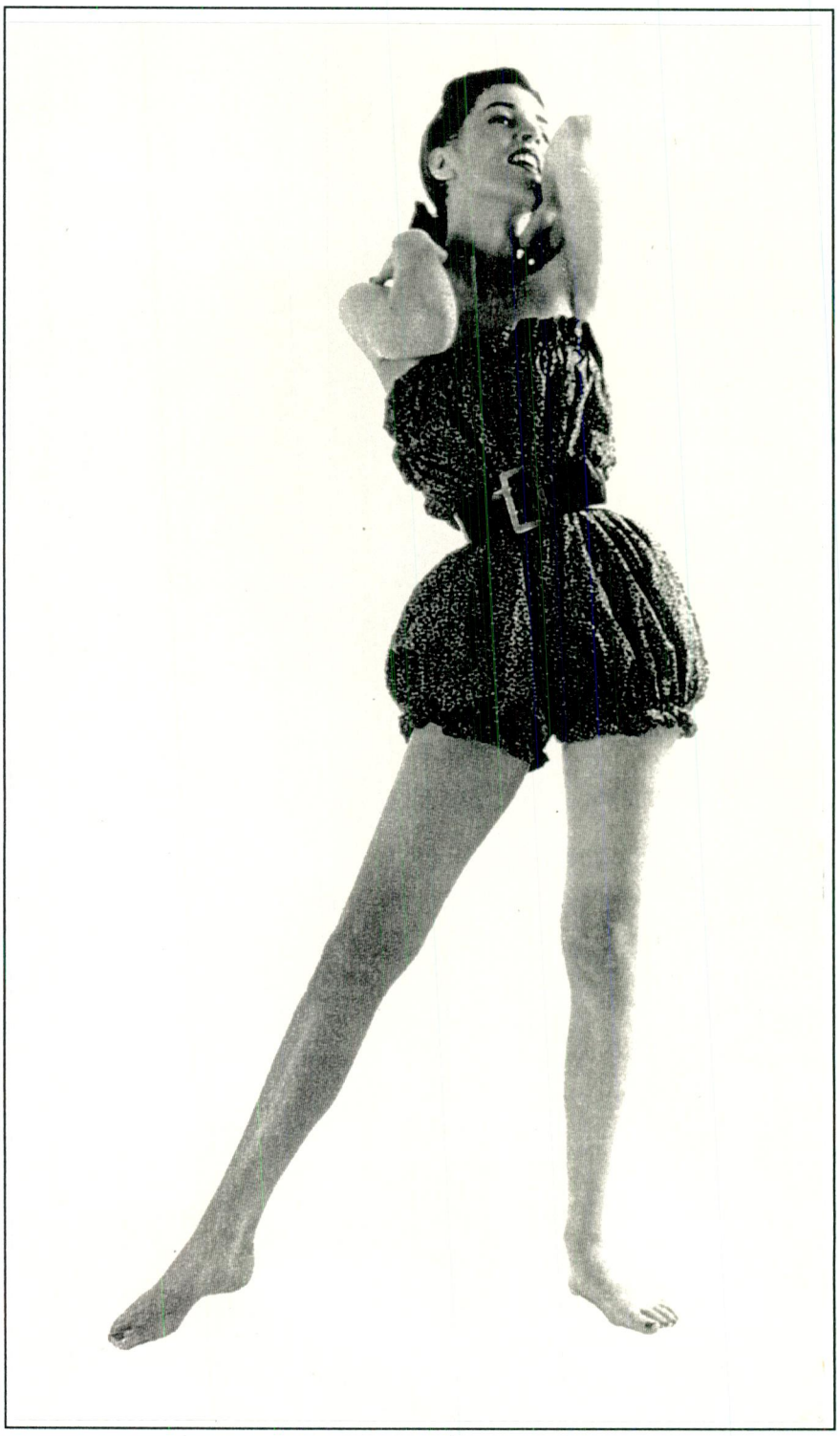
McCardell would have been pleased but not entirely surprised at the favorable reaction to her clothes in the seventies. While she was without concept, she had a profound sense of the importance of her profession. "Good fashion somehow ensure the right to survive," she said. (Lee, American Fashion, The Life and Lives of Adrian, Mainbocher, McCardell, Novel, Tigere, 1972, Page 301) and not only did she produce plenty of good fashions in her life time she also had an instinctive first for designs that are as fresh and modern right now, this minute, as they were over fifty years ago. It can truly be said that had she was the primal busy of the peter sportswear industry of America. She was the Chanel of America.

"We (designers) specialize in what we like best in what we do best and in what satisfies us most deeply for me it's America. It looks and Feels like America. It's freedom, it's democracy, it casualness, it's good health. Clothes can say all that"

(Lee, American Fashion, The Life and Lives of Adrian, Mainbocher, McCardell, Novel, Tigere, 1972 Page 332)

FIGURE 26

Calico Bubble Swimsuit.



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