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SYBIL CONNOLLY
Irish Couturiere
A Critical Assessment

by Moya Donnellan

Fourth Year Fashion and Textiles.

SYBIL CONNOLLY

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Introduction

Prior to the 1950's, Ireland was not a country readily associated with the term 'Haute Couture'. In fact, the clothing trade in Ireland at that time was only in its infancy and was totally dwarfed by the great international couturiers working in England, France and Italy. This fact and the real lack of a substantial clientele on which to build a couture house (really chic, wealthy Irish women were very much accustomed to shopping in London and Paris for their wardrobes) makes the astonishing and meteoric rise to fashion stardom of a young Irish woman - Sybil Connolly - an even more remarkable event than it actually appeared at the time.

A young woman, of wealthy background, trained in the dying art of Haute Couture in London, she used as her inspiration and her medium traditional Irish fabrics and colourings which were overlooked by the more 'sophisticated' of European designers. She used a truly romantic and fresh approach to fashion to carve a niche for herself and Ireland in the highly competitive world of international fashion in the 1950's. She became a national heroine for the way she thrust Ireland, albeit unwittingly, into the spotlight of world fashion. She created markets for Irish handcrafts, such as hand crochet and lace and fabrics which had been developed to high fashion specifications - light weight pure wool tweed, gossamer-fine linen, red flannel and bainin. She encouraged the flagging fortunes of the native fabric industry and created new export markets for a country des-

perately in need of such support.

Sybil Connolly reached a status towards which most designers only remotely aspire. According to American journalists, she was "a sovereign power in the realm of elegance".¹ Dublin was now, because of her unusual contribution to international couture, "a one-woman fashion capital".² As early as 1952, Sybil Connolly had established Ireland as an important source of style.

The work of any designer of prominence deserves discussion and analysis. Even more importantly the work of such a successful designer requires analysis and critical assessment in order to understand and evaluate such a contribution, internationally and historically, to both Irish and world fashion. It is also interesting to try and understand its exact appeal to fashion buyers, journalists and clients alike which assured its acceptance as exceptional and supremely elegant fashion from the criteria of design and craftsmanship.

Was her sudden national and international recognition directly related to her talent as a designer or, simply, to the novelty of a new Irish couturiere with a charming personality and image? I feel that no designer can achieve and, more importantly, maintain a strong position in the world of fashion, especially in the 1950's simply on the strength of an attractive personality. There must be a strong element of originality or talent in her work.

I hope, in the course of my discussion of Sybil Connolly's work to pinpoint what exactly was her key to success and why

Sybil Connolly-career summary

she was so remarkably successful in a time when many of the great European designers such as Dior and Balenciaga were at their zenith.

In my research Sybil Connolly has by far been the greatest source of information. Much of the following work is a direct result of many interviews with her during the period of June 1982 to March 1985. Also during this time I have been allowed access to her collection of magazines and very extensive collection of American, English, Italian and Irish newspaper and magazine cuttings which cover a period of over forty years and which have proved to be the most important and richest source for this thesis.

Indeed, in the two years during which I have spent working with Sybil Connolly, I feel I have gained some insight into her work which, I hope, has helped me in my discussion of her distinctive brand of couture.

Sybil Connolly - career summary

Sybil Connolly was born in Swansea in Wales of an Irish father and Welsh mother, quite out of line with her Dublin rooted image. The middle daughter of three, she had a sheltered, solitary upbringing and was entrusted mainly to a series of private governesses and her grandfather Reynolds, a Greek scholar and country squire, who steeped the imaginative child in Greek philosophy.

The central and dominant figure in this introverted, privileged childhood was, however, her Welsh mother Evelyn, a strong charactered woman with a highly developed sense of good taste, in both clothing and interior decorating. She encouraged in her favourite daughter an appreciation and love of all her own favourite things - antiques, porcelain, furniture and Eighteenth century houses. Her upbringing in this rarified atmosphere created a very bright and alert child with unusually sophisticated and well-developed tastes.

Another passion this obviously tasteful woman instilled in her daughter was a love and appreciation of beautiful clothes. One of Sybil Connolly's earliest memories is of her trips to London and Paris with her mother to buy clothes created by the great English and French couturiers. She recalls many of their visits to these couture houses but the most prominent in her memory was the visit to the House of Balenciaga then, as now, one of her favourite designers. " I felt when we entered that we were in the presence of something great".³

Sybil Connolly's early life was divided between Wales where she lived with her grandfather and the rest of her family and Ireland, where she spent time especially during the summers, in Waterford and Dublin where her mother further developed her passion for gardens at the National Botanic Gardens, which are still very much a part of her vived childhood memories.

It is evident that in her early life her mother had the greatest influence on her development, creating a strong, confident and creative young woman with excellent taste. But her mother was destined for a great shock as this favourite daughter had a mind of her own and determinedly planned a career for herself, rather than take the road which every young and privileged woman was expected to take - that of marriage.

But Sybil Connolly's first choice of career- that of writing - was not to be; her first articles were refused publication. So, taking the advice of a career consultant she applied for an apprenticeship in Bradley's of Chepstow Place, a leading English couture house which catered for royalty and the aristocracy of the British Empire.

After overcoming the problems of a reluctant mother and a rigorous interview in London, she obtained a place and started her course in September, 1938 - her first steps towards a remarkable future.

Long hours and hard work formed the basis of a training which was to take three years. Each student was assigned

to and worked with a vendeuse in one of the ninety eight fitting rooms in Bradleys, gaining valuable knowledge and experience, literally, on the job. Miss Connolly recalls attending a fitting at Buckingham Palace of one of Bradley's most prestigious customers - the Dowager Queen Mary " I was allowed to hold the pins".⁴

It was during these long demanding days that the most important quality in Sybil Connolly's success came to the fore - her determination. Determination was, according to Miss Connolly, the most important force essential for success; without it she feels she could have achieved nothing. This quality came to the fore soon after her arrival when Joan Whistler, an older apprentice was pointed out to her as the best student Bradley's ever had - Sybil Connolly vowed it would soon be her.

Her rigorous course was constituted mainly of garment fitting and construction, pattern making and draping and the essential business studies which, against the background of practical experience, would have constituted a formidable training, if she had been allowed to complete her full apprenticeship.⁵

This was not to be; her training was abruptly brought to an end when war broke out in 1939, eleven months after her arrival. All students, including Miss Connolly who pleaded to stay, were returned to the relative safety of their families.

Sybil Connolly's family had now been living in Dublin for

some time after spending a short period in Waterford, the home county of her father John Connolly. So, on the abrupt ending of her training in Bradleys it was to Dublin that Sybil Connolly returned to spend the war years.

It is hard to understand why Sybil Connolly actually returned permanently to Dublin. Miss Connolly had requested Bradleys to allow her to stay given the fact that she was from Ireland, but they were unwilling to accept responsibility for any of their apprentices safety during the course of the war. One possible course that lay open to her was to seek a minor position at a clothing company or house for the duration of the war - most designers managed to remain reasonably active during the war and experience would have greatly complemented her training in Bradleys. Nevertheless, she returned to Dublin - probably for personal and family reasons.

Soon after her return to Dublin she was engaged to be married which indicates that Miss Connolly did not plan to return to London to complete her training after the end of the war.

Nevertheless, an opportunity arose in Dublin. By sheer chance, while shopping with her future sister-in-law, she was introduced to the manageress of Richard Alan, an exclusive yet conservative dress shop in Dublins fashionable Grafton Street. She told Sybil Connolly that her brother, Jack Clark, who owned Richard Alan was looking for an assistant/designer and would the job interest her. Sybil Connolly took time to consider the offer and meanwhile wrote to Mr Bradley for advice -

he replied that the job was better than staying at home so she accepted her first job at the age of nineteen.⁶

In the Dublin of the late 1930's and early 1940's there were few shops with a sufficiently high quality stock to satisfy the demands of Irelands few yet discerning wealthy and chic women. Jack Clarke's Richard Alan (named after his two sons) seemed to be one of the few shops in Dublin that was capable of supplying high class ladies ready-to-wear. In the 1930's, fashionable women bought abroad or took their own ideas to tailors and dressmakers. Larger shops such as Brown Thomas also stocked current styles and trends from Europe.

After the war the whole area expanded - Richard Alan opened a new couture salon and Irene Gilbert set up her own business on her return from Paris where she worked for Madame Grès and other retail outlets opened along the fashionable Grafton Street.

Sybil Connolly who, by the age of 21, was manageress of Richard Alan and was instrumental in persuading Jack Clarke to open a small couture workroom/salon to cater for Irish customers and as a platform for her own talents.

In 1949, Sybil Connolly was responsible in procuring for the new salon a designer called Gaston Mallet - a young French Canadian to design seasonal collections to supplement their already high quality stock and to keep their new salon busy. This enabled Sybil Connolly to continue with her own managerial duties. This was a new and imaginative move for

an Irish shop and the subsequent collections were a great success with the Irish press.⁷ But it was in 1952, following Gaston Mallet's departure that Sybil Connolly stepped into the void created in the design rooms. She then designed her first full collection in 1952 for Richard Alan even though she had been supplying the finesse and style in the County Wear range of daywear for many seasons (Sybil Connolly had been contributing advice and designs to the County Wear range for some time).

In the summer of 1952 this and a subsequent collection was spotted, by sheer chance, by the Philadelphia Fashion Group (a group of women journalists, fashion buyers and interior decorators together with some of Boston and Philadelphia's most prominent business women). This important group was to invite Sybil Connolly to show her collection in some of America's most prestigious stores - an opportunity that was to bring phenomenal success to Sybil Connolly.⁸

From that year onwards Sybil Connolly's life was hectic. A gala showing and ball at Dunsany Castle in County Meath launched the 1953 Winter collection and established Sybil Connolly as an important new designer. Fashion journalists such as Carmel Snow, the formidable Editor-in-chief of Harper's Bazaar and Bettina Ballard, editor of Vogue gathered with fashion representatives from America, Canada, England and South Africa to witness the first major international showing in Ireland and proclaimed that it was a great success. According to Sol Kamensky, fashion director of American store Rich's and Talons "Sybil Connolly has fresh, wonderful ideas"⁹, and cabled New York with the follow-

ing message on July 16

"Ireland's bright young designer, Sybil Connolly's collection premiered before quite special audience at magnificent Dunsany Castle stop clothes direct, unhackneyed stop emphasis on bainin tweeds petticoat red flannel, embroidered cambric stop collection indigenous but not limited more international at home world over".¹⁰

This was indicative of the reaction that was to greet Sybil Connolly on her constant trips to the United States over the next ten years. In addition to her seasonal showings in the U.S.A., Sybil Connolly also visited Australia - two extremely successful trips to Australia were sponsored by Australian Consolidated Press and opened new and very lucrative market for her clothing. (1954 and 1957).¹¹

While at home she was involved in frantic searches for fabrics working with reluctant Irish weavers in Donegal, knitters on the Aran Islands, lace makers and expert needlewomen working from their own homes accross Ireland.¹² She constantly supervised the production of each collection every season and the ensuing orders. Sybil Connolly also undertook many specific commissions such as garments for the 'Jacqmar International' collections each season and outfits in high quality synthetics for the Celanese Corporation of America (exact dates unknown).

During the 1950's and the 1960's, she was often a guest of honour at various American and international fashion fairs and

extravaganzas- "The Eldorado Party"^{I3} in Hollywood, promotions by major stores such as I. Magnins, Jordans, Marshs (Boston), "The Pride of Ireland" exhibition in 1965 at Bloomingdales, to name but a few. She was also invited to show at the International Fashion Fair at the Palazzo Gracchi in Venice in 1956.

The 1950's and 1960's were good years for developing new interests in areas other than haute couture ladies wear. Sybil Connolly designed an exclusive range of menswear to be sold in the prestigious menswear stores such as Fitches and Abercrombies in New York. She also worked temporarily in the childrenswear area as well as designing costumes for stage productions^{I4} and habits for religious orders such as the Sisters of Charity and Bon Secours.^{I5}

These two decades brought successes in the area of fabrics- Sybil Connolly continued to develop her own featherweight tweeds and also discovered, in some of her many trips to Ulster, exciting fabrics that had not been produced in many years - heavy linen lace and a fabric that was to become a firm favourite- fine linen drawn threadwork that was practically crease-resistant.^{I6}

Recent years have brought success in areas not directly related to clothing. Sybil Connolly has had considerable success in the interior decoration and fabric and china fields. She has often been asked to design interiors and examples of her work include The Countess of Iveagh's print room in her London home, Fort Belvedere in London and a suite in the American Embassy in Dublin. Her most

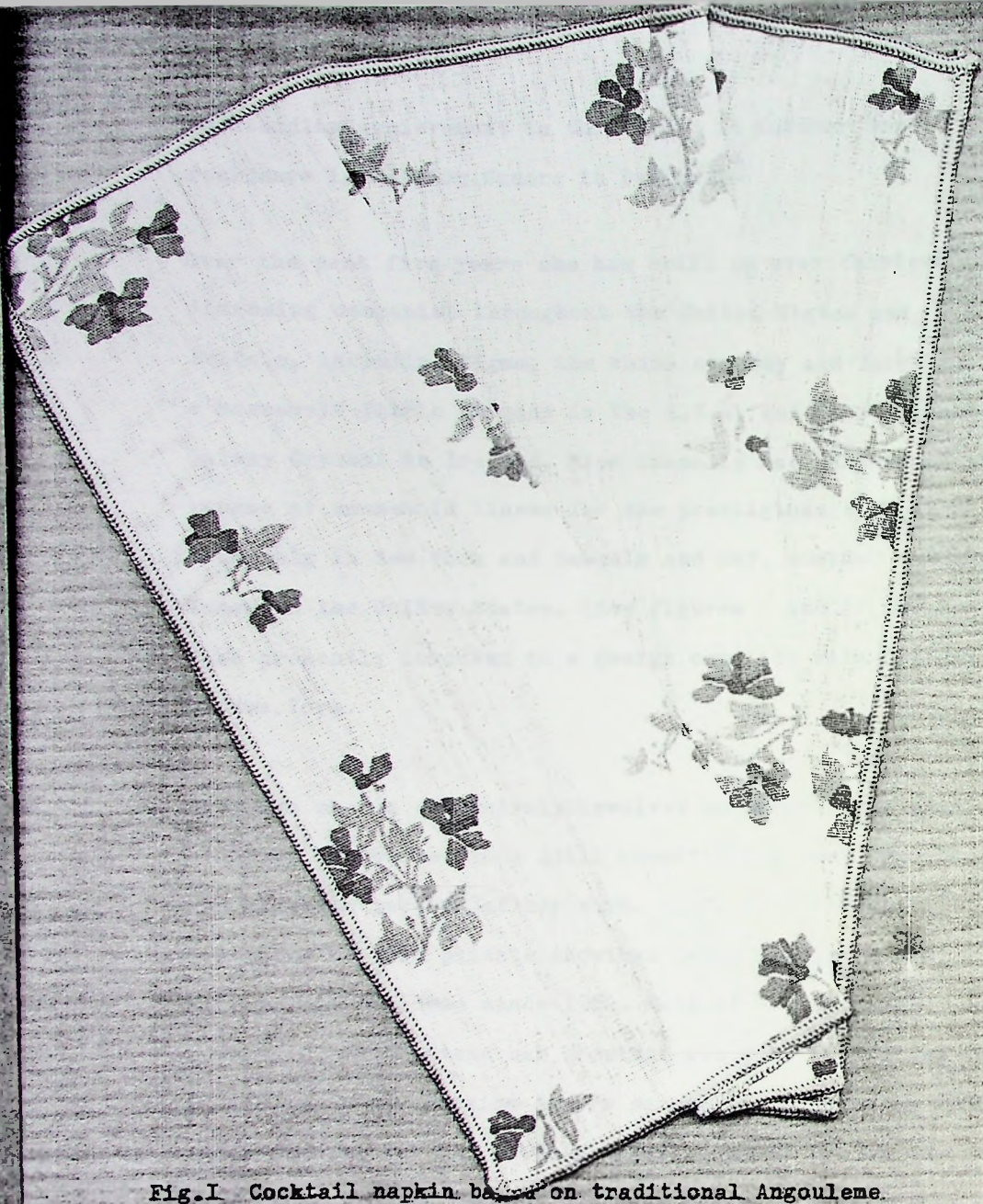


Fig. I Cocktail napkin based on traditional Angouleme pattern, part of a range of table linen designed by Sybil Connolly for Samuels and Jay of New York, 1983.

outstanding achievement in this field is however her residence in Merrion Square in Dublin.¹⁷

Over the past five years she has built up over thirteen licensing companies throughout the United States and Britain, including Sigma, the china company and Tarrants a household fabric company in the U.S.A. and very recently Galway Crystal in Ireland. Miss Connolly has just completed ranges of household linens for the prestigious firm of Brunswigh in New York and Samuels and Jay, another company based in the United States. (See Figures 1 and 2) She is also presently involved in a design capacity with Tiffanys in New York.

Although she is extensively involved in areas other than clothing her collections still constitute a very important and sizeable portion of her work. Sybil Connolly still continues to hold private showings twice yearly in New York as she has done since 1952. Many of her original customers still attend her showings and come to Ireland to be fitted in her Merrion Square salon. Since November 1982 sales figures for her clothing have rocketed by 50% due to both new customers and her regulars ordering more styles. Her order books still feature names such as Kissinger, Rothschilds, Rockefeller.

Her most important source of inspiration and raw materials is still very much Ireland - she is still 'in love' with Donegal tweeds and Irish linen although she now uses fabrics imported from London and Switzerland. But her staple fabric is still the gossamer-fine hand pleated



Fig.2 'Angoulême'. Range of table linen designed by
Sybil Connolly.

linen for which she became reknown.

This lively, enthusiastic and youthful woman, now aged 64 has no plans to retire - she cannot imagine her life without the stimulation of her many creative and demanding commissions and projects. She still receives many requests to design ranges of china, fabrics and many other items and contribute to magazines articles on interior design and her favourite passion- gardening.

Sybil Connolly feels that it would be pointless to retire when she is still interested in her work and still obviously very much in demand - and it is doubtful if her private clients or the many companies with which she works would let her.

Richard Alan - 1940 to 1952

Richard Alan, in the 1940's was a retail outlet, situated in Dublin's fashionable Grafton Street, catering for a select clientele drawn from the upper middle classes of Post-war Dublin and Ireland. Richard Alan had been started by Jack Clarke in 1935, who was one of the foremost figures in the clothing trade in Ireland at that time. The shop featured the 'County Wear' range which was designed and manufactured by Clarke - in fact, it was quite impossible to separate the two names as Richard Alan Ltd was the chief retail outlet in Ireland for this range of high quality ladies wear.

The name 'County Wear' was synonymous with superbly cut and tailored ladies ready-to-wear garments which were produced under the rigorous scrutiny of Clarke, an acknowledged perfectionist in the art of tailoring.

Clarke was a Limerick man, born in 1908 of Irish parents, and a designer in his own right. He started designing for the wholesale market in 1932, opened his own workrooms shortly afterwards and in 1935 added to his lucrative businesses the retail shop of Richard Alan, which was to be patronised by the best dressed women in Ireland who had previously bought their clothes abroad or used tailors for their very basic wardrobes.

County Wear had an excellent reputation in Ireland for chic yet practical tailored separates and coats for ladies, and indeed, in both America and Canada, where Clarke had dev-

eloped a very successful export trade and become well established in many American stores in a short period of time.

Sybil Connolly joined Jack Clarke's fast growing business as his assistant in 1940. It is hard to determine exactly what her initial job was, it seems to have entailed working in a combination of the retail and wholesale aspects of the business. Her training ideally suited her for couture work but there was little call for this skill at Clarkes. However her training at Bradley's had also equipped her for the retail side of her position - they had had business studies as part of their course and this proved to be beneficial in her work as manageress of the salon and shop.

This period of Sybil Connolly's development is sparsely documented - at least by the press and magazine reporters who never thought it important enough to discover her gradual rise through the ranks of the workroom staff. Some contemporaries can still be traced who confirm that she started 'at the bottom' and with a combination of favour from Clarke and hard work she eventually became manageress/director of Richard Alan at the age of twenty two.

One of her most important innovations at Richard Alan's was to encourage Clarke to set up couture workrooms and employ Gaston Mallet to produce an exclusive designer range each season for Richard Alan's newly acquired couture clients.¹⁸

Gaston Mallet, a young French Canadian from Montreal, had worked and studied in Paris after the war. His studies completed, he joined the staff of Pierre Balmain. On leaving Balmain, he opened his own salon in London for a short time and subsequently designed costumes for films and theatrical productions including Greer Garson's film "The Miniver Story" (1942).

Mallets work attracted the attention of Connolly and Clarke in Dublin and they journeyed to London to interview him for the position. An agreement was reached and, without delay, he was contracted to design a seasonal collection for County Wear beginning in 1949.

This collaboration was supremely successful. The new designer collection and couture salon, launched simultaneously, received excellent press reviews at home and attracted attention in New York, when a small article appeared in Women's Wear Daily on his new collection and new found affiliation with Richard Alan/County Wear.

Although extremely successful, the collection hardly broke new ground in the Irish fashion trade. Gaston Mallet did not set out to dazzle the Irish with totally original and innovative design but kept to the general silhouette and use of fabric that "County Wear" was already famous for. The evening wear was sophisticated and simple, utilising beautiful fabrics and the supple jersey and jersey metallics of which Mallet was so fond.(Fig.3)

"If we would sum up Gaston Mallet's collection of coats and suits in one word - we should



Fig.3 A collection of models from the Autumn
1950 season designed by Gaston Mallet
for Richard Alan.

The Irish Times, Tuesday, September 20,
1950.

choose the adjective "sensible" - in no way meaning dull or prosaic or ultra-practical, but meaning that rare thing - a collection of coats and suits eminently suited to the vagaries of our climate and designed clearly for town and country wear. Faultless cut and the finest of tweeds and suitings added lustre to the selection of coats and suits which were shown." 19

Gaston Mallet never really departed from the general silhouette or lines dictated by his more famous French and English counterparts. He used mainly imported fabrics with a particularly 'Irish' feel for colour - soft, muted shadings, greyed tones of pastels, subtle variations on the new fine tweeds which were currently emerging.²⁰

At this time a striking similarity in shape, detailing and use of fabrics can be seen between Mallet's work and that of other European designers. Digby Morton and Hardy Amies were also producing styles which resembled these "County Wear" designs. Suits and coats were rigidly tailored - always slim fitting, with accentuated bosom and waist. This was in total contrast to the full-skirted retrospective elegance of Dior's New Look of just a few seasons previously. These slim suits were in many ways more indicative of the severe styles of utility clothing favoured during the second World War, but with important differences - a more feminine and subtle shaping and detailing. (Fig.4 to 7)

The alliance between Richard Alan, County Wear and Gaston

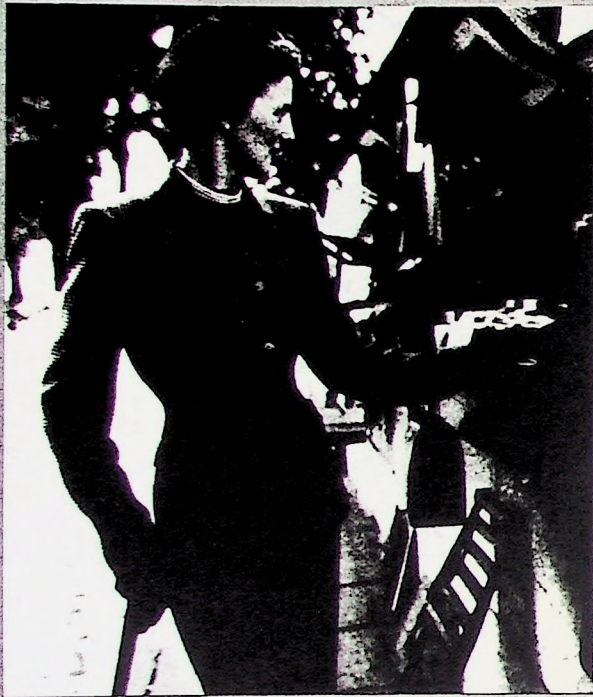


Fig. 4. Suit in pink and grey check tweed by Gaston Mallet for County Wear. This suit features the rigid tailoring and 'constructed' look common in day suits of the period. This suit dates from 1949 but is characteristic of Mallet's work while at Richard Alan.



Fig-5. Tweed suit by Hardy Amies, 1951.

This style had been popular with Amies for some time and is very similar to Mallet's suit in Fig.4



Fig.6 Tailored worsted suit called 'Grand National' by Brenner Sports, a ready to-wear label. This slim silhouette had filtered down to companies invol-

Daily Express, March 7, 1951.



Fig.7 Utility clothing from 1942.

Blue, cream, brown tweed suit
by Hardy Amies and brown crepe
blouse by Molyneux. This exam-
ple shows striking similarities
between clothing from this per-
iod and those of the late 40's
and early 50's in both construc-
tion and detailing.

Mallet was remarkable mainly for two reasons. First, it was a unique collaboration of design talents from abroad with Irish tailoring and technical skills which produced such highly fashionable, saleable and, indeed, beautiful clothing. Secondly, it show the very obvious potential that existed in Ireland for the development of a sizeable fashion industry and the possibility of a much needed new export industry. It proved that Ireland was capable of high quality couture production for discerning clients which could, if given the chance, also appeal to a selective foreign market.

Gaston Mallet stayed with Richard Alan until 1952 when he received an excellent job offer from a bridal company in the United States - which was, as Sybil Connolly said "too good to turn down. When Gaston Mallet departed, he left a vacuum in both Richard Alan and, more generally, in the fashion business in Ireland.



Fig.8 'White Lilacs', white tulle and chantilly lace evening dress from the Spring Summer collection 1951.

The Queen, June 20, 1951.

Début!

On Mallet's departure, the most pressing problem was of actually finding an immediate replacement. This difficult task fell to Sybil Connolly as director/manageress of the salon and, when no ideally suitable candidate could immediately be found, Sybil Connolly herself, backed by a very reluctant Jack Clarke, decided to add the designers responsibilities to her already loaded work schedule.

Sybil Connolly made her presence as designer immediately felt. She insisted on a change of presentation of the shows and imported well-known model girls from London to show her collection. A trip to Paris solved the problem of accessories which were brought from the couture houses of Dior, Desses and Fath. This trip to Paris also supplied the extra designs to make her first showing a complete success. These designs were cut from the toiles of the great Paris couturiers including Piquet, Desses and Dior. These designs from Europe seemed to supply also the shaky inspiration for certain elements of the Connolly Spring- Summer range.

Many ideas featured in the County Wear styles had already appeared in the toiles of Parisian designers. An example of this strange approach to design was the melon sleeve with turned back cuffs which seemed to be a recurring idea throughout the collection.

I thought it would be interesting, at this point, to include a report on Sybil Connolly's first collection from Social and

Personal, May, 1952.

"The Richard Alan Collection.

The haute couture collection at Richard Alan's was modelled by some well-known London mannequins and over forty models, including tailored suits, topcoats, sports clothes, day dresses, cocktail clothes and evening gowns, were shown.

The suits, which were by County Wear, featured the new shorter jacket and many of the skirts were gently flared or, if straight, had panels of knife pleating at the back. Irish tweeds were used with great imagination and many of the worsteds used were also of Irish make. The dropped shoulderline, which was inspired by Jean Desses, was also used in several lovely suits and also in a slick town coat of black barathea.

A suit of emerald green tweed, named Country Cousin, had a short tailored jacket with a well-defined waistline, and a slender skirt which had two knife pleats at the back. This suit was a copy of one chosen to represent Irish tailoring at the International Fashion Show in Atlantic City recently. A black barathea suit with a slim skirt had a braided jacket which was made with the fashionable mandarin collar.....

..... The County Wear coats shown were beautifully cut and voluminous travel coats were includ-

ed as well as exquisitely fitted coats for formal wear. Traveller's Joy was a loose coat of red mohair made with softly rounded shoulders and extra deep armholes, while another travel coat was made of grey and yellow plaid and had snugly fitted shoulders and a tiny collar.....

..... Most of the dresses were needle-slim and many of them had their own little jackets either matching or in interesting contrast. 'Spick and Span' was a button Thru' dress of navy wool which had a brief bolero of navy and white check, while a grey and black tweed dress, also very slim, had a double-breasted bolero to match...

..... Pure silk shantung, surah and taffetas were used for many of the elegant cocktail and afternoon ensembles As usual, the evening gowns in the Richard Alan collection were the outstanding feature. They range from a simple ballet dress of white waffle piqué which had its own quipure lace bolero..... A gown of cinnamon lace and tulle had a skirt of cinnamon tulle flounced beneath which was seen bands of matching quipure lace. Flounces were also used in an outstanding gown of black quipure lace the skirt of which was very straight in front. The flounces of stiffened tulle came at the back of the skirt from the knee to the hemline.....

..... A note worth part of the Richard Alan

collection were the accessories, many of which came from the boutiques of famous Paris couturiers such as Dior, Fath, Balenciaga and Balmain. Star shaped earrings of rhinestone were worn with afternoon and evening gowns; The hats, which were by Otto Lucas, were particularly striking. Hugh cartwheels of black straw, wide east-to-west hats of white leghorn straw, and brilliant- studded cocktail hats were in sharp contrast to the jaunty crochet caps worn with travel coats and sportswear. It is interesting to note that the jewelry, handbags and long slender umbrellas from the Paris boutiques, and also the Otto Lucas hats and Jaegar caps are all to be found in the Richard Alan Boutique."

As in Mallet's show, the collection was divided into two parts - one devoted to daywear and the other to eveningwear which was certainly the most successful. Her romantic creations - such as 'Bal Masque' (Fig.9) stole the show. Her eveningwear differed to that of Mallet - they were predominantly more innocent, more romantic, young, fresh and quite traditional - no femme fatale was to be seen in this collection.

Sybil Connolly favored pure silk shantung, surah and taffeta in contrast to Mallet who excelled in the use of draped plain and metallic jerseys in chic, slim dinner gowns. Miss Connolly concentrated on a bouffant 'New Look' silhouette while Mallet worked within a needle-slim construction. Sybil Connolly also preferred to design individual gowns while Mallet strove to develop a unity throughout the collection in his choice of

colour, fabric and shape.

Two outfits from this collection were chosen by Rosemary Sheehan to represent Irish fashion design at an International Fashion Revue in America. From County Wear was chosen a top coat in black and white check, cut on flaring lines, with push up sleeves and velvet trimmed collar. The suit was of emerald green tweed and featured a short jacket and reed slim skirt. A grey tulle and chantilly lace dress by Sybil Connolly was also chosen.

This was to be the first taste of international acclaim and recognition to touch the new Irish couture and its new-found star Sybil Connolly. Others to be included in the show were Dior, Fath, Desses, Amies and Morton - an impressive occasion on which to make a début.

Sybil Connolly's design concept was immediately and recognisably different from that of Mallet - romantic, ballgowns in the grand manner in total contrast to Mallet's slim, sophisticated dinner gowns. Gaston Mallet, in his daywear models, made use of tweeds - not strictly Irish - in pale Irish landscape colours. But Sybil Connolly was to use exclusively Irish tweeds which she strove to develop to a high standard of quality, to develop a new, fine, lightweight quality combined with pale, high fashion colours, designed exclusively for her own collection. She was to extend the Irish content of her collections in the area of both fabrics and inspiration.

There were no dramatic departures from the sophisticated yet simply practical look created by Mallet - subtle gradual dev-

elopments and changes to the already elegant look were the order of the day at Richard Alan - an approach which her hero Balenciaga would have very much approved - collections were designed with one eye on current English and Parisian trends and the other on the practical minded, rather conventional Irish customer - a rather successful attempt to amalgamate both concepts.

The Philadelphia Fashion Week - their interest aroused by the three Irish garments which decorated femininity at the International Fashion Show in the U.S.A. with French and British inspirations, were on their way to the French with reference and there was a strong chance they would pay a visit to Ireland as well.

April, according to reports in Dublin with just a little over two weeks to go before a collection which was worthy of these distinguished fashion experts, a small preview in a magazine April and forward, August, 1955, announced their imminent arrival that

many members of the well-known Philadelphia fashion group will be present in Ireland during three days in June this week.

Irish Textile Institute have arranged a programme, including a conducted tour around Dublin at the day of their arrival, August 1st followed by a luncheon given by the association of Woollen and Waxed Manufacturers of Ireland and a display of their fabrics. In the evening of the same day there will be a fashion showing

Success!

After the strenuous work to complete her first collection, Sybil Connolly took a holiday with Jack Clarke, travelling through Paris to Monte Carlo for some well-earned rest. Her relaxation, however, was short lived - a telegram arrived which called them both back to Ireland immediately - the Philadelphia Fashion Group - their interest aroused by the three Irish garments which competed favorably at the International Fashion Revue in the U.S.A. with French and British competition, were on their way to the French collections and there was a strong chance they might pay a visit to Ireland en route.

Sybil Connolly returned to Dublin with just a little over two months in which to prepare a collection which was worthy of these distinguished fashion experts. A small preview in a magazine Social and Personal, August, 1952, announced their imminent arrival thus

"Fifty members of the well-known Philadelphia fashion group will be guests in Ireland during three days of Horse Show week.

Coras Trachtala Teoranta have arranged a programme, including a conducted tour around Dublin on the day of their arrival, August 6th followed by a luncheon given by the Association of Woollen and Worsted Manufacturers of Ireland and a display of their fabrics. In the evening of the same day there will be a fashion showing

of the Autumn collection of Richard Alan and 'County Wear' designed by Sybil Connolly and Jack Clarke; following the display they are inviting their guests to a champagne party. On the 7th August the group will visit the Dublin Horse Show in the afternoon, and later will attend a dinner given by Coras Trachtala Teoranta at the Shelbourne Hotel."

Originally their stop-over was to last just a few hours - enough to refuel their aircraft, but Sybil Connolly and Jack Clarke, in conjunction with C.T.T. persuaded this group of prestigious buyers and fashion correspondents to stay a little longer and to sample the various attractions of Ireland. One small part of their visit was to be devoted to a fashion show at the showrooms of Richard Alan. They met the Association of Woolen and Worsted Manufacturers and at a luncheon in their honour a member of the group, Alice O'Neill, an interior decorator for Gimbels, said "We are interested in tweeds, linens and lace, we shall see some of the fashion shows as observers but we are looking forward most of all to the Horse Show." ²¹

But the Horse Show was not to be the most remarkable event on their three day sojourn in Ireland.

A cosmopolitan atmosphere prevailed at the showing of the Richard Alan collection on the evening of 6th August, 1952.

"There was a definite international flavour about the clothing which could take their place alongside top creations of other countries..." ²²

The 'international flavour' was enhanced by the top models flown in from London especially for the occasion. Barbara Goalen, Seignon and three Irish girls at the top of their profession - Pat O'Reilly, Anne Gunning and Sheila Wilson.

The models might have been drawn from abroad but the fabrics, design and workmanship had a very distinct Irish flavour. But it was this Irish flavour that contributed greatly to the absolute success of the evening - the show was an unmitigated success, unexpected by audience, the visiting fashion group and designers alike.

"Arc lamps glared on a small Grafton Street dress shop last week. They bathed Irish clothes in the harsh, merciless limelight of sleek international fashion - and a Cinderella industry survived the gruelling ordeal without showing a wrinkle.

I was one of an embarrassingly large male audience to see these very glad rags put through their paces. And I congratulate Sybil Connolly, Richard Alan's designer, for elevating Irish materials to the rare brittle atmosphere of Paris, London and New York." ²³

The outstanding feature of the collection was indeed the fabrics tweeds, lace and linen. One Irish journalist reported that "Donegal tweeds, lace, linen, poplin were fashioned into elegant

clothes which the most dress-conscious woman in the world would enjoy wearing." ²⁴ The usual format also prevailed - separated into two sections - daywear, coats, suits and separates by Jack Clarke and Sybil Connolly, cocktail and evening wear by Sybil Connolly.

As this was Sybil Connolly's first major collection I have decided to discuss it in greater detail than her other collections. In this collection, Sybil Connolly established certain themes and ideas which she was to develop and re-use over the next thirty years.

The suits were, mainly very figure-conscious, reed slim skirts, narrow to the knee but "which flared into fullness when the mannequin moved". ²⁵ This movement was often achieved by deep inverted pleats at the back of the skirt. Jackets were short, often belted, in muted Autumn-tinted tweeds most of which were single breasted with neat waists and wrist length sleeves. This look was both sophisticated and supple - very suitable for both town and country.

Coats included massive loose swinging greatcoats (Fig.10) which were also taking Paris by storm, the travel coat and a fitted town coat with voluminous skirt. Nothing radically different but which exploited to great effect the magnificent Irish tweeds which were especially woven for the collection. Velvet was frequently used as a trim, most usually with black and white speckled Donegal tweeds.

Day dresses were often slim and worn under the vast greatcoats, these dresses were figure hugging, the slim line being often



Fig.10. Massive great coat worn with slim two piece suit. Large military- style coats were taking Paris by storm.

'Travel Circuit'

Irish Tatler and Sketch, 1952.

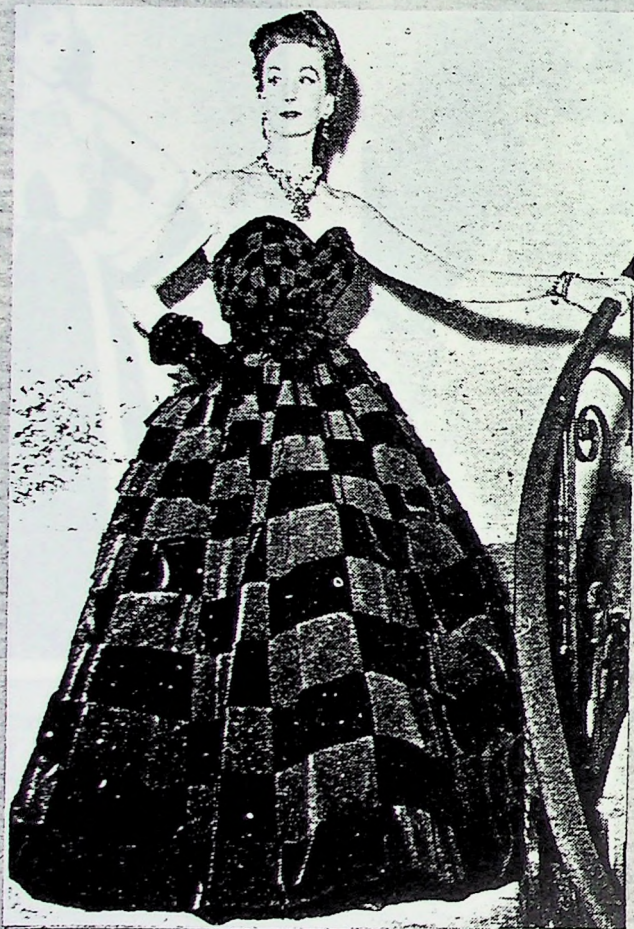


Fig.II 'Harlequin' poplin and velvet
evening gown in red and black
plaited sections.

Irish Tatler and Sketch, September, 1952.



Fig. 12 'Connemara Mist' evening gown in grey chiffon (left)

'In Pursuit of Love' grey tulle and white hand
crochet dress (right).

Autumn collection, 1952.

broken by unusual button- on panels. Some full-skirted dresses did appear and these were belted at the waist with the traditional aran crios of the West of Ireland.

The daywear section was a great hit with the American women who loved the new weights and colours in traditional tweeds. This allied with superb craftsmanship and stylish design in clear colours proved irresistible to these seasoned buyers and journalists.

This success was even more obvious in the evening wear section where, yet again, the emphasis was on native Irish fabrics and couture craftsmanship and finish. Evening gowns were in the grand manner - Sybil Connolly used velvets and silks, poplins and wools. Sumptuously embroidered and beaded dresses were in evidence. Both shapes and use of fabric were very similar to the eveningwear in Paris at the time.

(Fig II and I2 for illustrations of eveningwear in this collection).

But it was not the daywear or conventional eveningwear that was to steal the show and capture the rapt attention of both audience and fashion press in Ireland and America alike. It was the more whimsical element, such as an ensemble in the most traditional of Irish fabrics - red flannel, linen and wool - an ensemble entitled 'Irish Washerwoman' (Fig.I3). This was a long evening skirt of quilted red flannel, beautifully cut and flaring, worn with a white vee- neck blouse in fine white linen with accordion- pleated sleeves and a traditional fringed black stole. When the model wearing this ensemble walked onto the ramp the women of the Philadelphia Fashion group



Fig.13 "Irish Washerwoman" - the outfit
that captured the imagination of
American buyers and public. 1952.

just stood up and cheered!

Dorothy Reid, fashion director for an American firm said,
"I love this red petticoat idea, American women will go
crazy about it." ²⁶

The novel idea caught the attention of both Irish and international press and they printed, time and time again, photographs and reports on the outfit and how Sybil Connolly came on the original idea. Sybil Connolly attributes the flash of inspiration to a holiday in the West of Ireland, when she saw the original peasant red petticoat on the native women.

The show, in total, was an absolute success - the audience and fashion group stayed in the salon until 3 o'clock in the morning. "The atmosphere was faintly hysterical"- the sceptical, knowledgable, seen everything fashion experts were buying furiously - not for their stores, but for themselves. " 'But that does not even fit you!' she was saying weakly, to her secretaries hardly concealed dismay".²⁷

As a result of the show in Richard Alan, Sybil Connolly was invited to participate at the Strawbridge Import Show in America together with designers from France, England, Italy and Spain - the beginning of international acclaim. Sybil Connolly's garments were also included in American magazines in fashion features with other designers (Fig.14 to 16) such as Dior, Balmain and Fath, Kogan and Manguin, showing that American journalists considered her contribution to fashion an important one.



Fig. 14 Black satin formal evening gown by
Manguin, in a feature which ranked
Sybil Connolly's work with that of
other European couturiers.
Social and Personal, December, 1952.



Fig.16 White lace dress by young Parisian
couturier Serge Kogan.

Social and Personal, December, 1952.

This series of photographs also
appeared in American magazine, 1952.



Fig.15 'Seville' black lace cocktail dress by

Jacques Fath.

Social and Personal, December, 1952.

America, 1953

The show was such a resounding success that the Philadelphia Fashion Group invited Sybil Connolly to show her next Spring-Summer collection in the United States which was to be sponsored by Gimbel's, the prestigious Philadelphia department store.

This was a splendid profession of faith in Sybil Connolly's work and design talent - it was an accolade never previously accorded an Irish designer. Sybil Connolly was to discover, as E.O. Hauser said, "as so many others had before her the limitless exhuberance with which America unrolls the red carpet for the imported prodigy." ²⁸

America, 1953

Sybil Connolly arrived in New York on board the Queen Mary with trunks containing the forty seven models she was to show at fashion spectacles in Montreal, New York, Philadelphia and Boston. The highlight of the trip was the showing on St. Patrick's Day, March 17, 1953 in the Waldorf- Astoria, sponsored by Gimbel's store.

The collection encompassed suits, coats and separates, leisure wear and sportswear and Sybil Connolly's favourite- eveningwear. The models featured the native fabrics of Ireland - Donegal tweeds which took the colours of the Irish landscape as their inspiration. All the fabrics used in the collection were especially woven for Sybil Connolly, the colourings and patterns being exclusive to her garments. Colours were muted, pale greys greens and yellows. Fabrics were light in weight - an incredible 4 oz. per yard in widths of 32 inches. These fabrics were woven with worsted yarns to create a smooth, almost linen- like texture - months of work had gone into persuading reluctant cottage weavers to sufficiently refine their product so as to make it suitable for high fashion garments.

The Spring - Summer collection, 1953

The suits in her new collection were basically classic in shape with slim skirts and sculptured jackets which closely followed the contours of the body. The jackets were slightly shaped at the hips, shoulders had a soft, unexaggerated shape. This look was at once feminine, figure- conscious, very wearable in an unexaggerated way. The Americans were very taken with these extra fine tweeds and simple styling which they saw as extremely

NATURALLY, IT'S FIRST AT

GIMBELS

for Famous Fashions

"Cead mile failte"

(Gaelic for one hundred thousand welcomes)

to a new star

the first
fashion
collection
from

Ireland

to be seen in the U.S.A. . . . in two exciting

Fashion Shows

Tomorrow 1 and 3:30 P. M.

displaying the newsmaking collection of coats,
suits, daytime dresses and evening gowns by
famed designer Sybil Connolly of Dublin . . .
with Miss Connolly here **IN PERSON**, tomorrow

phia.

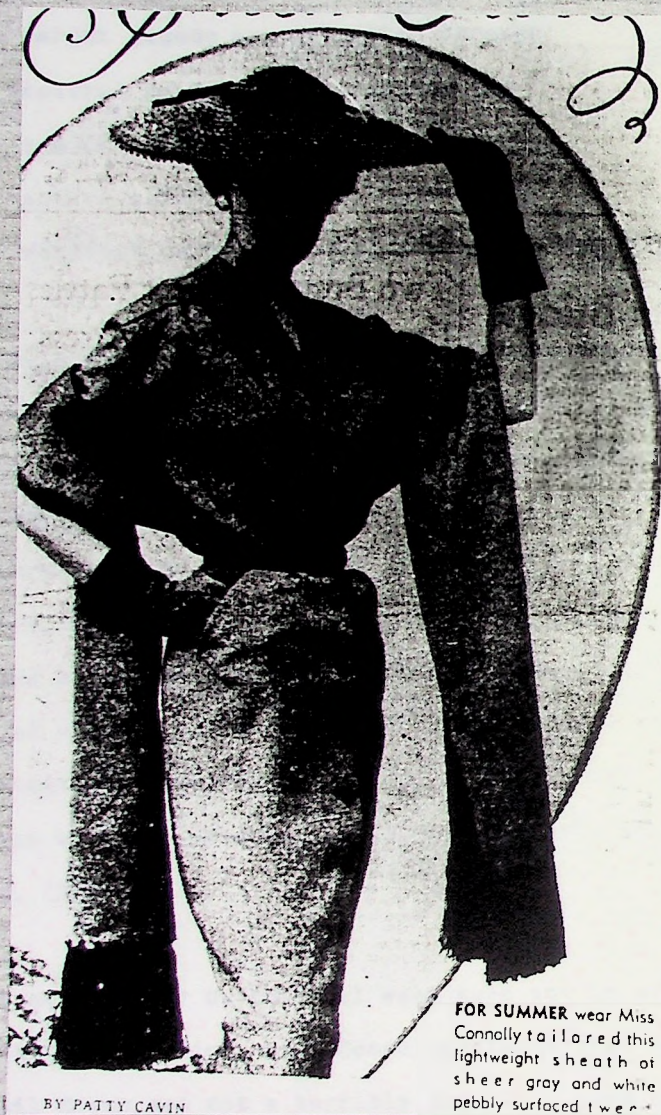


Fig.I7 Tailored sheath dress in grey/white
tweed with the accessory which re-
curred throughout the collection-
a fringed stole.

Spring- Summer collection, 1953.

suitable for their own active lives. Miss Connolly recognized that

"In America, for instance, these light-weight tweeds are essential because central heating is universal. And remember- American women lead very active lives. They don't want to be weighted down by cumbersome clothes."²⁹

Suits, coats and dresses often sported trims - cuffs and collars - in contrast fabrics such as white piqué and linen, yellow or black velvets. An interesting point is that many of these trims were often detachable which added to the versatility of the garment. Some examples of this use of trims - a taupe tweed suit, softly tailored, had collar and cuffs in black velvet and a pale grey tweed suit with a bubbly white fleck boasted of a white piqué collar and cuffs. Stoles were also an important accessory for the slim, sophisticated day look, often worn with day dresses as well as with late afternoon clothing. (Fig.17)

Informal eveningwear or cocktail wear were not in great evidence in this collection. Miss Connolly stated that she thought a cocktail dress was not a terribly essential part of a woman's wardrobe, she had discovered that a good afternoon dress served the purpose adequately provided it was "cut with grace and imagination."³⁰

The lavish eveningwear was, however, in direct contrast to the simplicity of the daywear. Evening gowns were mainly full-length,

TIME

THE WEEKLY NEWSMAGAZINE

FASHION

Flair from Eire

In the grand ballroom of Manhattan's Waldorf-Astoria last week, some 1,200 members of the garment industry crowded in for a look at the latest fashions from abroad. Among the 57 styles paraded across the stage were some from Europe's top designers—Dior, Fath, Balenciaga, Visconti. But the dress that brought the house down was "First Love," the product of an almost unknown Irish woman. Designed by Dublin's 32-year-old Sybil Connolly, it was a dazzling white ball gown made of gossamer-thin handkerchief linen. Sewn into 5,500 minuscule pleats and banded with five strips of bright woven white satin, the flowing dress looked fit for a fairy queen (*see cut*). Price: \$475.

The evening gown was one of 44 designs that Sybil Connolly brought to the U.S. for her first American showings at Gimbel's in Philadelphia and later at Filene's in Boston. Though she has been designing in Dublin for ten years, Connolly first caught the eye of the continental trade last year, when she brought out her "Irish Washerwoman" style in line with a new trend to fringed tweeds and shawls.

Most of Connolly's styles reflect traditional Irish dress ("I couldn't design a button anywhere but in Ireland," says Sybil), instead of merely copying the trends of Rome and Paris. She uses native Irish materials, designs many of the fabrics herself, works closely with the Irish weavers, and turns out clothes from \$80 to \$475. In the middle bracket (\$295) is her green velvet, off-the-shoulder "Kinsale Cape" for evening wear. One of the prettiest of the Connolly lot: "Kitchen Fugue," a full-skirted evening dress with stole, made of multicolored Irish-linen kitchen toweling, for \$89.95.



CONNOLLY'S "FIRST LOVE"



"KINSALE CAPE"



with some notable exceptions such as 'Irish Washerwoman' which opened each showing (Fig.13) and an opulent grey silk taffeta, harem-skirted dress with a trim of pearls and mink fur.

But, as in most other designers collections that season, white was the most important colour for evening. Sybil Connolly used white linen for her most popular and successful gown of the season. This dress, 'First Love', was of gossamer- fine linen, chiffon sheer and hand-pleated into over 5,500 tiny pleats. These were held in place with delicate bands of plaited satin ribbon. This amazing fabric was found languishing in an Ulster linen mill during one of Sybil Connolly's frequent trips to the North. It was originally used to manufacturer handkerchiefs for the monarchs of Europe but the market for these exclusive items was fast diminishing and the linen mill had not managed to find another use for the super-fine fabric.

The dress was a smash, with the American press and public alike who were captured by the fresh romanticism of the creation. The dress was photographed and written about in newspapers across the United States and the reaction it received in the face of the illustrious competition it faced from other European designers. Time magazine devoted a full page to photographs and a report on this new designer and her collection (see Fig.18) At this point I include a report which was indicative of the reaction to her work:

"Irish Dress Stole New York Show.

Not from Dior, Fath or Visconti came the dress



Fig.19 'First Love' handkerchief linen
mudhroomed into 5,500 tiny hand-
pleats.

The Montrealer, April, 1953.



Fig.20 'Kitchen Fugue' full-skirted summer evening gown in striped linen kitchen towelling, 1953.

that brought the house down in a foreign fashion parade at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, New York, last week.

Among the 57 styles shown by the world's leading designers, says 'Time' magazine, 'First Love' designed by Dublin's 32 year old Sybil Connolly, was favourite.

A dazzling white evening gown made of gossamer thin handkerchief linen, Miss Connolly's design is sewn into 5,500 miniscule pleats and banded with fine strips of bright woven white satin."³¹

For photograph of 'First Love' see Fig.19.

Other models also caused a sensation in this collection. The whimsical 'Kitchen Fugue' (Fig.20) ensembles, very reminiscent to Dior's New Look in shape, were made of linen kitchen towel-like printed with dramatic, colourful stripes. These sophisticated strapless summer evening dresses were accessorised with the stoles which were a common feature throughout the collection. The American press loved this unconventional fabric and its use in a chic evening dress.

Other models highlighted Irish Themes - 'Dark Lake' (Fig.21) an evening cloak in dark green velvet inspired by the traditional Kinsale cloak worn with a draped white jersey sheath was another great success as was 'Age of Innocence', a white cambric evening jacket, inspired, possibly, by Balenciaga's new drawstring jackets for day and eveningwear. This was worn with a slim sheath dress (Fig.22).



Fig.2I 'Dark Lake', the traditional Kinsale cloak becomes haute couture in dark green velvet with a Grecian-style white jersey sheath beneath.

Time magazine, March 23, 1953.



Fig.22 'Age of Innocence' pleated Irish cambric jacket with jersey sheath, very similar to 'draw string' line by Balenciaga (see fashion report by Bettina Ballard of Vogue.

Helen Ballard, fashion editor, Vogue Paris Spring + Other European Collections

Ready-to-Wear Meeting, March 13, 1953

MRS. BALLARD: ...I just got back from flying some 10,000 miles and seeing over 4,000 costumes of one nationality or another...I came home impressed with the interest in and the economic importance of fashion everywhere. Governments are interested in fashion, diplomats are interested, bankers are interested, the press never seems to tire of it, and, judging by the frenzied crowd trying to get into Dior's every day, the public can't get enough of it.

The export of fabric is the important economic result of successful fashion in a country. Textiles, plus clothes and hats, account for 35 to 40% of France's exports to the U.S. Spain's main entering the fashion field is to export what fabrics they have to get dollars to buy raw materials, which they haven't. In Italy, over-population makes ability and willingness to work useless unless an outside market can be reached. Italian fashion shows, by promoting their fabrics, have given hope and work to thousands of skilled hands. And we all know what fabric exports mean to England.

Fashion travels some interesting and strange routes in Europe today. For example, the Swiss in Zurich buy in Paris or Italy, quickly copy and pass their less expensive versions on to Scandinavian countries and Germany. Sweden has a high class couture that reproduces French models, then bought in Zurich, for export to England, America, and Egypt. Cuba, South America, and Mexico buy from Spain, where the exchange is in their favor. Canadians, with their really solid money, are courted everywhere. And the Germans, too, now buy all over, but prefer Italy or Spain because of the exchange. At the Italian Couture show in Florence, there were only a handful of Americans. The great ballroom of the Pitti Palace was filled with hundreds of Germans and Swiss and Scandinavians, all buying a little and sketching a lot. The clothes were announced in German as well as English, and the releases and programs were printed in German and English. The handful of Americans were treated like royalty, but the others made the show pay.

I am asked constantly if Italian fashion is really going to push French fashion off the map, or if Spain really is the new rising fashion star. My answer, for what value it has, is no... There are excellent clothes and lots of ideas in Italy, but Paris is still the creative fashion center of the world. It is, and probably will continue to be, the place from which fashion direction springs. It is a great pool of creative effort, the smallest of craftsmen throwing in his button or belt or piece of embroidery to make a creative whole. The back stairs of the great couture houses are filled with inventive talent, talent which has to be sifted through the hands of a Dior or a Balenciaga to become part of fashion. No other country has such an age-old creative organization to back up a designer. Mind you, Paris is slightly troubled. A big Paris store, the Galeries Lafayette, went to buy in Florence, which was a terrific blow to French pride, and the lower Spanish and Italian prices have definitely cut in on the European buyer trade in Paris. So, the rising ready-to-wear market in France is a troubling thorn.

The Paris Collections had a very special spring feeling this year...I never remember, in all the collections I have covered, such deliciousness in prints and embroideries: tomatoes, grapes, peonies, moss roses, English garden prints, birds or oysters on silk. When the costume was sober, there was a toque of daisies, a cap of fresh berries, a single lotus flower on top of the head, or a big straw in mint green or rose pink.

Accessories also accentuated the traditional Irish look in her collection - 'leprechaun' hats in felts and velvets, hand made jewelry in silver and gold reminiscent of Tara brooches and collars worn in ancient Ireland. These pieces were worn with simple black sweaters and slim skirts.

It was this collection that captured the imagination of the Irish-American market and thrust Sybil Connolly into the limelight of international fashion and sent her back to Ireland with order books bulging and the task of producing another collection which would compare favourably with her impressive début.

Sybil Connolly's appeal to Irish and especially to the American market can be summed up by the words simple, chic, practical and wearable. Each of these words emphasises the look which Sybil Connolly has developed over the past 25 years. She never pioneered a particular cut or a design concept. She never set a trend in shape, rather followed the styles and shapes that were established by her more inventive contemporaries.

It was definitely this conservatism that made her a most successful designer in Ireland and the United States. These two countries demanded of their designers fashions which were at once wearable yet elegant and sophisticated, simple yet with the touches/refinements of haute couture (certainly for the few who could afford it). What Sybil Connolly seemed to offer was a more 'commercial' (not in the economic sense but in a broader context) version and development of the fashions presented by designers such as Amies, Dior and Balenciaga.

This first American collection was to establish themes in fabric, ideas and colourings which were to predominate in Sybil Connolly's work for the next twenty to thirty years. Sybil Connolly was to develop her shapes and design ideas over long periods of time, subtly introducing new ideas over a number of seasons rather than abandon the previous seasons styles and frantically search for a new source of inspiration and a new concept.

Sybil Connolly's work rarely deviated from the simple, elegant image executed in truly Irish fabrics. She strove to constantly re-iterate her point that Ireland and Irish hand-crafts and fabrics had a unique quality to be exploited. Miss Connolly, with her astounding success in America in 1952-53, saw and carved out a very specific niche for herself in the American market and having done so, she strove constantly to keep a firm grip on that market season after season, and to supply these faithful clients with the type of fashion they obviously appreciated.

In the next chapter, I hope to discuss Sybil Connolly's development as a designer and to analyse her appeal, especially to the American market and to discover, in the process of doing so, her key to the phenomenal success both national and international she has achieved.

for Release:

From: Heather C. Huntington
Gimbel Brothers, Philadelphia

WAlnut 2-3300, Ext. 869

Subject:

FURTHER MATERIAL ON THE SPRING COLLECTION OF IRISH FASHION DESIGNER SYBIL CONNOLLY, BEING SHOWN IN THE UNITED STATES FOR THE FIRST TIME AT GIMBELS IN PHILADELPHIA, at Auditorium fashion shows at 1 and 3:30 Tuesday, March 17th (St. Patrick's Day).

Miss Connolly feels that Spring, 1953, will be remembered as the season when the ~~figure~~ figure took over and triumphed! Softly padded shoulders, small waists, gently rounded hips have won the day. Waists have stopped wandering, and are almost always back in their normal position.

The "look" in the Sybil Connolly collection is not an exaggerated "look," but one which follows the ins and outs of waists and hips with meditated simplicity. A look to suit the tempo and way of life in Ireland - and wonderfully right for Americans living as well!

Day dresses, whether they are in handwoven tweed, Irish linen or dacron have an easy, casual look - a feeling of motion even when in repose.

It is in the tailored suits that the rounded silhouette is most noticeable. Jackets have never been closer to the woman, and never further from elaborate fantasy. Coats follow the figure to the waistline, and then swirl gracefully over the hips. Loose coats hang straight from the shoulder, with no resemblance to the full pyramid coats of past seasons.

INTEREST

In fabric, wool is still triumphant, and for Spring and Summer, the ray-fine lightweight handwoven Donegal tweeds are the most attractive. The colors are quite often "iridescent," with a cool mountain lake as their inspiration, or alternatively, they have an interesting palette. Linen takes on the guise of trend in "Simplicity," a linen dress and jacket, and to prove its versatility, it becomes gossamer fine and plants into \$5.00 (repeat, \$5.00!) of the smallest imaginable plants in "First Love." This fine linen is actually handkerchiefs, which were handwoven twenty years ago to the orders of the various Kings and Princess of Europe. With the number of crowned heads diminishing in Europe, a certain amount of these handkerchiefs were able to find their way into "First Love."

The Work of Sybil Connolly

I feel the reason for her remarkable success as a designer was not due to one outstanding factor but a combination of a number of elements - both obvious and to be expected as well as factors which are not necessarily related purely to her abilities as a designer, although essentially, it is these abilities on which a designer stands or falls.

To use a well-worn cliché - Sybil Connolly was in the right place at the right time, and to her credit, realised it. While a talented and creative designer, what assured her success and indeed that of other designers was the recognition, by one or two individuals, of that fact. Sybil Connolly, with a combination of acute business sense, cloaked with personal charm, talent, hardwork, determination and a certain element of humility, made herself a fashion authority in both Ireland and America.

In the 1950's, when Sybil Connolly came to prominence, the centre of the world of Haute Couture was very firmly set in Paris. Since the 1930's Spain had made a dramatic entrance into the world of couture with the supremely talented Balenciaga. Britain and especially Italy also challenged the French couturiers position. Most challenged this supremacy with their brand of sophisticated, 'European' couture, sometimes, as in the case of Spain, inspired by ethnic costume and dress. It was elegant, beautiful and often very 'continental and French' in its approach. An American buyer/woman might have very firmly put these continental designers into one large group.

But, unexpectedly, from a country with little affinity with couture, despite having contributed some excellent designers to the group of British couturiers working in London, America glimpsed a very 'Irish' approach to couture. This approach was fresh, romantic, humorous, innocent yet womanly - a very feminine approach to the art of dressing. The American, especially, were to find the work of this couturiere particularly to their liking

"Only from Ireland could come such a fairy tale to capture the imagination and admiration of the fashion world. And only a Sybil Connolly - beautiful and capable - could have single-handedly plunged Ireland into the very centre of the fashion world.

Miss Connolly's clothes have a refreshing sense of the unhackneyed. There is a wonderful, improbable, rather sophisticated use of homespun fabrics, leathers, linens, tweeds, knits, flannels, in her hands they take on new significance, added lustre." ³²

Sybil Connolly's design concept was at once simple yet time-consumingly constructed, practical yet wearable, yet very much haute couture. She was to combine in her eveningwear simplicity and innocence with a touch of sophistication, elegance and glamour.

Sybil Connolly's appeal/success was not due to her originality - indeed, how many designers actually manage to create a partic-

ularly original look - but to her ability to interpret current trends in a particularly 'Irish' way which was to appeal greatly to an Irish-American public. Other Irish designers such as Irene Gilbert who actually preceded Sybil Connolly, explored this area also but never actually achieved Sybil Connolly's level of success.

Her collections, more often than not, fall into two categories - daywear and eveningwear. Her daywear was essentially practical, combining in it couture detailing and European styling with an unusually good use of Irish tweed fabrics which was to be the cornerstone of her 'look' Fig.17, Fig.27 . It was this wearability, combined with good fabric, that was to catch the attention of the American public and press.

The American market differed to that of Europe - ready-to-wear clothing figured prominently even in the more fashionable women's wardrobes. Granted, chic, fashionable women - as did the press - still looked to Europe for guidance as to line, cut and the development of new trends and these women still ordered large quantities of clothing from the more prominent English and French couturiers opening up new and very vast markets for them on the other side of the Atlantic.

American ready-to-wear was of a quality then unknown in Europe. Traina-Norell, Hattie Carnegie, Claire McCardell and Adrian all established lucrative ready-to-wear lines - all were excellently made in good fabrics and in well-proportioned sizes so that practically every woman could find something to suit. Prices were also higher - no woman in Europe would have paid such prices.

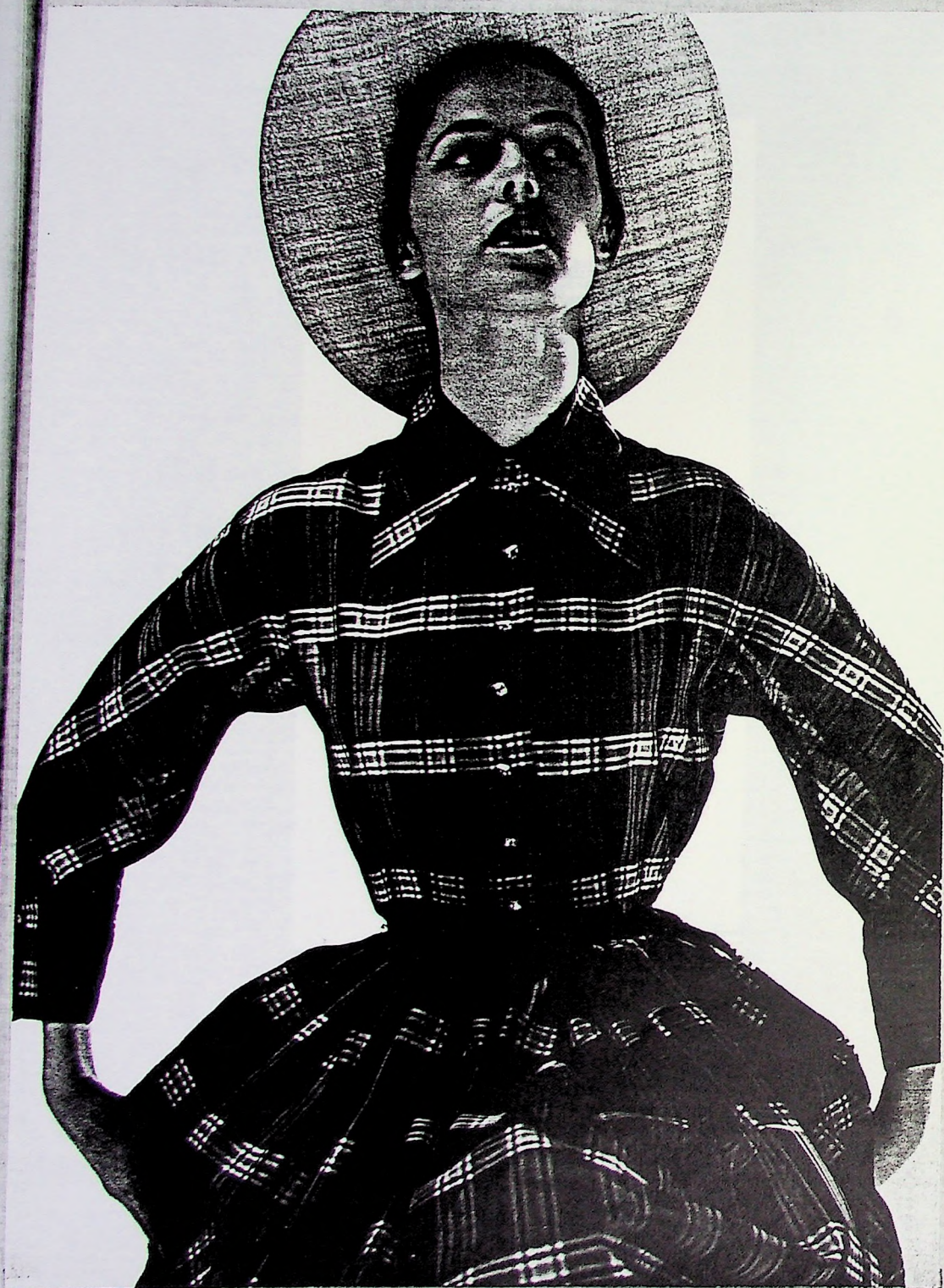


Fig.23 Summer dress by Claire McCardell, 1949.

One of America's ready-to-wear designers
who helped to create and 'American Look'.

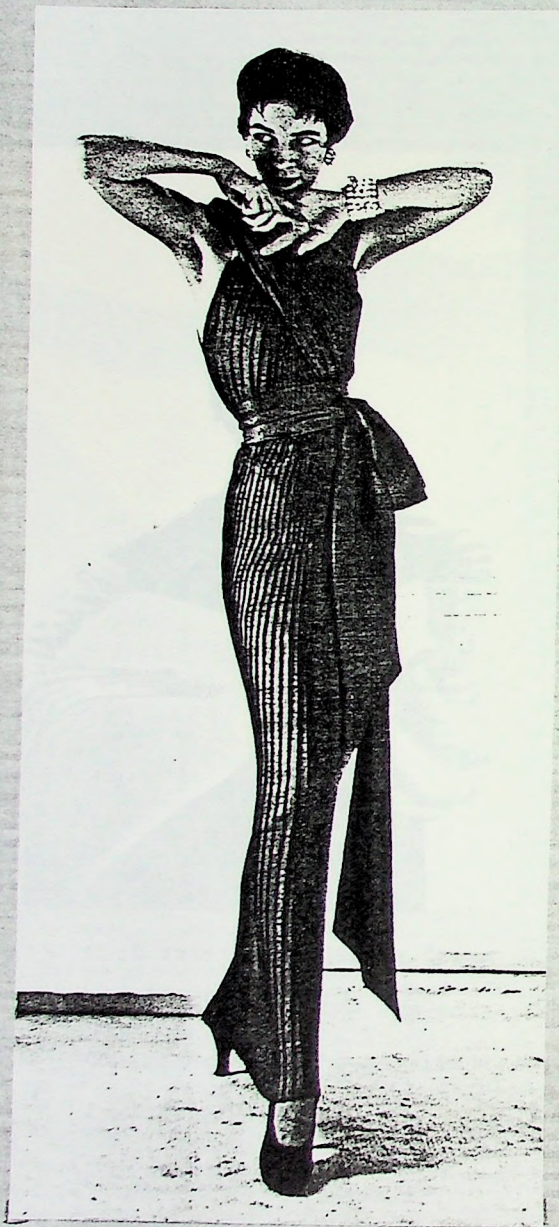


Fig.24 Sheath dress by Claire
McCardell which featured
permanent pleating and wrap
bodice, 1950.



Fig.25 Soft untailed jersey dress
with rouleau belt - one of
Claire McCardell's distinctive
features, 1950.



Fig.26 Evening dress in synthetic fabric by Claire McCardell.

Style is reminiscent of Vionnet with soft drapes and
rouleau decoration.

This American ready-to-wear market blossomed after the four years of isolation caused by the Second World War when American designers had the opportunity to create an 'American' look - a look suitable for the new breed of American Career Woman. Claire McCardell was a prime example of a successful designer working in American ready-to-wear who saw this sort of woman as her arch-typal client. Claire McCardell's clothes were successful because they were comfortable and easy-to-wear. Her designs had a timeless quality which look very bit as good today as they did in the forties and fifties. They are simple and rely totally on functional decorations for their appeal - rouleau drawstrings, trousers with deep pleating at the waist, tabbed belts, all-in-one dungaree outfits, loose sleeved and collarless but totally feminine. All these outfits were in inexpensive fabrics which were imaginatively used to create original designs.

See illustrations of Claire McCardell's work in Fig.23, 24, 25 and 26.

Despite high quality, chic ready-to-wear, Americans still loved to buy the prestige of hand finished expensive couture and the strenght of the dollar made it easier for them to do so. Sybil Connolly slipped, albeit unconsciously, very nicely into a niche in the market which had yet to be filled - Sybil Connolly's clothes had the appeal of the hand finished, exquisitely tailored European styles - simpler and easier to wear than French couture and in fabrics very suitable for the American career woman . These women snapped up the daywear when it became available in the more prestigious stores such as Rich's and Talons and Gimbels on the East coast and I. Magnin's on the West coast. Also, the fact that these

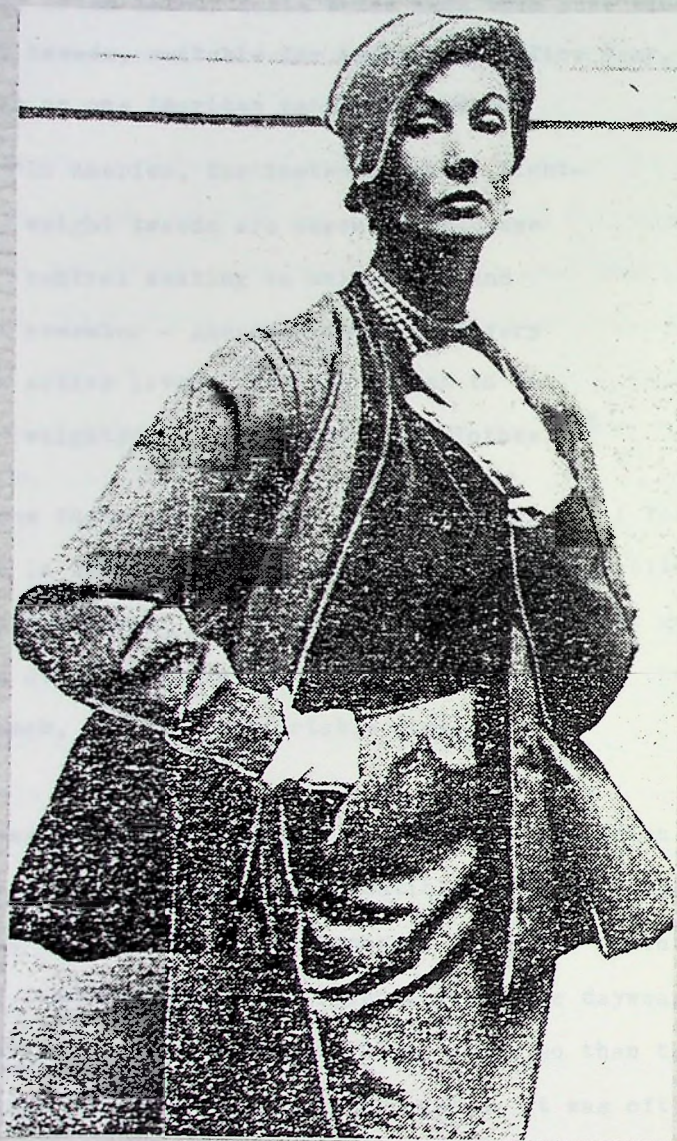


Fig.27 Green tweed homespun tweed suit with
velvet facings and taffeta lining.
Women's Wear Daily, Monday, August 18,
1952.

styles were more reasonably priced than other European designers due to lower Irish labour costs which made them sure winners. The lightweight tweeds, suitable for indoor and office wear, were very popular as one American paper pointed out

"In America, for instance, these lightweight tweeds are essential because central heating is universal. And remember - American women lead very active lives. They don't want to be weighted down by cumbersome clothes."³³

Americans saw these simple, well cut clothes as ideal for the way of life in American towns and cities, eminently suitable for the 'career woman' - chic yet understated, elegant and in a selection of original fabrics. Their appeal was, in the words of Lady Iveagh, that of 'comfortable elegance!'.³⁴

Americans responded to the appeal of the new - the Irish and European elements combined were irresistible. Another element, although not crucial, cannot be ignored - American clients found Sybil Connolly's clothing (specifically the daywear) to be a financially reasonable proposition - more so than the couture of France which was extremely expensive. It was often reported that Sybil Connolly's fashions were slightly more affordable than those of her fellow couturiers. This consideration, however, would not have applied to the private clients who did and still do fly into Ireland especially for fittings, or who ordered her exclusive eveningwear models at £495 a garment. It applied to the potential buyers and customers who would invest in her daywear when it became available during the promotions at various stores such as Gimbel's, Lord and Taylors, I. Magnins

throughout America.

The eveningwear, which constituted a large part of each show, also appealed to a particularly American audience, indeed, often an Irish-American audience. It was in this section that Sybil Connolly gave free reign to her 'romantic' and 'innocent' imagination. It was in her eveningwear that she used most of the traditional Irish fabrics which were associated with this country - hand crochet lace, linen and linen towelling, poplin and the minutely hand-pleated linen for which she became reknown. It was the humorous ideas in the collection that most caught the eye - 'Irish Washerwoman (Fig. 13) and 'Kitchen Fugue' (Fig. 20) with their unique use of Irish fabrics. The 'Kitchen Fugue' models in particular, although not extremely original in shape or construction, were youthful, witty, chic for summer eveningwear which particularly appealed to the press and public's sense of the zany. These models wre made of towelling which was printed with broad, colourful stripes. Incidentally, these fabrics, printed with fish and sea motifs were later to be used in a swimwear collection.

However, her most spectacular gowns, the ones which provoked an estatic reaction from both European and American fashion journalists, were of gossamer-fine linen with 1,000's of miniscule pleats made by hand. Yards of pure Irish linen went into each dress - a certain boost for the Irish linen weaving industry. It was a dress in pleated linen that was to steal the show at the Waldorf-Astoria in an international fashion gala and was hailed by Time magazine as the piece-de-resistance of a show which featured designers such as Dior, Fath and Visconti.

Eveningwear was the area in which Sybil Connolly could make the



Fig.28 Pale blue satin dress with quilting inspired by Waterford glass, bodice and skirt trimmed with tiny glass droplets. Sybil Connolly's Autumn-Winter collection, 1955.

most of Irish inspiration - the traditional cloak of the south of Ireland became, in green velvet, a lavish 'Kinsale' hooded, evening cloak. The traditional red flannel petticoat worn by the women on the Western seaboard became a quilted evening skirt which attracted the attention of the Philadelphia Fashion group. In later collections, Waterford crystal was to supply the inspiration for evening gowns, quilted in geometric patterns and decorated with tiny Waterford crystal droplets.³⁵ It was a rare, but sometimes welcome, occasion when Sybil Connolly departed from her conventional source of inspiration - for example, the 'Russian' collection which combined a very foreign source with a creative use of Irish mohair tweeds - mohair tweeds were pioneered by Balenciaga in the same year.³⁶

If any one aspect of Sybil Connolly's work contributed to her success it was not her 'trend' setting detailing or shapes but her original use of fabric. While other designers had been using tweeds (Irish and otherwise) for some time, Sybil Connolly developed her own exclusive fabrics.

Irish fabrics were always her primary medium and inspiration. Her achievements with traditional tweeds were remarkable - superfine, lightweight tweeds were produced, using special worsted yarns to create an almost linen-like effect

Up until the 1940's, when Sybil Connolly and Jack Clarke had started to use Irish tweeds as fashion fabrics, they were bulky, heavy and only suitable for the roughest and most unsophisticated of garb. Irene Gilbert had started in 1945 to experiment with Irish tweeds and Carrickmacross lace but Sybil Connolly was to



Fig.29 'Aran Atmosphere' jacket in bainin tweed
with aran knit sleeves and hood.
Autumn-Winter collection, 1953.
Life magazine, August 10, 1953.



Fig.30 Day dress in white bainin tweed
inspired by monks habit.
Daily Express, Monday, August 31, 1953.

steal the limelight in this direction.

Sybil Connolly worked with Donegal weavers to produce the weights, textures and colour schemes she particularly wanted for each collection - fine 4 oz tweeds (per 30 ins yard) for suits and dresses, heavier weights for coats. Sybil Connolly particularly favoured white-washed tweeds - an unbleached base of white shot through with blue, grey, pink and yellow. Bainin, the traditional fisherman's cloth was often used in feather-weights for dresses and heavier cloths for outerwear, Fig.28. Sybil Connolly also followed the Italian lead by using simple knitted garments as part of a co-ordinated look, often using oiled aran yarns with bainin as in 'Aran Atmosphere' Fig.29. She also used large, black casual sweaters with slim black skirts and gold and silver 'Irish' hand-made jewelry. Soft leather was also used, especially in the Dunsany collection for Autumn- Winter 1953. Flannels, red and in other colours, were also extensively used, dyed to Sybil Connolly's specifications.

In later collections, Sybil Connolly was to follow Balenciaga's lead and experiment with traditional tweeds combining mohairs and fancy yarns with the usual yarns in wool to create a shaggy 'Cassels' tweed - first used in the Autumn collection of 1956.³⁶

In eveningwear, handwoven pleated linen made in Ulster was a firm favourite. Carrickmacross lace - dyed into siren red, black and pastel shades, hand crocheted lace in red, black and creams slotted through with satin ribbon. Also a firm favourite of Sybil Connolly was poplin - a 60% mohair and 40% silk mix, ideal for afternoon and evening wear - this combination was much applauded by fashion journalists as a great innovation. Drawn thread-

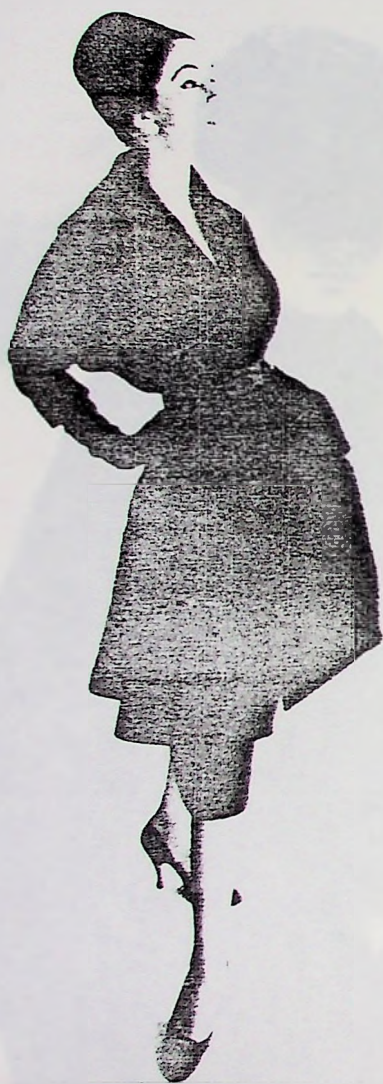


Fig.3I 'Russian' suit which featured the new Cassells tweed, similar to the new tweeds by Balenciaga which combined mohairs and other fancy yarns to great effect.

Autumn-Winter collection, 1956.



Fig.32 Christian Dior suit in mohair and ribbon tweed
- other companies followed Balenciaga's and
Sybil Connolly's lead in introducing new com-
binations in the conventional tweed fabrics.
Daily Mail, September 1, 1964.

work in linen that was almost crush resistant was also a firm favourite.

Her frequent trips to Ulster often brought important discoveries - linen lace which resembled old French made by Dicksons and Co. of Dungannon and a new version of her favourite line - fine drawn threadwork on a heavy damask linen from Lamont and Company, also in Ulster. Much experimentation followed the discovery of this fabric which had not been produced since before the war.

Her use of Irish fabrics was almost exclusive and unparalleled even among other Irish designers. At times, she combined the use of these with satins, brocades and silks and, at one point, produced a gossamer light evening fabric with a slight shimmer which was the result of combining 80% linen with 20% nylon.

Sybil Connolly's use of fabric was definitely original and very beneficial for the ailing fabric industries, providing much work for cottage weavers, some of which worked exclusively for Sybil Connolly. She helped revive some old fabrics - drawn threadwork and linen lace together with handkerchief linen when production of these had ceased through lack of demand - a definite boost and contribution to our fabric heritage.

It is hard in the 1980's to look back at 1952-53 with a fresh mind and to consider the effect of this new Irish couture on both the American and Irish markets. The traditional Irish fabrics and concept may seem clichéd to us, over thirty years later, but when one considers the fact that no one previous to Sybil

Connolly, with the possible exception of Irene Gilbert, had explored this avenue, one can see this fresh approach as having a great appeal with Irish and, especially, American audiences.

The 'Sybil Connolly' look was especially suitable for those fashionable Irish women who could afford such prices - chic yet comfortable, classic city suits in muted tweeds which were in keeping with European trends and dramatic, romantic eveningwear with a feeling of their native country.

Their appeal to a broader American public could also be attributed to the qualities outlined above. The fact that they were mellowed versions of the European trends worked very much in their favour - simple, European couture elegance in fine, custom woven Irish tweeds - a soft, refreshing version of high fashion Parisian garments.

But Sybil Connolly's appeal is not only attributable to her garments but also, I think, to her nationality. A certain nostalgia worked very much in her favour - the Irish-American public opened their arms to what was a very charming, beautiful Irish 'collieen' - it was no co-incidence that her début was held at Limbels store in Philadelphia and that her greatest appeal/success was on the East coast of America in the Irish-American strongholds of Philadelphia, Boston and, to a lesser extent, New York. This is not to say that her only sizable market was that of indulgent Irish-Americans, who sought any link, however pathetic and clichéd, with their home land. Many of her customers had no connection whatever with Ireland and were genuinely smitten with this new fresh and romantic approach to fashion and were glad to give a new and talented designer a chance at success.

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FOR RELEASE

Sure and what would be a more fitting day for the American debut of an Irish fashion designer.

Sybil Connolly, the black-haired Dublin colleen who has stolen the fashion headlines from Paris and Rome, will hold her first American show in Philadelphia's Gimbels store. And — on St. Paddy's Day!

The fashion world first heard about Dublin last fall, when Miss Connolly launched her "Irish Washerwoman" style. This instituted a trend for fringed shawls and flared mid-calf-length evening skirts.

Members of the Philadelphia Fashion Group flew to Europe last summer for a two-week tour. Their first stop was Ireland. There, they were greatly startled by the creations paraded by the charming Miss Connolly.

In fact, Miss Connolly so charmed the Gimbels representative that she insisted the Dublin lass present a fashion show in Philadelphia's Gimbels. Consequently, Miss Connolly arrived in the United States on the Queen Mary ^(TODAY) ~~last~~ Tuesday, where she was met by Heather Huntington and Dorothy Burgin, of Philadelphia's Gimbels. Within five days, the pert Miss Connolly and her styles, made their American debut.

Perhaps the prettiest counterpoint of the day, Miss Connolly drew her inspiration from the mellow Irish countryside. She experiments with actual weaves of the Irish linens and woollens in a preponderance of subtle blues, yellows, and, of course, greens.

MORE

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TELLING BY SPADEA

IRLAND JOINS THE INTERNATIONAL SET - France Still Unchallenged as Pace Setter

DATE: APRIL 19, 1953

REMARKS OF COPY:

PAGE 2

and away.

We're not showing any of the spring coats because it's a little late in the season, but Fath's pinched-shoulders are another look-for-in-the-fall item.

In the evening gown department, it is interesting to note that one of Dior's creations is reminiscent of your Grandmother's high school graduation dress - simplicity. Evening simplicity is so prevalent among the French in fact that one lady was overheard remarking, "It is difficult to find something elaborate for our season."

The English lady was right - for what season could possibly be as elaborate and elegant as that of the coming Coronation. Therefore, John Cavanagh erases every trace of austerity with a ball gown of ostrich feathers and rhinestones - and still, with an eye on the devalued pound, specially designs for peeresses less rich, a costume made out of bunny fur and velvet - but with all the grace of the real thing.

To educate your eye as it takes a visual trip to Europe and its offerings in the world of Fashion.

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TELETYPE TELLING BY SPADEA

SUBJECT: IRELAND JOINS THE INTERNATIONAL SET - France Still Unchallenged as Face Setter

RELEASE DATE: APRIL 19, 1953

NY

'Tis grand news for the fair that the Irish are making in the person of as good a lass as your eyes could wish for: herself, Miss Sybil Connolly. For as it is St. Patrick's Day is March 17, Miss Connolly's collection of tweed suits, master linen dresses, witty petticoat flannel skirts and tea toweling evening gowns, held its own among the fan-fared fabulous fashion names from the Continent.

Bettina Ballard, Vogue's fashion editor and commentator at the Fashion Group's annual presentation of the highlights of European couture, predicts that next fall will see a host of buyers and fashion experts stopping over at Shannon to meet Miss Connolly and dance at the ball she is planning at Dunsany Castle right after her opening.

But it's not only Ireland that plays a part in this season's picture. Dior comes with his tulip tops...Balenciaga with his vacillating waistlines.

The tulip silhouette will probably be planted again in fall collections, and has absolutely no connection with the tulip skirt of a few years back. This year's skirt is a molded, slim stem; this year's bodice is lined, interlined and padded with a break between bosom and shoulder. (See sketches below). His waistlines, under and smooth, were amazingly beltless - a new American habit we reported early in February.

Balenciaga's waistlines, while newsworthy, are a little hard for this reporter to take. They do nothing for an ordinary figure, but if you're a willowy string bean, they're all right. For the most part he has discarded collars, a trick that makes necks look longer and lovelier. If he does happen to use collars, he stands

-more-

However this aspect of Sybil Connolly's appeal cannot be overlooked - her success, to some extent, was due to her talent as a designer but her appeal as a person, which is considerable, cannot be disregarded. Her success was certainly a publicity coup. Although this cannot be responsible for a period of success which spans over thirty years, it would certainly help to thrust a young designer into the limelight of international fashion.

When one sees the amount, and more importantly, the content of newspaper articles, press releases and publicity sheets which pertain to the first collections (see attached sheets) one cannot but be astounded by the stage Irishness of their content

"Sure and what would be a more fitting day for the American debut of an Irish designer, Sybil Connolly, the black-haired Dublin colleen, who has stolen the fashion headlines from Paris and Rome, will hold her first American show in Philadelphia's Gimbels store." ³⁷

"Sure, and it was a grand day for the Irish when Sybil Connolly started designing! For in three short years, this noted couturiere has placed Ireland on the fashion map." ³⁸

Frequent remarks were often also made on her attractiveness and charming personality - she seemed to captivate the American press -

"Tis grand news for the fair that the Irish

are making in the person of as pretty
a lass as your eyes could wish for:
herself, Miss Sybil Connolly." 39

It was certain that newspapers, and most importantly, the store who had financed her trip saw the value of this approach and exploited it as best they could - very sensible and effective piece of marketing.

The last point I wish to discuss is probably the most immediate observation that can be made regarding her work and that is that it was not particularly original or innovative - many of the ideas featured in her collections although beautifully executed in fine fabrics and workmanship and with an unusually 'Irish' feeling for design, could be seen in other European designers collections two or three seasons previously. There was very little innovation in a well-tailored, slim suit in tweed or a ballgown in the grand manner. I have included a selection of photographs and illustrations of Sybil Connolly's work and that of other prominent designers working at that time. Inarguably, there is a resemblance remarkable in some cases. Note particularly the similarity in detail between the London designer Hardy Amies' cotton organdie wedding gown (Fig. 33) and the ivory silk faille dress by Sybil Connolly (Fig. 34). Another instance of this extraordinary coincidence is, yet again, a Hardy Amies dress from 1949 (Fig. 35) and a Georgian blouse and evening skirt (Fig. 36) by Sybil Connolly. Nobody comparing the two photographs could be but struck by the remarkable similarities between the two styles. (see later chapter for further discussion)⁴⁰

The fashion idea most applauded by fashion press and audience alike

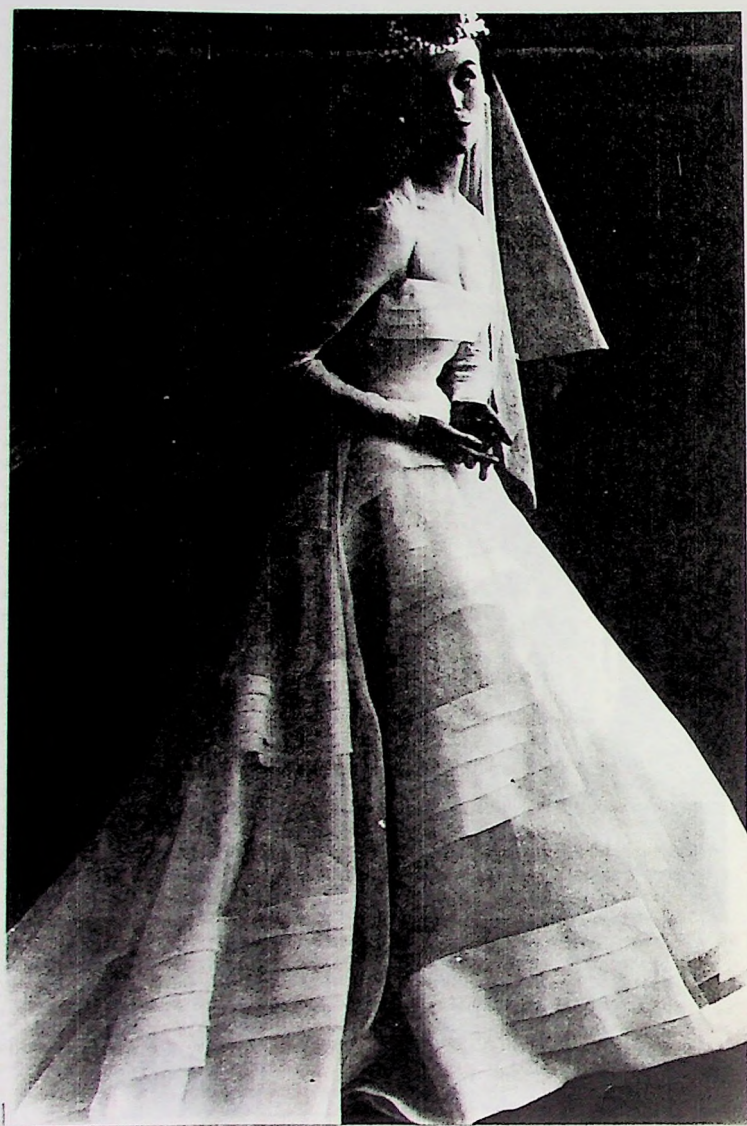


Fig.33 Wedding gown by Hardy Amies.

Cotton organdie dress designed for the Cotton
Board in summer, 1953.

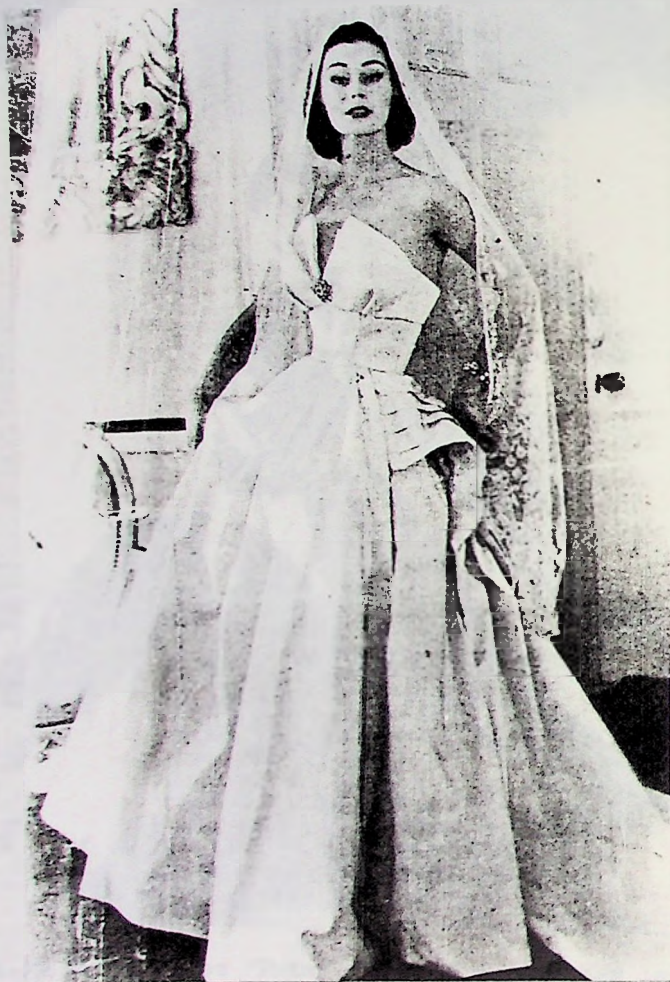


Fig.34 Ivory silk faille wedding gown by
Sybil Connolly with similar details
to a Hardy Amies cotton gown.
Social and Personal, September, 1953.



Fig.35 Hardy Amies 'Foam' dress of Nottingham lace
edged with volants of lace with swaths of
transparent lace on shoulders.
March, 1949.



Fig.36 'Pamela' a grey linen skirt with hand
crochet and embroidery inspired by
plasterwork on Georgian ceilings, worn with
wrap blouse.
Spring collection, 1954.

was the magnificent pleated linen gown 'First Love' which made headlines right across the United States. The prestigious Time magazine featured a report on the famous 'First Love' dress recording the rapturous reception it was accorded at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York.⁴¹

This minutely pleated, gossamer-fine linen was to become Sybil Connolly's hallmark. Finely pleated fabrics were not strictly original and exclusive to Sybil Connolly although many, including Sybil Connolly, would claim it so. Mariano Fortuny, the extraordinary Venetian designer produced minutely pleated, often printed, silks in a vast selection of colours (Fig.37 and 38). Fortuny used his vibrantly coloured pleated fabrics in simple, slim evening dresses which clung beautifully and relied totally on the body for shape. His dresses, produced in the early twentieth century, were very remarkable for their simplicity and modernity (Fig.38 to 39). Sybil Connolly, on the other hand, favoured the traditional and conservative but very romantic shapes of gala ballgowns for her pleated linen confections rather than create a new silhouette.

American designer Mary McFadden has continued to use these very finely pleated fabrics as the cornerstone of her look which is still very successful. Unfortunately she has confined herself to slim sheath shapes, very much inspired by Fortuny, and has not developed her own individual shapes (Fig.40).

What was most definitely original in her work was the use of hand worked lace and crochet, red flannel, quilted and plain - all very basic, traditional Irish items which she was to thrust into the limelight of international fashion.



Fig.37 Pleated silks by Mariano Fortuny.



Fig.38 Slim, sheath pleated silk dress by Mariano Fortuny, 1910's.



Fig-39 Pleated apricot silk dress, about
1912.

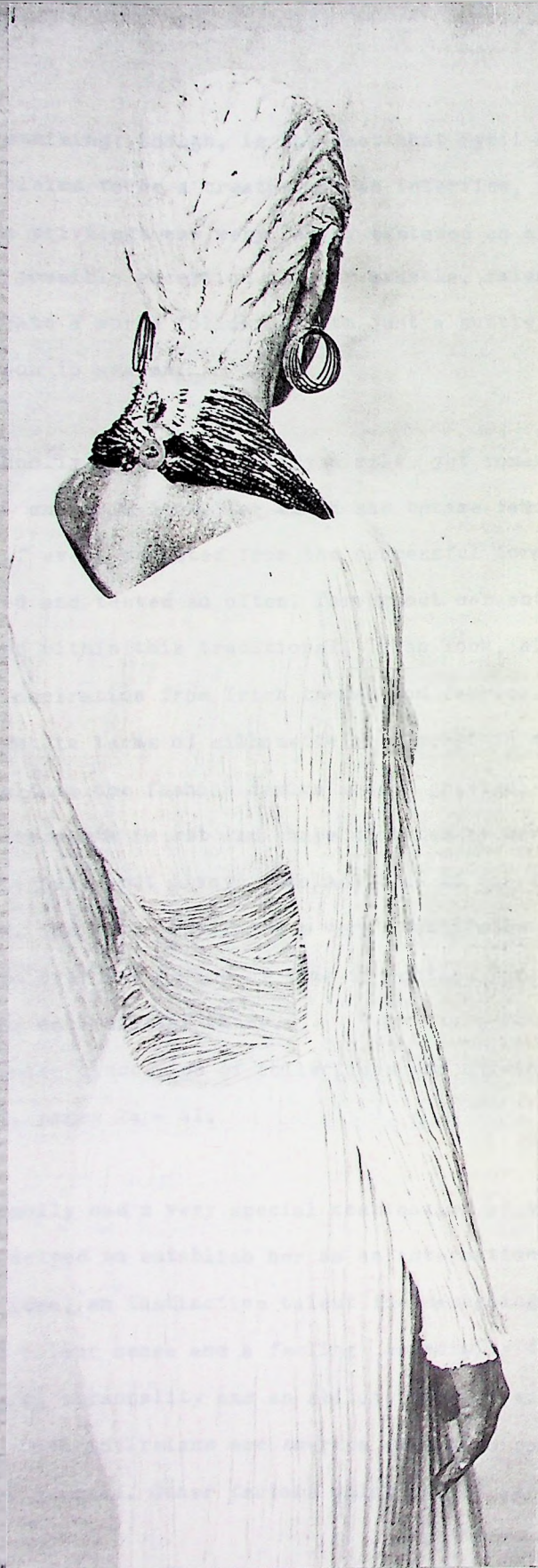


Fig.40 Pleated silk dress by Mary McFadden, 1985

What is striking, though, is the fact that Sybil Connolly never totally claims to be a creator - in an interview, she has said that this privilege was very rarely bestowed on any designer - with the possible exception of, for example, Balenciaga, who could create a world following with just a subtle development from season to season.

Sybil Connolly's look was a very simple, yet romantically effective one - and this look, for which she became famous in the 1950's rarely, if ever, deviated from the successful formula which had been tried and tested so often. Throughout her entire career, she had worked within this traditional, Irish look, almost always taking her inspiration from Irish themes and fabrics. There is little development in terms of silhouette or concept in over thirty years of work within the fashion design area - granted, her line changed with developments in cut and shape dictated by her French and Italian counterparts but always remained true to the feminine ideal she liked. She never developed a very identifiable cut or silhouette of her own over her period of time in couture but produced subtle variations on a similar theme.

For a greater discussion of collections and developments see Volume II, pages 24 - 41.

Sybil Connolly had a very special combination of things which together helped to establish her as an international designer - one good idea, an instinctive talent for designing clothing, an excellent colour sense and a feeling especially for Irish fabrics. Charm, personality and an ability to deal with, and exploit, the press both in Ireland and America were also considerable factors in her success. Other factors which helped her were her ext-



Fig.4I Two examples of three-piece suits
from Autumn-Winter collection, 1955.



Fig.42 Advertisement from B.
Altman and Co., 1960's.



The
secret
lies in
Donegal



"THEY signify
charm and warmth.
They hold their own
against the wind and
Paris or London. In
the tweed suit there is
the lace and silk and
topped evening dress
quality. They are the
most and more in every
cottage in Donegal,
Ireland.
Both were designed by
Sara Lamont. The
suits for 22.50. Donegal

Fig.43 Tweed suit from Spring
collection, 1962.

remely influential allies - Carmel Snow, Editor-in-chief of Harper's Bazaar, who could make or break a designers career/ collection with one stroke of the pen, and Eleanor Lambert-Birkson, American agent and "international Arbiter of Fashion".⁴² This created a specially close connection with the American market, "for a discerning and widely travelled clients who enjoyed particularly Cybil's image."⁴³ With these factors, coupled with a singular determination to succeed, how could anybody possibly fail?

Sybil Connolly in a European Context

Sybil Connolly achieved international success during a period when the acknowledged masters of Haute Couture were at their zenith - Balenciaga, Dior, Balmain, Fath and the newly discovered Givenchy. It was a difficult time for new and struggling couturiers out, increasingly, the domination of haute couture by Paris was broadening to include other European countries such as Italy and Spain. England also boasted of noteworthy couturiers such as Norman Hartnell, Hardy Amies and the Irish-born Digby Morton. Italy had produced a young aristocrat by the name of Emilio Pucci who brought a high fashion element to resort, ski and beachwear. Spanish designers Pertegaz and Rodriguez, as well as Balenciaga, brought a new sense of drama and severity to couture with their elegant and sophisticated brand of fashion. The essential stop-overs for international fashion journalists and buyers were now Paris, Florence/Rome, Madrid/Barcelona and London.

In the early 1950's one other European capital was to be temporarily to be added to this list - Dublin. One young designer who had caught the attention and imagination of the American press and public made Dublin, for a short number of years, another essential stop-over.

While Sybil Connolly's main success was based in America, her source of inspiration and ideas, besides that of Irish themes and fabrics, was most definitely from Paris. Balenciaga, her hero from her youth, the greatest inspiration - often Sybil Connolly's shapes, colours and detailing were inspired by this truly great couturier.

It is obvious from her work that the couture of both England and

France greatly influenced her. From her early teens, Sybil Connolly had learned to look to Paris and London as the trendsetters of style and elegance. Her frequent trips to Paris and London couture houses with her mother and her short period of training in Bradleys contributed greatly to her development as a designer and her years as a manageress and buyer for Richard Alan with their frequent trips to buy accessories and ranges of clothing for the shop, by necessity made Sybil Connolly look to Paris and London as the source of all things great in couture.

Sybil Connolly took certain elements from these two branches of couture - the rigid construction and almost military look of British tailoring was softened with a Continental approach to colour and elegance. Her short stay at Bradleys opened her to the influence of the London couturiers in particular and it is predictable that an Irish designer would look to London to find some parallels between her work and theirs.

Irish designers, including Sybil Connolly, very much adhered to the British way of thinking - simple, well tailored suits and coats for daywear and lavish and lavish ball gowns or svelte dinner gowns and cocktail wear for evening.

On an international level, Sybil Connolly was not the first to use pure wool Irish tweeds. The Irish-born Digby Morton, the first designer at Lachasse, the London couture sportswear firm, showed great expertise with soft Irish tweed sculpting it into immaculately clean lined suits. This was very much the look (at least in daywear) that Sybil Connolly and Jack Clarke were to have great success with in the United States.

Fig.44 Loose check jacket
pencil-slim skirt.
1950.



Fig.45 Tweed suit by John Cavanagh,
suit is indicative of the
shaping then very much in
fashion. This tweed fabric is
a direct copy of Irish tweeds
then on the market and caused
an uproar when French weavers
were found to be advertising
their fabrics as 'Donegal'
tweeds.

Sunday Independent, 31/8/52.

Hardy Amies also favoured this clean, expertly cut, slim line in daywear - he strove to make the tailored suit more feminine often by using subtle, soft-coloured tweeds - a look that Sybil Connolly was to adopt so successfully. It is easy to see the similarity in approach to design between Hardy Amies and Sybil Connolly - a more feminine, tailored look, slim, elegant and expertly cut. There was never an outrageous element in their work - garments were always beautifully constructed in country-fied fabrics but which were eminently suitable for citywear.

In evening wear similarities can also be seen between the work of Hardy Amies and Sybil Connolly - not in their use of fabric but in design concept and often in shape and detailing. For, as I have stated previously, Sybil Connolly favoured the use of traditional Irish fabrics such as poplin in mixtures of silk and linen, pure linen and hand-worked crochet and lace in soft pastel colourings, Amies used the more exotic fabrics often associated with couture - silks, tulles and fine French laces. To illustrate these points, I have included examples of both designers work where similarities are most in evidence. (Fig. 35 and Fig. 36) The similarities in shape/line, especially between these two garments, are quite phenomenal - a full skirt with a shaped waist extension. The bodice, in Amies gown, is of Nottingham lace which is wrapped, shawl-like, across the shoulders. In Sybil Connolly's adaptation which is practically identical the only modifications have been to substitute Irish crochet lace for the English and Georgian crochet medallions applied on the much simpler skirt, an Irish development of an English idea. Another example of this adaptation is the cotton organdie wedding gown by Hardy Amies. The unusual pleated detail on the full skirt slightly simplified appears on a Connolly dress two years later

with a different bodice. In fact, I consider this dress to be more successful, elegant and less fussy dress than the Amies gown.

(Fig. 33 and Fig. 34)

But while English designers, either consciously or unconsciously, inspired Sybil Connolly, undoubtedly the greatest influence on her work was the great Spanish couturier Balenciaga.

Balenciaga was born in the Basque region of Spain in 1895 and left his native country at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 to open his own couture house in Paris where, by the beginning of World War Two, he had established a reputation for severe, uncluttered design and expert, flawless tailoring.

Balenciaga was, in her youth, her god and still ranks as one of her favourite designers - a creator and a truly original designer. His work was often an inspiration to Sybil Connolly and it is very obvious in her work. She often reflected his subtle, seasonal changes. Sybil Connolly followed Balenciaga's theory that simplicity and tailored elegance are preferable to a mass of clutter and unnecessary detail.

Balenciaga believed in perfection in both cut and construction - he was a true classicist, very much in the tradition of Molyneux and Chanel. Elegance, to him, was the elimination of the superfluous. He subscribed to the belief that innovations had to be subtle and gradually introduced - novelty and sudden change were, to this perfectionist in couture, crass and the ultimate in bad taste.

This was a view to which Sybil Connolly subscribed - her own cloth

ing was to vary very little in over twenty to thirty years - especially in line and detailing. Both Sybil Connolly and her customers were to thrive on this regular combination of exclusive Irish tweeds in subtle colourings used in quite conventional shapes. Sybil Connolly claims, as did Balenciaga, that the most elegant of women did not need of want novelty or outrageous ideas each season but a gradual development of clothing which complemented the client and her life-style.

Balenciaga favoured the use of neutral colours, white, black, cinnamons, brown and beiges - colours which reflected the severity of his Spanish origins and which showed the expertly tailored garments to best effect. Jacques Fath, on the other hand, brightened colours considerably using strong yellows, blues and greens in his collections and thought Balenciaga's use of colour to be too severe.

Sybil Connolly, however, in her use of colour, fell between the two opposing schools of thought - she was not as selective or as severe as Balenciaga or as outrageous or extreme as Fath in her use of colour. She often stated that her favourite colours are neutrals but has, since her first collections, favoured the use of strong colours in subtle combinations with more subdued shades as in her range of 'white-washed' tweeds. Other examples of her use of colour show a clear but not sharp or gaudy approach - one which the American and Australian market was to appreciate greatly. (Figs. 46, 47, and 48) Un-doubtedly, her best use of colours were in her 'white-washed' tweeds range where she used the inspiration of Irish landscapes for her colourways. Sybil Connolly, in this distinctive range mixed flashes of strong colours such as greens, blues, yellows and pinks with a predominance of white or cream to obtain a soft, washed



Fig.46, 47 -Two ensembles from Autumn-Winter collection, 1958.

Fig.48 Suit in yellow Moygashel linen, date unknown.

These strong colours appealed most to the American market.



Fig.46, 47 -Two ensembles from Autumn-Winter collection, 1958.

Fig.48 Suit in yellow Moygashel linen, date unknown.

These strong colours appealed most to the American market.



Fig.46, 47 -Two ensembles from Autumn-Winter collection, 1958.

Fig.48 Suit in yellow Moygashel linen, date unknown.

These strong colours appealed most to the American market.

out effect.

Sybil Connolly would have appeared to take elements of inspiration for her use of colour not only from Irish themes but from other leading couturiers which is probably unavoidable. But it would be impossible to say that one designer in particular was responsible for her colour choices - in fact, Sybil Connolly has an excellent sense of colour in itself and it is possible that she felt no need to supplement her choices by looking to her more famous counterparts and that any similarity that can be seen in their colours was most likely coincidental.

Sybil Connolly's work, unlike that of many of her contemporaries, was very uncontrived - she rarely, if ever, made use of dramatic draperies or complicated cuts and use of fabric. She preferred to leave the fabric to make its own statement - indeed, her use of fabric was the most important element in her collection and she did not feel obliged to detract from it by complicated constructions. Most of her models were very simple in their line - her favourite fabric pleated linen which was very quickly to become her hallmark gave little scope for elaborate draping and manipulation, so Sybil Connolly utilised it in traditional, yet very effective, romantic gowns which alternated in shape between 'Celeste' (Fig.49) and the slimmer, more sophisticated cocktail and dinner wear of later years (Figs 50 and 51). Many Parisian designers tackled eveningwear with an almost sculptural approach which were, in many cases, superb feats of engineering. Dior, Balenciaga and others produced sculpted, draped and intricately cut garments which were constructed, literally, with all the devices of couture (Fig. 52). Rarely did this approach filter down into Sybil Connolly's work - possibly with the rare exception of a slim, black pleated linen cocktail dress with a draped bustle



Fig.49 'Celeste' white pleated wedding dress,
Harper's Bazaar, October, 1953.

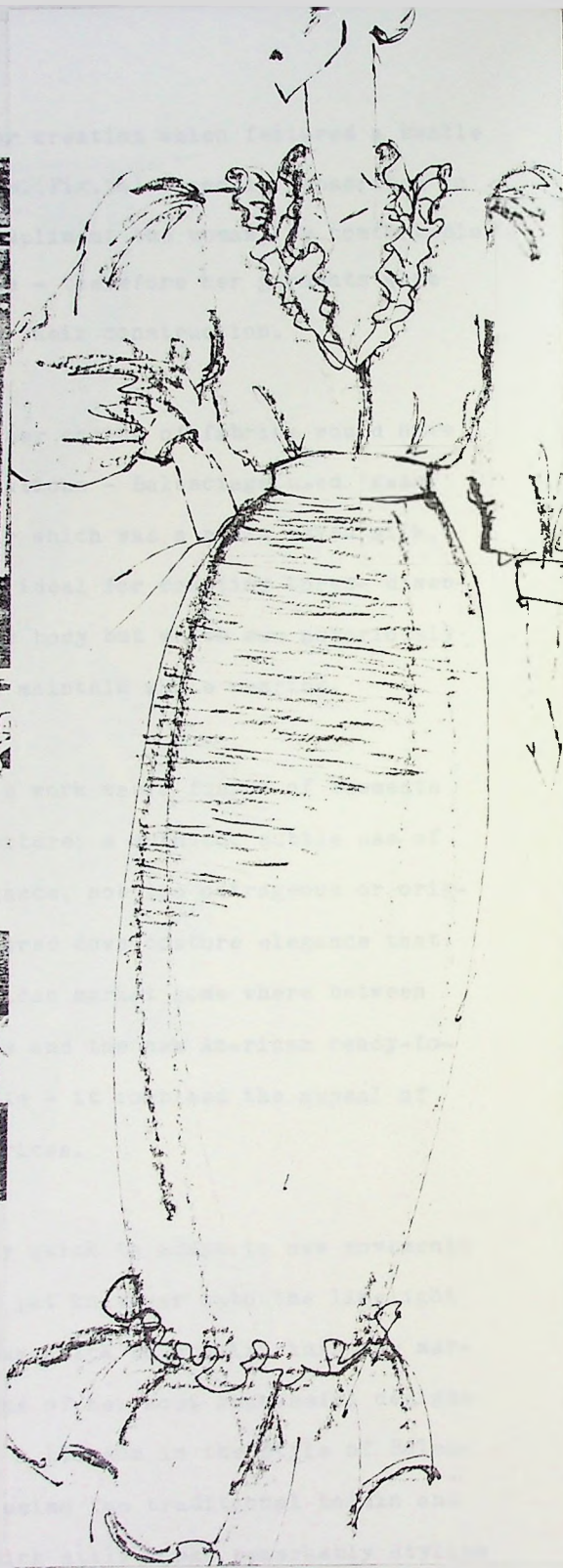


Fig.50 'Sirena' slim evening dress in pleated linen shown at
International Fashion Exhibition in Venice, 1956

Fig.51 Evening blouse and pleated linen skirt, 1984.

which was very similar to a Dior creation which featured a bustle constructed from floating panels.(Fig.54) Connolly subscribed to the idea that clothes should compliment the woman, be comfortable and be able to be worn with ease - therefore her garments were lighter and less complicated in their construction.

Indeed, it is doubtful whether her choice of fabrics would have been suitable for these manipulations - Balenciaga used 'gazar' predominantly in his eveningwear which was a plain woven silk, stiff with finishing - a fabric ideal for creating three- dimensional, sculptural forms for the body but which was notoriously difficult to both work with and maintain while wearing.

I consider that Sybil Connolly's work was a fusion of elements from both English and French couture; a subdued, subtle use of colour, tasteful, feminine elegance, not too outrageous or original in cut or line. It was a pared down couture elegance that fitted into a niche in the American market some where between the Haute Couturiers from Europe and the new American ready-to-wear of Norell and Claire McArdle - it combined the appeal of European couture and American prices.

Sybil Connolly was exceptionally quick to adapt to new movements in European fashion - Italy had put knitwear into the limelight of fashion and Sybil Connolly was quick to utilise this new market using Irish chunky yarns. One of her most successful designs was 'Aran Atmosphere' (Fig.29) a blouson in the style of Balenciaga's drawstring jackets but using the traditional bainin and aran rib knit, a combination which still looks remarkably stylish thirty years on. Unfortunately I was unable to find a suitable example of Balenciaga's jacket for comparison.



Fig.52 Christian Dior evening dress -
elaborate techniques of couture
were used at this house to construct
most evening wear models, 1950's.

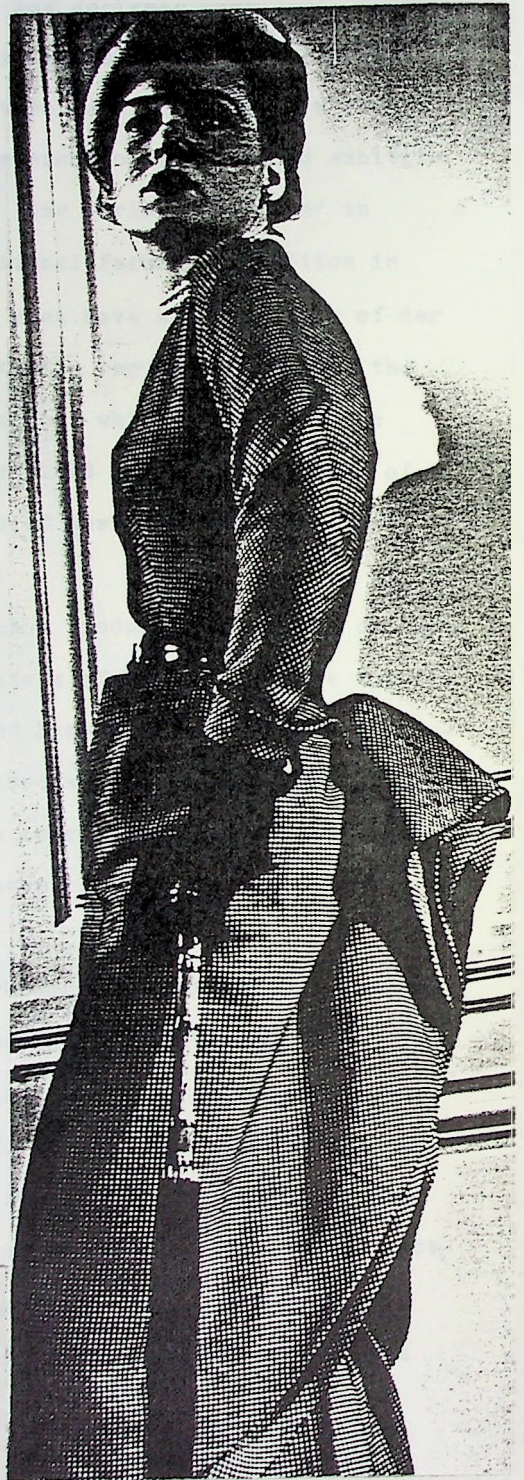


Fig.53 Bustle cut suit by Christian

Dior - similar to black linen

cocktail dress by Connolly - Fig.54 (illustration)

Sybil Connolly obviously kept a very close 'eye' on international markets and developments as indeed any designer does, as a matter of course. Her obvious knowledge on the most recent developments within both English and French couture were probably as a result of her travelling to many of the international shows and exhibitions in America and Europe such as 'One World of Fashion' in America in 1953, and the International Fashion Exhibition in 1956, to name but a few where she must have seen the work of her fellow couturiers. I do not doubt that a regular perusal of the French and American fashion publications which is par for the course in such a highly competitive field was a regular part of Miss Connolly's efforts to be aware of new developments abroad.

Indeed, Sybil Connolly was very much a product of European couture of the 1950's - her markets and methods of production were typical of the great couturiers in Paris and London. These methods of constructing the works of art of couture were time consuming, expensive and it was necessary to have a team of skilled workers who could cope with the exacting standards required of them.

In some of the great couturiers workrooms, seamstresses, cutters, tailors and finishers were organised into small battalions. The designer himself would create the line/look for the season but it was up to his team of assistants, together with these groups of workers, to produce the toiles for the designer's approval. This method of work created a sense of competition and furthered exacting standards of cutting and workmanship as each team vied with each other to produce toiles which matched the designers sketch and would find his favour.

Some of couture's greatest champions, such as Balenciaga and



Fig.55 Fuschia silk dress by
Balenciaga, about 1955.

Lucien Lelong, achieved prominence in their field due to their exacting and superb standards of tailoring and understanding of the art of construction and cut, but others, such as Dior, were, although, at a glance they recognised exquisite cut and expert tailoring, were very much at the mercy of their workroom staff. Dior's talent, for example, lay not only in design but also in finding exactly the right collaborators to execute his designs and to inspire them fully with the ideal in his head. He would make a series of 'petites gravures' which he would then hand to his three key assistants, Marguerite Caire, Raymonde Zehnacker and Bricard. Where necessary, Dior would give an instruction about the cut of the cloth, the lay of the material, the desired effect to be achieved. Marguerite Caire would then be responsible for handing the sketches to the appropriate 'premieres', the workrooms heads, attempting to suit the ideas to each woman concerned. It was she who was responsible also for the cutting of the muslin model, keeping to the essence of the petite gravure as much as possible. The showroom assistants sewed the toiles ready for submission to Dior for approval. The toile would then be subjected to close scrutiny, torn apart and marked in chalk to indicate where alterations should be made. For each collection an average of sixty or more models would be assembled. Interestingly, Dior would often give the same sketch to several different units within the house, so that he would have a choice of interpretations of cut and line from which to choose, selecting the one which came closest to his original conception.

This system operated in most couture houses which served the purpose of maintaining standards worthy of their art. In fact, when Balenciaga closed his doors in 1963, a whole team of workers moved 'en masse' to the house of Givenchy, keeping alive the high sense

of quality and standards.

The tailored, slim look favoured by many designers of the day required impeccable cut and tailoring to achieve a faultless look. At the house of Balenciaga as at others, garments were mainly sewn by hand - main seams were usually sewn by machine, but all basting, collars, cuffs and other important detailing and finishing was hand worked. At Balenciaga, all hems were turned once to avoid unsightly bulges, raw edges bound either by hand stitching or with bias strips of silk chiffon and blind-stitched by hand in the usual couture methods. Garments were always lined with silks or satins. Open weave fabrics were always mounted on organza prior to construction so as to maintain their shape and to control stretching. Eveningwear, especially the boned bodice variety, was so perfectly constructed that they required no foundation garments which were incorporated into the design so much so that many garments could have stood up on their own.

The methods that Dior used for constructing his 'New Look' clothes were indicative of the methods that were used to construct the more usual eveningwear models (Fig.56 and Fig.57). In many case corsets or rib cages of fine boning were built into the waist and midriff of a dress, not only to provide the firmness that the silhouette required but, as is the principle of all couture work, so that the boning of the bodice should fit an individual wearer's frame exactly. It ensured that the fullness of the overbodice, deep necklines or draped backs would fall with precision. Often bodices were completely interfaced with the fabrics being manipulated and sculpted to hug or create stand away shapes to certain lines. Dior



Fig. 56 Dior's 'New Look' which took the fashion world by storm in 1947. Elaboate construction methods were revived to achieve these complicated shapes.



Fig-57 Another evening dress by Dior which would have required a foundation garment to be built into the actual garment.

Daily Express, October 19, 1953.

developed ways of creating garments with statuesque firmness underneath and a soft elegance on the surface by poring over old fashion plates and examining examples in museums and private collections.

" I wanted my dresses to be constructed like buildings, moulded to the curves of the female form, stylizing its shape. I emphasised the width of the hips, and gave the bust its true prominence; and in order to give my models more 'presence' I revived the old tradition of cambric or taffeta linings.⁴⁴

Many of Sybil Connolly's methods were remarkably similar to those in use in Paris, ones which she had learned not only during her training in Bradleys but also from Jack Clarke who was a perfectionist in the art of tailoring. Sybil Connolly did not employ a collection of workroom units as her production and quantities did and still does not warrant it. This is a state of affairs she much regrets realising that without competition staff can 'take it easy' and that this atmosphere is not a most conducive one in which to work - she often states that she does not think that the Irish mentality could cope with this sort of operation. Nevertheless her standards of workmanship and tailoring are remarkably high - this is one of her attractions which both now and in the early fifties, assured her acceptance both in the Irish and American markets.

Sybil Connolly's daywear was not as heavily constructed as that of Dior as her shapes were not as extreme or demanding of the body - nevertheless they demanded expert craftsmanship which often achieved the high standards of a Parisian couturier. Many of Sybil Connolly's



Fig-58 Evening skirt and bodice shown
in Australian collection, 1954.

models were created on the stand - always a stand created especially to the precise measurements of the clients. The main seams were machine-worked but all detailing, hems, buttonholes and linings were by machine. Indeed, Miss Connolly states that one suit takes an experienced girl one whole week to finish including hems, buttons and holes and weighting hems. Elaborate use is made as in any couture garment of interlinings to achieve the exact shape especially in tailored garments such as suits and coats.

Sybil Connolly's eveningwear is equally as constructed, especially, her pleated linen creations which have to be carefully handstitched together to achieve the correct fit and effect which is especially difficult and demanding when working in a fabric this fine and delicate. The pleated linen was so uncontrollable that each panel was hand-stitched to a corresponding section of lining with a series of tiny running stitches - an operation that must take hours. Indeed many of Sybil Connolly's fabrics and designs must have been equally arduous - Carrickmacross and hand crochet lace must have been very difficult to handle given the amount of time that each fabric had taken to create before it even reached the cutting table. In her eveningwear Miss Connolly often employed the traditional couture method of constructing the foundation garment into the actual dress - it is fascinating to see a garment constructed in this way and despite its weight in the hand it is comfortable on the body.

This particular, expert making and hand finishing of a garment made it a very special garment - and a very expensive one. It was, as Balenciaga acknowledged, perfection for the few - the wealthy few. But that market for clothing was changing gradually. It was no longer enough to be an exclusive art which only the rich could

afford - couture was now under pressure to cater for wider tastes. Young women and teenagers with new-found freedom and spending power did not have the necessary capital to invest in a couture model, they wanted high fashion clothing at reasonable prices. Many of the French and English couturiers saw this gap in the market - some such as Fath and Digby Morton as early as the 1930's and produced a more modified version of their extreme couture styles. These were to be sold at reasonable prices. Most of the couturiers joined this ready-to-wear movement - Balmain, Cardin, Givenchy, Dior and Yves St. Laurent and Courreges. Balenciaga refused to sully his art and in 1968, closed his couture workrooms forever stating that couture was dead - a slight exaggeration perhaps as wealthy, stylish women will always appreciate exquisite craftsmanship in clothing whatever the cost.

Most maintained small couture rooms at a substantial financial loss to show their more outrageous and innovative designs which, in years to come, will filter down into their ready-to-wear collections. But it was the ready-to-wear business that financed these workrooms. Designers also licensed their names to other companies and these famous names appeared on labels for everything from towelling to wallpapers and cars to toiletries. The most famous of houses had to accept these ever widening markets to survive and those who retained the outmoded work methods, such as Worth and Paquin, closed.

The seal of approval, if any was needed, for this movement came when Chanel, who pioneered the licensing of designer names, announced she would design for the ready-to-wear market. Ready-to-wear was here to stay.

See illustrations of contemporary couture work and ready-to-wear

designs from English and European designers some of which were working in the 1950's, Fig.59 to Fig.62).

What is most interesting is that Sybil Connolly, aloof and distant in her Dublin 'atelier', while recognising the change in direction and markets in London, Paris and New York, decided to remain fully immersed in the world of couture, and survived financially. When questioned on this subject, she states that ready-to-wear really never interested her - although on one or two occasions such as the Bloomingdales promotion of 1980, her models were produced for sale as ready-to-wear garments.

Her business has survived on a diet of private clients and her many licensed products and contributions to household fabric collections in both Britain and America which is a new and exciting development in her work over the past five years. Sybil Connolly much prefers the personal element in couture and has no urge to go extensively into ready-to-wear - despite the small boutique she has in her Merrion Square house. Her business is very much centred around a selection of clients who can afford and appreciate the time and workmanship in a Connolly garment. She feels there is not a great shift of emphasis in her clothing - more a development and a reworking of established themes. She feels her models have become more suited to the individual needs of each of her clients. She recognises that her clients are women of distinction that neither want or need clothing that will make a statement but clothing that fits in with their way of life.

When one surveys Sybil Connolly's work with that of her British and French contemporaries, one can see great similarities in cut, detailing and silhouette and in methods of production. Their market was also



Fig-59 Contemporary couture from American Bill Blass, 1984.



Fig.60 1984 - Chanel keeps pace with fashion, duchess satin gown.



Fig.6I Contemporary Chanel- Modern classics, 1984.



Fig.62 Yves St. Laurent in 1984-85. There are many startling developments in this designers work over the past three decades which have lead to a truly modern apptoach to dressing - Connolly's work has remained virtually unchanged over this period reflecting her unchanged market.

very similar. Each aimed their production at the same market - that of the wealthy woman who favoured a chic, elegant and understated comfort of dress for day and a range of eveningwear which was at once fabulous, dramatic and with no restrictions of cost, from the cocktail dress to the gala, formal ball gown.

Sybil Connolly's basic shapes, detailing and, indeed, design concept rarely, if ever, differed from that of her contemporaries except in the important incidences where traditional Irish clothing inspired her garments - not other European designer, possibly with the exception of some Spanish designers such as Rodriguez and Per-tegaz, who used national dress so prominently for their inspiration.

What is interesting is that each couturier's clientele did not expect a totally different look but subtle intonations of the basic classics. Sybil Connolly's subtle change was in fabrics - even her own contemporaries saw her achievements in this field as very important. When in Ireland her personal friend and fellow couturier, Emilio Pucci, who had become famous for his revolutionisation of sports and leisurewear and beautiful prints for resortwear, hailed her

"She has great flair and imagination and her matching of colour and creations from Irish handwoven linen and tweeds are brilliant."⁴⁵

While European couturiers found their clientele mainly from within their own national boundaries as well as prestigious clients from abroad. Sybil Connolly's production was mainly aimed at clients in America. She remained working in the retail area until 1958 when she left Richard Alan in order to set up her own workrooms in Merr-

ion Square where she continued to cater for a broad selection of clients from England such as Lady Astor, Ireland - Lady Dunsany, Lady Beit and the Countess of Dunraven, Australia and America where her clients included Mrs Henry Kissinger, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Mrs Bob Hope and Nancy Reagan.

Legacy to Irish Design

Sybil Connolly's legacy to Irish design is quite considerable. In the 1950's, she broke new ground in haute couture and made the impossible seem possible- she made international fame achievable for a new Irish designer and she opened new markets for Irish fabrics and handcrafts and helped establish Ireland's embryonic fashion industry on a solid base. Interestingly, other designers had been working in Ireland prior to the 1950's when Sybil Connolly became Ireland's acknowledged 'First Lady of Fashion'. Jack Clarke, for whom she had worked, had already established an export market in the United States and Canada prior to the 1950's and Irene Gilbert, another Irish couturiere, had been working as a designer since 1945. But these talented designers never achieved international success in the way Sybil Connolly had - they never quite captured the public's imagination in such a way.

What is most interesting is the fact that Jack Clarke and Irene Gilbert were in many ways more deserving of international recognition and indeed more talented than Sybil Connolly. This is especially the case with Irene Gilbert. According to accounts of her assistants and clients she was a greatly talented but very neurotic person. She opened her own house in the fashionable St. Stephen's Green in 1945, not far from Jack Clarke's retail outlet in Grafton Street. Previous to this she had worked as an assistant to Madame Gres in Paris where she developed a love of the art of draping - she preferred to create her models, especially her evening wear, on the stand. Her approach was essentially a feminine one combined with an exceptional sense of colour - most obvious in her stained glass collection. She also preceded Sybil Connolly

in her specialisation in the use of Irish fabrics. She worked extensively with Mc Nutts fabrics and with Wynne Sisters of Avoca hand weaving. Both companies produced fabrics which were dyed and woven to her exact specifications. Her eveningwear was often in Irish fabrics - Carrickmacross lace was one of her favourites - and with Irish inspiration. Her clients included the Countess of Rosse and Princess Grace of Monaco.

The quality that Sybil Connolly possessed that set her apart from the other Irish designers that preceded her was, I think, quite basically her personality and charm and the good-natured way she exploited it. The American and Irish press opened their arms to her in a way they never did to Jack Clarke and Irene Gilbert. Jack Clarke worked hand in hand with Sybil Connolly and his collections of daywear were always shown with her eveningwear in the United States but, because his daywear was shown under the label of County Wear, the American press never related to the man behind the range. Sybil Connolly attributes her success to the fact that Americans related to a name and personality rather than an impersonal label.

Irene Gilbert achieved fame only when Ireland became part of the international couture movement and she very much resented the success of the younger Sybil Connolly, whom she considered to be a less talented rival. A notoriously difficult person, she seemed embittered to both Sybil Connolly and her assistants and workroom staff. She closed her salon in January, 1968 and decided to emigrate to France. On her departure she destroyed all her photographs so as they would not fall into the wrong hands - hence the fact that there are few photographs of her work available to include in this thesis. These two designers, together with many others such as Donald Davies,



Fig.63 Donald Davies pure wool dress. Although his most successful period was the 1960's and 70's, he still has quite a lucrative export business in pure wool shirtwaister dresses.

Fig.64 1960's Jack Clarke tweed suit - I feel his clothing has lost its elegance and femininity, the look is now overly military and masculine.



Nelli Mulcahy, Sheila Mullally, benefitted greatly from Sybil Connolly's phenomenal success which paved the way for their own success in America and other international markets. In the 1960's the 'Pride of Ireland' exhibitions (1965 and 1968) and other international fairs and store promotions started to invite other Irish designers as well as Sybil Connolly to their functions, but Sybil Connolly was still regarded as reigning supreme in Irish couture. Also, this particularly 'Irish' approach to couture began to appear a little stale towards the end of the 1960's - the traditional look was no longer a novelty.

No other designer has ever managed to repeat her success - many have tried - Ib Jorgensen, Pat Crowley and Paul Costelloe have taken their collections to the United States and have created for themselves valuable export markets but have never managed to have such a popular media success. This is possibly because, with the exception of Ib Jorgensen, of the completely different markets each designer aimed for, and the fact that America has now many more extremely successful designers of its own. America has also learned to look less to Europe for its fashion inspiration than in the 1950's. Designers working in America have created their own brand of fashion - with more emphasis on the casual/sports wear market than on any other.

Traditional Irish fabrics - linens, tweeds - still have a very great appeal in America, Britain and indeed Europe. In fact they have become an even more sought-after commodity by the truly international designers - Luciano Soprani, Anne Marie Beretta, Issey Miyake and Perry Ellis, to name only a handful. These designers have made great use of Irish fabrics which are generally considered

to be some of the best in the world. While Sybil Connolly might not be totally responsible for this resurgence of interest in the Irish fabric industry, she has surely been of great importance as a publicity agent for them - so much so that the Linen Board of Ireland, in the 1950's and 1960's, christened her "Ambadress of Irish Linen" - a title she justly deserves.

No other Irish designer has been as interested or obsessed with Irish fabrics as Sybil Connolly. Designers such as Ib Jorgensen and Richard Lewis import the vast bulk of their fabrics while Michael Mortell and Paul Costelloe use tweeds and linens extensively but not exclusively. They use also fabrics imported from abroad together with an imaginative and very modern approach to our traditional fabrics. Both of these designers are currently enjoying a great success and following in both Britain and North America. Paul Costelloe is so interested in using Irish linens that he has just recently won an award for his use of the fabric from the International Linen Board to be presented to him at a gala fashion show in Monte Carlo this May.

For illustrations of Paul Costelloe's and Michael Mortell's use of Irish fabrics see Fig.65 to 66.

Interestingly, of all these Irish designers enjoying a large measure of success abroad none, with the notable exception of Ib Jorgensen, has ever been involved in the market in which Sybil Connolly specialised- that of haute couture. Even he is now curtailing his couture operation to concentrate on his retail outlet - a sure sign of the times.

Irish design is a small, struggling industry with great potential



Fig.65 A modern approach to the age old Irish linens
Linen suit by Paul Costelloe, 1985.

McNutt tweed coat with flecks approximately £155, black wool sweater £39.50 both by Michael Mortell and available from Mirror Switzers and Kerries of Grafton St. Black pleated trousers by Ivoire de Lawrence £49.00 from Pia Bang, Powercourt Townhouse Centre. Black rubber belt with silver chains attached £3.99 from Zerep, Grafton St., black earrings £1.99 from Accent Switzers, Grafton St.



Fig.66 Design by Michael Mortell in Irish woven McNutt tweed.

which, whether it acknowledges it or not, owes a lot to this woman who opened new possibilities and markets and revived flagging native industries in a time of great economic depression.

Conclusion

It is always difficult to summarise a designer's work and achievements. In the case of Sybil Connolly, her contribution to Irish fashion design and the fabric industry, especially in the depressed, economically shaky Ireland of the 1950's, is inestimable.

Her main achievement was not originality or the development of a new silhouette or cut, but to take traditional Irish fabrics and make a high fashion statement with them - she saw these beautiful but underestimated fabrics, many of which had been relegated to the tables of the more sophisticated houses, through new eyes. With flair and style she created something new from old - in the words of Jean Wiseman, "she added her own personal signature and sophistication to age old Irish crafts"⁴⁶ and made them a sought-after commodity in the exclusive world of high fashion.

Secondly, she achieved a position in the world of fashion that previously had, despite some quite startling native Irish talent, never been reached by any Irish designer. What is even more remarkable - she achieved this fame at a time when the great couturiers were at the peak of their success - a time when it was even more difficult to achieve recognition.

But, with determination, hard work and some talent and help from her illustrious colleagues such as Eleanor Lambert and Carmel Snow, she carved a place for both herself and Ireland in the exclusive world of Haute Couture. She still, despite the passage of time and change in fashion markets, has managed to maintain

her position as Ireland's First Lady of Couture.

Her use of traditional Irish fabrics and themes in an international context was definitely the main reason for her amazing success and she was internationally acknowledged as the one designer who raised traditional Irish fabrics from the status of quaint customs to being considered suitable as raw material for Haute Couture.

She helped to make Irish linen and tweeds an accepted choice by international designers and opened up new possibilities with regards to vast markets in Britain and, especially, the United States for Irish industries badly in need of such. So much so that many impoverished weavers in Donegal made quite a handsome living from their earnings while supplying Sybil Connolly with her exclusive fabrics.

She also took fabrics that were in danger of becoming extinct and by using them in a new high fashion application ensured their survival. With a combination of drive, charm and determination, she galvanised the Irish fabric manufacturers into producing the fabrics she wanted - she persuaded Donegal weavers to use different yarns to achieve sophisticated, high fashion weave effects and to encourage them to develop their standards and quality. These fabrics have now become much sought after on international markets. They have become well established as fabrics suitable for high fashion ready-to-wear and couture collections in both the United States and Europe.

Sybil Connolly helped organise the supplies of exclusive, hand worked fabrics such as Carrickmacross and hand crochet lace.

She made sure that their quality remained consistent and that there were regular supplies. She dyed this traditional fabric into delicate pastel shades - an unheard of departure from tradition. She organised bands of knitters in the West of Ireland to supply her with knitwear for her collections and, sensibly put the postmistress's daughter in charge to ensure her lines of communication! In fact she provided so much work, both directly and indirectly, that some weavers worked exclusively for her. One magazine described her success as a "beacon to illuminate the industry"⁴⁷

Sybil Connolly also popularised linen as a chic fabric - these linens became extremely popular in California, Australia and other warm climates and Sybil Connolly responded to this new demand by making half to three-quarters of her collection in Irish linen (1954). In that same year, the Irish Linen Guild reported that linen sales had increased 100 per cent in dollar countries. Sybil Connolly had become a one-woman publicity campaign for Irish fabrics.

Sybil Connolly, even in other areas, continued to create employment - she refused to let her collections be made abroad claiming that their production meant more employment in Ireland. She also claimed that she could ensure a higher standard of craftsmanship if she managed to keep a tighter control and with a team of superior Irish tailors and seamstresses.

Very importantly, Sybil Connolly made it possible for young Irish design talent to remain at home and create an even stronger fashion industry. Previously, design talent such as Digby Morton, John Cavanagh and Michael Donnellan had emigrated to London



Fig.67 Embroidered cambric evening dress by
Sybil Connolly 'Born to Dance' shown
as part of Winter collection, 1953.
Life magazine, August 10, 1953.

to train and had never returned to Ireland. Sybil Connolly reversed this pattern and a greater number of designers achieved recognition despite being based in Ireland - Irene Gilbert, Sheila Mulcahy, Nelli Mullaly and Donald Davies all stayed in Ireland and achieved some measure of success abroad. But despite this change for the better, no other Irish designer achieved the remarkable success and position in international couture that Sybil Connolly did.

As a designer she was not totally original - but her one idea - that of using traditional Irish themes and fabrics - was an unusual and excellent one, despite what now appears to be a stage Irish, clichéd approach to fashion. She captured the imagination of the Irish-American and European press and public and was recognised in many circles as a designer of some worth. In 1956, she was asked to take her collection to the Palace Hotel in St. Moritz and the press reported that

"So far only the big European designers have been asked to show here, names such as Pierre Balmain, Dior etc. and no British designer has ever been invited."⁴⁸

Sybil Connolly, within the well-proven structure of couture, developed a very 'Irish' approach to dressing - at times clichéd and conventional but, at its best, inspired and with a truly international flavour. It was this 'international' flavour combined with a superb publicity campaign in America which utilised to the full her very evident personality and charm that contributed greatly to her success.

"But what makes Miss Connolly's coll-

ection worth the detour is not a dominating line or a copyable detail, but a special freshness and individuality, and a lively appreciation of the fact that women really want to look pretty. Beautiful herself, she is generous in making other women beautiful as well."⁴⁹

Sybil Connolly still pursues her interests in couture while developing many other interests, such as designing ranges of household linens and china collections, and her biggest passion - that of interior decoration. These ranges of household linens and wallpapers have proved to be best sellers in the U.S.A. Even in these areas her inspiration is truly 'Irish' - a fact these companies seem very happy to accept. Her favourite patterns and colours are taken, for these ranges, from Irish gardens and flowers. These ranges, which have been extremely successful, capture the innerent romanticism which is very much a part of Sybil Connolly's work now as always. This area of her work has still to be developed to its full potential but looks to be very promising and, Sybil Connolly admits, is beginning to rival her couture work in its importance.

Sybil Connolly, according to anybody's criteria, was a successful designer. Many elements worked in her favour - an original idea which was absolutely right for the time and directed at a very receptive market - that is the ideal climate for the launching of any new product. Not only did she carve a niche for herself in Couture but provided Ireland and its fabric industries with much needed contracts and, most importantly, made Ireland a more suitable country in which young Irish designers could

work and flourish.

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Footnotes

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