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The Birth of American Designers

Before WWII American fashion looked towards Europe for inspiration. Designs resembled those of French designers and were mass-produced in America. The couture era was prominent during this time but, fashion had to change as women were forced to move into the work place to occupy the labor force that men left behind due to WWII. Consequently, women could no longer wear garments that conflicted with their new lifestyle. Therefore, the idea of designing with America in mind was born. Fashion as was once envisioned would change dramatically. In this paper, the impact that the Depression and the American lifestyle had on Couture will be analyzed. Also, the series of events leading to the sprout of American designers, specifically Caroline Schnurer, will be broken down.

Couture and the Depression

The world revolved around French couture, and Americans were not an exception. As soon as French designs were put out to the public “American garment manufacturers simply copied French designs and mass-produced them in America” (Robinson 2). There was a deep rooted desire for these designs because they sold a superior lifestyle. “It was assumed all of the women in the world wanted French designs, known as the French Legend, this philosophy dominated the American clothing industry for decades” (Robinson 6). So much was the need to have identical looks that American designers searched for similar fabrics and trims to match them. Americans had no say in the fashion world. They were simply followers of French designs. In the fashion world couture occupied the lead. So much was the influence that “couturiers set

the trends, whether customers liked them or not, there was no rhyme or reason to the development of a line” (Robinson 7). However, couture “was limited to those who could afford the clothing” (Robinson 11). The handwork and the fine delicate fabrics were just some of the components of couture, not to mention the extensive fittings. Consequently, this notion along with economic instability would extensively narrow down their already existing clientele.

The Depression took a toll on couture fashion. At the start of the 1920s the economy seemed to be doing well. However, too much money was being made in profits and too little in wages. (csun.edu) Also, businesses produced more goods than could be consumed. This caused the economy to weaken and lead the stock market to crash in 1929 hence the Great Depression. Businesses and banks were forced to close and many property owners lost their land (csun.edu).

“Unemployment in the Golden State reached a staggering 28 percent in years later one-fifth of all Californians were dependent upon public relief” (csun.edu). Many Americans lost their jobs and source of income during this time. Some were even left in poverty.



Thus, purchasing expensive garments was out of question. Since, they could no longer afford to buy French designs, most were then forced to turn to American made clothing. “During the Depression, American women felt compelled to apologize for their American clothes and blamed the Depression for the lack of French clothing” (Robinson 14). Some even felt inferior when wearing them. The texture and quality was beyond different from what they were accustomed to.

Despite all the negativity towards these clothes, America had an old trick up their sleeve that would play a role in changing their minds.

Advertising contributed to the appreciation of American fashion. Hollywood movies featured clothing made in America. The high exposure to this new fashion via Hollywood made it acceptable to wear it. “It was within the escapist films of 1930’s Hollywood that brought women fashion information, thousands could see the styles on any given movie night” (Robinson 15). Consequently, “with the exposure to Hollywood, Americans grew more confident in American designers” (Robinson 15). This new attitude opened the door to successful designers.

Designing for America

There was an urgent need to design for the American lifestyle. As men were needed for World War II, women were implemented into the work place. The war “pushed women into paid factory and office work, creating a need for practical, protective work clothing” (Robinson 2). The fashion of the 1930s was not caught out for work wear. Elegance was a lifestyle in this era. Fashion consisted of a



“form fitted style with an accentuated natural “high waist”, fitted hips, longer mid-calf or floor length hemline, high neckline, and wide exaggerated shoulders with puff sleeves, shoulder pads, full collars, and “caplet,” “butterfly’ or ruffled cap sleeves” (Sessions). Also, garment styles and fabrics varied from afternoon to evening. Since women were going to be taking on the role of

men at the workplace their clothing needed to adjust as well. Therefore, “women’s blouses and jackets adopted the boxy, square shouldered look of the military uniform by stitching cheap shoulder pads into the fabric and women’s skirts maintained a uniformly short and straight look”



(Harrod). The workplace fashion, if you will, was inspired by the war. By implementing styles that were military inspired women were reinforcing the idea of patriotism. This also reminded them about their contribution towards the war.

The war efforts paved the way for American designers. French designers didn’t think about the functionality of their garments, therefore, “a small group of American fashion designers sought to cast off the restrictions of European design and create a style that was uniquely American and placed function before form” (Robinson 2). This new clothing would be more comfortable and easier to reproduce. “Factory-made garments became popular, because clothing could be mass produced for far less than made-to-order custom garments” (Sessions). Even though this new way of reproducing clothing was faster, textile quality was sacrificed. American designers had to find alternative textiles for this new method of production.

The Era of Mass Production

Mass production lead to the use of less expensive fabrics. The need to create garments faster and more economically was the highlight for the innovative American designers.

Therefore, “humble fabrics such as organdy, eyelet, pique` and cotton lace” were utilized in American garments (Robinson 14). Fabrics such as these didn’t not have any sort of glamour attached to it. They were relatively known as “rough” or “peasant” fabrics because of their texture and inexpensive price (Sessions). However, these textiles proved to be “more conducive to mass production” (Robinson 15). Also, since the fabric was inexpensive it allowed for reasonable prices in clothing, something Americans urged for as they recuperated from the Great Depression.

The idea of a fitted garment was not lost, but revolutionized in mass production. The element that made Couture most favorable was its fit. Consequently, as garments were being mass produced, it made it almost impossible to tailor them to one specific person. Nevertheless, American designers sought out to take that challenge. In the 1930’s zippers and belts were added (Robinson 14). Not only did these new tools create a nice fit, but it was also an inexpensive alternative as oppose to buttons. Another resource that was utilized to acquire flexibility in clothing was “Lastex, an elastic yarn wrapped in strands of natural fibers around a rubber core, developed by U.S. Rubber Fabrics” (Robinson 14). The elastic yarn allowed for more elasticity which made it possible to catered to women of varying sizes. These innovative methods were an astonishing advantage to the American culture because of its functionality and reduced cost.

Designed by Women for Women

The rise of women designers. During this time, male designers dominated the design world. They were the ones in charge of designing for women. However, many women felt misrepresented and misunderstood because males didn’t know the daily functions that women carried on throughout their day. Therefore, there was a need to break free from the mold that men had imposed on women’s clothing. The pioneers of this movement were Claire McCardell,

Vera Maxwell, Bonnie Cashin, Tina Leser, Clare Potter, and Carolyn Schnurer. They made sure to revolutionize American fashion and gave it a female face.

Women dominated the fashion scene. As American fashion began to take up speed, women designers refused to be left behind. “In 1955, French designer Jacques Fath spoke the now famous quote, ‘Women are bad designers. The only role they should have in fashion is to wear clothes. Someday all great designers will be men.’” (Robinson 255). Even though, they faced opposition by male designers, their designs and functionality were the power source that drove them to success, especially in sportswear. “From the 1930’s through the 1950’s the majority of sportswear designers were women” (Robinson 15). Who could be better fit for such role than women designer. They understood to perfection the function and performance that clothing needed to offer to women. Thus, “they designed clothing for the life that they, themselves, led” (Skorich 215). Having women design sportswear allowed for more women to enter that industry because their needs were now met. Accordingly, it also contributed to the growth of a more athletic lifestyle.

America’s new fashion was now sportswear. After the war, as Americans were getting back on their feet, the demand for leisure clothing increased. “Sportswear became the uniform of the American middle class, that huge group that shaped post-war society” (Skorich 215). This new lifestyle sold an enthusiastic and refreshing atmosphere. It was also a lifestyle fit for those who could afford to have spare outings. “Sportswear projected a desire to renew a fundamental, organic relationship between the self and the body which work did not address (Skorich 214). The sportswear market allowed their clients to disconnect from their everyday life and find comfort in exercise. The American market responded better to this idea than their European counterparts. It was believed that “American women wore sportswear with increasing frequency

and were more athletic than European women” (Robinson 14). Hence, the success that American designers, specifically women, had in the sportswear market.

Carolyn Schnurer: Sportswear Designer

One of the pioneers from the sportswear design world was Carolyn Schnurer. She is best known for her extensive research and her Western inspired designs. Schnurer was born as Carolyn Goldsand on January 5, 1908 in the Yorkville section of New York City (Robinson 242). She chose to become an educator and “enrolled in the New York Training School for Teachers” (Robinson 242). Carolyn later became an elementary school teacher who taught music. She lived a comfortable life along with her husband, a bathing suit manufacturer, Harold (Burt) Teller Schnurer. As noted, her career didn’t start off in the world of design but rather in the world of learning and teaching, something that she later adapts as she moves over to the design world.

Designing was her calling but, she wasn’t aware of it. One day Carolyn described an idea she had for pinafores for women, the style had always been used in children’s wear, to her friend who happened to be a sportswear buyer for Best & Co. (Robinson 243). Her friend liked the idea so much that “Carolyn created a rough sketch and her husband produced the garment specifically in his factory. The pinafore was an instant hit.” (Robinson 243). From that moment forward she realized that her ideas could become successful designs. She also counted with the perfect work companion, her husband. “He supplied the business/manufacturing support and contacts needed to produce successful collections” (Robinson 242). Almost immediately she was granted a designing job with Best & Co. Even the designers that had seniority in that company felt jealousy towards her because she was “illiterate” in the process of design and garment construction. However, Schnurer would prove to be more than an amateur designer.

Education was an important aspect in her life. Even though she knew nothing of pattern making or draping, Carolyn was determined to learn. “After the birth of her son Anthony in 1939, Carolyn attended the Traphagen School of Design to learn pattern making, draping, and cutting as well as Ethel Traphagen’s adaptive method of design” (Robinson 243). The adaptive method was a new teaching at that time. Before that designers never considered the consumer, it was all about elegance and intricate designs rather than functionality. In contrast, the adaptive method focused on the need of the consumer. This teaching would later on be reflected in Schnurer’s designs. However, her educational career did not stop there. “Carolyn attended New York University in 1941 and earned her Bachelor of Science degree, she did this in order to gain the retailer’s point of view in design. She continued to educate herself and pursued a Master’s degree in the 1950’s and talked of earning a doctorate” (Robinson 243). Her appreciation for education was an important factor that also led to her success as a designer.

Schnurer’s love for travel and research was reflected in her designs. Carolyn was one of the very few designers from the 1950s that would travel for inspiration. Although, it might have seemed like a luxury to visit different countries, to her it was a duty in which she submerged deeply in. “Her design methodology focused on one country or culture at a time and included extensive study on her part. She would use the costume, background, and native habits to plan her collections” (Robinson 245). The reason why her designs were so peculiar was because she would absorb into a culture, research it and study it from different perspectives. Carolyn was known for “studying foreign cultures as inspiration for modern, Western fashion” (Robinson 242). Her approach of extensive research and analysis resulted in distinctive designs that would later become her trademark.

Cuzco, Peru

Traveling as design inspiration begins. One of Schnurer's earliest registered destination was Cuzco, Peru. "The journey took two days by train with a stop in Juliaca" (Robinson 246). As Schnurer arrived she was intrigued by the hand-crafted work done by the villagers. So much was her astonishments that she selected embroidered nightgowns as her inspiration. These "were later developed into prints and embroidered designs or knits as inspiration for sportswear" (Robinson 246). Carolyn searched in the most remote areas for design inspiration. Nothing was meaningless to her. She could turn humble motifs into beautiful works of art.

Quito, Ecuador

Schnurer's next destination was Quito, Ecuador. There she concentrated on the silhouettes of the people. "Carolyn spotted a dropped shoulder, linen-like over blouse worn with shorts by a Mestizos or half-breed woman" (Robinson 246). That piece was enough inspiration to create a collection. From her South American travels the Serrano collection was born. It featured: "the Cholo coat, a loose fitting, pleated, high necked, hip length beach jacket was one of her most popular pieces as well as the dropped shoulder blouse" (Robinson 246). Both ideas were refreshing and well adaptive for the American lifestyle, especially in swimwear. Her collection was well received and loved. "It toured the country and was displayed in the best department stores of every major city along with the native costumes she collected during her trip" (Robinson 247). However, not everything she did was successful. Like every designer in history she too had her share of ups and downs.

WWII takes a toll in the workspace. Everything seemed to be going well both in production and design. So, far buyers reacted well to Carolyn's designs. However, Schnurer would have to overcome a global challenge: World War II. "Since rationing restricted the production of machinery and tools of the trade, the Schnurer's were without the means for tables

and equipment” (Robinson 247). Both her and her husband felt defenseless over the war efforts. Her husband could no longer acquire the tools to construct the garments she designed. To make matters worse their workplace was lacking. Nevertheless, they wouldn’t let this stop their creating process. With the help of her friends from the fashion industry they obtained the essential tools for reproduction. Carolyn stated that, “it wasn’t a gesture; it was such a warm-hearted, marvelous thing” that their friends did for both (Robinson 247). As for their workplace, “they took a billiard table factory at 87 Ferry Street and turned it into their factory and she made her designs at a small hotel on 33rd off of Broadway” (Robinson 247). They put together the means necessary to create a collection even during such treacherous times. However, “in 1945, her first collection flopped” (Robinson 247). This didn’t discourage her, but rather took her back to her high extensive research roots.

Florida

Research and good timing lead to her swimwear success. Carolyn traveled to Florida for two days and observed that everyone was on the beach. During this time the war was beginning to fade down and Americans started to take time off for leisure. Schnurer then noted the urgency to fit her design into this new American lifestyle. Through research, she found that “post-World War I the beachwear market grew and she also found that successful manufacturers went into the shirt and blouse business” (Robinson 248). So, she decided then to do the same. But, this time she would merge shirting into beachwear. Although Schnurer had never worked with this material before she would take on the challenge. She utilized “shirting materials for playsuits,

shorts, and sundresses because the cotton lent itself well to the playsuits and dresses she designed” (Robinson 248). Her line also featured screen-printed materials. On top of her swimwear uprising collection she was also featured in the January issue of Life Magazine in 1946. This “provided the publicity Schnurer desperately needed for her struggling company” (Robinson 249). Carolyn couldn’t go wrong with swim wear because it was an industry that made-up America. One could not disconnect the American lifestyle from the beach. It was a field that any designer who had the ambition



could succeed. Thus, the Caribamba collection was born with a touch of her South American travels. “Pieces included two-piece bathing suits with shawls or modified ponchos for coverage when needed, one shouldered bloomer playsuits with drawstring belts, and blouses with puffed sleeves. Her fabrics included simple cottons in solids, stripes, and plaids while her colors ranged from nutmeg brown to beige and turquoise” (Robinson 249). Her constant reference to history and research is what caused reestablished her name.

Normandy

Breaking off the French mold. Carolyn aspired for American fashion to differ from French fashion. Therefore, she decided to make a trip to Normandy. It had been the location for “one of worst battles in Europe” (Robinson 249). From her previous travels, she learned the importance to explore less popular areas such as inland areas and fishing villages. She no longer wanted to copy the design of French designer but instead wanted to bring forth “a collection of colorful smocks and feminine sportswear that represented the spirit of the French people in its

prints, silhouettes, and textures” (Robinson 250). She then produced the “Provencal” Collection (Robinson 250). Carolyn was brave enough to reinvent herself as well as the world of fashion. Hence, the reason why she is known as a pioneer of American design.

Spain and Portugal

Carolyn’s experiments with culture and fabrics brought an unfamiliar approach to the design world. Another part of Europe that Schnurer was interested in was Spain and Portugal. From there she developed a collection made up of “a variety of toreador inspired jackets, slim pants, and embroidery. This trip also produced cotton print of rich deep red with bright blue and yellow spots and a fabric of dark green vertical stripes that was quite popular” (Robinson 250). Cotton started to become her signature fabric. She believed that it was more water resistant and created better dimension than wool. Also, it was less expensive and catered better to the consumer. It is evident that Schnurer brought unique ideals in both the swimwear and high fashion industry.



Greece

Schnurer was a fearless designer. Not only were her designs extraordinary, but also her travels. For instance, in 1949 she traveled to Greece when the country was at war with Yugoslavia. She put political disputes aside when it came to finding inspiration. In fact, “she flew into Janina, Greece, which was close to the fighting, and still managed to find some beautifully cut, embroidered treads” (Robinson 250). However, her efforts did not go unnoticed. “She was regularly featured in Vogue and Harper’s Bazaar, and had been featured in Life and

Time” (Robinson 250). Even government officials wanted to be part of her fame and treated her well because of the publicity and promotions Carolyn provided (Robinson 250). Schnurer is a fine example of living life at the edge, but all with the purpose of bringing light to overlooked hand-made designs.

India

Publicity based travels. After the media exposed her travels, Carolyn became better known and even recognized by foreign officials. “In 1950, she traveled to India and was the guest of Krishna Hasasing” (Robinson 250). This event was highly noted because Schnurer was meeting with ‘the first prime minister of Independent India and was the architect of India’s foreign policy” (Robinson 250). Nevertheless, Carolyn still managed to score in on Indian textiles and draped methods for her



collection. Schnurer knew how to take advantage of publicized events as forms of inspiration.

Japan

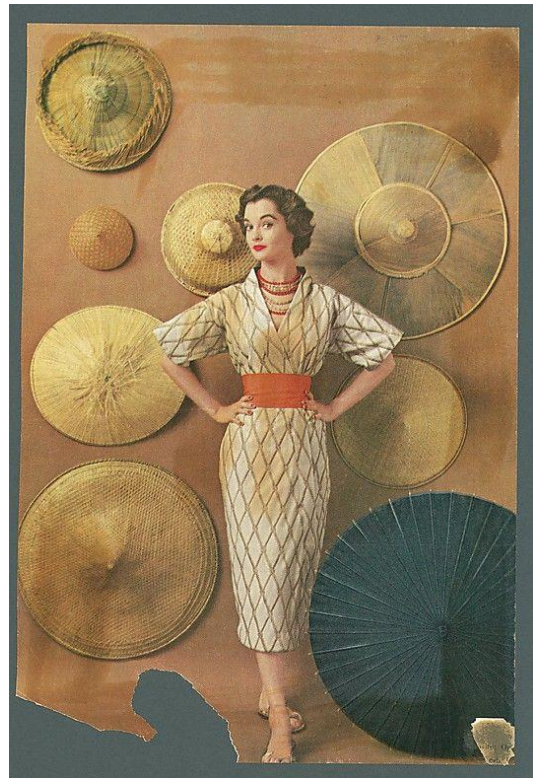
The attractive way that Schnurer presented Western silhouettes into the American lifestyle captured the consumer. Perhaps, her most publicized trip was to Japan. There she submerged in Japanese art and their traditional costumes. For instance, her 1951 “Flight to Japan” collection “included fabrics of flower and leaf motifs from the Japanese love of nature as well as modified obis for belts with dresses and bathing suits. The crossies and kimono sleeve was the dominating

feature in the collection” (Robinson 251). She also simulated the padded hems of kimonos by using double tucks in skirts. Carolyn not only observed clothing as inspiration, but was also inspired by unconventional items such as paper, which inspired prints for her swimwear collection. Another unconventional reference was the imitation of Japanese rice bowls found in the hems of dresses that were boned and flared (Robinson 251). Fan pleats were added to the collection as well. One piece that was inspired by it was “a trickshaw, or waistlength jacket, which was fan pleated from neck to hem.” Art was not exempted from her designs. Schnurer incorporated Japanese art into her collection by implementing the duck signature of the artist D’amato as a motif for her print (Robinson 252). The Japanese inspired line made up her fifth collection for Peck and Peck Department Stores. It became so iconic that “it was first shown in the Sculpture Garden at the Brooklyn Museum” (Robinson 252). Although her collections were inexpensive, they didn’t sacrifice the quality of research. Schnurer always ensured that her collections had a cultural flare.

Africa

One of her most memorable textile trip was to Africa’s Gold Coast in 1952. Carolyn worked alongside the natives to gain better understanding of the African prints. For her African themed collection “she resorted to using the motifs, textures, and colors found in Africa” (Robinson 253).

However, Carolyn didn’t refer to African silhouettes, but was rather fascinated by the animals that inhabited that area. “The collection sported elephants and giraffes as well as motifs from



African woodcarvings and mud cloth patterns were translated into all-over embroidery patterns” (Robinson 253). The way that she approached fashion was through a research lens that brought exposure to a disregarded culture. She reinvented the fashion scene and gave it a cultural twist.

Carolyn Schnurer was one of the early innovative designers of the 1950s. Being a female designer in a male nominated industry meant a lot during this time. Not only were these female designers creating comfortable designs for women, but also a revolution. She along with other designers challenged the mold that men had created for them. Even though it was believed that females were only good for wearing the clothing instead of designing. Designers such as Vera Maxwell, Bonnie Cashin, Tina Leser, Clare Potter, and Carolyn Schnurer took that challenges head on. Schnurer brought distinct ideas from her extensive research habits. Her early start as an educator played a role in her disciplinary designs. Her travels exposed the world to overlooked cultures. The way that she implemented them in to her designs was a key feature to her success. She found the needs necessary to expose America into a direction of freedom, which was translated in her swimwear designs. Innovative Western designs and research will always be a trademark that will describe Carolyn Schnurer.

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