

'THE AMERICAN LOOK'

THE TRANSFORMATION OF WOMEN'S SPORTSWEAR IN 1930S AND 1940S AMERICA

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"You can thank your ancestors for The American Look", Lord & Taylor Advertisement promoting The American Look © Lord & Taylor, 1945.

“Before there was an American fashion, there was an American style.”

(Millbank 1989: 8)



“When *Vogue Magazine*, in 1950, wanted to define the prevailing American look of the forties, they chose these McCardell jerseys and leotards.” Irving Penn, 1950. (Kirkland, 1975: 213)



Claire McCardell wool
coat with cape.
Photoshoot for *Vogue*
magazine, 1950
Photographer unknown.



“Simplicity in dress celebrated both self-sufficiency and the freedoms inherent in a democracy.”

(Millbank 1989: 8)

“A 1944 brown tweed is typically dropped shouldered and easy skirted but the top stitching and the pockets are like those on frontier pants.” (Kirkland, 1975: 247).
Photograph: Louise Dahl-Wolfe, *Harper's Bazaar*, 1944.

“Mass produced or custom-made, serviceable or dainty, the versatile blouse played an essential role in the democratization of fashion.”

(Haughland 2010: 85)

THE GIBSON GIRL



Gibson girl on a bicycle, 1890s. Hand-colored woodcut of a Charles Dana Gibson illustration



On the golf links. Drawing, 1899, by Charles Dana Gibson



THE SPORTING GIRL.

The Sporting Girl, Drawing by Charles Dana Gibson, Circa, 1903



McCardell designs: Tennis dress above, golf outfit, right.
Photograph: Louise Dahl-Wolfe, *Harper's Bazaar*, 1947.

American Sportswear Designers 1930s & 1940s

Tom Brigance

Bonnie Cashin

Tina Leser

Vera Maxwell

Claire McCardell

Mildred Orrick

Claire Potter

Sydney Wragge



No shoulder pads and a self-tailored waist using spaghetti ties.
Photograph: Louise Dahl-Wolfe, *Harper's Bazaar*, 1945.

THE AMERICAN LOOK

Progressing the cultural memory of
American dress

V O G U E

INCORPORATING VANITY FAIR



- bobai

Vogue 'Americana' issue no. 1,
February 1938.

AMERICANA NUMBER · FEBRUARY 1, 1938 · PRICE 35 CENTS





Above and right: Merchandising 'The American Look' with the designs of ready-to-wear designer Clare Potter in Lord & Taylor, 1936.



You can thank your ancestors for

The American Look

The way you carry your head high and proud—

it's because you share in the heritage of freedom handed down since the Revolution.

That free and easy stride of yours—

our pioneers, pushing farther and farther west, speak in it.

Your warm, generous look—

it stems from the abounding plenty they wrested from the wilderness.

That look of aliveness—

it is an eloquent testimony to the challenges they met in a new world.

That natural, unaffected air—

it marks you as citizen in the world's greatest democracy.

Lord & Taylor

Copyright 1945 by

Summer town dress—
cool satin-striped cotton
by Adele Simpson.

“You can thank your ancestors for
The American Look:
the way you carry your head high
and proud; that free and easy stride
of yours; your warm generous look;
that look of aliveness; that natural,
unaffected air...”

(Lord & Taylor advertisement, 1945)

Lord & Taylor Advertisement
promoting The American
Look © Lord & Taylor, 1945.





You'd know
that was
an American dress
anywhere

Its grace, its superbly casual cut, its simple femininity—
these are the marks of a typically American creative genius.
The kind Lord & Taylor loves to find, loves to launch.

Since 1932, when this store conceived the American Designer movement,
hundreds of names have had their first recognition here.
Fashion designers, furniture and fabric designers, designers of
children's clothes, of gloves, handbags, jewelry, shoes, sunglasses—
all were introduced to their public—for it is our belief that
Americans want to know who makes these contributions to American living.

In 1938 came the Lord & Taylor American Design Awards,
a concept which has grown in scope each year.

In 1945 Lord & Taylor coined "The American Look"—a natural evolution
of the recognition and appreciation of our designers—a phrase,
and an influence, which have traveled round the world.

In 1956 the fresh, provocative flavor of American design pervades
every floor of Lord & Taylor. Creative ideas by new, unknown American
designers—and by the nationally-recognized men and women whose work
was just as unknown when Lord & Taylor launched it many years ago.

This happens to be Claire McCordell's "Popover" of 1956,
newest edition of a celebrated Lord & Taylor summer classic—
we introduced the first in 1942. You'll find it now,
if you found it there, on the Sports Floor, fifth.

"You'd know that was an American dress anywhere. Its grace, its superbly casual cut, its simple femininity – these are the marks of a typically American creative genius. The kind Lord & Taylor loves to find, loves to launch."

(Lord & Taylor advertisement, 1956)

Lord & Taylor Advertisement
promoting The American Look ©
Lord & Taylor, 1956.



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Contrasting to the built-in structure of Dior's 1947 "New Look" (above) is (Left) McCardell's "Unlined cotton dress with a defined waist, very full skirt and attached to a bias cut bodice. Sleek sandals and a Phelps belt bag complete Claire's 'American Look'." (Kirkland, 1975: 271). Photograph: Louise Dahl-Wolfe, *Harper's Bazaar*, 1947.

“Oversized check broadcloth halter dress,
its bare middle section crossed with
bands of fabric.” (Kirkland, 1975: 283).
Photograph: John Rawlings, *Vogue*, 1946





McCardell 'Play Suit', *Vogue*, January 1949.

CLAIRE MCCARDELL

Designing 'The American Look'

“It is her name, in particular, that is associated with the phenomenon known as ‘The American Look’. Paris had Chanel, America had McCardell...who helped make this period the golden age of American sportswear.

(Steele 1991: 103).

McCardell in *Vogue* in a dress she designed for the shoot, 1945.
Photographer: John Rawlings





“We [designers] specialize in what we know best. For me it’s America – it looks and feels like America. It’s freedom, it’s democracy, it’s casualness, it’s good health. Clothes can say all that”
(McCardell, 1956: 56)

A narrow shift dress Claire called the 'stringbean' which had her eye for versatility built in: it could be worn with a cummerbund or hang straight. Photographs: Louise Dahl-Wolfe, *Harper's Bazaar*, 1953





Claire McCardell clothing label in a Monastic dress, Townley Fabrics, c.1941

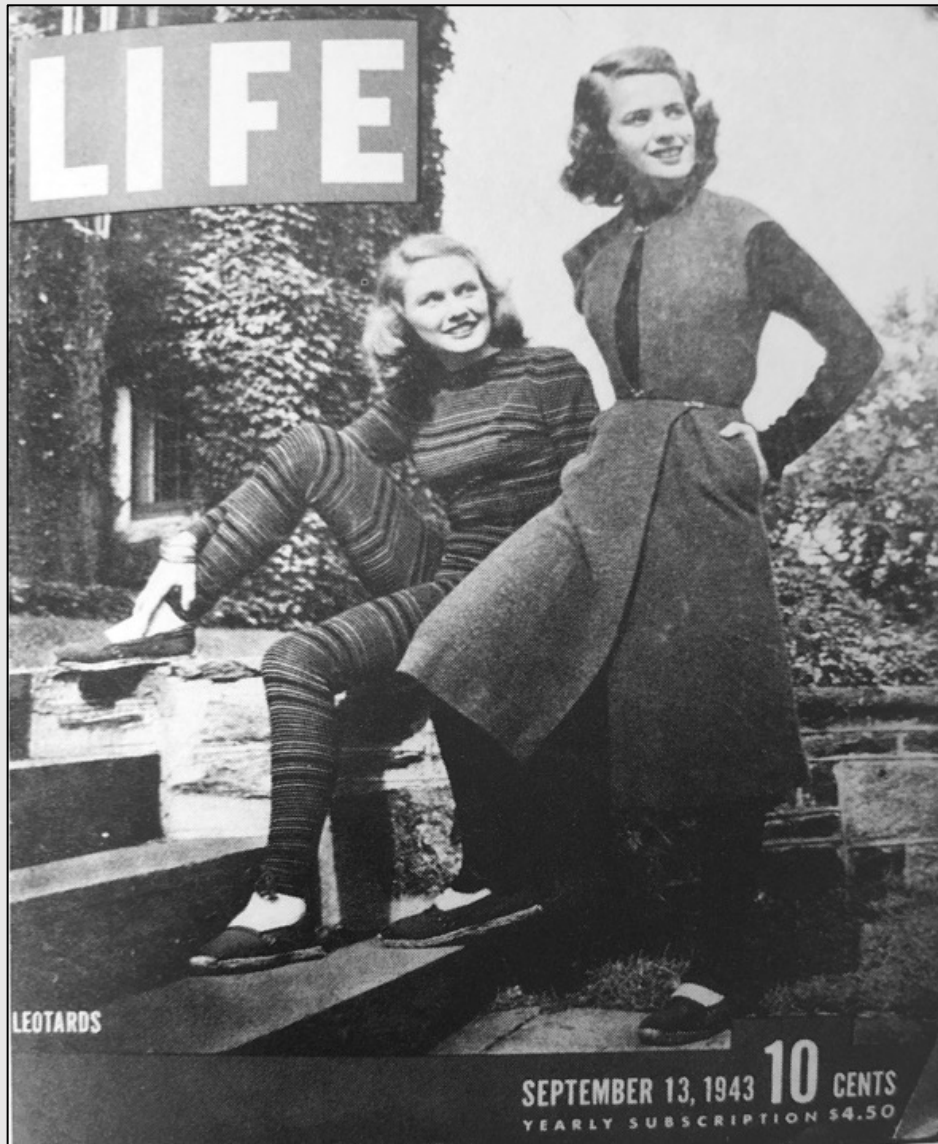


“Contrasting top-stitching outlines the structural details of these bare midriff outfits from the mid-forties resort collections.” (Kirkland, 1975: 264-5).
Photographs: Louise Dahl-Wolfe, *Harper’s Bazaar*, 1944 (L), 1945 (R).

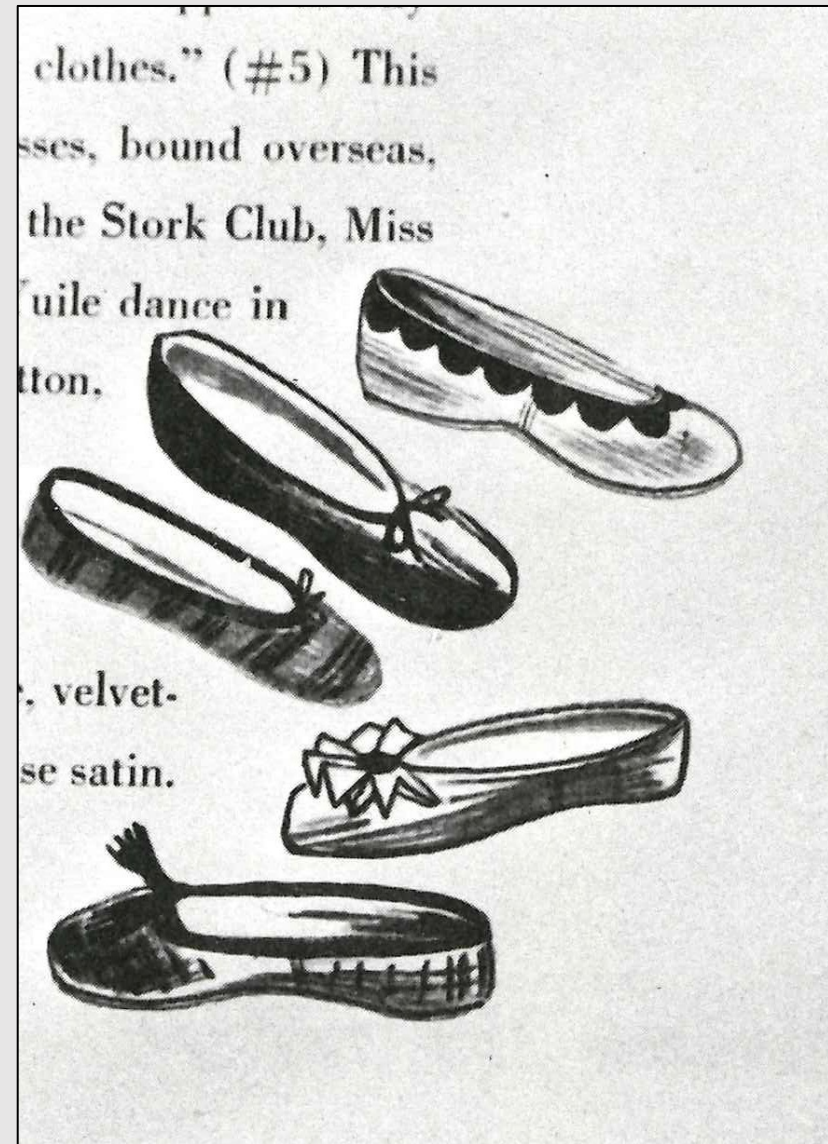


“The long American leg is glorified in Claire’s first resort collection for the new Townley.” (Kirkland, 1975: 239).

Photograph: Louise Dahl-Wolfe, *Harper’s Bazaar*, 1942.



“The first leotards, or as *LIFE* put it, “funny tights” were of wool jersey and too expensive to be popular.” (Kirkland, 1975: 261).
Photograph: *LIFE* Magazine, 1943.



Vogue, 1944. (Kirkland, 1975: 253).



Left: "My how we laughed when we made this one," said Bessie Susteric, Claire's sample room head. Right: How the dress looked worn (Kirkland 1975: 302-3)



“Drop everything!” an agitated dress manufacturer shouted to his designer. “There’s a girl up the street making a dress with no back, no front, no waistline, and my God, no BUST DARTS!”

(Kirkland 1975: 211)

Claire McCardell, The Monastic Dress, 1938.
Photograph: Bill Cunningham, c1974.





The 'baby dress'
Photograph: Louise Dahl-Wolfe, *Harper's Bazaar*, 1946.



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UTILITY FASHION
DESIGNED BY
*Claire McCordell***

Household device de-luxe for busy women. Gay, practical pinafore that you can wear by itself or over your dress. Equally at home in the kitchen, at play or outdoors. So becoming you can greet your guests in it. Has capacious, quilted, catch-all pocket. Quilted mitt swings from waistband. Striped and plain washable cottons. Sizes 10 to 20. **\$6.95**

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and at better stores everywhere, or write **TOWNLEY FROCKS, 550 Seventh Avenue, N. Y. C**

Dress Patented

Top: Lord & Taylor Popover dress advertisement, year not known

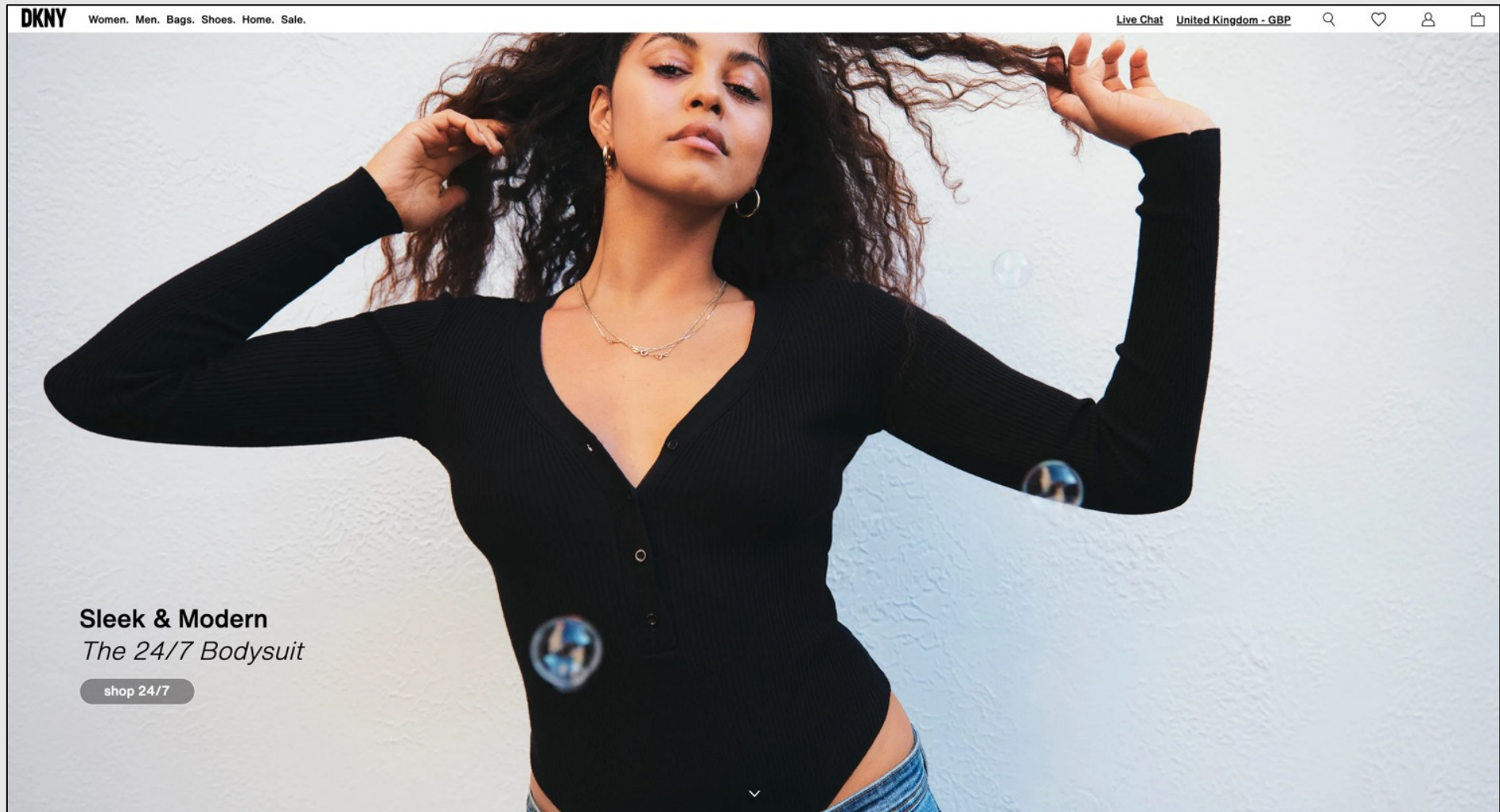
Right: "The first denim Popover", 1942
Photographer: Louise Dahl-Wolfe, Harper's Bazaar, 1942.



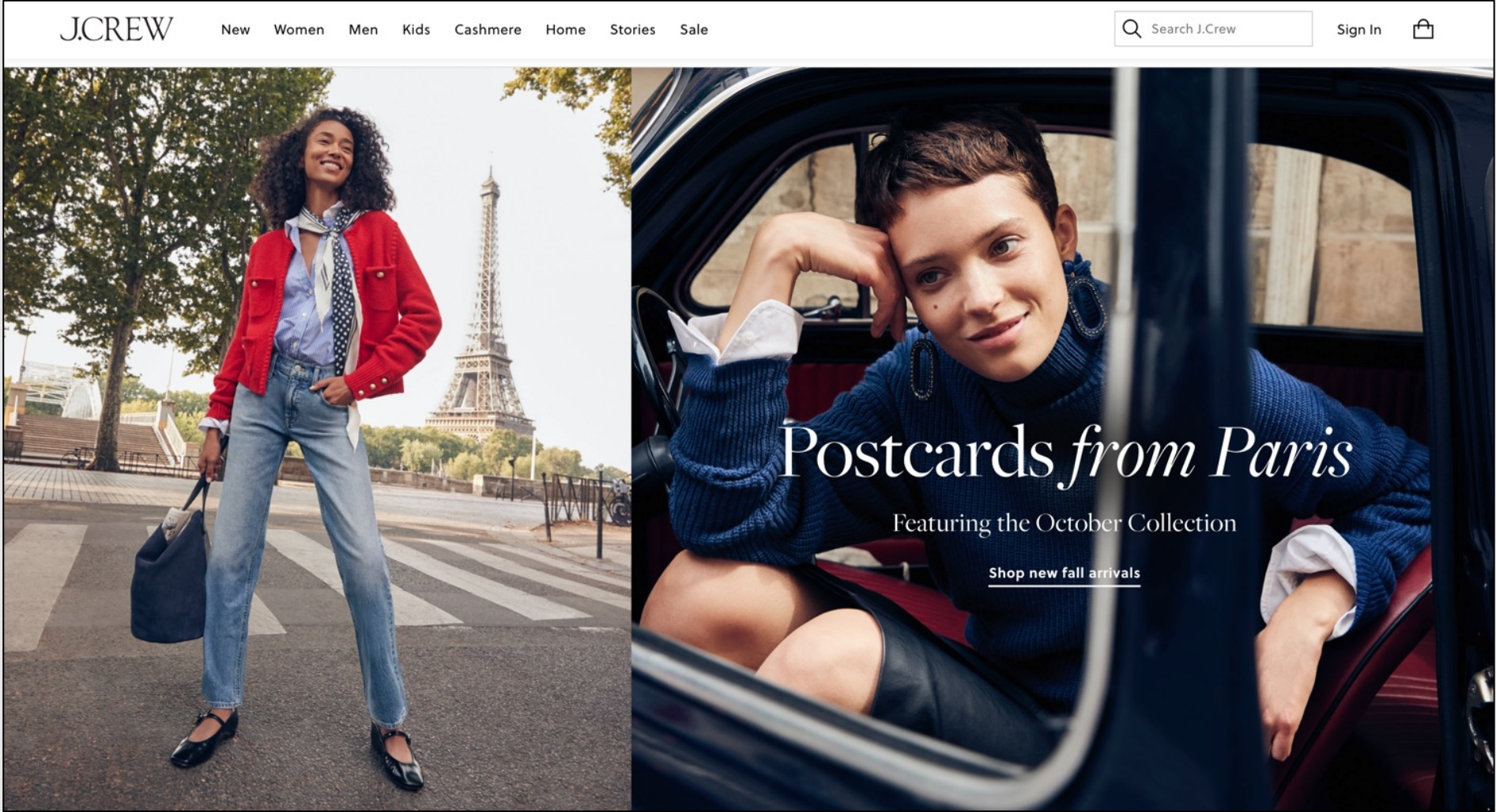
THE LEGACY OF THE AMERICAN LOOK



Geoffrey Beene, sequined jersey football dresses, 1967



DKNY 2022: The leotard is still relevant



J. Crew 2022: An American in Paris

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NEW ARRIVAL



Polo Ralph Lauren
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Lace-Up Piqué Polo Dress
£165.00

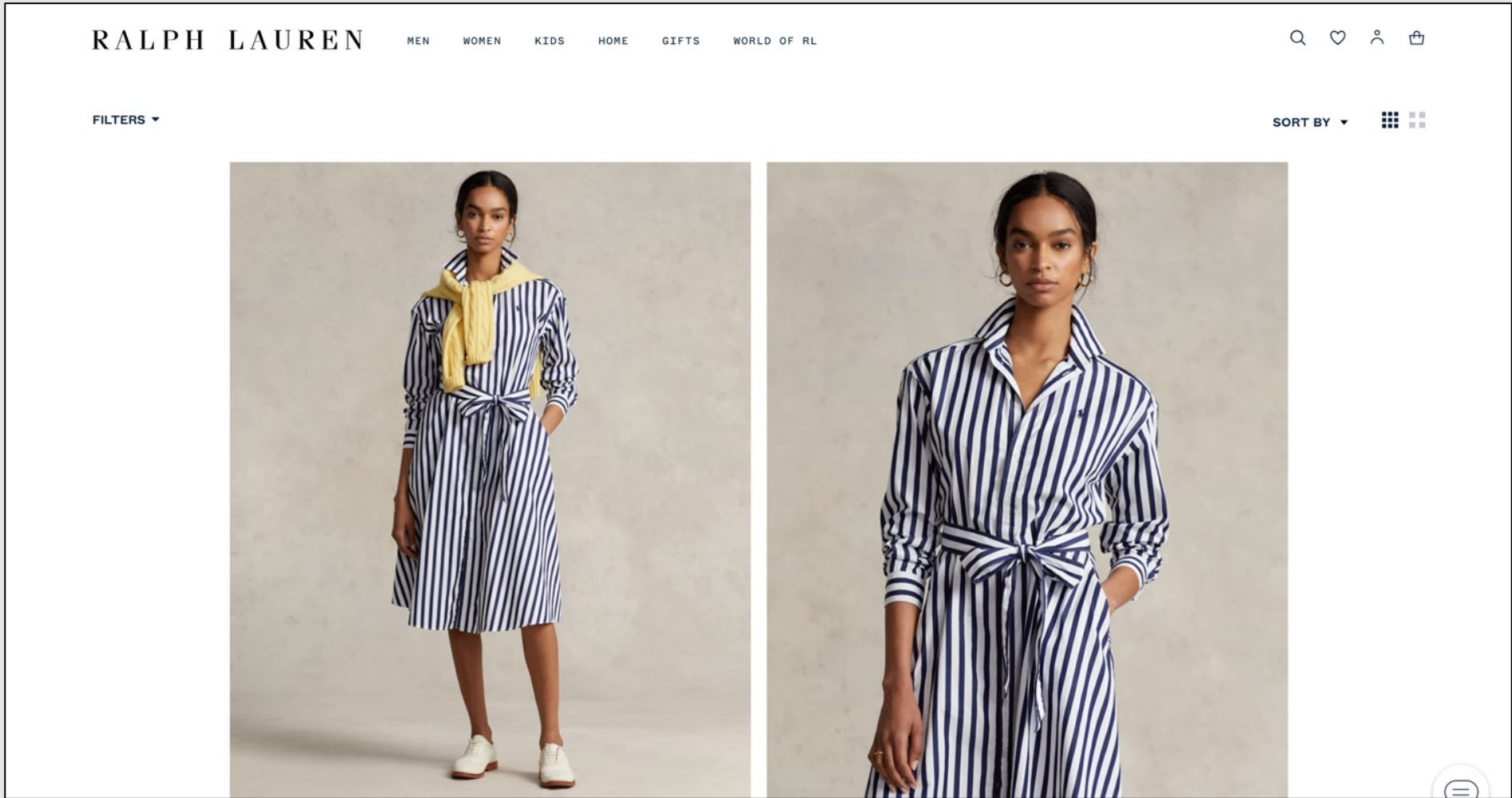


Polo Ralph Lauren
Floral Smocked Cotton Midi Dress
£349.00



Polo Ralph Lauren
Floral Crinkled Georgette Midi Dress
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Ralph Lauren 2022: Dresses to move in



Ralph Lauren 2022: The shirtdress with stand-up collar in nautical stripes


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CORIN SWEATER IN WOOL AND CASHMERE AMAL DRESS IN MERINO WOOL AMAL DRESS IN MERINO WOOL MAKENNA TOP IN LIQUID SATIN

Halston 2022: Knitwear with 'McCardellisms' in the detail

Worth It: Tory Burch's Claire McCardell Dress


Its namesake is credited with inventing American sportswear.



(Image credit: Tory Burch)

[Marie Claire Magazine](#), 4 May 2022


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2022 Tory Burch: The Claire McCardell Dress

what shall i wear?

The What, Where, When,
and How Much of Fashion



Claire McCardell

New Edition with a
Foreword by
Tory Burch

2022 release of a new edition of
Claire McCardell's 1956 fashion
manifesto *What Shall I Wear?*
with a forward by Tory Burch



Sarah Hempel Irani, 7.5 foot bronze, 2021
Commissioned by the Claire McCardell Project
Frederick, Maryland



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