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

(Haugland 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, Drawing by Charles Dana Gibson, Circa, 1903
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-tailed waist using spaghetti ties.
THE AMERICAN LOOK

Progressing the cultural memory of American dress
Vogue ‘Americana’ issue no. 1, February 1938.
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; that free and easy stride of yours; your warm generous look; that look of aliveness; that natural, unaffected air…”

(Lord & Taylor advertisement, 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.”

(Lord & Taylor advertisement, 1956)
“(T)he advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lives. And to study this advance... is to study the really American part of our history.

(Turner 1893)
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 McCordell…who helped make this period the golden age of American sportswear.

(Steele 1991: 103).
“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).
“The long American leg is glorified in Claire’s first resort collection for the new Townley.” (Kirkland, 1975: 239).
“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)
The ‘baby dress’
Top: Lord & Taylor Popover dress advertisement, year not known

Right: "The first denim Popover", 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
Ralph Lauren 2022: Dresses to move in
Ralph Lauren 2022: The shirtdress with stand-up collar in nautical stripes
Halston 2022: Knitwear with ‘McCardellisms’ in the detail
Worth It: Tory Burch's Claire McCardell Dress

Its namesake is credited with inventing American sportswear.
2022 Tory Burch: The Claire McCardell Dress
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
References


References


