

An American Original: Celebrating Claire McCardell

In 1990, decades after her death, Life magazine named McCardell one of the most influential women of the 20th century.

By

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It's not exactly a comeback, but Claire McCardell is having a moment.

Sixty-three years after her death, there is budding appreciation for the American designer, who brought ballet flats, oversized pockets, zippered dresses, matching separates, spaghetti straps and the monastic dress to generations of shoppers.

Four hundred-plus people turned up in McCardell's hometown of Frederick, Md., for Sunday's unveiling of a 680-pound statue in her likeness. Tory Burch saluted the designer as the source of inspiration for her spring collection. The Maryland Center for History and Culture has announced the Tory Burch Claire McCardell Fashion Fellowship, which will start early next year.

In a fitting twist of irony, the bronze piece rests in the foreground of a public park with Union Mills, the first factory to manufacture pantyhose, in the distance. Perhaps more than any other American designer, McCardell freed women from the constraints of appropriate attire. Ballet flats, the modern dirndl, spaghetti straps, the monastic dress and the popover dress are just a few of her greatest hits. But following her death at the age of 52, WWD reiterated how McCardell had not made "any I-was-first-with-it claims about fashion, contending that too many elements enter into it, making the originations highly debatable." Her American look boiled down to livable clothes that women could wear and afford.

Burch spoke rhetorically of McCardell's lasting influence in an interview Friday: "Beyond putting a zipper on a dress, pockets in clothing, this casual elegance and allowing women to feel free? Also, the idea of accentuating

the waist was something that we wanted to think about. Everything she did had such an impact on so many that it's hard to even quantify what her lasting impact is because it's been everywhere.”

Patricia Mears, deputy director of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, said Monday that people who know a bit about fashion history “really revere” McCardell as probably the greatest American designer. “We had tremendous talents in many areas. But if you talk about American ideals — democracy, accessibility, certain levels of freedom, equity — McCardell more closely matches that. She doesn't do haute couture and even the ready-to-wear that she did was not luxury. It was not what Norman Norell, Pauline Trigère, James Galanos were doing. They did beautiful work, but it was relatively expensive,” Mears said. “Whereas, McCardell made clothes for real working women of many classes. Aside from making things that were practical, she found a way to cut the garments so you could customize how to wear it on your own body.”

Athletic in her own right, McCardell had such an in-depth understanding of American sportswear that she served on a committee that helped to create Sports Illustrated **magazine**, according to Allison Tolman, who oversees the Maryland center's museum and library collection. The **magazine** had awarded her with its first American Sportswear Designers award. McCardell, a Coty award winner and Time magazine cover star, was also honored by President Harry Truman with an award from the Women's National Press Club. Her 1956 book, “What Shall I Wear? The What, Where, When and How Much of Fashion,” was used by many colleges and universities as a text book.

Working on behalf of the Frederick Art Club, sculptor Sarah Hempel Irani said the statue unveiled over the weekend had to be larger than life, since McCardell was. Standing 7 feet, 6 inches tall, the bronze figure depicts the uninhibited designer wearing a dirndl with one hand in a skirt pocket and her shirt collar popped up. Hempel noted that of the 5,000-plus statues of historical figures, only 7 percent are of women.



The 7-foot, 6-inch statue being transported to Frederick, Md. COURTESY OF SARAH HEMPEL IRANI

Transporting the statue upright for 1,600 miles in the bed of a pickup truck (as advised by the Loveland, Colo., foundry) to McCardell's hometown was memorable. "You can imagine the curious looks we got along the way," Irani said Monday. "Whenever we stopped for gas, folks wanted to know who this was. When I started to tell people, people became more and more curious. [I told them], 'She is the person who put pockets in women's clothing.'"

Stan Herman said, "She was the first of the poets that I discovered in our industry. First of all, she was a female designer. There weren't many of them. She didn't make clothes that wore people. She made clothes that people wore. She simplified the message of how to dress. The clothes were so simple that they were deceptive. Simplicity is the poetry of our business, and very often it's lost."

After McCardell's 1958 death due to colon cancer, more than 300 people turned up at St. James Church in Manhattan. Many in the crowd were the people who had cut, sewn, pressed and finished her clothes during her 25-year affiliation with Townley Fabrics. Indicative of how gargantuan fashion brands have become now versus then, McCardell's estate was valued at



The new Claire McCordell statue by Sarah Hempel Irani. COURTESY OF FREDERICK ARTS CLUB

just more than \$20,000, based on a 1949 will that was signed nine years earlier. In 1990, Life magazine named McCordell one of the most influential women of the 20th century.

Burch said of McCordell: “She’s been a hero of mine for a very long time. I’ve always been interested in women of substance. Even in college, I remember learning about her and thinking, ‘Here’s someone who transformed the way that women dressed.’ I didn’t feel that people knew enough about her. Beyond our industry, I don’t feel that she gets the credit that she deserves for really changing the way women dress, embracing women’s empowerment and having women feel freer to express themselves in the way that they dressed in the ’40s.”

For her spring collection, Burch referenced McCordell signatures, but wanted to “hopefully do it in our own way, take it further and think of it for today,” she said. Dresses, knit dressing, accessories and a Capezio reissued ballet flat are some of the early favorites with stores.

A year ago Burch and her team visited the Maryland Center for History and Culture to comb through the McCardell archives, which also include letters and other personal materials that the designer left to the institution. Drawn to McCardell's fearlessness, irreverence and how she thought about design, Burch said: "She definitely was someone who wanted to solve problems for women. That was something that I related to very much. She definitely ignored the rules of fashion in the '40s and '50s. It was interesting to me that people in Europe were looking to her."

In addition to McCardell's design talent, Burch has been inspired by her wit and character, too. Noting that McCardell's collections "were never meant to be precious," Burch said, "In fact a lot of things no longer exist, because people wore them so much."

In 1938, McCardell created the "Monastic Dress," which could be worn loosely or belted. What some saw as a forerunner to the "sack dress" had been inspired by an Algerian costume that McCardell was intrigued by at the Beaux Arts Ball. After making a red wool version with a black leather belt and before going on vacation, she gave strict instructions to her team not to show the design to retailers, convinced they wouldn't want it. Best and Co. disagreed and featured it in its stores a month later and named it a "Nada fashion."

Plagued by the prevalence of knockoffs of the Monastic Dress, Townley tried to battle them legally but that dragged the company under. McCardell had started her career painting lampshades at B. Altman before taking a short-lived design job. Before joining Townley in 1931, she joined Robert Turk, and following the namesake designer's death in a drowning, she was asked to finish his collection.

After Townley closed for two years, McCardell joined Hattie Carnegie. In 1940, when Townley reopened with new owners, McCardell returned as designer and principal with her own label. "Everyone was looking at what she was doing, including people in couture in Europe," Burch said, adding that McCardell often used materials that were very unusual at the time to put in a dress. "She took a lot risk at the time with the way that she put things together. But now it seems quite modern."

The fact that her clothing label ended with her was only one reason why recognition of her name has not lived on. “Remember that the French are very good at using their legacy. It’s part of a national mindset to respect fashion. In the midcentury, haute couture counted for more than 5 percent of the GDP [gross domestic product] in France. There’s nothing like that in America. Someone like Christian Dior counted for more than 50 percent of the total gross that fashion brought in. A lot of that was licensing. These companies benefit from keeping the legacies of these designers alive. An American is much more likely to remember a **Chanel** for that reason than McCardell,” Mears said. “Even when we try to revitalize a name like Halston, it’s been done in fits and starts.”

Through the McCardell fellowship, which will be a yearlong endeavor, the aim is to advance professionals in the museum field — the yearlong program will include the creation of a McCardell exhibition at the Maryland Center for History and Culture. The commitment is meant to preserve McCardell’s legacy as such an important part in American fashion, Burch said. The initiative will also familiarize young designers with her contributions.