

Black crepe cocktail
dress, ca. 1980s. Ryerson
FRC2015.05.001. Gift of
Marian Fowler.



PORTRAIT OF A LITTLE BLACK DRESS

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There is a garment in many women's closets that is so ubiquitous that it has a nickname: the "Little Black Dress," or "LBD" to those who prefer sartorial shorthand. The fashion designer Coco Chanel claimed to have invented the term "little black dress" in the 1920s, though many designers of the time were working on a similar design concept (note 1). The little black dress is an evening or cocktail dress with a simple, yet elegant cut that is both effortless and timeless. Karl Lagerfeld once said: **"One is never over-dressed or under-dressed with a Little Black Dress."**

The LBD is a truly versatile garment that suits any occasion, since it can be dressed up with accessories or worn unadorned. It also does not become dated or out of style after a few years and can become a wardrobe workhorse. This is an apt description for a black crêpe cocktail dress by Pauline Trigère that now belongs to the Ryerson Fashion Research Collection (FRC2015.05.001).

Picture a simple yet elegant black cocktail dress. It has a jewel collar, elbow-length sleeves, and a hem that lands just above the knee. The dress fits close to the body through the sleeves and bodice, gradually flowing away from the body into an A-line skirt. This dress sounds like any little black dress, but what makes the Trigère dress memorable is evident in the subtle design elements and tailoring – which include multiple, inch-wide panels that run vertically throughout the dress, gradually widening down the length of the skirt to a width of five inches at the hem. These panels also run the length of the sleeves, starting at two inches wide, tapering to one inch at the cuffs. These meticulous details of design and construction are what make this little black dress classically elegant, just like its former owner.

This LBD is one of several Trigère pieces that previously belonged to Marian Fowler, a Toronto author and fashion aficionado, before she donated it to the FRC. Fowler earned her PhD in English literature from the University of Toronto, taught at York University, and was the recipient of the Canadian Biography Award (note 2). She wrote seven works of non-fiction, including *The Way She Looks Tonight: Five Women of Style*; *Hope: Adventure of a Diamond*; and *In a Gilded Cage: From Heiress to Duchess*. Fowler has also written for *The Globe and Mail*, *The Beaver*, and *City and Country Home* (note 3).

After discussing her wardrobe and fashion philosophy with me in an oral history interview that took place at her home in Toronto in November 2015, it became clear that this LBD is exemplary of Fowler's overall taste and appreciation of timeless, expertly tailored, classic pieces. Fowler admitted that she was drawn to Trigère's garments because of the designer's attention to tailoring and quality: **"... of all the American designers ... certainly my favourite was Pauline Trigère, because she knew how to cut."**

Pauline Trigère (1912-2002) was a French-born American designer, known for her ready-to-wear designs, which were always tailored with precision, as well as her personal taste and style. After Trigère's death in 2002, the *New York Times* reported that: **"she was noted for not only her designing skills, but also her tailoring and such touches as constructing dresses with no obvious seams" (note 4)**. Trigère also made a clear distinction between fashion and style (note 5): **"Fashion is what people tell you to wear Style is what comes from your own inner thing."**



Cherry red knit dress,
ca. 1980s. Ryerson
FRC2015.05.002A. Gift of
Marian Fowler.

Fowler has an affinity for garments by Trigère and also donated another Trigère piece to the FRC - a cherry red knit day dress with square neckline, centre front seam, back zipper, raglan sleeves and angular pockets set into side seams lined in red silk with a matching open hip-length flared jacket, partially lined in red silk (FRC2015.05.002 A+B).

The distinction between fashion and style asserted by Trigère is evident in Fowler's personal wardrobe and her story. Fowler recounted that as a young woman, she was aware of the very prescriptive rules of fashion: matching shoes and handbags; hemline lengths being dictated each season; no wearing white after Labour Day, and only wearing navy-coloured clothing in the spring.

As Fowler aged, and fashion rules became less rigid, she began to be more creative and playful with her clothing choices, using her eye to put pieces together, and creating her own personal style, much like Trigère. The degree of attention that Fowler pays to the quality of her clothing, from the fabrics, to the construction, to the design, shows the importance that clothing plays in her everyday life. There is an understanding that clothing can say a lot about the wearer: **"... the clothes we choose to wear can be expressive of identity, telling others something about our gender, class, status and so on ..."** (note 7). Fowler is aware of how her clothing can communicate something about her to those that she interacts with. With this knowledge, Fowler selects the best quality of clothing that she can afford, showing to others the value that she places onto not only her clothing, but onto herself. Fowler has been interested in clothing her whole life and what it can communicate about the wearer, joking, "... until I'm in the coffin, I will be terribly interested in clothing, in fashion".

When asked about her personal style, Fowler says, "I really love the best ... beautiful quality fabrics that designers use." Her fashion philosophy is centred on wearing simple garments that fit perfectly, like the black Trigère dress. In her opinion, this is the key to looking truly exceptional. When asked about her overall style, Fowler states that Trigère's designs are indicative of her taste, saying that she prefers classic pieces that she can wear for years. Her dedication to fashion and style - and specifically to owning designs by Trigère - is made apparent when she talks about needing to purchase the black Trigère dress, regardless of its high price at the time. Fowler jokes, when recalling purchasing the dress from Creeds in Toronto, back in the 1970s, "And I thought, I don't care, I have to have that dress. I'm happy to eat Kraft Dinner for two years, to get that dress". This humorous quote shows Fowler's commitment to wearing timeless and elegant clothing of the best possible quality.

In talking to Fowler about her experiences with her wardrobe and her appreciation of Trigère's precise construction of subtle, understated designs, it is clear that this little black dress expresses a powerful relationship between clothing and identity. This little black dress is elegant and understated, like Marian Fowler herself.

NOTES

Note 1: Gessner, Liz. "Little Black Dress". *Berg Fashion Library*, 2016. n.p.

Note 2: "Marian Fowler". *Good Reads*, 2016. Accessed Feb. 9, 2016 http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/247800.Marian_Fowler

Note 3: Nemy, Enid. "Pauline Trigère, Exemplar of American Style, Dies at 93". *The New York Times*, 2002. <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/14/nyregion/pauline-trigere-exemplar-of-american-style-dies-at-93.html?pagewanted=all>

Note 4: Ibid.

Note 5: Bev Editions. Marian Fowler. 2016. Accessed Dec. 15, 2015. <http://beveditions.com/authors/marian-fowler/>

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Entwistle, J. (2000) *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory*. Polity Press, 2000.

Fowler, M. (2015) Personal interview with author, Toronto. November 17, 2015.

Gabrielle Trach is a photographer and an MA Fashion student at Ryerson University in Toronto. Her oral history interview with Marian Fowler took place as part of a graduate seminar in Oral History and Ethnography, under my supervision. Marian Fowler has given her permission for the publication of this essay.