



Claire McCardell
Townley red cotton
dress c.1940s. Toronto
Metropolitan University
FRC2014.07.477.

AN ODE TO CLAIRE MCCARDELL

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In the 1940's, Paris was under occupation and designers elsewhere were cut off from their Parisian inspirations. To prevent the demise of the industry, American designers were thrust into a position of fashion authority that had been previously denied to them (Buckland). Key influencers, like Vogue and Harper's Bazaar, fueled by economic nationalism promoted homegrown talent in hopes of stimulating American investment in American designers (Buckland). **The increased publicity and the changing social landscape of the forties elevated Claire McCardell's simple yet stylish design into fashion discourse.** She emerged as: "refreshing unFrench" (Yohannan).

McCardell designed well cut garments that transitioned into well made mass-produced pieces. Trained in haute couture techniques, McCardell repelled from the frivolity of couture garments - but not without studying every Parisian design she could get her hands on, giving her an impeccable understanding of clothing construction (Robinson, 104). **McCardell took inspiration from the needs of the American women that she identified with.** During the war, women were interacting with the world in new ways and McCardell was acutely aware of the evolution of the mid-century woman - she aimed to create clothing that was "at once appropriate for the office, cocktail hour and leisure" (Yohannan).

Claire McCardell's designs were radical in the context of the forties, since they did not feature shoulder pads, back zippers, boning, and the heavily constructed looks of the times (Yohannan). Instead McCardell garments embodied the fundamentals of sportswear as it is known today: offering functionality, quality and practicality, characteristics so entrenched in contemporary fashions that they remain largely "under appreciated and understudied" (Robinson, 100). **McCardell created pieces that were fashionable and durable.** Some of her signature elements were derived from the functional characteristics of American working class clothing. For example, her use of cotton, reinforced by classic double stitching from denim work eventually became a design staple (245, Kirkland). **Her production of stylish clothing in traditionally non-fashionable fabrics was ground breaking.** She preferred wools, jerseys and cottons because of their reasonable price and availability (Kirkland, 252); "effectively ennobling everyday materials by way of thoughtful design and deftly executed construction" (Yohannan).

These design signatures came to be known as "McCardellisms", distinctive in identifying a garment as her design (Robinson, 110). She made use of techniques from couture production, but only "those that worked within the constraints of mass production and American fashion" (Robinson, 106). Her distinctive use of the bias cut was influenced by the work of Madeleine Vionnet, which she was exposed to during her training years in Paris (Robinson, 105). **The McCardellisms were features that integrated functionality into women's every day wear.** She insisted on deep side pockets in every garment, including her evening gowns, as pockets offered "a place to put one's hands so as not to feel ill at ease or vulnerable" (Yohannan and Nolf, quoted by Stanfill). As she instructed her models to display her designs with their shoulders leaning back, hips thrust forward, and hands in their pockets, she is credited with creating the modern slouched stance used on the catwalk today (Robinson, 108).



Claire McCardell
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FRC2014.07.477. Collar
detail.

The Toronto Metropolitan University Research Fashion Collection has a garment by Claire McCardell: a red cotton below-knee length dress in a white and black trefoil motif, with a shawl collar and short sleeves (FRC2014.07.477).

The dress was dated by the donor to the 1940s. In 1940, McCardell began her second chapter with Townley Frocks as the head designer. The label in the dress reads "Claire McCardell Clothes: By Townley". During her first period designing with the company in the thirties, McCardell's work was strictly under the Townley label - the company fearing that naming the designer would make McCardell difficult to work with (Kirkland, 239). The label change in the forties however only strengthened the relationship between McCardell and Townley, which lasted until her death in 1958.

The dress itself is in remarkable condition - reflecting the designer's belief that "good fashion somehow earns the right to survive" (Kirkland, 307). Any displays of aging are only visible upon close inspection. Under the collar and inside the pockets, the original darker red colour contrasts the faded red of the exposed fabric, a combination of age and wear. The latter is further displayed in the discolouration visible directly in the underarms and the hem of the skirt which is slightly tattered; seams are starting to separate, the stitches loosening from one another. There are multiple alterations - re-stitching done in red, and eventually in contrasting threads of black and white. **The signs of wear and the overall condition signify a beloved dress, one that was worn often but taken care of, supported by the integrity of its production.**

The red cotton dress is a modified princess cut, the seams detailed in white contrasting thread - a McCardellism of reimagining classic patterns in modern fashion. The princess cut features continuous vertical panels, shaped to the body through the torso with no waistline seam - rather than a typical bodice and skirt. Alternatively, the red dress has two vertical bust darts that begin near the shoulders and meet the top of the large side pockets, detailed again in white thread; eventually merging into the side seam at the bottom of the pockets. There is a rather large zipper on the left side that was originally red, but has chipped away to reveal silver from use - it's placement essential to a woman's ability to dress herself, another McCardellism (Robinson, 125). The center seam mimics the double stitching techniques borrowed from denim work. The dress is cut on a bias with pink tape used selectively along the inner hem, both shoulders, and on the inner right side seam: a signature detail, giving the garment greater movement and elegantly draping on the body.

In 1947, after the war had ended, Dior released the New Look - characterized by its emphasized bust, longer hemline, indented waist and accentuated hips (Charleston). The look contradicted militaristic aesthetics of the period that broadened women's shoulders and narrowed their hips (McDowell, 70). Comparatively, McCardell's red cotton dress in the FRC reflects a similar silhouette, leading me to believe that the dress could have been produced in the later years of the 1940s - specifically between the years of 1946-1949. **Despite the presence of the aforesaid McCardellisms; the piece conspicuously lacks other specific design details of her pieces in the early forties, such as adjustable waistlines, wraps and spaghetti ties, large belts, and gilt hooks and eyes.** While McCardell rarely used zippers after the war, when she did they were a highly visible design detail (Robinson, 125); in this case the red cotton dress features a zipper on the left side, drawing attention with contrasting white thread.

Sally Kirkland, a Vogue fashion editor, recalled a conversation in spring 1946 with McCardell when the designer shared her prediction that the "following spring she thought women were going to want very full and much longer skirts" (271) in response to the silhouettes of the forties and the restrictions enforced during the war. **The next spring, McCardell released a collection of dresses with full circle skirts and dropped hemlines - working out "new proportions so that the unaccustomed length and fullness was set off by a snug bias bodice and tiny waist"** (Kirkland, 271). The red dress embodies these very features: a narrow fit through the bust, drawing in at the waist, and opening towards the hips; which are further accentuated by the large, rounded pockets on both the left and right side. The back of the dress is embellished with a piercing, almost a gore, and without risking the integrity of waistline, offers additional volume while making the round skirt much fuller. It is also significantly longer than her dresses from earlier in the decade; measuring at 31 inches from the front waist to the hem, and hangs slightly longer at the back measuring 34 inches from waist to hem. The skirt hangs around 10-12 inches longer than previous designs (Kirkland, 271). The dress would fall well below the knee on a wearer between 5'5" - 5'7".



Claire McCardell Townley
red cotton dress c.1940s.
Ryerson FRC2014.07.477.
Side view.

All things considered, I believe that McCardell's 1946 prediction that "fashion would gravitate towards longer lengths, yards of fabric, and rounded narrow shoulders", manifested itself in the red cotton dress of the FRC, dating it more accurately to the years 1946-1949 (Robinson, 135). While both Dior and McCardell envisioned the emergence of the silhouette, Dior's dramatic interpretation overshadowed Claire's much simpler designs. In this one red cotton dress, I see evidence of the difference between the old world of French fashion versus the new American look; the male versus the female designer; and glamour versus practicality. Her vision developed into a more youthful feminine silhouette "often made more so with a shawl collar", and produced in practical fabrics as displayed in the red cotton dress (Kirkland, 71); a mainstay in the "wardrobe of college girls, working women and housewives alike" (Yohannan). **The red cotton dress of the FRC perfectly embodies Claire McCardell's approach to dressing the American woman; it harmoniously incorporates function into fashion, moving with the wearer through the day in effortless style.**

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