Jan 1st, 12:00 AM

Review and Documentation of Signature Bonnie Cashin Designs

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Bonnie Cashin, born in Oakley, California in 1908, was one of the most important and influential American fashion designers of the last century. Her contributions to American fashion are especially notable given the dominance of European designers during the 1950s. She pioneered new styles and approaches in casual wear that continue to influence fashion design to this day. These styles and approaches are now fundamental to so many aspects of fashion design that they are considered foundational.

Bonnie Cashin has left a remarkable signature on fashion in general and, specifically, on American sportswear. She always remained true to her design sensibility and let her customer totally lead her because, in fact, she was her own best customer. Bonnie led an active life, involved in the theatre, arts, travel, leisure activities, and perfecting her skill at fabric design and apparel development. She always followed the true path of design - her form of clothing followed its function. She was an accomplished artist and it was her inspirational sketches that led to her design focus. The idea would be developed first, and then the fabric explored or designed. She knew that the two were interdependent and had to interact with the wearer.

Renewed attention was drawn to Cashin’s work when the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) Museum in New York City held a widely publicized retrospective exhibit of her work shortly after she passed away in February 2000. The exhibit was the brainchild of three individuals who worked with Cashin during her life: Anthony Muto, Stephanie Day Iverson, and Dorothy Twining Globus. Through association with these individuals, I have come to understand the significance of Cashin’s contributions more comprehensively. Knowing that the University of Cincinnati has a private collection of 110 pieces of Bonnie Cashin’s original designed garments, I decided to document some of these pieces thoroughly. This was a valuable undertaking in the understanding of American fashion history.

The purpose of this exploratory research was to examine the 110 pieces of Cashin’s work in the University’s collection. The documentation includes origins of the garments, fabric and analyses of pattern design, and design details. This research yielded a compilation of written material, garment data, and visual data to analyze Bonnie Cashin’s design work.

The methodology of this documentation and examination first consisted of interviews with several people who have studied and worked with Bonnie Cashin to understand her work from a more foundational perspective. Second, literature and data were collected at the FIT library, which contains extensive material on Bonnie Cashin. Such material included her original sketches, articles and advertisements, all of which enhanced the understanding of the significant
pieces of her work in general. Third, a group of 80 garments (from the 1960s and 1970s) were selected for extensive study and evaluation. Fourth, the 80 garments were documented in Quick Time VR (QTVR) format including photos. Fifth, each garment’s design details were analyzed and then flat sketches and patterns were developed.

One of the most important outcomes of this study is the awareness of Bonnie Cashin’s contribution to modern American fashion design. Despite her significance, publications with respect to her profound influence on American sportswear remain scarce to this day. Although there has been published research on other American designers' work, Cashin, an undeniably important American fashion designer, seems to have been mostly ignored. This study of her contributions aids in revealing the origins of functional and practical American fashion design, as it exists today.

Cashin’s poncho and coat designs were unique and of particular interest to her. The coats were loose and dart-less with squared, kimono or raglan sleeves, as well as pockets deep enough to be functional. Their large size allowed other layers of clothing to fit comfortably underneath. She believed in simplicity, using as few darts and seams as possible. Her ponchos were without shoulder seams and illustrate clearly her two-dimensional approach to design. Patch pockets were added from the inside with only the stitching visible on the outside of the garment. The outline of the pocket became an integrated aspect of the design itself.

Other trademark elements include tweed suits, canvas raincoats, fringed suede dresses, loose-fitting pullover turtlenecks, jumpsuits and ponchos. She used industrial zippers and designed her own hardware, notably the chain link dog leash, toggles and buckles. She often emphasized layering fabric in garments. She selected lush and thick fabrics for her designs, finishing exterior edges with leather or suede bindings. Interior seams were finished with flat-felled seams to eliminate bulk in joining thick fabrics. Vibrantly colored materials were often the focus of the design. Accents like leather or suede trim complemented or matched colors in her fabrics. This affinity for using color creatively became an important characteristic of her designs. The colors she saw in her travels and observed in the environment were stunningly reproduced in her garments.

This research, in conjunction with the findings from examining patterns and design details, gives a complete picture of both the innovation and the execution of Bonnie Cashin’s design work. Cashin’s place in American fashion design history warrants further analysis. The examination of 80 pieces from the University of Cincinnati’s private Bonnie Cashin Collection is a part of the bigger picture of who Bonnie Cashin was and what she represented in the development of American emphasis on casual wear and separates in the 20th century.
Reference:


The Fashion Institute of Technology. 2001. Bonnie Cashion fashion sketch. 29 September. [http://fitny/index/su&material_filter.edu](http://fitny/index/su&material_filter.edu)