"American Fashions for American Women:"
Cultivating Ready-to-Wear Designers, 1910-1920

Jean L. Parsons
Iowa State University

Sara Brubacher
Iowa State University, sbb@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/aeshm_conf

Part of the Advertising and Promotion Management Commons, Fashion Business Commons, Fashion Design Commons, and the Sales and Merchandising Commons

Recommended Citation
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/aeshm_conf/31

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the Apparel, Events and Hospitality Management at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Apparel, Events and Hospitality Management Conference Proceedings and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
"American Fasions for American Women:" Cultivating Ready-to-Wear Designers, 1910-1920

Abstract
The purpose of this essay is to examine the earliest development of an American design presence in the fashion industry and to analyze methods used by the industry to develop and support its own unique creative talents.

Keywords
design, American, ready-to-wear

Disciplines
Advertising and Promotion Management | Fashion Business | Fashion Design | Sales and Merchandising

Comments

This conference proceeding is available at Iowa State University Digital Repository: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/aeshm_conf/31
“American Fashions for American Women:”
Cultivating Ready-to-Wear Designers, 1910-1920

Jean L. Parsons
Sara Brubacher
Iowa State University, Ames, IA, USA

Keywords: design, American, ready-to wear

At the beginning of the 20th century an increasingly complex set of fashion organizations in the women’s ready-to-wear industry began to exert an influence on transmission of fashion ideas. These burgeoning retailing and manufacturing structures recognized a need to both forecast and control fashion change, but found it difficult to predict. In one of the first issues of Women’s Wear, editors endeavored to identify sources of fashion change for industry readers, crediting influential society women, prominent actresses, Parisian dressmakers, and clothing manufacturers (“Mystery,” 1910). But, most U.S. apparel manufacturers were slow to develop their own design talents, and tended to rely on a growing world of style brokers who sold designs for copying. Scholars have rightly identified World War II as the period when American designers began to achieve wide recognition. Nevertheless, the U.S. ready-to-wear industry began to cultivate the idea of American design as early as the 1910s. The purpose of this essay is to examine the earliest development of an American design presence in the fashion industry and to analyze methods used by the industry to develop and support its own unique creative talents.1

For the ready-to-wear industry, the capacity to create unique styles played a role in rapid growth and an ability to reach consumers. Both ready-to-wear and custom-made producers competed for customers who demanded the latest fashion and attached value to a Paris label. One way to develop new styles was through copying of Parisian dressmakers and fashion houses. Some manufacturers and retailers even copied French designer labels to promote sales. The U.S. industry struggled to offer a unique product, even though stylistic differences between originals and adaptations were often slight. They became convinced of the need to create their own styles, yet recognized the continuing influence of Parisian creations. Increasingly strident voices began to demand development of an American style not dependent on Paris. But, without access to the training and the resources of Paris, American designers had to fight for credibility.

Editorials and advertising in trade publications argued the need for original American fashions with cries of patriotism, demands to promote the national economy, and disappointment in “the freakish, tasteless, and audacious Parisian models (“Paris Losing, 1912”). “American
fashions for American women" became the rallying cry, as they cited physical and lifestyle differences between American and French women to convince readers of the need for American created fashions ("American Fashions," 1912). There were also indications that Paris had ceased to be as open to U.S. businesses. These included showing outdated styles, refusal to offer discounts to certain manufacturers, and creation of anti-piracy organizations. Many questioned why U.S. manufacturers, who had adapted Parisian styles all along to fit American tastes, did not originate their own styles ("We are," 1912). There were numerous proposals for ways to support emergent creative talents in the U.S. These included establishment of style libraries and museums for American designers, use of advertising to promote American fashion, a plea for U.S. stores to recognize American design talent, and a call to teach design students independence from Paris. With the unique ability to manufacture large quantities of garments, American producers who sought style distinction slowly began to create original models and to foster fashion designers in the United States. While it would be decades before American designers were truly promoted by the fashion press, the beginning of the slow progress to recognition was initiated in this period.

References
Mystery of the fashions. (1910, August 10). Women's Wear, p. 5.
We are advertising foreign styles while they are copying our own smart women. (1912, October 15). Women's Wear, p. 1.

(Endnotes)
1 We systematically examined the trade and popular press, newspapers, business publications and archival materials.