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THE FABRIC OF YOUR LIFE: HERITAGE



MAISON MCCALL

Revisiting the patterns of interwar couture

It's a beautiful gown, French, of course. The blush silk taffeta robe de style, found in the collection of the Costume Institute New York, sports a large velvet bow and silk tulle vestee. On the panniered skirt, thirty-eight discs, cut from silk lamé and edged with embroidered beadwork, form a pair of shimmering hexagons. The label, stamped Hiver 1924–25 and hand-numbered on the reverse, reads Jeanne Lanvin, Paris. The gown's donor, the Chicago heiress, artist, and collector Loretta Hines Howard, was a young woman of twenty when Madame Lanvin designed it. It even has a name: Colombine. Was this the season's It-dress? Working for *Vogue*, Edward Steichen photographed Carlotta Monterey (an actor who would become Eugene O'Neill's third wife) in the same robe de style. The Palais Galliera holds another example. And in the now-fragile pages of McCall's *Style News*, we find the silent film star Hope Hampton in the same distinctive dress: by early 1925, the Lanvin design was available as a commercial sewing pattern from McCall's.

As our new Twenties begin, the McCall Pattern Company is celebrating its sesquicentennial. Founded in 1870 by James McCall, a Glaswegian tailor and émigré to New York, McCall's is now a 150-year-old veteran of the American sewing industry. Yet despite the recent revivals of interwar style — from Gatsby parties to Gosford Park — McCall's early haute couture heritage is receding from living memory.

In the 1920s and 1930s, decades before *Vogue* launched its famous Paris Originals, McCall's sold patterns from the Paris couture houses. Over the

course of fifteen years, the company produced hundreds of couturier designs, from what can seem like the entire *Chambre Syndicale*. Prior to World War Two, McCall's roster of couturiers included the famous rivals Chanel and Patou; the storied House of Worth; Lanvin, Nina Ricci, and Rochas, maisons that endure to this day; Lucile, who survived the sinking of the Titanic; Chéruit, immortalised in Proust; Wallis Simpson's favourite, Mainbocher; and the singular talents Vionnet, Alix (the future Madame Grès), and the inimitable Schiaparelli.

Betty Williams, the late costume designer who founded the Commercial Pattern Archive, was one of the few authorities on McCall's couture patterns. For her 1995 article, '1920s Couture Patterns and the Home Sewer,' she inquired with the house of Patou about a McCall's design in her collection. Although staff found no record of early business dealings with the company, they agreed her Patou was authentic. (Browse Williams' patterns at copa.apps.uri.edu/.)

In more recent memory, during the postwar Golden Age of Couture, McCall's and *Vogue* inked licensing deals with the great French fashion houses. (Think Dior and Givenchy.) But in the days before licensing, the flourishing couture copying industry worked directly from originals imported from Paris. As Caroline Evans has argued, the seasonal shows were staged less for individual couture clients than for trade buyers, such as McCall's, engaged in the copying business.

Unfortunately for today's collectors, identifying early couture patterns takes some detective work.

Unlike Fanny in *Love in a Cold Climate*, who wants to wear her Schiaparelli jacket inside out to show the label, McCall's was generally disinclined to print couturier names on its pattern envelopes. Unless a design is recognisable on sight, one needs a small archive's worth of ephemera - McCall's magazines, catalogues, and promotional leaflets like the one mentioned above, showing Hope Hampton in Lanvin - to sift the Redferns from the rest.

Couture chez McCall's got off to an inauspicious start. In spring, 1923, the McCall Pattern Company launched its couturier patterns with two dresses by Paul Poiret, by then a fading star of Paris fashion. McCall's promotional materials reproduce a portrait of the former *enfant terrible* and his letter, hand-written in French, to the McCall Building in New York. Just like other McCall's patterns from the earlier 1920s, couture patterns such as Poiret's come in small, now-yellowed envelopes, etched with fashion engravings of doll-like women.

The best interwar fashion has a Deco modernity: Patou's tennis whites, Vionnet's geometric experiments. Art Deco caught up with McCall's in the form of a big redesign, in 1927, involving colour fashion plates. By then, the company had expanded its couture offerings, adding houses that have continued to thrive (Chanel, Lanvin), but also many that have fallen into obscurity, like Drecoll and Molyneux — both of whom dressed Loretta Hines Howard, the late heiress. Old meets new on the Deco cover of the year's winter quarterly, which features a short evening dress by Jean-Charles Worth, the latest successor to the ▶

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8524 SIZE 18
Ladies & Misses' Dinner Dress 65¢



nineteenth-century Father of Haute Couture. But what happens when the authority of Paris meets the DIY ethos? Each McCall pattern came with an instruction sheet that doubled as advertising for the company's transfers for decorative embellishment. For a chic Patou dress with zigzag insets, McCall's suggested adding an embroidered motif mid-bodice or dense sleeve embroidery.

McCall's revamped its look again in the value-conscious 1930s, introducing printed illustrations and fabric recommendations. The new insight into contemporary textiles coincided with the trend for Hollywood glamour. What to wear to an Alpine resort? For winter 1932-33, McCall's suggested a fur-trimmed coat by Vionnet or Lanvin. For the former, with Astrakhan collar and melon sleeves, the suggested materials were woollens, velveteen, and 52-inch fur cloth. For evening, a striped, bias gown by Vera Borea has astonishing cuffs, pleated like cupcake papers. And the pattern diagrams give up their secrets: the twisting seam of a Mainbocher evening dress, or an Alix dinner dress, ideal for silk velvet, the sleeve piece wider than anything.

When the outbreak of war disrupted the French fashion industry, McCall's had already discontinued its couture patterns. The company released its last such design in December, 1937. Yet it leaves a legacy of accessible elegance that could be worn by women of all social classes. The McCall Building is still standing in New York's garment district. It's now home to Stitch, a bar on West 37th Street. Bartender, one Corpse Reviver, please. To true copies, and McCall's 150th. •••**Sarah Sheehan**