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**“LA MODE” AMERICAN: A HISTORY OF THE MODERN
AMERICAN FASHION INDUSTRY (1930s-1950s)**

***O istorie a industriei americane de modă din anii 1930 până în anii
1950***

Abstract: Name a top figure in the American fashion industry. One would think Calvin Klein, Oscar de la Renta, Anne Wintour (despite not being American). Name a top figure in the same industry ninety years ago. Stumped? The modern American style was fashioned beginning in the 1930s by strong women from Claire McCardell to Eleanor Lambert, weak and strong economics, and ever-changing social norms. But most people do not picture the modern American style with these factors. Some do not even know McCardell or Lambert existed. The purpose of this paper is to fill the knowledge gap on the origins of the modern American style and the transfer of full power from the European fashion capital, Paris, to power shared with New York City.

Keywords: twentieth century, Eleanor Lambert, United States, World War II, Great Depression

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Picture this: 1920s America. The country is booming in what they believed to be a post-war period. Prohibition was not stopping anybody from drinking a night away at the speakeasies. Women’s suffrage was finally an amendment. Writers and artists graced the pages of Vogue and Harper’s Bazaar. The New York Times was Wall Street’s bible. Chanel’s Little Black Dress (LBD) arrived in America through Henri Bendel. It was a decade of parties and excess, only to crash on Black Tuesday, 1929. From then on, America shifted from excess to minimal as the Great Depression loomed over the country for over ten years. It was the war, World War II, when America’s economy bounced back. It was during the war, America—second rate to the European fashion capitals—found its voice in the fashion world. No, not just its voice, but it’s brain and heart. The United States became a major player in the fashion world in the 1940s and 1950s through economic busts and booms, changing social norms, and publicist Eleanor Lambert. With these three ingredients, America had found its individual style.

This paper will discuss the origins of America’s modern style, from the Great Depression to the Post-War Boom, Eleanor Lambert’s role in the fashion industry, and the impact made on today’s society.

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1930s: Great Depression

Economic Effect. When one thinks of the Great Depression, they tend to think of one of these things: Black Tuesday, 25 percent peak unemployment rate, and Hooverville. The stock market crash, in hindsight, could have been seen a mile away. The 1920s was a time of historic expansion for the United States. There was mass migration shifts from rural regions to the cities. The country's industrial sector boomed, allowing American cities to become more prosperous. Investors and the general public saw the stock market as a get-rich-quick strategy since prices were rising to unprecedented levels. However, poorly managed monetary and fiscal policies, along with agriculturally destructive phenomena, brought Roaring 20s America to its knees. First economic effect to be discussed: The Federal Reserve.

The Federal Reserve was newly formed. Federal Reserve president Benjamin Strong came out with monetary policies allowing economic expansion through the mid-to-late 1920s. In a 1922 speech made to the Farm Bureau Convention, Strong stated that in order to properly conduct the "business of the nation," monetary policy should "insure [there is] sufficient money and credit available (...) [as well as] maintain the volume of credit and currency" to the point that "volume has any influence upon prices," it could not become "the means for either promoting speculative advances in prices, or of a depression in prices."¹ In 1924 the Fed created some "\$500 million in new credit" leading to a "bank credit expansion of over \$4 billion in less than one year"², and in 1927 the Federal Reserve made "large open market purchases and discount rate reductions" followed by "increases in bank reserves and the money supply."³ Thing is, after this several-year period of continuous expansion something will burst, and Benjamin Strong's death in 1928 did not help. A leaderless Federal Reserve staffed with unknowledgeable governors led to mistakes in response. In response to the beginnings of the crash, the inexperienced Federal Reserve dropped the money supply by 30 percent.⁴ If they had known about the natural business cycle they would have held off due to the natural readjustment of the economy. Nominal Gross National Product (GNP) fell 46 percent, real GNP fell 33 percent, and price levels fell 25 percent after this several-year long period.⁵ These factors led to the infamous bank panics. In 1930 the Federal Reserve owned approximately 8,000 banks; 16,000 more banks were not under the Federal Reserve, operating in an environment to the style of pre-

¹ Lester Vernon Chandler, *Benjamin Strong, Central Banker*, Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 1958, p. 200.

² "What Caused the Great Depression" on *Foundation for Economic Education* website, published 2018, section "The Artificial Boom of the Roaring 20s"; bit.ly/2DPyxc8 (09.03.2019).

³ D. Wheelock, "Monetary Policy in the Great Depression: What the Fed Did, and Why" in *Review* 74.2, 1992, pp. 14-15; bit.ly/31uBbl7 (06.03.2019).

⁴ "What Caused the Great Depression?", section "Hoover's Anti-Adjustment Policies".

⁵ D. Wheelock, "Monetary Policy in the Great Depression: What the Fed Did, and Why", p. 4.

1914 Fed. A major issue with banks in the 1920s and 1930s was the mobilization of bank reserves in crises, which in this period was lacking. Non-Fed correspondent banks outside of the reserve city - called “country banks” - kept only a portion of their reserves in their vaults while the remainder were kept as deposits in correspondent reserve banks, called a “city bank.”⁶ This “reverse pyramid” severely limited country banks in times of crises. If a country banks’ customer panicked due to news related to financial markets or the economy, they will demand withdrawals in mass numbers. The country bank will turn to its city bank partner, which will most likely be experiencing the same situation, and so goes the downward spiral of the bank run.

The first failures occurred in November-December of 1930, with a second series of panics in 1931 before falling into the biggest slump in March 1933, known as the Bank Holiday.⁷ These panics were more region-specific. On November 7th 1930 Bank of Tennessee, a subsidiary of Nashville-based Caldwell & Company, the largest financial conglomerate in the South, got into trouble through “heavy [investment of] securities markets”, losing “substantial sums” following stock price declines.⁸ That led to a chain reaction, jumping to cities such as Louisville and Knoxville. The later panics were related to the correspondent cycles mentioned above. Between 1930 and 1933 approximately 9,000 banks with nearly \$6.8 billion in deposits failed. In 1933 alone there were over 25 percent bank suspensions.⁹ According to B. Bernanke, the bank failures of the 1930s disrupted credit markets, increasing the credit intermediation costs that reduced national output significantly.¹⁰

On the agricultural front, the price of crops dropped. Farmers produced record number of crops during The Great War. By the 1920s America had overproduced crops, thanks in part to new industrial fertilizers, development of tractors, and scientists breeding “hybrid strains of corn” for more efficient farming.¹¹ The agricultural depression lasted from 1921 to 1940. There were actions to attempt to aid the farmers, such as the Hugh-Smith Resolution of 1925. This required the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) to “consider agricultural conditions in settling railroad rates.” There was also the Capper-Volstead Act of 1922 which gave

⁶ G. Richardson, “The Check Is in the Mail: Correspondent Clearing and the Collapse of the Banking System, 1930 to 1933” in *The Journal of Economic History*, 67:3, 2007, pp. 645; 649.

⁷ B. Bernanke, “Nonmonetary Effects of the Financial Crisis in the Propagation of the Great Depression”, *National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) Working Paper Series*, Working Paper No. 1054, 1983, p. 14, nber.org/papers/w1054.pdf.

⁸ G. Richardson, “Banking Panics of 1930-31: November 1930–August 1931” on *Federal Reserve History* website, published 2013, section 5; bit.ly/2FBkvz5 (22.02.2019).

⁹ D. Wheelock, “Monetary Policy in the Great Depression: What the Fed Did, and Why”, p. 4.

¹⁰ B. Bernanke, “Nonmonetary Effects of the Financial Crisis”, p. 27.

¹¹ B. Plumer, “A Brief History of U.S. Corn, in One Chart” on *The Washington Post* website, published 2012, section 4; wapo.st/2TWbklJ (23.02.2019).

“cooperatives legal standing”.¹² Unfortunately, by the early 1930s the prices of crops dropped so low that families found it more profitable to burn off the excess corn in their kitchens than to buy coal. From 1930-1936 things only got worse from the Dust Bowl, caused by severe droughts and poor execution of dryland farming methods. The Dust Bowl not only severely damaged the agriculture but the ecology of the Great Plains and the Canadian plains.

The Great Depression was weakened by President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, a series of programs to help the American economy and population recover. These programs began between 1933 and 1936. Some of these programs included the Emergency Bank Relief Act (March 9th 1933)¹³, the Beer-Wine Revenue Act (March 22nd 1933)¹⁴, the Federal Emergency Relief Act of 1933, the Banking Act of 1933¹⁵, the Public Works of Art Project¹⁶, Securities Act of 1934¹⁷, and the Social Security Act (1935). Beyond the New Deal, Roosevelt continued recovery with laws such as the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938)¹⁸ and the Food Stamps Act (1938).¹⁹ These programs contributed to billions of dollars towards infrastructure projects, aiding the unemployed, getting farmers back on their feet, and standardizing the banking industry to protect consumers and investors. Some of these programs lasted beyond the Roosevelt Administration, still existing today. Some of the programs, especially the Fair Labor Standards Act, will greatly affect the shift in consumer spending demographics in the 1950s.

Social Norms & Style. Prior to World War II women were heavily restricted on fashion sense. Any everyday woman who wore trousers in public were arrested, on the claim they were “masquerading as men.”²⁰ Only women of celebrity status dared to wear trousers and menswear-inspired styles. These rebels included Joan Bennett, Marlene Dietrich, and most

¹² D. M. Spielmaker, “Agriculture in the Classroom” on *Growing a Nation Historical Timeline* website, published 2018; bit.ly/2OLx539 (23.02.2019).

¹³ The Emergency Banking Relief Act Congress’ attempt to stabilize the banking industry during the Bank Holiday.

¹⁴ The Beer-Wine Revenue Act was the first step to repeal the 18th Amendment, popularly known as Prohibition.

¹⁵ The Banking Act of 1933, also known as “Glass-Steagall”, separated commercial and investment banking, and created the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) to insure deposits and prevent bank runs.

¹⁶ The Public Works of Art Project hired unemployed artists to create works of art for parks and public buildings, contributing nearly 16,000 pieces during the program’s life.

¹⁷ The Securities Act of 1934 established the Securities and Exchange Commission, giving them regulatory power over publicly traded corporations.

¹⁸ The Fair Labor Standards Act established minimum wage and overtime pay, along with banning certain types of child labor.

¹⁹ “New Deal Timeline” on *The Living New Deal* website, Department of Geography, University of California Berkeley, published 2015; bit.ly/2WlgDrE (02.03.2019).

²⁰ See M. Bianco, M. Johns, “The Most Daring Thing About Katharine Hepburn? Her Pants” on *Vanity Fair* website, published 2016; bit.ly/2UNHaxj (28.02.2019).

notably, Katherine Hepburn.²¹ Not every Hollywood star agreed. One had outspoken critics such as Constance “Connie” Bennett, Joan Bennett’s sister, who called the androgynous styles “such atrocities.”²²

The New York fashion scene specialized more on the manufacturing side as opposed to the design side. There were fashion companies in the United States, sure. Successful American fashion companies included Lane Bryant and 19th century establishments such as Brooks Brothers (est. 1818) and Abercrombie & Fitch (est. 1892). The United States had plenty of department stores, such as Lord & Taylor (est. 1826), Macy’s (est. 1858), and Nordstrom (est. 1901).²³ However, the high-class department stores housed mainly European fashion house products.

Prior to the 1940s fashion magazines *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar* focused their stories on artists and writers, royalty and socialites. It made sense as the editors were typically of grand family lines and immense fortunes. Think French-born Baron Nicolas de Gunzburg, whose Russian-Jewish family made their fortune in banking and oil, and Daisy Fellowes, heir to the Singer sewing machine fortune, as ringleaders running the show at *Vogue* and *Harper’s*. Yes, there were American trendsetters: Fred Astaire, Joan Crawford, and Carole Lombard. But from where did they receive their inspiration? Europe.

The most famous American designer in the early decades of the twentieth century was from Hollywood: MGM’s chief costume designer Gilbert Adrian. He dressed starlets from Judy Garland to Joan Crawford to Greta Garbo. Some of his most iconic costumes included the gingham dress in “Wizard of Oz” and Joan Crawford’s “signature strong-shouldered silhouette” in “The Women”.²⁴ Like the American trendsetters, he also got most of his inspiration from across the pond.

The 1930s was a time of Hollywood glam and planting the seeds for future designers and innovations. Towards the end of the 1930s Anne Klein was a student at the Traphagen School of Design in New York. In 1934, Bonnie Cashin—a pioneer of American sportswear—moved to New York to work for the Roxy Theater as its costume designer. Three years later she was offered a job at Alder & Alder, staying there until 1943.²⁵ Then, you have

²¹ Hepburn cross-dressed since she was a child, even asking her family to call her Jimmy without necessarily feeling like a boy on the inside. She told Barbara Walters in a 1981 interview that she has “not lived like a woman. [She has] lived like a man”, according to *Ibidem*.

²² D. Calhoun, “Will It Be Trousers for Women” in *Movie Classic (May 1933)* in Library of Congress, Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division archive website, p. 62; bit.ly/2FqCl6w (05.02.2020).

²³ See B. Farfan, “Learn About the Oldest US Retailing Companies Still in Business” on *The Balance Small Business* website, published 2018; bit.ly/2Todfud (26.02.2019).

²⁴ ELLE staff, “Fashion Figure: Gilbert Adrian” on *ELLE* website, published 2019; bit.ly/2FmhJwm (26.02.2019).

²⁵ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Bonnie Cashin | American Designer” on *Encyclopedia Britannica* website, published 2019; bit.ly/2HPxGOz (27.02.2019).

Claire McCardell. In the 1920s Claire McCardell—the creator of American sportswear—studied at Parsons, receiving her certificate in costume design. She worked odd jobs until she met designer Robert Turk. She worked with Turk until his death in 1932. McCardell was asked to finish Robert Turk’s fall fashion line at Townley Frocks after Turk drowned. The collection was not perfect, but it sold in Paris. Not wanting to take inspiration from Europe for her debut collection, McCardell looked to the art world and street fashion.²⁶ In 1938 she created one of her most successful pieces, the Monastic Dress. This dress was an adaptable, bias-cut, almost tent-like outfit that hung loose. To gracefully hug a woman’s waist, the dress was to be paired with a belt.²⁷ Retailer Best & Co. exclusively sold the dress for \$29.95 and “sold out in a day.” Knockoffs were numerous and vast, Townley Frocks’ fight against them briefly shut them down. After restructuring, Townley Frocks gave McCardell what no other American designer held: her name on clothing labels.²⁸ Typically, designer names were on the company’s name or the manufacturer’s name, but never on the clothing labels. For McCardell, this was an acknowledgement to her hard work.

McCardell was an innovator, introducing fixes such as spaghetti straps as well as aspects of menswear into her signature look. She was responsible for the Monastic craze of the late 1930s: a wrinkle-free wool dress with pockets that gave the “ease and pragmatism of men’s clothing” while still “stylish and sophisticated” for social gathering or work. The Monastic offered American women “independence (...) in the form of [a] ready-to-wear dress capable of fitting any body size.”²⁹

McCardell loathed restrictive underpinnings and desired “easy-to-mix separates.” Her use of alternative fabrics—denim, wool jersey, calico—allowed her to experiment with double row top-stitching and metal closures. These bold ideas, so revered in the fashion industry during this time, had their own name: McCardellisms. McCardell was a pioneer, setting the stage for “The American Look.”³⁰ Without McCardell and the other designers of the 1930s, where would have the American fashion industry been during World War II? Certainly not on walking the New York Fashion Week runway,

²⁶ A. Huggins, “Claire McCardell (1905-1958)” on *Archives of Maryland* website, published 2006; bit.ly/2YixBZp (27.02.2019).

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ M. Corey, “Thoroughly Modern McCardell Designer: Frederick Native Claire McCardell Started a Fashion Revolution in the 1930s. Now, Her Legacy Is Being Celebrated in a Book, a Gallery and a Retrospective Show” on *Baltimore Sun* website, published 1998; bit.ly/2CzgSrm (27.02.2019).

²⁹ Originally called the “Nada” dress, McCardell’s design was not part of Townley’s original fall collection. The dress came to the public spotlight after a buyer from retailer Best & Co. saw the dress on McCardell. Townley and Best & Co. signed an exclusive deal for McCardell’s dress. When the dress hit the market in 1938 for the price of \$29.95 the inventory of 100 Nada/Monastic dresses were sold out in a day. See E. E. Dickinson (2018), “A Dress for Everyone” on *The Washington Post* website, published 2018, section 3; wapo.st/2vbwuQZ (05.02.2020).

³⁰ M. Corey, “Thoroughly Modern McCardell Designer”.

or socializing at the first Met Gala, or gracing the International Best Dressed List.

The Early 1940s: Au Revoir Paris, Hello New York

Economic Effect. On September 1st 1939 Europe erupted into World War II when Nazi Germany’s military invaded Poland in the Battle of Westerplatte. In a matter of days countries such as the United Kingdom, France, and the Soviet Union declared war on Nazi Germany. By June 1940 France surrendered to Germany. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill requested that President Franklin Roosevelt supply the British military with planes, weapons, and supplies. The United States remained neutral in the first couple of years of the war. American companies were not on board with shifting to a “Conversion” strategy, which meant manufacturing military supplies as opposed to civilian goods, possibly losing out on market share against competitors who did not convert.³¹

In March 1941 Roosevelt’s Lend-Lease Act was approved, shifting the American economy into a wartime economy. Some sectors of the American economy, such as merchant shipbuilders, mobilized early due to help with funding from government agencies, in this case the U.S. Maritime Commission (USMC). Other industries, such as the auto industry, were not quick to convert. The auto industry did not shift its focus until 1942 after the United States entered World War II because of the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

To pay for the war, Congress passed the Current Tax Payment Act of 1943, which changed the collection of taxes from an after-the-fact lump sum to the “now familiar method of continuous withholdings from paychecks.”³² To prevent resistance to the withholdings, tax payments were “wrapped in patriotism,” emphasizing that the “sacrifice on the home front is a yardstick of [the United States’] determination to win the war.”³³ Another method for the United States to pay for the war was through the famous war bonds. These bonds returned 2.9 percent annual interest over a 10-month maturity and were bought by both civilians and financial institutions. By the end of the war, 85 million Americans had bought war bonds.³⁴

Despite the \$304 billion bill for the war, and as destructive and chaotic as it was, World War II was a miracle for the American economy and as will be discussed later, the fashion industry. The Lend-Lease Act allowed the United States to export approximately \$36.5 billion to its foreign allies between its approval in 1941 and the end of the war in 1945.³⁵ The civilian

³¹ C. Tassava, “The American Economy during World War II” on *EH.Net Encyclopedia* website, published 2008, section 3; bit.ly/2eEFlgi (24.02.2019).

³² C. Tassava, “The American Economy during World War II”, section 8.

³³ C. Twight, “Evolution of Federal Income Tax Withholding The Machinery Of Institutional Change” in *CATO Journal*. 14.3, 1995, p. 39.

³⁴ C. Tassava, “The American Economy during World War II”, section 9.

³⁵ This \$36.5 billion accounted for 15% of the United States’ wartime budget. See M. Seidl,

unemployment rate hovered around 15.7 percent in 1940. In 1944, the civilian unemployment rate dropped to approximately 1.3 percent.³⁶ This increased the number of required Americans to pay taxes from 4 million in 1939 to 43 million in 1945. In 1945, the United States received nearly \$45 billion in taxpayer withholdings, making up approximately 20 percent of the United States' GDP (Gross Domestic Product). By 1946, the 85 million Americans bondholders purchased \$185 billion worth of bonds. The financial institutions held another \$24 billion in bonds and other treasury securities.³⁷

Social Norms & Style. Unlike its European counterparts, the rationing of clothing in the United States fell to the responsibility of the manufacturing companies, not the civilians. Any manufacturer who went against the limitation orders of the War Production Board (WPB) were met with “heavy fines and potential jail time.” These mandates included “no hoods” and “no more than one pocket, inside or out” for blouses, no “tabs on the shoulders” for coats, no manufacturing of skirts like culottes or skating skirts, and “no quilting using more than 300 square inches.”³⁸ Man-made fibers rose as a popularized fabric. Also, women of different classes and regions shifted towards more simplistic silhouettes. The everyday woman had to use their imagination to come up with stylish outfits based on the government mandates, especially for matters such as work.

American civilian restrictions included the limitation of “[three] pairs of footwear per year.”³⁹ Americans were given the “right to purchase a pair of shoes with each valid shoe stamp contained in (...) Ration Book #3.” There were ways to get around the shoe stamp. Sears, Roebuck & Co. allowed the purchase of shoes in exchange for other ration stamps, such as War Ration Stamp No. 17, which was for sugar and coffee. Brands such as Lane Bryant⁴⁰ advertised “Non-Rationed shoes,” which were made from non-leather fabrics and took on the style of wedges. Wedges had become popular during World War II as the soles were made of wood or cork and the upper portion of the

“The Lend-Lease Program, 1941-1945,” on *The Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum* website, published 2020, section “Conclusion”; fdrlibrary.org/lend-lease (05.02.2020).

³⁶ R. Higgs, “Wartime Prosperity? A Reassessment of the U.S. Economy in the 1940s | Robert Higgs” on *The Independent Institute*, “Table 1: Employment and Unemployment, Fiscal Years 1940-1949 (as percent of total [civilian plus military] labor force”, published 1992; bit.ly/2OwatDE (05.02.2020).

³⁷ C. Tassava, “The American Economy during World War II”, section 8.

³⁸ M. Mason, “The Impact of World War II on Women’s Fashion in the United States and Britain”, in *University of Nevada, Las Vegas’ Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers, and Capstones*, published 2011, p. 19; bit.ly/2UUC2MO.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

⁴⁰ Lane Bryant was established in 1904 by Lena Himmelstein Bryant as the first known commercially maternity shop. See “Lena Bryant Malsin” on *Jewish Virtual Library* website, published 2019; bit.ly/2HNTEed.

shoe was made from alternative natural fiber such as hemp.⁴¹

Nylon had become a scarce resource for American women. Before the war, nylon was a fashion trend turned necessity. On May 6th 1940 DuPont—creator and manufacturer of Nylon—declared the day “Nylon Day” where 4 million pairs of stockings hit the department store shelves at “about \$1.15 a pair” and “sold out within two days.”⁴² When the United States entered the war, allied forces used nylon as parachutes, leaving women’s legs exposed. On the black market, one shipment of nylon could go for \$100,000.⁴³ To make up for this lack, women would draw black lines on their back legs and use leg makeup. Working women and younger women went on a completely different direction for alternative nylon: trousers.

As mentioned earlier, only celebrities could play the role of rebels. However, things were different in the 1940s. Men were shipped off to fight, leaving women to work. They embraced the freedoms of working and living independently. Women freely wore trousers as they were more comfortable and practical for the workplace. College students and working women embraced the style of a nicely tailored blouse with a tailored suit. As much as trousers grew in popularity, skirts were still preferred. Skirts were worn around knee length, usually paired with a blouse and square-shouldered jacket. Magazines and manufacturers encouraged women to reuse and refit men’s clothing, so the unused fabric meant for male consumers would not be wasted.

Prior to the 1940s women’s career choices were slim, including but not limited to teachers, maids, and nurses. At the height of World War II, more than 19 million women—including minority women—worked part of the labor force. The defense industries’ female employment rate “grew by 462% from 1940 to 1944.”⁴⁴ It was this environment, full of restrictions and disconnect from the European world, that the “American Look” McCardell set up in the 1930s took on a more substantial role. Ideas flew, creativity flourished, and the catalyst—Eleanor Lambert—will shine the spotlight on American fashion. A spotlight that will remain lit beyond the war and beyond the world today.

Post-War America, late 1940s-1950s: Conform or Create

Economic Effect. In the Post-War world, a larger portion of the United States’ population identified as being part of the middle class. Jobs were plentiful and wages were higher. The Korean War, costing the United

⁴¹ Wedges were not invented in the 1940s, but in 1935 by designer Salvatore Ferragamo. American designers and retail companies simply took the concept in the early 1940s. See M. Mason, “The Impact of World War II”, p. 20; bit.ly/39fjxVf (05.02.2020).

⁴² E. Spivack, “Stocking Series, Part 1: Wartime Rationing and Nylon Riots” on *Smithsonian Magazine* website, published 2012, paragraph 3; bit.ly/2q4KtCC (09.03.2019).

⁴³ *Ibidem*, paragraph 4.

⁴⁴ “Women & World War II” on *Metropolitan State University of Denver Camp Hale* website, section “Women Workers in World War II”, published 2020; bit.ly/31fzBX (10.02.2020).

States \$30 billion⁴⁵, was financed through higher taxes, increasing debt, and money creation. In its peak year in 1952, the war costs took up approximately 4.2 percent of the GDP.⁴⁶ Overall GDP grew during the war because of early abnormal consumption due to fear of shortages. In 1951, the GDP growth rate peaked at 11.4 percent.⁴⁷ Pieces of legislation such as the 1944 Servicemen's Readjustment Act (aka G.I. Bill of Rights) allowed returning soldiers opportunities to receive a college education, unemployment insurance, and housing.⁴⁸ Leaving behind a period of stringent spending on the essentials, consumers—especially young adults—were eager to buy and spend. From 1939 to 1944, the “total payments for wages and salaries (...) more than doubled.”⁴⁹ American consumer spending revolved around domestic and family life. From 1945 to 1949 approximately 20 million refrigerators, 5.5 million stoves, and 21.4 million cars were purchased in the United States.⁵⁰ In the late 1940s-early 1950s American automobile production quadrupled. The average real GDP growth for the decade was 4.25 percent.⁵¹ The unemployment rate in 1953 reached its lowest point since World War II, at 2.3 percent.⁵² This is particularly interesting since gender roles were set back in place after the war. Women were no longer needed to work, and most families were able to live off one income. Though times were great economically, there were women who desired to continue to work in the business world.

Social Norms & Style. Contrary to prior decades, everyone wanted to keep up with the Jones by buying the nicest car and the nicest house in the mass-produced, standardized neighborhoods called the suburbs. In the 1950s, 1.5 million homes were built, up from 142,000 in 1944. Businesses, advertisers, politicians, and magazines pushed forth the idea of the American Dream as a “warm, happy place filled with healthy families and friendly

⁴⁵ \$30 billion in 1953 dollars. In 2019 dollars, the Korean War cost the U.S. approximately \$277 billion.

⁴⁶ S. Daggett, “Costs of Major U.S. Wars” on *Congressional Research Service* website, “Table 1. Military Costs of Major U.S. Wars, 1775-2010”, p. 2, published 2010; bit.ly/2LKBoZd (25.02.2019).

⁴⁷ “Economic Consequences of War on the U.S. Economy”, *Institute for Economics & Peace*, p. 5, published 2011; bit.ly/2HBpWAq (23.02.2019)

⁴⁸ “History and Timeline - Education and Training” on U.S. *Department of Veteran Affairs* website, published 2013; bit.ly/2z25wMF (25.02.2019)

⁴⁹ R. Myers, N. A. Tolles, US Department of Labor, “Income From Wages and Salaries in the Postwar Period: Bulletin of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, No. 845”, written 1945, published on *FRASER Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis* website, section “Summary”; bit.ly/2HeiQ2w (10.02.2020).

⁵⁰ “The Rise of American Consumerism | American Experience | PBS” on *PBS* website, published 2019; to.pbs.org/2rvvKll (24.02.2019).

⁵¹ “Real Gross Domestic Product [GDPC1]”, retrieved from *FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis* website, published 2019; bit.ly/2AGQOLB (24.02.2019).

⁵² “Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey” (Unadj) Unemployment Rate retrieved from the *U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics* website; bit.ly/2hbEN7l (25.02.2019).

neighbors, living (...) with the latest products and appliances.” Television also got into this image, with shows such as “Leave It to Beaver”. These shows offered “family-centered stories of generational quarrels and reconciliation, all sponsored by advertisers eager to tap into the lucrative suburban market.” Politicians linked the rise in suburbia and rise in consumerism to the “health of the republic itself.”⁵³ These factors brought about homogenous lifestyles colored in blind conformity dressed in pencil skirts and accessorized with pearls.

Before the 1950s children were sent off to work to help increase the family income. They would work on the family farm, the local factory, or on the streets selling newspapers. Though there were around 1,600 child labor laws in the late 1800s, it was not until President Roosevelt and the Great Depression that freed children from labor.⁵⁴ With the economic boom in the Post-War period and a set age requirement, teenagers had something no other generation before them had: leisure time. Upon realizing teenagers were the “Luckiest Generation”, holding a “bigger piece of the nation’s economic pie” stuffed with pick-of-the-crop jobs, leisure time, and increased spending power, advertisers and businesses jumped at the opportunity to sell to them.⁵⁵ Seventeen magazine catered to white teenage girls while car manufacturers advertised fast hot rods to teenage boys.

The 1950s also gave the answer to the decade’s counterculture, the Beat Generation. These Beatniks, or Beats, were a group of writers who pondered on and influenced American politics and culture. This group of university student and writers believed the “rampant materialism of their society” as well as “the runaway capitalism” were destructive forces to the “human spirit” and “antithetical to social equality.”⁵⁶ The Beats rejected materialism, experimented with psychedelic drugs and sexual liberation, and celebrated non-conformity.

Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and Jack Kerouac were some of the most prominent founding members, meeting at Columbia University. As the years passed the group expanded geographically and members-wise. They took their ideas and thoughts to places like the “underworld of Times Square”, landing into arrests and stints at Bellevue Hospital; Greenwich Village, living on low rent and gathering poets at local bookstores; and even to San Francisco, falling in love and finding inspiration to write some of the most iconic books of the decade.⁵⁷ Later expansions of the Beatniks included

⁵³ B. Nicolaidis, A. Wiese, “Suburbanization in the United States after 1945” on *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History* website, section “‘Culture Wars’ over the Postwar Suburbs”, published 2017; bit.ly/2UoXcqz (25.02.2019)

⁵⁴ See C. Amack, “Child Labor” on *Kaw Valley Unified School District* website, published 2005; bit.ly/2hANbfs (26.02.2019).

⁵⁵ See B. Cosgrove, “The Luckiest Generation’: LIFE with Teenagers in 1950s America” on *TIME Magazine* website, published 2014; bit.ly/2eXt6No (27.02.2019).

⁵⁶ J. Rahn, “The Beat Generation” on *The Literature Network* website, par. 1, published 2011; bit.ly/2H6XyDH (05.02.2020)

⁵⁷ It was Herbert Huncke who introduced the trio to the depths of Time Square. In Ginsberg’s

artists such as Jackson Pollock and founder of City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco, Lawrence Ferlinghetti. The style of the Beatniks was considered as “non-fashion.” Clothing to the Beatniks, especially in the San Francisco Bay Area, held “minimal importance.” They wore the styles of the time but put in as little effort as possible. Women did not wear jewelry and men did not wear the “business fedoras.” The Beatniks took their style tips from the social labor movements of the 1930s as opposed to the New Look designers of the 1950s.⁵⁸ Their style was absent but to this day, there is something compelling about the style of confidence and spontaneity through personality and intellect as opposed to outfits and materialism.

As much as the 1950s was an economic and artistic boom for the United States, it was also a dark period filled with bigotry and segregation. Segregation ran deep in the country. The Federal Housing Administration “routinely denied low-interest loans to non-whites,” contributing to the “wealth gap between whites and non-whites.” The policies by the Federal Housing Administration enforced “redlining and discrimination in sales, financing, and homeowner’s insurance.” Japanese Americans were confiscated of their wealth during the war so even though they had the right to own property they did not have the financial means to rebuild their life in the Post-War period. African Americans were victims of fraud and “exploitative tenant-sharecropping systems” which kept them “in perpetual debt.” Though the minorities groups were treated harshly, advertisers still targeted minority teenagers through minority focused publications and television shows.⁵⁹

The 1950s can be remembered as leather jackets and poodle skirts. It was actually more than that. Elvis created his brand of “preppy Rockabilly,” presenting to the fashion world and pop culture “biker chic, guyliner and high waisted trousers.” Helen Rose designed one of the most iconic, elegant wedding dresses of all time for American actress-turned-Monaco princess, Grace Kelly. Marilyn Monroe, known for her bombshell movie star glam, wore jeans from “J. C. Penney and the Army surplus store, puffed-sleeved dresses with babyish jokes, [and] skintight sweaters” off the stage. After her divorce from Joe DiMaggio in 1954, family friends Milton Greene—a photographer—and his wife Amy—a former model—noticed Monroe “[walked] around like a slob” with her cheap styles. Amy called on her good friend, Anne Klein, to provide a winter wardrobe to Amy’s nameless friend. She and Milton also called on George Naridello and Norman Norell to create

book, *The Best Minds of My Generation: A Literary History of the Beats*, Ginsberg considers Huncke the originator of the Beats, an almost godfather-esque figure. A. Douglas, “Professor Ginsberg’s Notes on the Beats” on *The New York Times* website, section 8, published 2017; nyti.ms/2S2ECwm (05.02.2020)

⁵⁸ S. Norton, “Fashion and Non-Fashion and the Beat Generation” in *The Great Pattern Review*, p. 1, published 2019; bit.ly/2bbeN96 (01.03.2019).

⁵⁹ See American Anthropological Association, “1945-1950s: Economic Boom, Discrimination” on *msnbc* website, published 2008; nbcnews.to/2ToGn4s (24.02.2019).

Monroe’s “wardrobe from scratch.” Norell’s style for Monroe was “sexy but understated—shirtwaists, mermaid dresses, high-necked sheaths, and nautical flourishes.” The experimental collection resulted in “black sheath and slips, sexy but simple,” making Marilyn Monroe go from “cheap blonde sexpot” to “effortless chic.”⁶⁰

One of the most iconic American designers to come out of the Post-War Period was Anne Klein. Klein “professed never to have seen a European fashion collection”, taking her ideas from the urban and economic trends in the United States during the 1950s.⁶¹ Anne Klein, born Hannah Golofski, married Ben Klein in 1948. In the same year, Klein became the principal designer of Ben’s newly established company, Junior Sophisticates. There, she transformed women’s clothing by offering petite sizes as shorter women’s options were “more in common with children’s wear.” She rid petite women’s style of “buttons, bows, and frills,” taking points from average women’s style, creating a “sleek but elegant” style. She adapted men’s clothing styles for women, the first American designer to do so. Klein responded to the increasing number of women joining the business world, the “expansion of the middle class,” and the popularity of the “informal lifestyle” by introducing “separates.”⁶² Separates allowed women the flexibility to mix and match pants, blouses, skirts, and jackets. Though Klein claimed to never have seen a European collection, she inspired both American and European designers with her innovations in women’s style.

Eleanor Lambert: Style of Self-Expression

As mentioned earlier, France surrendered to Nazi Germany in 1940. With the Nazis occupying Paris, the fashion capital was cut off from the world. Fashion houses like Chanel closed their doors during the war. This left an opportunity for a new region to arise wide open. Enter Eleanor Lambert.

An Indiana-native, Lambert moved to Manhattan in the mid-1920s. She intended on becoming an artist, but once she realized that was not necessarily her strongest skill she went on to represent artists. Lambert worked in an advertising firm in Manhattan as a publicist. She quickly became the “authority of the art world”, representing la crème de la crème of American artists such as Jackson Pollack and Salvador Dali.⁶³

When war broke out in Europe, the “Seventh Avenue’s captains of industry” forecasted a decrease in dress sales. To prevent this, the

⁶⁰ See E. Winder, “The Untold Story of Marilyn Monroe’s Head-to-Toe Fashion Makeover” on *Vogue* website, published 2017; bit.ly/2LOppK6 (24.02.2019).

⁶¹ J. Cummings, “One Min dead; designer was 51; Influential in Styling Casual but Elegant Clothing” from *The New York Times Archives*, section 2, written 1974; nyti.ms/2UqfUJ (05.02.2020).

⁶² “This Week in History” on *Jewish Women’s Archive* website, section “Birth of fashion designer Anne Klein”, published 2020; bit.ly/2tBX6dK (05.02.2020).

⁶³ See E. Skarda, “Eleanor Lambert. All-TIME 100 Fashion Icons” on *Time Magazine* website, published 2021; bit.ly/2WoeYS8 (24.02.2019).

manufacturers worked with the unions to heavily advertise to women, reminding them of their embarrassment for only owning one dress or their patriotic duty to support the American economy. Dress sales soared, but fashion business leaders—"Dorothy Shaver of Lord & Taylor, Adam Gimbel of Saks Fifth Avenue, Andrew Goodman of Bergdorf Goodman, and Henri Bendel"—were not impressed by the lack of taste. They wanted the New York Dress Institute to get more creative, insisting on hiring "publicity sorceress" Eleanor Lambert.⁶⁴

In 1940, Lambert established the International Best Dressed List, which showcased as a "historical record of how we lived as anything else".⁶⁵ Yet, this was not enough. Three years later, halfway into the war, Lambert held the first Press Week to "distract people from not being able to see French fashion."⁶⁶ Note this is not the first fashion show in the United States. Designers have hosted their individual labels in hotels and department stores throughout New York since the early twentieth century. Press Week was the first "coordinated fashion event" to showcase home-grown designers.⁶⁷ Out of 150 journalists invited, it is estimated that only 53 showed up. This, however, did not stop the show from being claimed as a success. *Vogue*, who had spent the last decades covering European fashion, finally gave the American designers the coverage they deserved.

Lambert focused on showcasing American fashion on a global scale during the 1950s. Throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, Lambert brought American fashion to countries such as Brazil, Germany, and even the Soviet Union. In 1959 Lambert assisted in the production of the American National Exhibition, held in Moscow and sponsored by the United States Department of Commerce and State Department.⁶⁸ This exhibition showed off American goods—appliances, automobiles, fashion, and art to name a few. It was meant to ease tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union while also subtly showing off the benefits and prosperity of a capitalist society.

In the 1960s Lambert continued building her American fashion empire. In 1962 she created the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA), one of the most prestigious councils in the United States today. The CFDA endorsed "fashion as an art and expression of culture."⁶⁹ The goal of

⁶⁴ A. Collins, "Amy Fine Collins on Eleanor Lambert | The International Best-Dressed List" on *Vanity Fair* website, section 2, published 2004; bit.ly/2TweqL7 (01.03.2019).

⁶⁵ Months prior to her death, Lambert allowed "four friends at *Vanity Fair*" editors to take over the IBDL, according to A. Collins, "The International Best-Dressed List: A History" on *Vanity Fair* website, published 2015; bit.ly/2Fq2UsC (01.03.2019).

⁶⁶ "A History Of New York Fashion Week" on *The Odyssey Online*, published 2016; bit.ly/2U6wBZg (27.02.2019).

⁶⁷ A. Lebovic, "Friday Essay: How New York Fashion Week Came to Be" on *The Conversation* website, section "Fashion Press Week", published 2016; bit.ly/2Tzirvr (01.03.2019).

⁶⁸ See J. Harbster, "Eleanor Lambert—Empress of Seventh Avenue" on *Inside Adams | Library of Congress* website, published 2012; bit.ly/2CAGnsw (28.02.2019).

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

the CFDA was to have fashion be included in the National Arts Legislation. On October 31st 1963 Lambert testified before the Special Subcommittee on the Arts of Committee on Labor and Public Welfare. In 1965 the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities passed. Lambert was on the “first 26-member National Council of the Arts.”⁷⁰ In 1968 Lambert produced the first fashion show at the White House for Lady Bird Johnson’s “Discover America” exhibition. In the 1970s Lambert helped in raising funds for the Palace of Versailles restoration by producing the Franco-American Fashion Show, notoriously known as “the Battle of Versailles”. Lambert’s resume is both impressive and impactful. She has been the American fashion industry’s guru and cheerleader since day one. If one were to ask who was responsible for the rise of the modern American fashion industry, the answer they would receive is Eleanor Lambert.

La Mode “American”: 80 Years Later

The origins of the modern American fashion industry were rooted in economic and social activities from the 1930s to the 1950s, along with help from publicist Eleanor Lambert. Today, New York is one of the top fashion hubs in the world. Fashion designers and models become on-stage celebrities on the runway, and off-stage influencers on social media. Editor-in-chiefs like Anne Wintour, designers like Tommy Hilfiger, Ralph Lauren, Donna Karen, Kate Spade, and models like Bella Hadid, Cindy Crawford, and Noemi Campbell are household names. Musicians are creating their own fashion empires (Rihanna). Plus-size models are successfully taking the runway (Ashley Graham). Minorities are embracing their heritage on New York Fashion Week (Tracy Reese). Reality TV stars are creating a globally successful makeup line and having a net worth of \$900 million (Kylie Jenner).⁷¹

In 2015, the United States apparel market was valued around \$315 billion. By 2025, the market is forecasted to value at \$385 billion.⁷² Despite the increasing trend in the industry’s market value, it is taking half the time of the American fashion industry building up to be torn down. Compared to ninety years ago, the United States fashion market is much more globalized, offering more options at various price points. The rise of fast fashion—Zara and H&M—have swept the nation’s millennials and Gen-Z consumers away from more traditional stores due to shorter-lived trends, lower price points, and social media pressure to look Insta-worthy. There is the rise of powerhouse Amazon, offering discounted items with top-quality convenience. Let us not forget TJ Maxx, Ross, and outlet mall concepts,

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁷¹ See N. Robehmed, “America’s Wealthiest Celebrities 2018: George Lucas Leads Kylie Jenner, Jay-Z With \$5.4 Billion Net Worth” on *Forbes* website, published 2018; bit.ly/2WhMgSE (04.03.2019).

⁷² See “Global Apparel Market Size 2012-2025” on *Statista* website, published 2019; bit.ly/2hiTySI (03.03.2019).

which offer brand name apparel, accessories and shoes for deep discounts. From a production perspective, most manufacturers have moved operations to countries such as China, India, and Southeast Asia to lower the cost of labor and materials.

These factors have not only changed the definition of the American style that was originally cultivated in the mid-twentieth century, but have caused spiraling trembles to full-on downfalls of establishments, including Henri Bendel (2019), Barneys New York (2019), Nine West (2018), and BCBG Max Azria (2017). US department stores have especially suffered, with bankruptcies and continuous store closures never failing to hit the headlines. Sears barely survived their 2018 bankruptcy. J.C. Penney and Macy's closed hundreds of stores between 2016 and 2017 and will continue to do so. Lord & Taylor announced store closings—including their NYC flagship—in the summer of 2018. Bon-Ton was in the process of liquidating its stores in the summer of 2018 after filing for bankruptcy.

These changes have affected not only the consumers' perspective but also designers' perspective on New York Fashion Week (NYFW), the hurrah of the American fashion world. There is a new praxis in the American fashion kingdom: "do what is right for your brand." The current CFDA chairman, Tom Ford, has skipped out on New York Fashion Week, preferring to hop on a plane for Los Angeles to coincide his show with the Oscars. Tommy Hilfiger preferred an absence at NYFW, choosing to showcase his collection in London. Ralph Lauren, who has not skipped NYFW in over 50 years: absent. Calvin Klein, a "90s powerhouse", is done with runway, period. Yes, big names are dropping like flies. One does wonder, what about the "downtown darlings"?⁷³ Well, they are opting out as well. Designers such as Jeremy Scott (Moschino) and Rosie Assolulin will be showcasing their collections in Paris, the original fashion capital. Why the shift? To put it simply, the crumbling of the American fashion pedestal can be drilled down into two concepts: validation and business.

With fast fashion, rental wardrobe sties, discount shops, and direct-to-consumer mentalities, powerhouse brands and rising stars alike are finding other ways to keep the reputation alive while attracting consumers. NYFW is no longer an exclusive, sacred milestone of luxury status to be achieved. It has become a melting pot of haute couture and casual apparel alike. With crowded audiences and an even more crowded schedule, "it can be nearly impossible to discern...who is making apparel and who is making fashion."⁷⁴ For high-end designers to maintain their haute couture status, they have been returning to Paris for Couture Week. There is also the argument that one does not even need validation from the runway anymore. For example, Ralph Lauren and Alexander Wang are moving their shows to

⁷³ C. Fernandez, "What Happened to New York Fashion?" on *Business of Fashion* website, section 4, published 2020; bit.ly/3bpVafZ (05.02.2020).

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*

later in 2020. Moving beyond NYFW allows them to keep the exclusivity and creative control without the pressures of schedule crowding, competition, and risk of diminishing their brand names. Also, as designers and brands are building a stronger presence online, it provides them the ability to interact with their audience directly. Feedback will come in quicker, allowing more accurate responses and speedier shifts in strategy if necessary.

From a business perspective, decisions are “really made independently on business strategy, timing, [and] opportunities elsewhere”.⁷⁵ Designers shifting focuses to other fashion hubs could mean a desire to expand their brand to other geographical markets, such as Europe. Going back to the Ralph Lauren example, moving a show from NYFW to later in the year provides better timing not only for production, but for marketing as well. Other business reasons are related to cost—marketing materials, material costs, production, salaries, contractors, etc. Finally, as mentioned earlier, having the direct connection with an audience via social media allows for quicker responses and shifts in strategy.

The industry has expanded in so many ways that it is difficult to theorize what Eleanor Lambert and the original designers back in the 1930s would think of the world now. Would they have approved the rise in e-commerce giant Amazon? Would they have approved the fast fashion lifestyle? These major players were innovators. They jumped at opportunities which disrupted the industry. They were savvy, confident and, above all, creative. They were the pioneers to America’s modern fashion industry.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem.*