

A Dress for Everyone

Claire McCardell took on the fashion industry — and revolutionized what women wear



Claire McCardell's experiences in the fashion industry were often frustrating before her big success came. "I'll never be a good designer," she confided to a friend. (Bettmann Archive)

Story by **Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson**

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The legend of how a simple wool dress forever changed American fashion begins, like many good stories, with a dramatic coincidence. It was August 1938. New York City. A little-known designer named Claire McCardell was at work in the Seventh Avenue headquarters of Townley Frocks, a clothing manufacturer. As one press report later described it, McCardell was hurrying across the busy showroom with a carton of coffee when she “nearly knocked down” a buyer from New York retailer Best & Co. who had been perusing Townley’s fall collection.

That day, McCardell was clad in a dress that she had sewn: a red wool shift with no padded shoulders or darts, and no sewn-in waist to structure the body into the idealized hourglass silhouette. Most significantly, at a time when fashion *was* Paris, this dress wasn’t a French

knockoff. In fact, it was as far as you could get from European haute couture.



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A 33-year-old career woman, single and living in Manhattan, McCardell loathed the trendy crinolines that got stuck in revolving doors and the bodices that “laced [women] to breathless,” leaving them unable to “cross the street without help,” as she later wrote in an essay. She envied the ease and pragmatism of men’s clothing, so she cut wrinkle-free wool on the bias, a technique that gives woven textiles a more flowing fit, and she sewed pockets into her dresses because “men are free from the clothes problem — why should I not follow their example?”

At Townley, the buyer was intrigued by what he saw. “Wait a minute,” he

reportedly said of the dress McCardell was wearing. “You didn’t show me that one.” Indeed, the design hadn’t been included in the fall collection that the buyer had just viewed because Townley’s owner, Henry Geiss, believed it wouldn’t sell. Off the body, the yards of unstructured fabric lacked what retailers called “hanger appeal.” But on Claire — with the addition of a belt at the waist — the tent of fabric transformed into a stylish and sophisticated shape.

The buyer didn’t purchase much from Townley’s official fall collection — but he did buy that dress off McCardell’s back in an exclusive deal for the retailer. Best & Co. called her design the “Nada,” which was the store’s own branded line. The industry, however, took to calling it the “Monastic” because it was, according to publicity material at the time, “as simple as a monk’s cassock.”

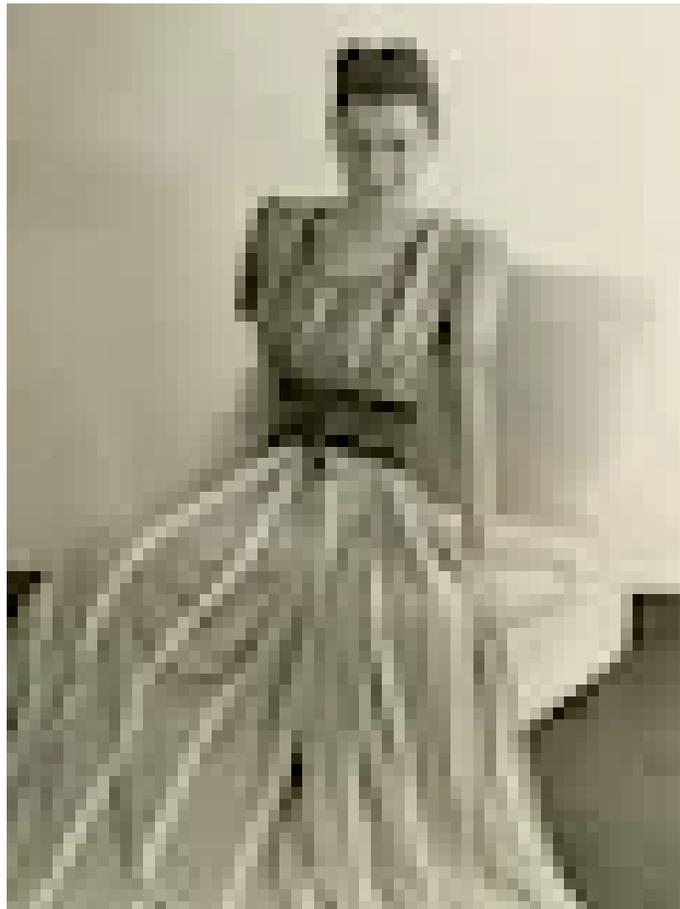
Best took out full-page ads in New York papers. “Once or twice a decade a history-making style appears,” the ad said. “It fits everyone — no alteration is necessary except in length” and “it’s

as appropriate above a typewriter as a tea table.” It is “a dress that women envy, a dress that men admire.”

When the Monastic hit stores 80 years ago this fall, priced at \$29.95, the initial order of 100 sold out in a day. The press raved that it “created more comment and discussion than any dress in years,” causing it to become a best-selling design of 1938. The Monastic offered American women something they’d never had: independence in the form of a washable, ready-to-wear dress capable of fitting any body size.

The dress also helped launch the career of Claire McCardell, who would go on, in the words of Steven Kolb, president and chief executive of the Council of Fashion Designers of America, to become “the defining designer for what American fashion is.” She has inspired designers from Michael Kors to Isaac Mizrahi to Anna Sui. “She modernized the way women dress,” Sui told me. “Her clothes are timeless.”

And yet, fashion is nothing if not reactive. By the late 1940s, designers, many of them men, endeavored to once again lace women into body-punishing, structured clothing, in what amounted to a backlash against the woman-centric look that McCardell had helped pioneer. McCardell's Monastic would become a significant development in a battle that continues to this day — over how women should dress and over who gets the right to dress them.



A model in a short-sleeved variant of the Monastic dress by McCardell, circa 1938. (Courtesy of

Born in May 1905, McCardell grew up in the cloistered town of Frederick, Md. Her father was the bank president, her mother a self-professed Southern belle from Mississippi. McCardell played dress-up and made paper dolls from her mother's castoff issues of Vogue magazine; but it was playing sports with her three younger brothers that led her, as she told Life magazine fashion reporter Sally Kirkland, to conclude that "some clothes, pretty though they may be, just got in the way when one was climbing a tree." Later, during an interview with author Beryl Williams for the 1945 book "Fashion Is Our Business," McCardell wondered "why women's clothes had to be delicate — why they couldn't be practical and sturdy as well as feminine."

McCardell persuaded her protective father to let her go to New York and study fashion at the Parsons School of Design. She marveled at the bustling Garment District, centered along Seventh Avenue, with its crush of

salesmen and workers speaking English, Italian, Yiddish and Russian, and with carts of clothes rattling down the sidewalks. But in the 1920s, the American fashion industry, as we know it, did not fully exist. New York was a manufacturing hub pumping out copies and lesser versions of French designs. Outside of a handful of outliers, there were few known American designers. Manufacturers and retailers preferred that their in-house talent work behind the scenes, and they assiduously kept their names off labels. Some retailers would buy a single haute couture dress from Paris to copy for wealthy customers. Others sent sketchers to the Paris shows to surreptitiously draw the styles for replication. “But a sketcher,” McCardell wrote home to her parents, “isn’t a designer.”

At school, McCardell found a like-minded friend in Mildred Orrick. “Mildred claims she and I are the only modernists in the class,” she wrote her parents. (Modernist painter Georgia O’Keeffe would come to own several McCardell dresses and call her “the best woman designer we’ve ever had”;

Pablo Picasso would later design fabric for McCardell.) They sailed to Paris in 1926 for a year abroad with Parsons, and they entered the city at the height of the Jazz Age. Parisian designers like Coco Chanel had freed women of the corset, but the boxy flapper dresses of the 1920s still hid a woman's figure. McCardell preferred the Grecian, draped elegance of French designer Madeleine Vionnet. Orrick and McCardell pooled their money and bought haute couture from Vionnet during sample sales. McCardell disassembled the pieces, stitch by stitch, to learn how they were made before putting them back together again, "like a little boy with alarm clocks," as a profile of McCardell would later recount.

After a few more months abroad, McCardell understood that "this clothes business certainly is a gamble. The person who can remember the models and sketch them for wholesale houses in the United States can make a fortune." The American buyers, McCardell wrote, "try to get as many sketches as possible" without paying the Parisian houses for the designs.

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As McCardell walked Paris, she wore through the soles of her shoes and was chagrined to discover that the French, while brilliant with clothing, made “terrible” footwear. McCardell learned of a young woman from New York who was manufacturing shoes for American expats in Paris. “She certainly was a smart girl,” McCardell wrote her parents. “She’s the only woman shoe manufacturer in the world.” Perhaps it was then that McCardell understood the power of a market gap and a bold female vision.

Around that time, there were rumblings of change in the American fashion industry. In 1928, a small group of women working in the upper echelons of New York fashion founded the Fashion Group, a powerful

woman-led organization for the promotion of American style on the global stage. They envisioned the industry built on American creative ingenuity. At a time when men ruled fashion, this cadre of women — department store owners, buyers, magazine editors, public relations professionals and designers — would band together to popularize what they called the American Look and put New York, for the first time, on the fashion map, establishing events like New York's seminal Fashion Week.

But when McCardell graduated in 1928, she entered an industry that was still far from friendly to ambitious, creative women. Looking for work during a sweltering New York summer, she lost out on one job because the man doing the hiring, she wrote home, “didn't think I could work like a dog during this hot weather ... and keep my clothes spruced up working from 9 to 5. He wanted someone to look like Park Avenue and work like Mott Street for nothing.” She took on a series of unsatisfying, low-paying jobs, all the while keeping an eye out for a job in

which “I don’t have to do any of this designer stealing.”

In 1929, Emmett Joyce, the owner of a made-to-order salon on Fifth Avenue, hired McCardell to scour New York boutiques for designs he could copy for rich clients. “I hated this,” she later wrote for a speech, “and often came back with collections of my own ideas, which I presented to my boss as rare finds from Bergdorf Goodman.” Joyce fired her after eight months, with the parting shot that she’d never understand design.

McCardell debated returning home to Frederick, but a friend encouraged her to meet with a sportswear designer named Robert Turk. Turk hired her as a general assistant and gave her tasks from modeling to sewing to shopping for buttons. By 1932, he was the lead designer at Townley Frocks, with McCardell at his side. That spring, with the latest collection nearly complete, Turk took a trip over Memorial Day weekend and drowned in a boating accident. Henry Geiss, with little option, turned to McCardell. “She was just a girl,” Bessie Sustersic,

who would remain McCardell's assistant throughout her career, told Sally Kirkland. Sustersic remembered McCardell coming to work wearing a long braid down her back and seeming quite young and vulnerable. "Things looked very black," McCardell later said in a speech about Turk's death, but the men and women in the Townley workroom rallied to her side, and McCardell, grief-stricken, finished the season. At 27 years old, she became Townley's head designer.



McCardell in an undated photograph. (Maryland Historical Society)

McCardell's early tenure at Townley was marked by frequent blowups with Geiss, a man Time magazine once described as "a harassed veteran of Seventh Avenue's fashion campaigns." Geiss wanted her to copy Paris, or at least stick with classic styles.

McCardell resisted. She loathed the popularity of shoulder pads, which were said to give women the illusion of thinner-looking waists. She found them fussy and refused to use them; Geiss ordered them sewn into the clothes anyway. McCardell would sometimes return to her apartment in New York's Murray Hill neighborhood feeling defeated. "I'll never be a good designer," she confided to Orrick, according to one press report.

Nonetheless, she kept making clothes for herself, using a dress form in her apartment that she had purchased.

By 1934, McCardell had wearied of lugging trunks of clothes on her semiannual trips to Paris, so she conceived of five interchangeable pieces of clothing that were easy to pack, and to mix and match. The concept of separates, now a

foundation of American fashion, was ahead of its time. Geiss, who was reported to be “in a constant state of alarm” over his designer’s ideas, risked showing the separates to a few buyers, and they balked. Adolph Klein, who later became a partner at Townley, referred to McCardell’s clothes as “some damned weird stuff.” He once told a reporter: “With these dames you don’t know where they get their inspiration. It may be from the crack in the wall.”

Meanwhile, the New York fashion media was catching on to McCardell’s damned weird stuff. In February 1937, a reporter from Women’s Wear Daily spotted her leaving Grand Central Terminal for a ski trip wearing a long hooded cape over dark trousers. McCardell, Women’s Wear Daily later noted, had “ferretted out in Paris a French peasant’s navy, woolen hooded cape that swept around her ankles” and now she had “brought it home to wear over her ski clothes.” The article marveled at how McCardell “leaps a year or so ahead of the design trend and never hesitates to wear the most extreme costumes she has turned out.”

Two months later, McCardell sailed on the SS Normandie to see the latest fashions in Paris. She stayed at the Ritz hotel at Place Vendome, and she moved about the city clad in a wardrobe that Women's Wear Daily said "reflects her adventurous approach to new ideas." She dressed her lithe 5-foot-7 frame in a confident mix of high and low fashion embellished with minimal but effective accessories. She rarely wore high heels, preferring flats, and she wore little makeup, save a swipe of silvery eye shadow above her hazel eyes.

While the fashion industry gathered in Paris for the new collections, McCardell often went on jaunts to other countries during these trips — mining the museums, the street life and the flea markets of cities for fresh ideas. Perhaps it was during one such excursion that she saw the traditional Algerian dress that would inspire a costume she created for a Beaux Arts Ball later in 1937. Back in New York, McCardell mimicked the style — a tentlike, bias-cut dress that fell straight from the shoulders — using

colorful cotton. She later wrote that she “liked the way the big folds of cloth fell when you put a belt around it,” and after the party McCardell imagined “a simple woolen dress along the same lines with a wide leather belt.” She sewed a version in red slubbed wool — and on an August day the following year, McCardell wore that dress to work.



From left: A plaid dress made and worn by McCardell, circa 1945; an evening gown made and worn by McCardell, circa 1940s; a McCardell dress made of fabric designed by Marc Chagall, circa 1955. (Photos from the Maryland Historical Society)

On a crisp Saturday in October 1938, a writer from *Women’s Wear Daily* went to Fifth Avenue at 35th Street to watch shoppers stroll past Best & Co.’s display, where the Monastic was

featured. “To stand by this window for a few minutes is to get a liberal education in customer reaction to this silhouette,” the article stated. “Women of all ages and sizes like it.”

(There are two competing versions of how the buyer from Best & Co. originally came across the dress. According to a chapter on McCardell written by Sally Kirkland in a book about American designers, McCardell was on vacation when the buyer showed up in August at Townley and, unhappy with the fall collection, asked to see something else. However, the more common version — recounted in a few press stories during her lifetime, as well as in “[Claire McCardell: Redefining Modernism](#),” a 1998 monograph by Nancy Nolf and Kohle Yohannan — is the one in which she accidentally runs into the buyer in the Townley showroom.)

The Monastic came to market at a time when the ready-to-wear industry in America had yet to grasp sizing for the masses. By allowing women to shape the garment to their own body, belting it wherever comfortable,

McCardell, according to April Calahan — curator at New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology library and a co-host of the podcast “Dressed: The History of Fashion” — was “solving a massive problem that existed for the production of ready-to-wear: the problem of fit.”

Henry Geiss was taken off guard by the dress’s remarkable success, and his workroom struggled to keep pace with demand. In the meantime, the Monastic was presold on deposit, “a retail procedure normally reserved for the limited number of expensive copies to be made from an original couture model, but a truly unprecedented response to a thirty dollar, ready-to-wear dress by a relatively unknown American designer,” according to Nolf and Yohannan.

Ready-to-wear had long been derided among the fashion world as ill-equipped to compete with haute couture, but McCardell changed that. “With yards and yards of rough, exquisitely colored fabrics and an untarnished belief in the beauty of a

woman's figure, Miss McCardell has created gowns to make Seventh Avenue sit up," the New York Times raved in an article that fall.

Flush with her success, McCardell asked Geiss to put her name on the Townley label. In the hundreds of articles written about McCardell over her career, she was often depicted as a shy and restrained small-town girl who had miraculously made it in the big city. However, McCardell's personal correspondence and papers, which are housed at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore and the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, show a woman of deep ambition and business acumen who negotiated hard for her vision. Even still, her boss refused the request, believing that designers should work behind the scenes. "Geiss is such a dope," she told her parents. "Think he dislikes all the publicity I'm getting."

Kirkland recalled how one "agitated dress manufacturer" on Seventh Avenue shouted at his staff, "There's a girl up the street making a dress with no back, no front, no waistline, and

my God, no bust darts!”

Manufacturers and retailers began flooding stores with copies of McCardell’s dress. By mid-October, Geiss ran ads in the trade papers demanding that manufacturers stop knocking off the Monastic. “The controversy about my dress is still going on,” McCardell wrote her parents. “It’s been copied by every manufacturer in the country. I seem to have proved to everyone that I did it first but I should have copyrighted the pattern” — a mistake that, as her career unfolded, McCardell would not repeat.

Soon the Monastic was prevalent enough that it was declared an open item. “Geiss has made such a mess of everything at Townley,” McCardell wrote home. The Monastic dress should have made Townley a mint, but the dress that “revolutionized the whole dress industry,” as Geiss described it to Time magazine in 1955, cratered his company. Exhausted from production problems and from fighting counterfeits, Geiss shuttered his business, and McCardell was out of her job.



Claire McCardell shown at work in an undated photograph. (Bettmann Archive)

In 1940, however, Townley revived under a new partnership between Geiss and businessman Adolph Klein, a savvy young salesman from Brooklyn. Klein wanted McCardell back as head designer, against Geiss's objections. McCardell agreed to return with a few conditions.

First, she would have no interference from the sales department. If buyers didn't like the way her clothes looked, then "buy something you do like — no changes." Second, her name would be on the label. When the new line

launched as Claire McCardell Clothes by Townley, she became one of the first American designers to have her name carried on the clothing that she designed. McCardell was asking for — and received — unprecedented creative control.

This time, instead of running from their designer's novel ideas, Townley frankly acknowledged them. "We admit this line is different," the company wrote in a press release to retailers, "but you will admit that your smartest customers often state they are tired of seeing the same old things."

Townley's business boomed. McCardell topped the popularity of the Monastic with designs like her Popover, a wrap-front dress with a built-in matching potholder that retailed for under \$7. Her designs harnessed the power of America's emerging mass-production machine, while also offering women the kinds of clothes they wanted for lives that now included careers as well as families. "Clairvoyant Claire had the subconscious desires of American

women cased to perfection,” Sports Illustrated wrote in 1956 upon giving McCardell its American Sportswear Design Award.

By the early 1940s, World War II had effectively shut down the Paris fashion industry. With America’s entry into the war, meanwhile, came regulations on the use of fashion materials. An article from 1942 featured one male designer bemoaning the cuts as “very drastic” and impossible to live up to. But McCardell believed that it was “rather fun to have a limit.” Her creativity soared even within the rationing: When leather was disallowed for any clothing except ballet slippers, McCardell partnered with Capezio to make the ballet flat — helping to turn this shoe design into a staple of women’s footwear.

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McCardell prefigured today's multifaceted designer-led brands when she expanded her line to include bathing suits and jewelry and sunglasses and wedding dresses and children's attire. "It's so much more fun making all kinds of clothes," she said. The 1940s became the decade of the McCardell woman — clad in casual jersey, wearing wrap dresses or pantsuits with pockets, going braless, maybe, and heelless, and feeling confident in her stylish attire. A young Lauren Bacall, who modeled McCardell's clothes, perhaps best exemplified this new American Look. "The busiest drawing board in the U.S. fashion industry belongs to Claire McCardell," Life magazine reported.

McCardell remained single into her late 30s — on her dresses, she always placed closures within easy reach because "a woman may live alone and

like it, but you may soon come to regret it if you wrench your arm trying to zip a back zipper into place” — but in 1943 she quietly married an architect named Irving Drought Harris. Harris “never approved of her career,” McCardell’s brother Bob later told the Baltimore Sun. “He would have been happy if she gave that up,” he said, but “she was intent on having her career. It was her first love.”

With the war’s end came the return of Paris, and the city was ready to reclaim its title as the center of global fashion. In 1947, Christian Dior presented a hyper-feminized silhouette replete with padded shoulders, tightly cinched waists and towering high heels. Zippers returned to the backs of dresses. Dior said he wanted to “save women from nature,” and he reintroduced the corset. Dubbed the New Look, it was in fact a regression to the old ways of manipulating a woman’s body. Coco Chanel famously said, “Only a man who never was intimate with a woman could design something that uncomfortable.”

The fashion media wondered if American designers would revert to copying now that Paris was back in the mix. When a radio broadcast in 1948 questioned whether designers could keep pace with Dior, McCardell seethed in her personal journal: “Are we returning to the dark ages when American designers were not allowed to think for themselves?”

Dior’s look would come to dominate Hollywood’s silver screen, immortalized by stars like Joan Crawford, but it was McCardell whom Crawford wanted for her daily life. “If there is any way that I could write to Miss Claire McCardell personally I would like to,” Crawford wrote to McCardell’s publicist in 1952. “There are so many of Miss McCardell’s clothes that I want.”

After viewing the Paris shows, Diana Vreeland, the famed editor of Vogue and Harper’s Bazaar, wrote to McCardell: “It is the most curious thing as I look at the French dresses in 1956. I recognize so many of the dresses you made in 1946 and so do

many other people.” Paris, it seemed, was now copying McCardell.

And yet, Parisian designer Jacques Fath had taken aim at American designers, women in particular, when he told a reporter from the New York World-Telegram in 1954 that “fashion is art, art is creative and men are the creators. There’ll come a day when all great designers are men.” McCardell, who had risen to the rank of full partner at Townley by then, replied, in part: “Ah men, they never understand the way clothes feel. Their lines are often harsh and masculine, ... [and] when Chanel gave them soft feminine simplicity, it was Chanel they loved. ... Some day all designers will be women.”

The battle over the female body and how to dress it caught the interest of 34-year-old journalist Betty Friedan. Friedan was already thinking about “the problem that has no name,” which would culminate in her 1963 feminist cri de coeur “The Feminine Mystique.” In 1955, she published a profile on McCardell under the headline “The Gal Who Defied Dior.”

Elizabeth Harris, McCardell's stepdaughter, later told Nolf and Yohannan: "Claire was a feminist long before we had a name for them."

In 1957, at what many believed to be the height of her career, she was diagnosed with colon cancer. Through radiation treatment, and a pain so severe it felt "as though my stomach will fall on the floor at times," as she wrote her parents, McCardell continued to work. Eventually, "she was a skeleton," her stepdaughter said. "She sometimes collapsed at work."

By January 1958, McCardell was hospitalized. She called on her old friend Orrick for a favor. Orrick arrived at the hospital on a cold January day and helped McCardell into a red wool suit. They sneaked by the nurses' station and went to the Pierre hotel, where Townley was holding a media preview of McCardell's new line. McCardell came out on stage at the end, and the audience — composed of many of the editors and writers who had

championed her career in their pages
— rose and gave her a long ovation.



McCardell in an undated photograph. (Maryland Historical Society)

McCardell died in March 1958 at the age of 52. “I can’t tell you how deeply distressed I am,” the Italian designer Emilio Pucci wrote to Klein when he heard the news. “I know that her disappearance has deprived the world of one of its very great designers of all times.”

Six decades later, this past spring, an original Claire McCardell Monastic dress was [on display](#) in New York as a part of the Met and the Costume Institute's exhibition "Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination." Art historian Anne Higonnet gave a lecture at the museum about the legacy of monasticism in fashion. McCardell, she told me, belongs to a lineage of women who aimed for freedom and democracy in their attire. "But even into the 1940s and '50s," she notes, "society was very resistant to what was radical and marvelous about McCardell." Her brilliance was in her deep understanding of how a body truly moves: "McCardell wanted women to feel and to look better."

Over the decades, McCardell's life and clothes have seen numerous revivals and retrospectives at museums, including at the Fashion Institute of Technology and the Maryland Historical Society. Last year, a pair of McCardell's original ballet flats were included in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. McCardell was "a giant of American

culture and of fashion,” says Paola Antonelli, senior curator of the department of architecture and design at MoMA, but “something happened that made us forget her, and I cannot really understand what it was.”

It may be that, as with her Monastic dress, the elegantly pragmatic genius of her work seeped into the culture at large. “Good fashion somehow earns the right to survive,” McCardell believed, and her ideas live on, even if detached from her name. After her death, McCardell’s family elected not to keep the label going. “We decided to let the name die with her,” her brother Adrian McCardell told the Baltimore Sun in 1998. “It wasn’t that difficult. Claire’s ideas were always her own.”

Today, few women reach the heights that McCardell did. Dior’s fashion brand didn’t appoint a woman as creative director until 2016. For Givenchy, founded in 1952, it was 2017. Women spend three times the amount of money on clothes as men, yet they helm only 14 percent of the top womenswear brands. To try to understand the reasons behind this,

CFDA and Glamour magazine conducted a survey within the industry this year called “[The Glass Runway](#).” One hundred percent of the women interviewed believed gender inequity to be rampant in fashion. Eighty years on from the Monastic dress, women are still embroiled in the same battles that McCardell knew all too well.

“It wasn’t me in the clothes, or just wearing them, that interested me,” McCardell said, “it was the clothes in relation to me — how *changed* I felt once in them.” McCardell’s creations contained an alchemy that so many of us still seek: the ability to command the narrative of our own bodies, and to be seen not as mere eye candy but as a person to be reckoned with.

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