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American Sportswear Pioneer Claire McCardell to Be Celebrated in Children's Book, Coloring Book and Bronze Statue

Debra Scala Giokas, a first-time children's book author, aims to introduce children and adults to Claire McCardell.

By [Rosemary Feitelberg](#) on March 31, 2021



📷 Model Betty Bridges in Tijuca, Brazil, wearing a Claire McCardell swimsuit. Photography by Louise Dahl-Wolfe, color proof, featured in Harper's Bazaar, May 1946. Collection of The Museum at FIT,

ESSENTIALIST

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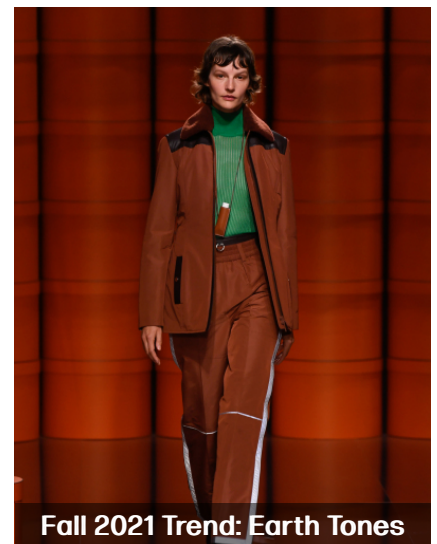
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LATEST GALLERIES

To introduce new generations to the comfort-driven American designer Claire McCardell, a new children's book, a coloring book and a bronze statue in her honor will debut this spring.

McCardell, who died of cancer in 1958 at the age of 52, was credited with pioneering an American look that offered livable clothes, which were extremely adaptable in the modern age. "Wearing clothes comfortably" was her design edict. In a 1944 interview with the designer, WWD described her "instinctive recognition of new trends." Everyday [ballet](#) flats, knit ski hats, hooded jerseys, the modern version of the dirndl skirt and the introduction of the monastic dress (a precursor to the sack dress) were among her fashion creations.

Debra Scala Giokas has written "Claire: The Little Girl Who Climbed to the Top and Changed the Way Women Dress." After taking a class with children's book author Emma Walton Hamilton at Stony Brook Southampton, the Sayville, N.Y., resident looked at 500 picture [books](#) to determine what was missing in the sector. Interested in women's role in American history, Scala Giokas first learned about McCardell through the [Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute's](#) "Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination." Her curiosity was piqued after seeing one of McCardell's monastic dresses on display. After reading articles about the designer and her autobiography, Scala Giokas determined it would be a great story for children and more. "If you're an aspiring fashion designer, you should really know about her. And it's a story about dreaming. She saw a problem — wanting to play in comfortable clothing with pockets like her brothers. She figured out a way when she got older to give us comfortable clothing," she said.





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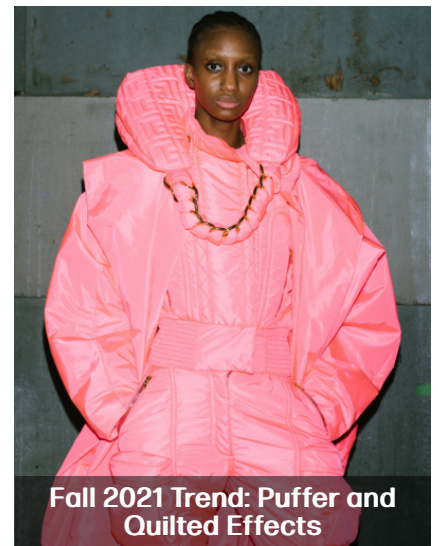
Forward-thinking as she was, McCardell wasn't one to "make any 'I-was-first-with-it' claims about fashion. "She thinks too many elements enter into it, making the order of origination highly debatable." WWD noted in the aforementioned 1944 interview.

The popover dress, railroad stitched denim, the draped bathing suit, string-tied Empire lines and at-home evening separates were among her signatures. The designer was known to combine demureness with the daring through color, texture and fabrics.

More than 300 people from fashion and media circles, including many of the workers who had cut, sewn and finished McCardell's distinctly American designs for Townley Frocks attended a tribute at St. James Church in Manhattan. Her relatively early death short-circuited her fame beyond the fashion industry, according to Scala Giokas, who was intrigued by McCardell's "ahead-of-her-time" designs, problem-solving solutions and athletic interests. "Clothes make you feel better about yourself. You don't have to have a lot of money. That was her message also — casual doesn't mean careless. Now we're in this pandemic, working remotely but we can still have a sense of style even though we're not dressing to the hilt," Scala Giokas said.



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The cover of the Claire McCardell-inspired coloring book. Image courtesy Debra Scala Giokas

After learning about the Frederick Art Club's campaign to create a statue for McCardell in her hometown of Frederick, Md., Scala Giokas reached out to its president Marilyn Bagel, who connected her with artist and fellow FAC member Mary Ryan Reeves. Together they created the coloring book "Claire's Closet" which, like the children's book, is being published by Chandelier Street and is available to preorder. Reeves also illustrated the children's book.

The statue will be unveiled in Frederick on May 24, which would have been the designer's 116th birthday. Sculptor Sarah Hempel Irani is designing the larger-than-life statue. Having raised \$209,000 for the Claire McCardell Project through fundraising, the FAC is now trying to raise \$55,000 for a garden to surround the statue.

The lineage for McCardell's monastic dress was traced back to an Algerian costume that she saw at the Beaux Art Ball in 1938. Her intrigue led to making one with the same loose lines and belting it in with a black leather belt. McCardell gave strict instructions to her team not to show it to customers because they would not want it. She, however, did want one for an

August vacation. And before long Best & Co. did too, naming it a Nada fashion and featuring the dress in its September advertising.

The 1943 Fashion Critics Award winner said she used designs such as a six-piece basic wardrobe for air travel to solve problems. The following year she recognized how the American woman had become more casual and less self-conscious than their European counterparts. McCardell was one of the few American designers at that time who had developed an individualistic style that was untouched by the influence of Paris fashion.

After two years at Hood College, McCardell decamped for Parsons School of Design and then spent a year abroad in Paris before returning to Manhattan. Recalling the designer's college route, Scala Giokas said a key point in the book is that a child can have a dream and can follow that dream. McCardell's first job involved painting lampshades at B. Altman & Co. before venturing into design, but that only lasted for eight months. Before too long she joined Robert Turk in the design department for a two-year run that ended in 1931. McCardell later joined Townley Frocks and exited there in 1938 to join Hattie Carnegie for what would be a two-year stint. She then returned to Townley Frocks as designer and principal.

In addition, through Claire McCardell Enterprises, she broadened her designs to include sunglasses, children's wear, costume jewelry and other categories.

In 1995, three years after buying the Claire McCardell label from her estate, the In Group Ltd. rolled out sportswear with limited success.

As a career marketer in a law firm, Scala Giokas, a member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, worked on her project at 5 a.m. before work and on weekends. The motivation stemmed in part from wanting to share McCardell's story with nonstyle-minded adults, too. Although the children's book is geared for youngsters between the ages of six and 10, adults are increasingly reading children's picture [books](#) to get synopses of people's lives. The collective mourning in the U.S.

following the recent death of “Ramona the Pest” writer Beverly Cleary at the age of 104 was another indicator of the lasting effect of children’s books on adults.

“We have fond memories of those books that we read growing up. So we’re very attached to those writers. Beverly Cleary obviously had an influence. In my case, I read all of the Laura Ingalls Wilder series,” said Scala Giokas, adding that her kindergarten teacher was floored to learn that the author remembers “Charlotte’s Web” and the other books they read in her class. “It’s a wonderful thing to show your kindergarten teacher things that you’re writing now for children.”

For biography buffs and kids, there is a timeline of McCardell’s career and illustrations of her signature looks. There are also paper dolls, something that McCardell played with as a child and what prompted her interest in fashion. “What happens when you’re a child — and this is true for everyone — whatever you love to do, if you tap into that and stick with that joy when you’re older, you’ll have a more fulfilled life,” Scala Giokas said. “That is one of the messages I want to give to kids. ‘Look what she did. She loved it as a kid and she used that love to make people’s lives better.’ [Donna Karan](#) was influenced by her with Seven Easy Pieces.”

claire

**The little girl who climbed to the top
and changed the way women dress**



words by **Debra Scala Giokas**
pictures by **Mary Ryan Reeves**

The cover of the children's picture book that is being published by Chandelier Street. Image courtesy of Debra Scala Giokas

Emphasizing how the nonfashion crowd should learn about McCardell, Scala Giokas said a man, whom she does not know, recently responded to one of her Facebook posts by looking up the designer and determining she was iconic. “Wow. That’s a reaction from an adult who wanted to look her up to see what she did? When he used the word ‘iconic,’ [I thought], ‘That’s right. She’s iconic but she’s not on the shelves [for her clothes].”

She's on the shelves because of her biography. She's out there because of the articles that people write about her. But how would children really hear the name Claire McCardell?"

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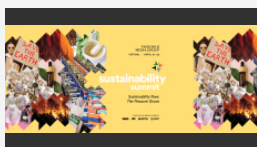
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