

## A Study on the American Women's Dress in the Early 1950s : Using an University Collection Garment

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1950년대 초기의 미국여성복식에 관한 연구  
- 대학소장유물을 이용하여 -

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본 연구의 목적은 두 종류의 다른 연구자료- 유물과 문헌자료를 이용하여 1950년대 초기에 유행하였던 미국여성복식 가운데 쉬스 드레스(sheath dress)의 디자인 특징을 고찰하는 데에 있다. 본 연구의 일차자료로는 하와이 대학교(University of Hawaii)의 The Western Costume Collection에 소장된 1950년대 초기의 복식으로 추측되는 유물과 1950년부터 1955년 사이에 출판된 *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *New York Times Magazine*을 문헌자료로 이용하였다.

연구결과, 1950년대 초기의 미국 여성복 디자인의 특징은 여성의 신체적 특징을 강조하며 여성스러움의 미를 극단적으로 추구하는 쉬스 드레스(sheath dress)의 'the straight and slender look'으로 요약될 수 있었다. 나아가 문헌분석을 통하여 본 연구의 유물자료가 50년대 초기(1950-1954)의 미국여성복식 디자인의 특징을 보여주는 대표적인 이 시기의 복식유물로 그 사용연대가 입증되었다.

본 연구는 지금까지 주로 문헌자료의 분석만으로 한정되어 왔던 한국의 전형적인 서양복식연구에서 한 걸음 나아가 과거에 실제로 입혀졌던 복식에 대한 이해를 확장하기 위한 또 하나의 연구방법으로 문헌분석과 유물분석(object study)을 병행하여 시도해 보았다는 데에 그 의의가 있다.

KEY WORDS : object study, 1950's, American women's costume :  
유물연구, 1950년대, 미국여성복식

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## I. Introduction

We often characterize the nineteen-fifties socially as a period of conventionality and efficiency. This social atmosphere of the Fifties is explained well in the phrase describing clothing styles of "the man in the gray flannel suit and the women in the simple, efficient, black cocktail sheath with a string of pearls"(Russell, 1983, p.448). To make an inquiry into the design traits of this period, the previous studies often employed documentary sources, mostly fashion magazines. However, combining the study of an extant garment with study of documentary materials can expand and deepen the scope of study on the aspect of what was actually worn. Moreover, use of actual garments allows to get a detailed information especially on fabrication and construction of the garment, while use of printed sources offer larger dated samples, sometimes with descriptions. Although, the studies on the history of western costume done in Korea have used only printed materials as primary research sources. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to verify the date of the collection object and to examine the design characteristics of American women's dress in the early Fifties using two different primary sources- a garment object from a university collection and printed sources.

A garment object used for this investigation was selected from the Western and Hawaiian Costume Collections in the University of Hawaii. Selecting an appropriate garment from a collection is crucial to a study of fashion styles of particular period. The garment object representing the American women's dresses of the period was selected by the author among a group of collection garments with similar characteristics of design, fabric, and construction. The selected garment object was documented as a next step of the study using object worksheet developed by the author. Only the approximate date

of the garment was obtained from the information given by the collection file. The donor information was not provided in the file. Therefore, it was attempted to verify the date of the garment object using photographs and descriptions found in documentary sources. The periodicals used as primary sources included the *New York Times Magazine*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Vogue*, all issues published in the United States from 1950 to 1955. The secondary sources obtained from the literatures in historic costume study were used to support the findings of the study.

## II. Fashion of the post-World War II

The period of development in trade and industry began following the post-war reconstruction era. People could afford more for consumer goods due to the considerable increase in their spending power. The economy was booming, wages rose, the market for fashion-conscious clothes also grew at all price levels(Bond, 1981, p.181). Although prices of goods were increased, the American's standards of living were also risen. This change affected the social patterns of people, in which they went back to the traditional roles and dress styles.

Melinkoff(1984, p.244) observed that this was the era when families moved to the suburbs and bought their first television. The popularity of television as a form of entertainment opened the fashion world to its viewers. What people were wearing was seen with an intensity and an immediacy. People also relied on fashion magazines for guidance. An increased amount of advertisements were carried in Women's magazines for many different kinds of goods including clothes. American women wanted to emulate the glamorous dresses of the stars appeared in these mass media.

In addition to media, French designers had a considerable influence on what people wore during this period. The shifting lifestyles of the years after the

war in Europe were reflected upon the fashion of the Fifties as mentioned by Laver(1988, p.260), "The mood in Paris in the Fifties was sophisticated: women had to look as if they had spent time themselves look perfectly groomed, 'Beauty' became a subject of much importance now that wartime cosmetic shortages were over". Dior and Balenciaga were the most influential designers. They set a high standard of taste and style in fashion and the cut, fit and line were the important features of dress designs(Bond, 1981, 182). Dior presented the New Look in the spring of 1947, which was characterized by a shaped bodice with rounded shoulders, corseted waist and a long full skirt. The wartime style- with its skirt length fixed just below the knee, its silhouette lines accentuating neither the hips nor the bust, its padded shoulders, all dating from 1939- disappeared after the New Look introduced. Charles-Roux(1981, p.229) described this

historic event of fashion world as: "English-speaking press immediately dubbed the 'New Look', signifying the 'womanly women'(*femme-femme*), a look launched by Christian Dior in an atmosphere of excitement and enthusiasm." This new style was soon repeated and developed by other designers to emerge into the post-war fashion world(Batterberry, 1982, p.348).

In short, the styles of American women's dress in this period projected the image of feminine elegance depicted in the extravagant style of the New Look recapturing the glamour of the previous era.

### III. Description of the Selected Collection Garment

The selected collection garment was investigated according to the object worksheet as shown in the Table 1. The illustration of the object garment used

Table 1. Object Worksheet

Object Worksheet	
<b>Object Number :</b> <i>W.80.1.18a/b</i>	
<b>Dimensions/Estimated Size of Wearer :</b>	
<i>Dress: 37.75 inches long</i>	<i>Jacket: 15.75 inches long</i>
<b>Fabrication :</b>	
<b>color :</b> <i>golden yellow</i>	
<b>predominant materials :</b> <i>brocaded acetate</i>	
<b>trim materials and location :</b> <i>none</i>	
<b>other applied decoration (embroidery, for example)</b>	
<i>bow sewn on center back waist</i>	
<b>outstanding or unusual details :</b>	
<i>none</i>	
<b>History :</b>	
<b>labels or other identification :</b>	
<i>"PECK &amp; PECK : FIFTH AVENUE NEW YORK"</i>	
<i>"100% acetate, exclusive of ornamentation"</i>	
<b>evidence of wear :</b>	
<i>slight tear of threads at the back pleat</i>	
<b>evidence of alteration or restyling :</b>	
<i>none, original form</i>	

for this study was depicted in the Fig. 1. The illustration, instead of the picture, of the object garment was included in this study because the photograph did not capture the design details.

The garment selected for this study was a two-piece dress manufactured by the company named, "Peck and Peck: Fifth Avenue New York". The garment consists of a sheath dress and a short jacket. The fabric used for the garment was 100% brocaded acetate. The color of the fabric was yellow with gold brocaded patterns. This sheath dress measured at 37.75 inches long. It has a low and round neckline and sleeves which extend slightly from shoulders. This dress had a zippered back with a bow sewn at the center-back waist. There was also a pleat at the back of the dress's skirt. The short jacket was of the same fabric as the dress and measured at 15.75 inches long. It had a small and rolled collar and sleeves that were about three-quarter length. There were also simulated pockets on both sides of the jacket's front.

#### IV. Design Characteristics of the Collection Garment

The result of the study is summarized in the Table 2. The collection garment consists of a sheath dress and a matching short jacket, a typical style of the early

Fifties. According to Tranquillo(1984, p.136)'s definition, sheath dress was "a dress with fitted darts at waist, fashionable in the 1950s". And the similar explanation was stated by Lessing(1963, p.112) on the design traits of sheath dress- a tight-fitting bodice and short sleeves cut in one and of extended shoulder length, a narrow waist and a straight skirt of about mid-calf length. She also remarked on the date of sheath dress as in the Fifties. Thus, the design characteristics of the collection garment was analyzed with design elements characterizing sheath dress style in this period.

##### 1. Form

###### 1) The bodice of the sheath dress

The bodice of the collection garment showed a simple and fitted silhouette with brief sleeves which extended slightly from shoulders and low, round necklines. The low and round neckline was one of the popular types seen in this period. The sheath dresses appeared in *Vogue*(Fig. 2-a) and *Harper's Bazaar* (Fig. 2-b) also had designs very similar to the collection garment in terms of sleeve and neckline designs. Different types of waist attachment such as belt or sash must have been used with the original collection garment, since the waist seam was found in

Table 2. Design Characteristics of the Collection Garment

Silhouette	sheath	
Form	dress	tight fitting bodice extended-shoulder-length sleeves round neckline straight skirt
	jacket	of matching fabric. short bolero style (rib-length). small flat round collar. three-quarter length tight sleeve
Detail	simulated pockets on matching jacket a kick pleat on bottom of skirt	
Fabric	acetate brocade with gold floral pattern	
Color	bright yellow	

the collection garment. However, sheath dresses were also often designed without waist attachments as Tranquillo (1984, p.136) pointed.

## 2) The skirt of the sheath dress

The collection garment had a 'straight' skirt- a fitted and slim skirt. This type of skirt was also called a sheath or tapered skirt according to Tranquillo (1984, p.42). During the Fifties, two different styles of skirts were usually shown (Fig. 3). One type of the skirts were sheaths as seen in the collection garment. And the other type was regular full skirts, gored or gathered, as seen in the dress on the left in Fig. 3.

The skirt of the collection garment was a mid-calf length. The popular hemline of the skirt came at mid-calf in this period (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4). The skirt length was lowered from the knee length (during the war) to the below mid-calf length, about twelve inches from the floor, after the New Look introduced in 1947 (Bigelow, 1979, p.257), and then it was raised again to the mid-calf length in the early Fifties.

The collection garment showed a decorative kick pleat at the back of the dress's skirt. Sheath skirts in this period usually had a deep pleat or double pleats in the back to give stepping or walking width. Melinkoff (1984, p.246) noted that sheaths were easiest to walk in when the hemline ended close to the knees with a kick pleat halfway up the thigh. This kind of pleat was real and functioning so women could actually stride. However, with straight skirts that ended at mid-calf, a kick pleat was strictly decorative when the top of the pleat ended at knee level.

## 3) The matching jacket

Sheath dresses of this period were usually worn with a short jacket, often called, 'a bolero'. The advertisement in *Harper's Bazaar* (March 1954) characterized the year of 1954 as "the year for jacketed sheaths" (Fig. 4-b). The collection garment also came with a matching jacket. The length of this

jacket was short, about a couple of inches above the waistline. This style was described as a "rib-length", or "cropped short above midriff" as shown in Fig. 2-a. Most of these short jackets have small collars and short tight sleeves, and this matches closely to the jacket of the collection garment which had small flat round collar and three-quarter length tight sleeves.

The usefulness of the sheath dress with matching jacket for various occasions was also pointed out in the advertisement appeared in the *Harper's Bazaar* (January 1954) (Fig. 4-a) showing a sheath dress with and without a short jacket. The description reads, "you'll be smarter 2 ways, on a breakfast-through-dinner schedule". The similar advertisement was found in the *New York Times Magazine* (May 2, 1954) describing a sheath dress with matching jacket for town-wear and without it for country-wear and in *Vogue* (September 15, 1953) to have "a change-about clause which enables it to play more than one role in a wardrobe". The dress could be a town wear when it was worn with a jacket and it became an evening costume without it, especially with brief sleeves and a low neckline. This was also noted by O'Donnol (1982, p.228) that sheath dresses were considered to be appropriate as short formal dresses. Especially, a strapless sheath in satin or brocade with a matching jacket was known to be popular as a theatre suit.

## 2. Decorative details

The application of simulated pockets was shown on the jacket fronts of the collection garment. The similar approach was also found in the sheath dress with its own jacket cropped above the midriff in *Harper's Bazaar* (February 1954), though, in different position, located high along the seam of the dart. Except this decorative pockets, no other decorative details were observed in the collection garment. It seemed that the simple style was an important design point of the sheath dresses of this period.



Fig. 1. Illustration of the collection garment



2-a



2-b

Fig. 2. Black sheath dresses

(a: *Vogue*, March 15, 1954, p.57; b: *Harper's Bazaar*, November 1954, p.72)



Fig. 3. Brocade dresses (*Vogue*, November 15, 1953, p.129)



4-a



4-b

Fig. 4. Sheath dresses with its own jackets  
(a: *Harper's Bazaar*, January 1954, p.45; b: *Harper's Bazaar*, March 1954, p.112)

### 3. Fabrics

The fabric used for the collection garment was 100% brocaded acetate similar to the garments in Fig. 3, which shows the examples of acetate and brocade fabric used to make sheath dresses. The dress in the middle shows a sheath dress made of brocaded cotton damask and the one on the right of black acetate fabric. Black, et. al.(Black, Garland, and Kennett, 1980, p.157) noted that dresses and jackets in the same satin or brocade were popular in this period, particularly for a formal attire. Therefore it can be speculated that the collection garment studied was worn for formal occasions.

As Bigelow(1979, p.257) pointed out, the development in new fabrics of synthetic fibers and fabrics with special weaves contributed to the designs of the Fifties women's dresses. Sheath dresses with simple straight silhouette were made interesting by using wide variety of textured fabrics. The use of rich and luxurious fabrics was popular in this period and this was noted in the *New York Times Magazine*(May 9, 1954): "Heavy, stiff brocades woven of gold and silver intermixed, which would certainly have been reserved for the world's richest heiress or an old-style Maharajah's favorite if they were not made in acetate, are suddenly transforming every American woman into a duchess".

### 4. Accessories

Luxurious accessories must have been worn with the collection garment since this was also very important feature of dressing-up in this period. Most of sheath dresses were shown with small flat hats of lace and feather decorations on top of simple and short hair-styles for both daytime and evening. Fig. 2-b and Fig. 4 show another important accessory used with sheath dresses, gloves, in different lengths. They were often accompanied to complete the whole

wardrobe with rather short sleeves of typical sheath dresses(extended-shoulder length) and matching jackets (three-quarter length).

## V. The Evolution of the Sheath Style in the Fifties

The fit and line were the most important features of women's dress designs in the Fifties. This was influenced by some high fashion designers in Paris who set a high standard of style in the world of fashion. The feminine silhouette created by Dior in the New Look displayed a softness and elegance that had been lost during the war years. The line created by the New Look made the transition to the sheath dresses of the early Fifties from the wartime styles, the military look. According to Contini(1965, p.308), the New Look was a deliberate attempt to break away from women's short-skirted, tubular appearance and from square, padded shoulders after the war.

The New Look was gradually modified to a sheath dress with a more slender outline and a slightly shorter skirt in the early Fifties. In 1952 and 53, Dior promoted sheath dresses, displaying tightly fitted body without any rounded or protruding parts. These sheath dresses molded body from the narrow hemline showing womanly figure. As Bond(1981) remarked, these sheath dresses became a surprisingly popular style for a few years in the early Fifties.

By the mid-nineteen fifties, there was a movement away from this ladylike image as Dior launched 'H-line' look- an efficient, short-skirted, tubular dress with a relatively low waist and a straight long-torso jacket. In the same year, Balenciaga, another influential designer of the decade, presented a semi-fitted look with jackets still darted in front, but not too tight, and the jacket back was straight. The styles of skirts were also straight.

Later on, 'A-line' was followed showing no defined



waist and the dress spread from the neck to above the knee. The feminine ideal in the late Fifties was eventually changed to a 20th-century ideal style- the slim and natural line that is somewhat similar to the Twenties.

## VI. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to verify the date of the collection garment and to examine the design characteristics of women's dress in the early Fifties using combined research sources- a university collection garment and documentary materials. It was verified that the design of the collection garment- a sheath dress with a *tight-fitting bodice and a matching jacket*, a narrow waist and a straight skirt of about mid-calf length- was popular in the early Fifties, probably between 1952 and 1954. The style of the collection garment conforms the descriptions on the sheath dress styles by some costume historians, as well as the sheath dresses illustrated in the fashion magazines, *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, of the same period. Therefore, it can be concluded that the collection garment showed the typical style of American women's dress in the early Fifties- 'the straight and slender style'.

The fitted sheath dress of the collection garment displayed a waist seam, which leads to the speculation of possible existence of belt or sash attached in the original garment since most of the sheaths appeared in the printed sources had a narrow belt buckled in front of elaborate fabric at the waist. The matching jacket of the collection garment depicted a popular style of the period as shown in the fashion periodical- cropped short above the midriff with sleeves three-quarter length. Furthermore, the frequent appearance of *textured fabrics* such as brocade was also observed in the collection garment as well as in the printed sources studied.

Fashion image of the early Fifties' women can be characterized as mature, womanly, and sophisticated. This image was represented in the designs of women's dress by the cut and fit of sheath dresses with simple styling. Moreover, the fashions of this period reaffirmed the ultra-feminine styles with accentuated figures depicting well-groomed images. They looked elegant and ladylike especially for the women with well-shaped figures as shown in the line of the New Look presented by Dior. The result of this study helped to speculate the possible transition of the New Look from the military style during the war and finally to the feminine style of the early Fifties. This transition process can be explained with the New Look style modified gradually to a sheath dress with a more slender outline and a slightly shorter skirt. This sheath style gained popularity for a few years in the early Fifties until Dior introduced the 'H-line' in 1954. Eventually, by the mid-Fifties, this mature and womanly sheath style was changed to a youthful style, a more efficient and natural style, reflecting the social atmosphere emphasizing youth culture.

As a conclusion, the collection garment studied in this paper showed the representative style of the American women's dresses in the early Fifties. More specifically, it could have been popular during the years of 1952 through 1954. The evidence which allowed to form this theory regarding the date of the collection garment were derived from both primary and secondary sources. The secondary sources, the costume history books, enabled to narrow down the time span of the garment explaining the design traits of this particular period. The primary sources, the fashion magazines, supported the judgements by providing pictures and descriptions similar to the collection garment, another primary source.

In historic costume studies, researchers have used various sources including documents and actual objects, depending on the availability and the research

topic. This study combined the object study using a collection garment with an analysis of documentary materials. This combined research method offered more information and better understanding of the design characteristics of the women's dress by studying the actual garment that was worn in the early Fifties. This exploratory qualitative study provided a basis for developing an effective research method combining variety of sources available for costume study.

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