



Patenting Fashion: Examining the design work of Marion McCoy, 1938 – 1944

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Patents offer significant information for researchers, and can provide insights into the history of object design. Fashion designers have also sought protection from copying through patents, and while designers filed for apparel patents intermittently throughout the twentieth century, for a short period of time between 1937 and 1944, the number of garments patented increased dramatically. Many of the designers that filed these patents did so under their own name and not that of the company. Because their names were generally not on the label, a study of the patents can offer glimpses of these often unknown ready-to-wear designers, and allow their work to be uncovered. It can also offer glimpses into a single designer's overall style and a fuller picture of seasonal lines, much of which does not survive other than as individual pieces in historic collections.

This research, conducted as part of an undergraduate research grant, focused on one designer, Marion McCoy (1912-1960), who began her career in the St. Louis junior market. She worked as head designer for Carlye Originations from the company's formation in 1938 until 1944. During that time she filed 96 dress patents. The purpose of this study was to analyze McCoy's patents to understand her overall design style, to develop a system to evaluate the design details, and to analyze changes in the designs before and during World War II. To organize the study, a database was created to break down the components of the designs into quantifiable elements. These included sleeve style, waist placement, shirt and skirt fullness,

neckline shape and surface designs. The percentage of dresses with each element was then calculated. Typical elements of McCoy's designs included full skirts (66%), button closures (80%), crew necklines (60%), and patch pockets (11%). There was a visible shift in design details from before the war to during the war, marking the designer's adjustment to the L-85 regulations. Marion McCoy's most distinctive design detail was applique. Just over one-third (36%) of her patented designs were created with appliqués, including flowers, leaves, umbrellas, and lobsters (See Figure 1). She also frequently used trims that radiate out from the neckline. McCoy generally filed her patents in groups. The largest was a group of fourteen filed on July 31 and August 4, 1943, presumably for the Fall season, as several have been found in store advertisements. This large group of patents reveals a portion of McCoy's body of work for one season and includes all the most common elements of her designs. This study offers insight into many as yet not fully researched areas of the ready-to-wear industry and as well as a look at how one designer created her lines, as she recycled themes and details.

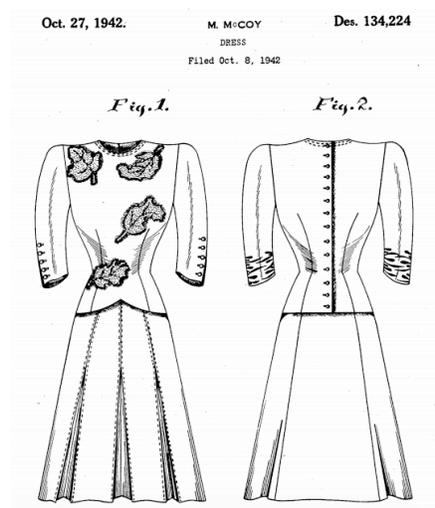


Figure 1: McCoy patent with leaf appliqués and narrower skirt.