

KLEIBACKER . . . background, philosophy, bias-cut designer

Hailed by fashion authorities for his individuality and fine workmanship, New York designer Charles Kleibacker was known as "the master of the bias", the cut he considers the most flattering for the female figure. Because of this fondness for the bias and his superb execution of it, Kleibacker was frequently compared to Vionnet, the Paris designer of the 1930's. He considers this a great compliment. "Vionnet was, for me, the very special designer of all time."

In the late 1960s, praise for Kleibacker had come from Norman Norell, the recognized dean of designers in this country. Norell had called him one of a dozen American designers "with their own creative looks."

Kleibacker began his career in still another field – journalism. He attended St. Bernard College near Cullman, Alabama (his hometown) for two years and then graduated, second in a class of 600, from the University of Notre Dame. With an A.B. in Journalism, he became a reporter for the Birmingham (Alabama) News.

His next job was for the famed Bernice Fitz-Gibbon, writing advertising copy for Gimbels, New York. In her book, *"Macy's, Gimbels and Me,"* Miss Fitz-Gibbon called Kleibacker "intelligent, industrious, dependable." At first, he wrote copy for automobile tires, garden accessories and the like. When a fashion copy-writing job suddenly became vacant, Miss Fitz-Gibbon chose him to fill it. "He was horrified. We talked him into it," Miss Fitz-Gibbon recalled. As a designer, Kleibacker is ranked by Miss Fitz-Gibbon "right up there next to Norman Norell, maybe alongside Norell," she wrote. While at Gimbels, Kleibacker spent evenings doing graduate work in retailing at New York University. After three years, he took a similar job, writing advertising copy and promotion for De Pinna, a Fifth Avenue specialty store.

Kleibacker worked next for Anna Sosenko, the then partner-manager to singer Hildegarde. His interest shifted to fashion after numerous visits to the house of Dior in Paris (Hildegarde being an important client) on one of the Hildegarde-Sosenko tours. He realized that the women's dress business had always been his first love. (His family owned a department store in Cullman. He had literally been brought up in the women's ready-to-wear department).

Returning to this country, he and two partners opened a women's custom and limited edition ready-to-wear business on New York's East 60th Street. He found the "going rough," but eventually his designs were sold through Hattie Carnegie, Bergdorf-Goodman, Bonwit Teller, Neiman-Marcus and were worn by such celebrities as the late Gertrude Lawrence, Lady Iris Mountbatten and socialites Zita Davidson and Mrs. L. V. Dodge.

In 1955 he closed the business and went to Paris, where he worked as designer for three years for Antonio Castillo in the house of Lanvin. He found this "a great experience . . . a design-intensity in engineering for which I would not take anything." He admires Paris designers. Grès, a favorite, did "beautiful, lyrical, lilting, soft body clothes."

For the next two years he designed for Seventh Avenue's Nettie Rosenstein. Then he opened his own business in New York in 1960. His designs were more often than not on the bias, soft body shapes in silk or wool with a couture character derived from his Paris experience. The clothes were painstakingly made, individually cut and supervised by him in his studio in the Hotel Park Royal on New York's West 73rd Street. The designs sold for \$1,200 to \$3,500. Kleibacker believed in simplicity, fit and comfort . . . "in engineering the garment to a person's anatomy." His designs were dramatic in look, but never flamboyant in silhouette or color. He never chose bold patterns; colors were more often than not in the neutral range. He believed he designed for the woman "who is very sure of herself. She wanted a dress as a background for her, her jewelry. She didn't want a knock-them-dead dress." For 26 years the Kleibacker label had an important following at Bergdorf-Goodman, Henri Bendel, Martha, Nan Duskin, Bonwit Teller.

The Kleibacker label was bought by Diahann Carroll, Mrs. Nelson Rockefeller, Mrs. Richard Nixon (when she was the First Lady), Hildegarde, Mary Travers, Jane Pickens Hoving, Regina Resnik, Mrs. Rebekah Harkness, Mrs. Irving Berlin, Mrs. Alfred Drake, Alicia Markova, among others.

KLEIBACKER . . . showman, lecturer, collector

In more recent years, Kleibacker had conquered another field – that of lecturer/showman, having assembled a collection of beautiful historic clothing, from the 1870's on. Kleibacker narrated two fascinating programs: "*Trends: Then and Now*" or "*Designs Worn by Famous People.*"

"*Trends: Then*" was a light-hearted fashion-history lesson that starred (always on live models) the work of such designers as Dior, Courrèges, Clare Potter, Valentina, Balenciaga, Adrian, Irene, Mainbocher, Lanvin, Chanel, Ceil Chapman, Trigère, Norell. The "*Trends: Now*" section of the show highlighted timeless clothes from Kleibacker-designed couture collections . . . or, depending upon the locale variable, current clothes from stores.

"*Designs Worn by Famous People*" was a dramatic Kleibacker presentation that revolved around the actual garments worn by Joan Crawford, Hildegard, Gene Kelly, Diahann Carroll, Mrs. Richard Nixon, Rosalind Russell, Jean Seberg, Farah Fawcett, Cheryl Tiegs, etc.

Kleibacker's showmanship placed him in great demand on the lecture circuit and for tours such as the Fall 1980, Fall 1981, Spring 1982 ones for Detroit's Taubman Company where his lively presentations in some of the nation's largest shopping malls attracted thousand upon thousands of viewers at one showing.

As consultant to New York's American Silk Mills for six years, Kleibacker toured cities throughout the United States and Canada presenting fashion shows and seminars to inspire and motivate standing-room-only audiences in the art of sewing silk fabrics. He appeared on numerous television shows, including "*Good Morning America*". He was contributing editor to Conde Nast's *Vogue Magazine*, July 1974 and March 1975 issues, coordinating appearances across the country for fashion shows/cliniques in the fabric areas of important department stores.

The Kleibacker historic collection consists of some 250 20th century dresses, suits, coats, capes of quality and merit. The collection also has an outstanding group of accessories: shoes, hats, furs, costume jewelry, etc.

KLEIBACKER . . . in academe

Kleibacker has served as visiting artist, visiting professor, consultant, teacher or conductor of summer workshops at many universities and colleges. These include Mount Mary College, Milwaukee; Drexel University, Philadelphia; The Ohio State University, Columbus; Pratt Institute, New York; Stephens College, Missouri; Mansfield State College, Pennsylvania; Iowa State University; Virginia Commonwealth University; Wayne State University, Detroit; University of Nebraska; University of Wisconsin-Stout; Colorado State University; University of Missouri; North Dakota State University; Southern Institute, Birmingham, Alabama. He was Designer-in-Residence to the Fashion Department, Stephens College, Columbia, Missouri, January – May 1984.

From September 1984 – June 1985, he worked as Visiting Professor to the Department of Textiles and Clothing, College of Home Economics (now College of Human Ecology), The Ohio State University, Columbus. His primary role was to amass an important costume and textiles collection for the University, as well as to curate a number of exhibitions around the collection's holdings.

In September 1985 Kleibacker was designated Designer-in-Residence to the Department of Textiles and Clothing, The Ohio State University. In this capacity, he continued his work as Director and Curator of the Collection until he left the University in October, 1995. He holds Emeritus status from the University.

KLEIBACKER . . . as historian, curator

Kleibacker continues his role of 20th century costume historian as he curates exhibitions around the country, exhibitions that focus on the seriousness of clothing as museum art.

He also presents, to various audiences, his slide presentation: DRESS: AS HISTORY, AS ENGINEERING, AS ART . . .

History: Kleibacker shows how the world of garment-making reflects the political, economic, and social values of the decades: i.e., the extravagances of the 1920's, until the crash of October, 1929; the 1940s slim silhouette brought on by the Government's L85 request; the quirks and unrest of the 1960s.

The Engineering of good clothes is a Kleibacker obsession, indicating the intricate workings of superb bias-cuts by Vionnet, Patou, Grès, Trigère . . . the comfort and timelessness of bias-cut; how Kleibacker's own backless-dress-design has its stay-on-the-body insistence through stretched-out bias string-straps.

The Art of the clothes? It's there throughout the slide presentation.

**Exhibitions curated by Kleibacker . . . exhibitions with
the key-words History, Education, Art, Drama**

1986: Memorable Dress/Ohio Women

Sullivant Hall, Arts Center, The Ohio State University, Columbus.
Clothes once owned and worn by Lillian Gish, Suzanne Farrell,
Mrs. O.O. McIntyre, Mrs. Harvey S. Firestone, Jr., Mrs. John
Glenn, Mrs. James A. Garfield, Mrs. Warren Harding,
Erma Bombeck, etc.

1987: Cars and Couture

Immke Gallery, Columbus, Ohio.
Cars from the 1930s – 1970s; clothes of the periods of the cars.
Clothes by Fath, Adrian, Maggy Rouff, Agnès-Drécoll, Lange,
Bergdorf-Goodman custom, etc.

1989: Linear Grace

Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio.
Sculpture by Paul Manship; coordinated evening couture of the
1920-1930s by Worth, Lanvin, Chanel, Lelong, Poiret, Vionnet,
Patou, Gallenga, Fortuny, Babani, Martial et Armand, etc.

1992: In Black and White: Dress from the 1920s to Today

Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University,
Columbus.
Design installation by Andree Putman; co-curated with Claudia
Gould. Clothes by Dior, Grès, Patou, Traina-Norell, Norman Norell,
Galanos, Trigère, Thierry Mugler, Karl Lagerfeld, Fortuny, Patricia
Lester, Fath, Capucci, Schiaparelli, Courrèges, Rochas, Saint
Laurent, Sonia Rykiel, Bob Mackie, Armani, Halston, Bonnie
Cashin, Carolina Herrera, Miyaki, Lacroix, Herve Leger, Patrick
Kelly, Alaia, Kleibacker, etc.

1993: Reel to Real: The Hollywood Designer After Film

Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio.
Clothes by Hollywood designers who went from film work to
establishing their own ready-to-wear businesses..Adrian, Irene,
Howard Greer, Charles LeMaire, Helen Rose, Travis Banton,
Bob Mackie, Bonnie Chasin, Shannon Rodgers, Jean Louis,
Lange, Omar Kiam, Edith Head, etc.

1996: **Stipelman: His Illustrations and the Fashions They Reflect**

Kent State University Museum, Kent, Ohio.

Fashion paintings and sketches by New York illustrator-author Steven Stipelman and the actual clothes illustrated: clothes by Charles James, Grès, Griffe, Vionnet, Adrian, Irene, Galanos, Bruyère, Trigère, Dior, Lanvin, Chanel, Balenciaga, Ungaro, Philip Hulitar, Norman Norell, Shannon Rodgers, Kleibacker, etc.

1997: **DRESSED-Up Photography**

Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio.

Photography by Horst, Neal Barr, Skrebneski, Maywald, Louise Dahl-Wolfe, Frederick Eberstadt, Harry Benson, Maurice Seymour, and the actual clothes they photographed by Charles James, Balenciaga, Bruyère, Pierre Cardin, Dior, Nina Ricci, Lange, Travilla, Galanos, Kleibacker, etc.

1998: **Couture/Ready-to-Wear**

Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio.

An exhibition that explained the world of couture (custom-made garments engineered to a private client's measurements and anatomy) from designers Worth, Fortuny, Grès, Balenciaga, Mainbocher, Sophie, Givenchy, Schiaparelli, Vionnet, Polret, Saint Laurent, Jenny, Valentina, Valentino, Doucet, Hanae Mori, Callot Soeurs, as against the world of fine ready-to-wear (shipped to the stores and shops in sizes 6, 8, 10, 12, etc.) from designers Galanos, Thierry Mugler, Montana, Jill Sander, Geoffrey Beane, Irene, Traina-Norell, Norman Norell, Courrèges, Jean Muir, Patrick Kelly, Halston, Bill Blass, Stavropoulos, Stephen Sprouse, etc.

KLEIBACKER , as designer . . . what the press said

***The New Yorker*, October 23, 1965**

Charles Kleibacker, whose skill approaches divinity . . .

***Women's Wear Daily*, December 2, 1966**

Charles Kleibacker – designer-owner – goes his own individual fashion way . . . a way that has a couture character derived from his early training in Paris . . . (he) . . . motivated the smashing spring collection now being shown – elegantly – in the Ritz Towers.

***Cue*, March 30, 1968**

I sat and viewed Charles Kleibacker's stunning collection of dresses. He's a master of the bias cut, of soft body-shapes, and of some of the most subtle, intricate seaming to be seen these days.

***Women's Wear Daily*, December 30, 1969**

Charles is not one of the Biggies on SA, but he always comes up with significant fashion news. And he's another designer who's quick to translate that easy '30s look for the '70s in his own way.

***Bernice Fitz-Gibbon, Macy's, Gimbel's, and Me*, page 280**

Charles Kleibacker – Today he's conceded to be one of the top American designers – right up there next to Norman Norell, maybe alongside of Norell. Charles' dreamy seductive dresses have made him "bias king" of the world. His fame is international. His 1965 showings brought rave reviews.

***Women's Wear Daily*, January 3, 1969**

Besides the seam tailors, there are soft seamers, too. Designers like Grès, Galanos or Kleibacker are involved with seams but their constructed shapes take a soft turn.

***Women's Wear Daily*, January 18, 1969**

He's the master of the fluid line. Charles Kleibacker knows about clothes that show the body. He does it with bias, with seaming that makes a dress fit like a second skin.

Kay Thomas, *New York Sunday News*, May 4, 1969

While most women rave about beautifully bred Mainbocher evening gowns, it's the silk day dresses which are unlike any you see about today. With the exception of Charles Kleibacker, no one seems to make those beautiful short silk crepes any more, those with easy bodices and fluid skirts, such as marked the French couture in the days of Vionnet, Patou and Lelong.

Kay Thomas, *New York Daily News*, April 1, 1970

When one can cut a dress on the bias as beautifully as does Charles Kleibacker, it's not surprising that he leans to silk crepes. For what fabric looks more in motion than this? Sitting, standing, walking, the bias-cut silk crepe dress draws the eye every time.

Kay Thomas, *New York Daily News*, October 9, 1970

Certain designers always seem to be with it, no matter what the current fashion. Charles Kleibacker is such a man.

***Fabricnews*, October 1971**

The drawing power of the Charles Kleibacker road show for DuPont's Qiana was considerable - even greater than anticipated. He attracted standing-room only crowds.

***Women's Wear Daily*, November 2, 1971**

One of the most popular attractions on the home sewing fair/seminar circuit these days is couturier Charles Kleibacker and the Qiana show.

Eugenia Sheppard, *New York Post*, April 5, 1972

A great individualist among the American fashion designers is certainly Charles Kleibacker, whose ultra-simple, bias-cut black crepes, and the marvelous, flowing blond cape over a long powder-blue crepe dinner dress, stood out with the same distinction as a Mme. Grès collection in Paris.

***Threads Magazine*, March, 1997**

Couture Draping with Charles Kleibacker, a one-week class at the Shannon Rodgers/Jerry Silverman School of Fashion Design and Merchandising, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio, is an advanced course on bias draping. Designer and teacher Kleibacker, known as the "master of the bias," is a superb instructor, patient and exacting, whose boundless knowledge and enthusiasm for the subject is infectious.

Jacqueline Hall, *Columbus, Ohio Dispatch*, April 12, 1998, writing about the exhibition guest-curated by Kleibacker

*The exhibition is beautifully presented, with a flair for drama and attention to detail. A walk through the show – past the impressive long black dress with re-embroidered lace and cut velvet by Charles Frederick Worth (from around the 1890s), to Donna Karan's little black dress (cashmere, 1980s), to the long **At-Home Silk Chiffon Gown** (1930s) by Jeanne Lanvin – reveals much about the evolution of lifestyle in our century. It also emphasizes that superb garments belong in museums.*

1998 Spring Magazine for Members, Columbus Museum of Art, highlighting *Couture-Ready-to-Wear*, guest-curated by Kleibacker

As Designer-in-Residence from 1984-1995 at The Ohio State University, Kleibacker propelled its Historic Costume Collection to international status. And as the owner of an outstanding historic costume collection, he uses a connoisseur's eye to bring together this magnificent exhibition of garments that are truly works of art.