



Bonnie Cashin

1908 - 2000

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Traditional Japanese kimonos. Military uniforms. A chorus line. A sporty convertible. These were the makings of mid-20th century American style, as defined by the singular Bonnie Cashin.

Cashin never formally trained as a fashion designer—in fact, she disdained the very term—but from her quiet start as a ballet-costume designer in the 1930s, Cashin would become one of the premier names in American sportswear. As fashion historians point out, during an era when the chicest clothing fashion came to the United States from Paris and Milan, Bonnie Cashin was among the first clothing designers to export American style and ingenuity.

BEGINNER'S LUCK

One might say that Bonnie Cashin was born to design. Her father, Carl, was a photographer and inventor; her mother Eunice a dressmaker. Born in Fresno, California in 1908, as a young child Bonnie played with her mother's fabric scraps and drafted clothing illustrations. Eunice fiercely encouraged her daughter's creativity, and she would prove to be a lifelong mentor and design partner.

Away from the sewing table, Bonnie loved to dance, and in high school she went to try out for the chorus line of a local vaudeville company, Fanchon and Marco. Losing her nerve before the audition, Bonnie instead ended up showing her drawings to the company director, and was hired on the spot as a costume designer. It was a turning point in her career. After two years working with Fanchon and Marco and taking drawing classes at the Chouinard School of Art, Bonnie followed the company director to New York City and the Roxy



Sketches of costume designs for New York's Roxyettes; and a young Bonnie in one of her early designs.

Theater in 1933. As the costume designer for the Roxyettes, the theater's famous showgirls, Bonnie designed three costume changes a week for each of the 24 dancers. In what little spare time she had, she continued to study drawing at the Art Students' League in midtown.

Despite those occasional classes, Bonnie considered her time at the Roxy her only "formal schooling in design." This was where she mastered the art of designing clothing that flattered figures in motion, which would define her style for decades to come. And Bonnie's designs for the Roxyettes did make quite a splash. An article published in *Variety* at the time recognized her as "the youngest designer to hit Broadway." Her work was spotted by *Harper's Bazaar* editor Carmel Snow, who introduced her to the coat and suit manufacturer Adler & Adler. Moving off the stage and onto the street, Bonnie Cashin landed a top design job.

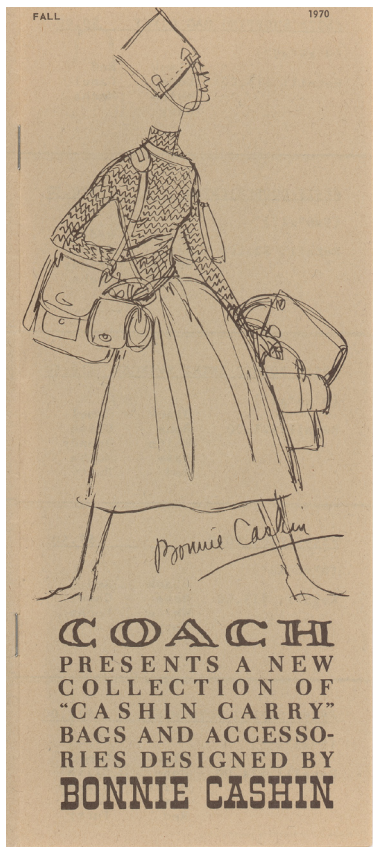
MAKING HER MARK

Cashin would stay with Adler & Adler for five years, from 1937 to 1942. In 1941, with World War II well underway, she was appointed, with fellow designers Vera Maxwell and Claire McCardell, to a committee charged with designing uniforms for women serving in the armed forces. Her experience working with the military would prove to be another long-term influence on her work. She developed an appreciation for clothing that was comfortable, protective, and—like her dance costumes—allowed freedom of movement. Uniform design meant exposure to new materials, too: The tough and practical leather, canvas, toggles, and industrial-strength zippers Cashin used in uniforms would reappear in her sportswear designs for years to come.

In 1942, at the request of producer William Perlberg, Cashin left Adler & Adler to move back to Hollywood and design costumes for Twentieth Century Fox. In seven years with the studio she created costumes for 60 films, including *Laura*, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, and *Anna and the King of Siam*. Cashin relished her time in Hollywood, later explaining: “I wasn’t designing for fashion, but for characteristics, which is the way I like to design clothes for daily wear.” It was, however, when Cashin returned to New York City and Adler & Adler in 1949 that her career really took off. In 1950, Cashin’s Adler & Adler collection won her the first of four Coty Awards and a Neiman Marcus Award.

Two years later, she struck out on her own, opening Bonnie Cashin Designs. Over the course of the next two decades, she collaborated with top labels, including Ballantyne, Philip Sills, Modelia, Bergdorf Goodman, Liberty of London, and Revillon. In 1964 Cashin was hired by Coach, where she revolutionized their handbags with her characteristically practical design elements—the brass hardware, detachable straps, and bright

A Coach
advertisement
from 1970.



colors—which remain emblematic of Coach’s signature style today. By the 1970s, Bonnie Cashin boutiques were fixtures in chic Paris and London department stores and she had been named to the Coty Fashion Critics Hall of Fame.

GLOBAL INFLUENCES, GLOBAL IMPACT

In copy she wrote for a Macy’s ad in 1950, Cashin described her ideal customer: “I live in New York or California or Paris. My suitcase is always packed, and the world is just around the corner.” To some extent, she was describing herself. Cashin was a “nomad by nature,” and often on the move. Wherever she went she collected local artifacts, folk art, and items of clothing, often replacing the wardrobe she packed with one she acquired overseas. Cashin observed the locals with a keen

eye, and the clothing she designed at home clearly reflected her adventures abroad. “I remember the way a fisherman wore his shirt in Portofino, the odd chic of the beige and white starched habit of a little nun in Spain, the straw hat of a man riding a donkey in Rhodes, a man’s wedding scarf in India, the elegant drape of a panung in Bangkok,” she scribbled on a colorful quote-covered wall in her apartment.

In fact, Cashin’s signature look—the layered, loose-fitting, elegant clothing for which she became most widely known—was inspired by her travels to Japan, where she learned that cool weather was referred to as a “nine-layer day.” Layered clothing—always lightweight and easy-to-pack for that independent woman on the go—was just one of Cashin’s dozens of design innovations. As Bill Blass wrote in Cashin’s *Women’s Wear Daily* obituary in 2000, she was “conspicuously first in a lot of sportswear and outerwear design.” She introduced capes and ponchos, replaced buttons with grommets, used industrial zippers, and integrated countless pockets and pouches into her belt, jacket, and handbag designs. She was the first to use canvas for raincoats and dress women in jumpsuits. Even the equestrian-style hardware so closely associated with Gucci designs showed up on Cashin’s Coach handbags first.

Cashin’s designs were clever, original, and most of all, practical. An often-cited Cashin anecdote tells how she designed a poncho after cutting a hole in a blanket during a windy ride in her convertible; that same car’s rooftop hardware inspired the brass toggles she adopted for her handbags. In a 2000 résumé of Cashin’s life and career in the *New York Times Magazine*, Amy Spindler aptly described Cashin as “inspired by the promise of modern design—that newer, more functional, more technological ideas could make life better.” This explains in part why Cashin didn’t



Bonnie in her studio.

consider herself a fashion designer, but a peer of other pure modernists like her friends Ray and Charles Eames, Isamu Noguchi, and George Nelson.

ENCORE PERFORMANCE

If Bonnie Cashin's name isn't always recognizable today, it's because her approach to business was as original as her clothing. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Cashin never licensed her name or hired design assistants. Anything that said "Bonnie Cashin" was designed by Bonnie Cashin, and she hand-picked manufacturing partners who granted her complete creative control. Cashin worked at more than arm's-length distance from the Seventh Avenue heart of the fashion industry, in what she called her "secret laboratories," and always considered herself an outsider in the fashion world.

Nonetheless, in the years leading up to her death in 2000, Cashin's contributions to fashion

were celebrated many times over by the very establishment from which she felt so alienated. Her work was featured in exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum of Art. The Fashion Institute of Technology mounted a solo retrospective that included a re-creation of her UN Plaza apartment, and a Coach reissue of her handbags was warmly received by fashion editors and consumers alike.

AN ENDURING LEGACY

Bonnie Cashin retired from design in 1985 and devoted herself to painting and philanthropy. She had always been known among friends and colleagues for her generosity, and had long demonstrated her commitment to nurturing a new generation of innovative thinkers. To that end, she established a scholarship fund in her mother's memory at the Fashion Institute of Technology, and an arts-focused lecture series in her uncle's name at California Institute of Technology. In 1981, she started the Innovative Design Fund, a New York City nonprofit created to support educational and cultural institutions that promote creative thinking in design arts and encourage dialogue with creative minds in diverse disciplines. In 1988, the Innovative Design Fund was moved to The New York Community Trust.

When she died in 2000, she left her estate to charity, and her executors created the Bonnie Cashin Fund in The New York Community Trust, "to be used for grants for educational, cultural, charitable, or scientific purposes, including libraries, museums, and schools, or for the rehabilitation and training of the poor and homeless, or for advanced scientific research."

The New York Community Trust

is a community foundation, helping New Yorkers achieve their charitable goals and making grants that respond to the needs of our City.

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