



Muriel King: Artist of Fashion Discussion Guide

This guide is meant to supplement and encourage discussion of *Muriel King: Artist of Fashion*. Suggested questions pertain to various sections of the exhibit, but you are encouraged to use them as you think best serves your classes. A glossary of fashion terms has been included.

Biography

Fashion designer Muriel King had a hugely successful career that spanned three decades and two continents. However, she has been largely forgotten today, despite the beauty of her work and her role in elevating high-end American fashion. Born near Seattle, Washington, in 1900, King trained as a painter before settling in Paris in the 1920s and embarking on a career in fashion illustration. She later moved to New York, where she opened her own couture house in 1932. King lacked the cutting, draping, and sewing skills typically needed for fashion design, but her beautifully executed watercolor sketches were transformed by her staff into fully-realized garments. She created couture garments for some of the most visible and stylish women of the 1930s and 1940s, as well as ready-to-wear lines for a number of New York's major department stores. King also made a brief sojourn to Hollywood, where she designed costumes for films such as *Cover Girl* (1944) and *Stage Door* (1937). King devoted the last twenty years of her life to painting. She died in 1977.

Discussion Questions

How do her designs look to you? Contemporary? Outdated? Representative of their time?

Do her designs remind you of other designers' work?

Muriel King did not know how to drape, cut, or sew. What are the drawbacks of not having these skills? What are the benefits?

Note: These skills are beneficial because they provide designers with a great deal of information before and during the creation or production of a garment. For example, draping allows a designer to see how a garment might look on the body, as well as how it may best be pieced together in order to achieve the desired effect, while knowledge of cutting can provide an understanding of how to maximize or minimize the amount of fabric to be used. If a designer is able to sew, then she will know how to put a garment together and therefore ensure that the design is created according to her own exact standards.

Muriel King believed that women's clothing should be versatile, and that garments should be able to be worn in different ways by adding and removing elements. Does it surprise you that King was doing this in the 1930s and 1940s? Do you think she was ahead of her time?

Many designers have created uniforms. How do you think designing for women in the workplace has changed since Muriel King created her Flying Fortress Fashions? What do you think women needed in the 1940s? What do you think they need now? Are their needs the same?

Muriel King used military details in her Flying Fortress Fashions. Do you think military style influenced any of her other designs? How do you see the influence of the military in fashion today?

Muriel King admired the "natural look" of American women. What does that mean to you? What contemporary designers also view American women this way?

Muriel King traveled extensively, and at one point worked for the State Department to open up textile trade markets with other countries. Do you think any of King's designs were inspired by other cultures?

What other characteristics do you see in her work?

Muriel King enjoyed working with modern, independent women, such as Katharine Hepburn. Hepburn was a legendary actress who was known for speaking her mind, as well as for her personal style, which embraced elements of menswear. Who best designs or represents the modern, independent woman today? Why?

Glossary*

couture French word used throughout the fashion industry to describe original styles by fashion designers, representing the ultimate in fine sewing and tailoring, and made of expensive fabrics. Couture designs are shown in collections twice a year—spring/summer and fall/winter.

costume designer A designer who creates garments to be worn by characters in a film or play.

cut Trade term used in ready-to-wear industry for cutting out fabric preparatory to sewing.

designer Person engaged in creating original clothing and accessories in various areas of the fashion industry. Some designers own their businesses, others are employed by manufacturers to develop collections of merchandise in ready-to-wear, couture, lingerie, millinery, footwear, accessories, and jewelry.

draping Trade term for arranging and pinning muslin cloth over a dummy to conform to the design of the intended garment. After draping, muslin is removed from dummy, stitched as seams and tried on a model. Then it is altered, refitted on model, and cut apart at the seams to make the pattern.

ready-to-wear Apparel that is mass produced in standard sizes. Known in French as *prêt-à-porter* (prêt-ah-por-tay).

sew To join together by stitches.

uniform Any specific type of apparel required for wear by the armed forces of any country; for a specialized occupation, by a school, or for competitive team sports such as baseball, football, and hockey.

* Majority of definitions courtesy of Charlotte Mankey Calasibetta. *Fairchild's Dictionary of Fashion* (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1988).