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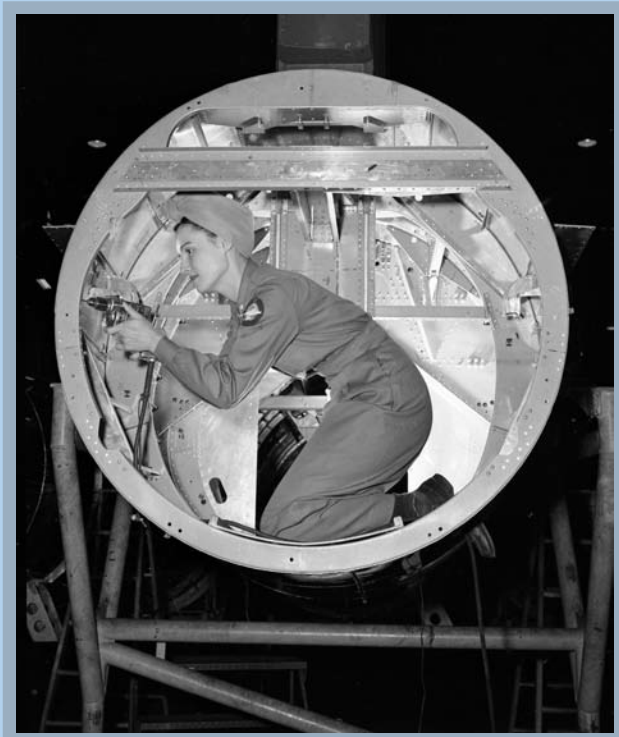
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Boeing employee wearing Muriel King's Flying Fortress Fashions, digital print, circa 1943, USA. Photograph courtesy of the Boeing Company Historical Archives.



Muriel King, evening dress and corset, navy-blue silk satin and chiffon with magenta ribbon, 1938, USA. Photograph, MFIT.

A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

Muriel King: Artist of Fashion has been organized by the graduate students in the Fashion Institute of Technology's MA program in Fashion and Textile Studies: History, Theory, Museum Practice.

April CalahanCurator, Research
Alison CastanedaConservation
Kira Eng-WilmotConservation, Registrar
Ashley-Paige FrankelEvents Planner and Media Relations
Miriam GoldEducation
Aisling JoeCurator
Jaclyn LernerResearch
Mary Lou MurilloEditor
Christiane NickelResearch
Anne ReillyCurator
Emily ToxieEducation
Alexis WalkerExhibition and Graphic Design
Tanya WetenhallExhibition Design
Abby ZoldowskiProject Manager

The Museum at **FIT**

Seventh Avenue at 27 Street
New York City 10001-5992

Muriel King: Artist of Fashion
March 10–April 4, 2009

Hours:
Tuesday–Friday, noon–8 pm
Saturday, 10 am–5 pm
Closed Sunday, Monday, and holidays

For more information, visit www.fitnyc.edu/museum or call the exhibition information line at 212 217.4558.

Cover:
Muriel King, sketch of an evening ensemble, watercolor on paper, 1936, USA, Muriel King Archive, Special Collections, Gladys Marcus Library at FIT.

Muriel King MURIEL KING

ARTIST OF FASHION



The Museum at **FIT**

MARCH 10–APRIL 4, 2009

In the 1920s and 1930s, the world of fashion was dominated by women. Female designers understood that the modern woman desired clothing that merged elegance, comfort, and versatility. The influence of Parisian fashion was pervasive; couturières such as Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel and Madeleine Vionnet were the French vanguard. In New York, leading department stores were promoting American fashions, and for the first time the names of designers such as Valentina, Elizabeth Hawes, and Muriel King were becoming as recognized as their Parisian counterparts. Today, however, King’s career, which spanned three decades, has been largely forgotten.

Muriel King: Artist of Fashion focuses on the artistry of King’s designs and seeks to define her contribution to the history of American fashion. She debuted as a designer in 1932, when she not only opened her own New York couture salon, but also entered into a licensing partnership with the retailer Lord & Taylor. For private couture clients, she created exclusive, one-of-a-kind garments, while at Lord & Taylor she offered select ready-to-wear designs. Prices for both were high. Adjusted for inflation, a Muriel King original dress would cost nearly \$1,900 today and a ready-to-wear copy would sell for more than \$750.

The cost of King’s designs is noteworthy considering that they were being marketed during the Great Depression, which had begun three years earlier. The market for luxury goods remained healthy in select circles of American society, yet decorum required styles that emphasized restraint over ostentation. King’s unique sense of pragmatic luxury brought immediate success, and her motto of “cautious daring” made her a favorite among America’s socialites. King’s separates and day-into-evening clothes provided versatility and value. A successful design, she believed, was one that a client could wear for at least five years—without appearing dated. She eschewed unnecessary embellishment and believed that “you put just one detail in a dress.” Accordingly, her designs were lauded for their clean lines and elegant simplicity.

Simplicity did not mean sacrificing luxury, however. King used the finest fabrics available—decadent silk satins, whisper-thin chiffons, and soft warm wools. The women who wore King’s clothes selected them for their exquisite quality and subtle details, such as painstakingly matched patterns and hand-covered buttons. While her garments exude ease when worn, they are frequently intricate in cut and construction, which makes King’s design process intriguing in light of the fact that

she did not know how to drape, cut, or sew. King called her process “backwards.” She would render fully realized watercolor sketches, from which a team of dressmakers would work to construct her garments. While her sketches show that she knew how to portray basic construction details, King’s unfamiliarity with sewing techniques allowed her artist’s imagination to run free. Period fashion journalists attributed much of her success to her unfettered creativity.

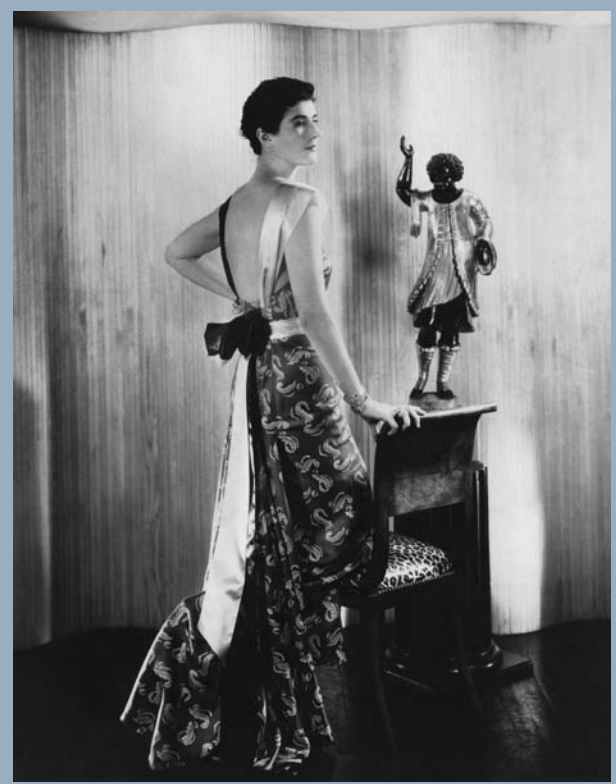
Fashion aside, King was first and foremost an artist. Born near Seattle, Washington, in 1900, she was formally educated as a painter. She worked in Paris during the 1920s as an illustrator for fashion publications such as *Vogue* and *Women’s Wear Daily*. The sketches in this exhibition attest to King’s virtuosity as a watercolorist. Her representations of striped and printed textiles are especially striking, as she deftly conveys the three-dimensionality of the patterning amongst the garments’ folds. King’s skill in depicting sheen, texture, and transparency elevates her sketches from mere working drafts to works of art in their own right. The transformation of King’s watercolors into clothing brought her artistry to a wider audience.

The latter half of Muriel King’s career was remarkably varied. She left the New York fashion world in the 1940s and temporarily relocated to Hollywood, where she was one of the few fashion designers to find continuous success designing for film. During World War II, King bolstered the spirits of real-life Rosie the Riveters with her seven-piece line of Flying Fortress Fashions, a wardrobe of work wear that was created with both factory safety and fashion in mind. She also worked as an emissary of the State Department, helping to establish trade relations in international textile markets. During this time, King periodically designed collections for a variety of department stores, which she would continue to do until her retirement from fashion in the late 1950s.

Fashion made King a recognized name, but at the core of her acclaim was her art. She had never strayed from her role as an artist. In fact, King dedicated herself solely to painting during the last two decades of her life, but little of this work survives.

Cut off from Paris during the war years, American fashion began to establish an identity of its own (although Christian Dior would reclaim French authority in 1947). During those formative years, Muriel King’s work made an indelible mark on American fashion. Her legacy is one of simple elegance, tasteful luxury, and quiet glamour.

April Calahan, Curator



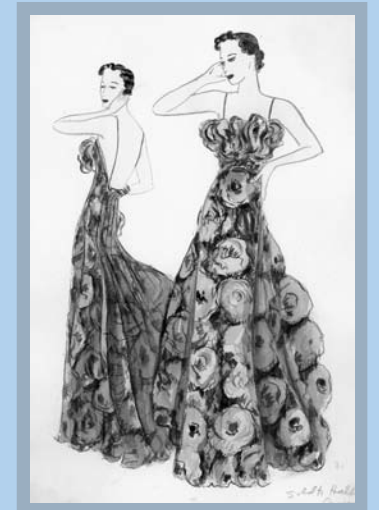
Edward Steichen, Muriel King modeling her design for *Vogue*, April 15, 1933. Photograph, Steichen/*Vogue*, © Condé Nast Publications.



Muriel King, sketch of a day ensemble, design sold to B. Altman & Co., watercolor on paper, 1935-1937, USA, Muriel King Archive, Special Collections, Gladys Marcus Library at FIT.



Muriel King, day jacket, gray wool flannel with passementerie trim and metal buttons, 1935, USA, gift of Muriel King. Photograph, MFIT.



Muriel King, sketch of an evening dress, design sold to Hattie Carnegie, watercolor on paper, 1936, USA, Muriel King Archive, Special Collections, Gladys Marcus Library at FIT.