

Kleibacker: New York Designer to Ohio Curator

More about Charles Kleibacker

Born in Cullman, Alabama, Charles Kleibacker earned a degree in journalism from the University of Notre Dame and worked as a newspaper reporter before pursuing graduate studies in retailing at New York University. He subsequently worked as an advertising copywriter. A job as an assistant to the singer and entertainer Hildegard took him to Paris in the late 1940s and introduced him to the world of the couture houses she frequented. Determined to become a designer himself, he employed an *atelier* head to teach him the basics of understanding fabrics, draping and design. In 1954, he returned to Paris with a photographic portfolio of his designs and landed a position as an assistant designer with Antonio del Castillo, then the head designer for Lanvin. By 1957, Kleibacker had returned to New York. He worked as a freelance designer, then as an assistant designer at Nettie Rosenstein, a well-established design house on Seventh Avenue.

By 1960, he had begun working on his own and opened KLEIBACKER studio in New York City. In 1963, he moved into a spacious seven-room suite on West 73rd Street, which the KLEIBACKER label occupied until 1983. His clothes attracted the attention of *Women's Wear Daily*, *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Town and Country*. His off-the-rack designs could be found in such retailers as Bergdorf Goodman, Henri Bendel and Bonwit Teller. Private clients, including actress Diahann Carroll and first lady Pat Nixon, also sought his clothes.

His designs were critically acclaimed by the fashion media. He was particularly noted for his bias-cut designs and often hailed as “the master of the bias.” *The New Yorker* (October 23, 1965) said his “skill approaches divinity.” *Women's Wear Daily* (January 3, 1969), placed his work in excellent company: “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.” Eugenia Sheppard, in the *New York Post* (April 5, 1972) called him “a great individualist among the American fashion designers,” whose clothes “stood out with the same distinction as a Mme. Grès collection in Paris.”

In addition to his own design work, Kleibacker consulted on fabrics, design and clothing construction. When DuPont was first developing the new synthetic fiber that became known as Qiana, the company turned to Kleibacker to make test garments that would investigate its potential and provide guidance for working with it. When American Silk Mills sought to revive interests in natural silk, following years of neglect caused by the shortages of the Second World War and then by the economic isolation of communist China, that firm also turned to Kleibacker. In the 1970s, he demonstrated and discussed its fabrics' uses, especially to home sewers, with tours that took him all across the country. He also offered advice to home sewers on how to achieve professional results in a series of three articles for Condé Nast's *Vogue*.

While based in New York, Kleibacker conducted workshops and accepted residencies at many colleges and universities. In 1968 he began a relationship teaching and working on special projects at Mount Mary College in Milwaukee that continues today. As teaching and other activities in academia came to overshadow designing in his professional life, he closed his New York business in 1986

Kleibacker first came to Columbus in 1984 as a visiting professor in the Department of Textiles and Clothing at The Ohio State University and became designer-in-residence there in 1985. He remained at Ohio State until 1995, where his primary responsibility was to build a collection of historical clothing for the university. As the collection grew—with works from such designers and labels as Madeleine Vionnet, Paul Poiret, Chanel, Jean Patou, Balenciaga, Christian Dior, Adrian, Irene, Charles James, Norman Norell, Galanos, Pauline Trigère, and many others—Kleibacker sought opportunities to raise its profile in the Columbus community. Exhibitions, he soon discovered, were a perfect way to do this, and so he became a curator, developing exhibition projects both on the Ohio State campus and at the Columbus Museum of Art.

Kleibacker has continued his curatorial activities since leaving the university, working independently and since 2002 as adjunct curator of design at the Columbus Museum of Art. He also has continued his educational activities, through his ongoing relationship with Mount Mary College, an adjunct professorship in Kent State University's School of Fashion Design and Merchandising and a winter 2001 teaching appointment at Columbus College of Art and Design.

Essay and biography by Ann Bremner