

“IT’S IN A BOX IN MY WARDROBE:” “RE-SEARCHING” THE PRACTICES OF NEW ZEALAND WOMEN FASHION DESIGNERS

Natalie Smith

In this report I reflect on conducting research on fashion design in New Zealand, drawing on Cheryl Buckley's article, "Made in Patriarchy II: Researching (or Re-Searching) Women and Design," in which she argues that to understand women in design, a disruption of the traditional design narrative and a "re-visioning [of] design through a feminist lens" (Buckley, 2020, p. 23) is required. Fashion's status as a popular and ephemeral form of visual culture means that it is often not archived in traditional ways; further, New Zealand's reputation as a nation of home sewers, and the predominance of women designers operating from home, means that material is housed in varied domestic spaces. This requires a "re-search" of sites of production, and a re-think of *how* and *where* design is produced in order to locate material and give visibility to the practices of women designers (Buckley, 2020).

Dinah Vincent's doctoral study on the emergence of dressmaking in New Zealand notes that while dressmaking was an everyday experience for New Zealand women and practiced at home and school, it is not well documented (Vincent, 2018). This lack of documentation extends to more formal business practices. Douglas Lloyd Jenkins, in the introduction to *The Dress Circle: New Zealand Fashion Design Since 1940*, which he co-wrote with Lucy Hammonds and Claire Regnault, noted the challenges in writing a history of New Zealand fashion design, because it was not recorded in the conventional ways. He unapologetically acknowledged that some of the visual material in the book was not up to traditional publication standards, but stressed the importance of its inclusion for recording New Zealand fashion history. Magazines, photographs, scrapbooks and oral histories were used to tell the story of New Zealand fashion design in *The Dress Circle*, with Lloyd Jenkins noting that "some labels can only be mentioned in passing because their trails have seemingly gone so completely cold" (Lloyd Jenkins, 2010, pp. 10-11).

These comments resonate with my experiences researching the history of the Benson and Hedges Fashion Design Awards. The Benson and Hedges Fashion Design Awards were established in 1964; in 1996 they were rebranded as the Smokefree Fashion Design Awards, and the final event was held in 1998. The awards were an open-entry design competition that attracted both amateur and professional designers. The tagline "When Dreams Turn to Gold" encouraged home sewers to think about the commercial potential of their design activity (Smith, 2017). The domestic location of these enterprises, however, means that women's participation in, and contribution to, fashion design history is often invisible.

Buckley argues that when researching women in design, we need to think about three key questions: *How* is design produced? *Where* is it produced? And *by whom* and *for whom* it is produced? Drawing on Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock's seminal work, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (1981), Buckley contends that the study of design history derives from the study of art history, an ideological discourse that privileges the grand narrative of the male artistic genius. Women are seen as both lower down the hierarchy and as "crafty" (Buckley, 2020, p. 21).

The traditional art/craft dichotomy can be seen in the discourses of creation attached to Rose Bertin (1747-1813), dressmaker and milliner to Queen Marie Antoinette (1755-1793) and arguably the first dressmaker credited with design, and those of Charles Frederick Worth (1825-1895), dubbed the "father of haute couture." Bertin was

defined by her skills in trimming and the making of accessories. As Buckley notes: "Women's roles in design were clear: women were categorized: they had sex-specific skills and attributes; they were deemed 'feminine', 'natural', 'decorative', 'instinctive'" (Buckley 2020, p. 21). Worth, in contrast, was aggressive in self-promoting his artistic talents. Adopting an artistic style of dress, he promoted himself as an artist in order to distance himself from the feminine connotations of dressmaking, and to utilise the prestige of art to market his designs to his wealthy clientele (Buckley, 2020; de Marly, 1990).

Within the New Zealand context, it has been easier to trace the lives of male designers who entered the Benson and Hedges awards because the 'how' and 'where' of design production follows the model established by Worth. This traditional design narrative is reflected nationally in the career of twentieth-century designer Michael Mattar (1920-2004). An admirer of the House of Dior, Mattar ran a salon from the Waikato town of Taumarunui (Pickmere, 2014). Mattar kept a scrapbook of his winning entries in the Benson and Hedges Fashion Design Awards, as well as other career highlights. (Figure 1) Meticulously assembled, the scrapbook serves to bolster his reputation as the archetypal designer genius and is now in the collection of The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, thus further cementing his reputation as one of New Zealand's greatest fashion designers. This contrasts sharply with the practices of women designers who also entered the Benson and Hedges awards. While these women may have been creating for similar clientele, *how* and *where* their design work was produced differs. This in turn has influenced how their practice is documented and archived.



Figure 1. An excerpt from Michael Mattar's scrapbook, his 1968 Benson and Hedges entry. Photograph: Natalie Smith.

In 2016, I presented a paper at "Making Women Visible: A Conference in Honour of Barbara Brookes" (held at the University of Otago, 15-17 February 2016), in which I explored some of the challenges of researching women's participation in fashion design competitions in New Zealand. The nature of women's making – at the kitchen table, and late into the night once children had been put to bed – meant that evidence of their practice was often relegated to domestic spaces. I recalled one conversation with a designer who told me, "it's in a box in my wardrobe," in reference to a particular garment I was looking for. One woman visited me in my office with a sports bag containing trophies, certificates and award-winning garments. She had not put the garments in the sports bag specifically for her visit to see me – that is where she kept them permanently. Another former entrant was able to show me some pieces of a ski outfit she had crocheted, but not other pieces – her daughter's friend had borrowed these and they were long gone. I met this designer at her home where she went to a wardrobe to pull the garment out.

My research has, however, benefited from women's traditional roles in preserving family history. The wife of one designer contacted me to say that they still had their husband's award-winning gown, adding, "I do have a professional photo of the gown somewhere that will require a bit of hunting." That "somewhere" turned out to be a drawer. I am also grateful to Phillip Shortt's mother for keeping clippings of his early work which she sent to the organisers of the Benson and Hedges awards. These clippings have subsequently found their way into the Maysie Bestall Cohen collection housed by Archives New Zealand. Shortt was the first Supreme Award winner in 1971; up until 1970 there was no supreme award offered, only awards for categories.

At “Making Women Visible” I met Chloe Searle, curator of collections and exhibitions at the North Otago Museum, Oamaru. Searle mentioned that the museum collection included some designers connected to the Benson and Hedges awards. This chance encounter led to the unearthing of the story of Maritza Boutique, established in 1966 by Marjorie Dench Tschopp (1934-2018). Maritza Boutique operated in Oamaru until the late 1970s. The boutique was named after Marjorie’s daughter Maritza, who won the Benson and Hedges Fashion Design Awards Supreme Award in 1977. Through a notice on the museum’s Facebook page, I was able to connect with Dench Tschopp and rediscover the forgotten history of an entrepreneurial Oamaru fashion house.

The story initially unfolded through Dench Tschopp in a series of emails in which she recounted the history of Maritza Boutique and emailed through images of garments. Searle liaised with Dench Tschopp, who put together a scrapbook about her fashion business, which is now in the museum collection. Visiting the museum to look through the scrapbook, I was struck by the pink cover embellished with the text “Scraps” in gold lettering (Figures 2 and 3) – a reference to the textile trade and a reminder that women’s design activity often occurs in marginal spaces and is recounted in scraps of information. Dench Tschopp’s scrapbook contrasts sharply with the meticulous, businesslike recording of Mattar’s design achievements. Where Mattar’s scrapbook promotes the designer and his business achievements, Dench Tschopp’s scrapbook focuses on the people who wore her garments and includes a section on wedding dresses created by Maritza Boutique.

Dench Tschopp began making children’s garments along with other ‘sewing mothers’ for a kindergarten fundraiser: It was from here that the idea of collaborating with local women to run a boutique grew: “I was already running a dressmaking business from my home using the ubiquitous ‘kitchen table’ (Formica) where many a New Zealand enterprise began.” Dench Tschopp (2017) writes in a letter accompanying the scrapbook. This account underlines Buckley’s observations that dressmaking practices were often disrupted by, and fitted in around, other family responsibilities: “Throughout the twentieth century women have made clothes by hand, aided

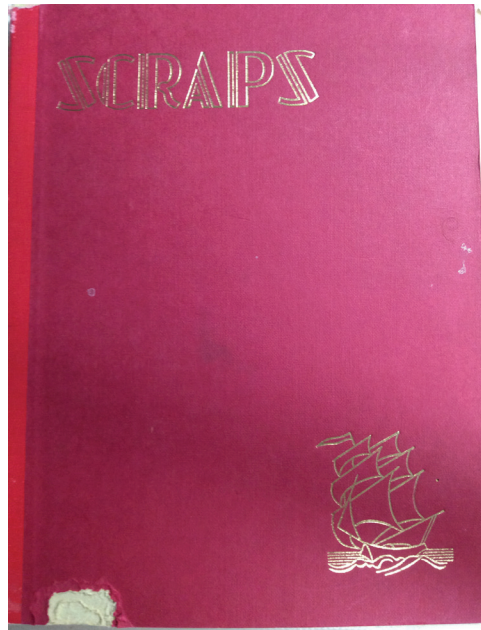


Figure 2. Scraps: The cover of Marjorie Dench’s scrapbook, North Otago Museum. Photograph: Natalie Smith.



Figure 3. The first premises of Maritza Boutique, an old doctors surgery, from Marjorie Dench’s scrapbook, North Otago Museum. Photograph: Natalie Smith.

latterly by a sewing machine finding space on the kitchen table, and squeezing sewing between other domestic responsibilities" (Buckley, 1998, p. 157). Dench Tschepp's history is revealing not only for highlighting the complexities of the lives of women fashion designers, but also for exposing attitudes towards women in business. She notes at one point that a bank manager asked her if her husband would guarantee the shop's rent (Dench Tschepp, 2017).

Reflecting on Buckley's key questions – How is design produced? Where is it produced? – has provided me with a new framework with which to research women fashion designers in New Zealand. The practices of collecting and recording fashion design from scrapbooking, to oral history and searching in domestic spaces for garments, replicates the everyday character of the emergence of fashion design in New Zealand as a practice that began at the kitchen table. Exploring the lives of women designers involves the researcher in rethinking and disrupting the traditional design narrative; correspondingly, it involves the uncovering of a story that by its very nature involves disruptions common to women's lives, from childbirth to childcare and domestic interventions. It is also a history that disrupts traditional narratives about women's place in the world of business. In the spaces between these interruptions, creativity and great design flourished; in the unconventional archives of wardrobes, drawers and family scrapbooks around the country there is abundant evidence of this activity.

Natalie Smith is an independent fashion scholar and a teaching fellow in the Sociology, Gender Studies and Criminology programme, University of Otago.

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