



## Jeffrey Banks on Norman Norell

### **The 1920s Part One**

What we're standing in front of now are three examples of one of Norell's favorite periods in fashion - the 1920s. In the 20s, Norell was twenty years old in 1920. He was born in 1900 and I think because of his youth at that period of time and because fashion was changing, corsets and fitted undergarments were going away, skirts were getting shorter, he loved the 20s as a period of fashion. He loved it when he was in the 20s in his 20s and he loved it years later, decades later, he loved harking back to it. So you've got three examples here. You've got the beautiful dress which has a tunic, a matching tunic over it. It looks like just a top and a skirt but it's actually a full pleated skirt with a plain bodice underneath the tunic top in this oatmeal colored crepe. Then you have the wool jersey striped-lining just the way he would do sequins with the striped-top and the solid black skirt. And then you have the silk crepe top skirt, pleated skirt, and cardigan jacket. And this has a dramatic u-shaped back, the top underneath the jacket. So again it's one of those things where the drama is when you take the jacket off of this buttercup silk crepe that you have this incredibly dramatic u-shaped back on the top. But this is all part of the 20s feelings that Norell really loved.

### **The 1920s Part Two**

Continuing with that 20s feeling, here's how Norell puts his own spin on the 1920s for a different decade. These were all done in the mid 60s. One, he loved bi-color. So you have pink silk crepe, a pale pinky peach silk crepe with bugle beaded trim and then you have a bi-color dress that is black on one side and iridescent sequins on the other. It's very dramatic, very simple, color blocking but done in a very very chic way and also reminiscent, very reminiscent, of the 20s.

## **The 1930s**

This dress is a dress that Norman did for Hattie Carnegie in 1932. It is silk chiffon striped with a beautiful godets and it is sort of the thing that one would wear to a tea party or tea dance in the summertime and then it has the organdy capelet. Now capes were something that Norell was fascinated with. He did them for day, for evening. He did them in heavy fabrics. He did them in lightweight fabrics. He just loved the drama of a cape. This dress was loaned to us by The Metropolitan museum. It is the oldest piece in the exhibition. Unfortunately, you know, not many of the things from the 30s survived because that's quite a while ago, especially when they were in, you know, sumptuous fabrics like silk and so forth. They become very delicate but we're very blessed to have this in our show and we're very thankful that The Met loaned it to us.

## **Capes Part One**

Here is a great example. Here are several great examples of capes. Not only full length cape as this beautiful salmon pink cape which was worn either with pants or with a slim pencil skirt. In many cases he made both to go because he felt a woman should have both of those options. So they were sold all together. Or these little capelets, which is a great alternative to a theatre suit especially in the summertime. Although, he did do it in wool crepe and he did do it in linen. But these little capelets when a woman did not want to completely bare her arms in the summertime. She was going into air condition, out of air conditioning, but she wanted to look pulled together and she did not want a full suit jacket. Norell was always looking for alternatives to the regular tailored suit, whether it was a vest with matching pants or a vest with a matching skirt. He was always looking for a way for a woman to look polished so she didn't look necessarily all buttoned up.

## **Capes Part Two**

These are from 1968. This happens to be my favorite collection, fall 1968 with these cape or puritan collars they were called, both of those. Not an easy sell because you couldn't be petite with this because the collar would be overpowering. But at the same time I think very dramatic, very elegant, and very very difficult to drape this so that it would fall over the shoulder without having darts in it. And there are no darts, no visible darts showing. So you have it here in the double-breasted coat. The two different colors in the beautiful taupe, pale taupe, and you have it in the prussian blue and then you have the theatre suit in the ice blue, which is just stunning. And again another example of how dramatic a woman could look without beads, without embellishments, without anything, just from pure cut and line, which is such a part of the genius of Norman Norell.

## **Norell Coats**

Norman Norell's coats. He made I think the most sumptuous coats. I mean there are certainly other fine American designers. People like Trigère, Bonnie Cashin, who made wonderful coats. But I think Norell's coats almost any of them could be worn right off of these mannequins right on to the street today. He used very heavy fabrics, coating fabrics, for his winter coats. By using the substantial fabrics, he didn't have to do a lot of tailoring. The fabrics really held the shape.

## **Fur Collection**

Where as many designers did as part of their retinue of designing, they would do shoes, scarves and hats and bags and fur collections. Norell never did a fur collection per se. But he loved the extravagance of fur trim, whether it was stone martin or sable or mink or one of his favorites fox. To do cuffs or to do a hemline with fur trim just elevated whatever it was on, whether it was an evening skirt, a ballgown skirt in beautiful double-faced satin. Or whether it was tweed or whether it was crepe or velvet. It didn't matter. When he added that fur, it gave that instant luxe feeling to anything. And he did fur trim throughout his career. You know, whether it was in the 1950s on a dark emerald green chiffon dress that Lauren Bacall wore in "How to Marry a Millionaire" with mink trim or any one of several movies and things worn by movie stars. He loved fur trim and he did in a very elegant way.

## **Jersey Dresses**

Now we come to four dresses which are really the hallmark and really the backbone of Norman Norell and that is wool jersey. Wool jersey looks to be a very simple fabrication but actually as Norell said it was one of the most difficult fabrics to work with. He had one tailor who did all the patterns for the jersey, for anything that was made out of jersey. And unlike the rest of his collection, which were made in Norell's workrooms, all the jersey garments were made in a factory that only made jersey in New Jersey. All the fabric for the most part came from a firm in France called Racine. Racine originally made underwear wool jersey fabric in the early 1900s and then Chanel discovered them in the 20s and began to use them. So this company has been in business for many many many years. And as I said the jersey dresses tend to look deceptively simple but there's a lot of engineering that goes into them. Women love them because they traveled, they packed, and they were supremely comfortable. You didn't need a lot of fussy undergarments underneath. You always looked polished when you wore them and they could go with a change of an accessory from day to evening. So these jersey dresses normally retail from anywhere from three to six hundred dollars retail, which was a lot of money in those days. But a lot less expensive than his tailored or beaded pieces or fur trimmed pieces. And he sold hundreds of these dresses. Hundreds of them every season. Black was number one color, navy, oatmeal, beige, chocolate, brown, green, heathered green. They just sold all the time.

## **Mermaid Dresses**

If you don't know Norell or if you know very little about Norell, probably the one thing you do know is that he was famous for what were called the mermaid sequin dresses. I think they got the name mermaid because of the way they hug the body so gracefully, every curve, every seam on the body seemed to be caressed by these sequin dresses, suits, coats, and pants. In general, they were made out of silk jersey, out of pure silk jersey which was lightweight. But which again moved with the body and stretched because it was knitted. What was unique about the way the sequins were done unlike the way we see sequins today, in most commercial manufacturing the sequins are sewn on by machine and they're sewn on in stripes. They're just sort of rigid stripes up and down. Norell's sequins were sewn on by hand. Every single sequin was placed on the fabric by hand and they were sewn in a unique way in that the sequin the actual stitch

where the sequin was applied was in a different place opposite the sequin that was next to it. So no two sequins were sewn in exactly the same spot which made the sequins undulate and move with the body. So they shimmered and moved and were unlike any other kind of sequin dresses. They really didn't need any more ornamentation because of the way they were sewn on and he did them as you see here lined in a camel's hair theatre suit, as a top in a lining in a wool jersey theatre suit to the floor, and of course as a short sleeve gown.

### **Pink Coat**

The other thing that I want to point out is this beautiful raglan sleeve pink coat over the two-piece dress underneath in wool. This was actually worn by Lauren Bacall. It was worn in a movie I think "Sex and the Single Girl." I believe is the movie that she wore it in. But with these dramatic diamante buttons is one of my favorite things. And again just the kind of easy classic that could be worn in any decade and the women wearing it would be chic and pretty snazzy.

### **Purple Coat**

But one of my favorites is this cone shaped coat in this beautiful deep imperial purple color. It's an a-line coat. It has almost no seaming in it seemingly, but it is the fabric and the cut of the coat that really stands out. It's incredibly flattering because of how the buttons are placed so that the bodice and the waistline look very small and then it extends and gets wider as it goes to the bottom. Not unlike a normal woman's shape. As you will see also one of the hallmarks of Norell's coats are the way the collars the back of the neck tend to be lower at the back of the neck than the front. And that gives the illusion of a longer neck which was very flattering to women.

### **Sailor Dress**

Right now we're looking at one of Norell's luxurious, extravagant, gorgeous, evening gowns made out of cotton organdy. The simplest of fabrics. I mean Norell could do that time and time again. And one of the hallmarks of his clothing was the fact that when Norell had a theme, an idea, or a shape that he liked, he would repeat it many times and through many decades. I mean as a small child he was dressed as a sailor in something called the Peter Thomson suit. Peter Thompson was the first manufacturer to make children's clothing of a higher caliber so people in the middle class or above. All little boys and little girls starting turn of the century started to wear what were called Peter Thomson's, which were sailor suits for boys and girls. So Norell was dressed this way as a child having been born in 1900 and I guess he must've really loved that outfit because the nautical influence went throughout his career, decade after decade. One of the other features about this that I love is this beautiful voluminous sleeve. I mean it's just drop dead gorgeous and you will see going back to his costume design in 1921 for Rudolph Valentino in a movie called "The Sainted Devil" you will see the exact same sleeve. So he followed through with that sleeve from the 20s to the 70s and it was prevalent in his work.

### **Three Sailor Dresses**

Here we have three versions of sailors or nautical influence. One in a denim covered linen with brass buttons and that dates from 1963. Then you have a beautiful shantung, a white shantung sailor dress, which dates from 1967. And then you have a wool jersey dress in navy with white collar and red bow tie. This dress was actually worn by Lady Bird Johnson and it was one of the most successful dresses that Norell ever did. He did it short and he also did it floor length and that dates from 1972.

### **Sequin Giraffe Ensembles**

We have three examples in all-over sequin from Norell. One is a cardigan suit that could literally have walked out of 1924 or 1925, Paris or London or Biarritz with the silk crepe tunic top and the diamante low belted waist. I mean this is as modern a suit as you could get. Again this could walk out onto Seventh Avenue today and be perfectly appropriate and chic for a woman of 20 or a woman of 85. And next to it the giraffe print in silver and black and gold and black. Again the beautiful chemise just barely touching the hips but looking completely modern and completely new and completely jazzy just because of the print. No real accessories needed and I love that we have the two examples in the silver and black and the gold and black.

### **Tweed Dress Turned Inside Out**

What we're looking at right now is a Norell tweed dress that is turned inside out. And the reason we've done this is because one of the things I really stress in the book, we've devoted a whole chapter to the fact that Norell's clothes were as beautifully made inside as they were outside. And that construction is so important when you look at a Norell garment. The clothes had all the technique of couture but translated into ready-to-wear and it was in doing that that Norell raised the bar for American manufacturing.