CHARLES KLEIBACKER, MASTER OF THE BIAS CUT; DESIGNS, CONSTRUCTION AND TECHNIQUES

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
The Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

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The Ohio State University
2008

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ABSTRACT

Charles Kleibacker was a fashion designer in New York City from 1960 to 1986, a time when fashion styles reflected the turmoil that occurred in society throughout those years. However, through it all Charles maintained an individual design aesthetic – soft figure-flattering bias dresses with a classic look that could be worn for years. This earned him a devoted clientele of women who purchased his designer ready-to-wear garments at top stores in New York, or were custom fit in his workshop. Because of his preference for and skill with bias, he became known as the Master of the Bias Cut.

Trained in French couturier methods of construction, Kleibacker’s garments were all produced with the highest standards in fabric, construction and fit. Bias is known to be the most difficult ‘cut’ to work with when constructing garments. Charles experimented until he figured out how to solve the challenges, and then trained his workers in the exacting techniques required.

Having first a career in journalism, Charles’ path to fashion was in “no way normal” and his approach to his business and the industry was not the norm either. Starting small, through much determination and sacrifice, he overcame many obstacles to produce garments engineered for an enduring and graceful artistry.

The “bias secrets” that Charles laboriously learned were never closely guarded. An educator at heart, he taught his “secrets” to packed audiences in national tours
targeted to the home-sewing market. He also shared his love of historic clothing and engineering garments cut on the bias with fashion design students in many college programs.

Kleibacker’s path stands as an excellent case study for students. He also tirelessly worked to preserve the techniques that go into couture quality garments. The “secrets” and the experiences of Kleibacker contained in this paper are an informative story for fashion students and lovers of fashion alike. An American original, unique in his approach to design, his ready-to-wear business, sharing his knowledge, and individual design aesthetic, Kleibacker stands out as a pinnacle of the fashion world in his artistry and drive for perfection.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Mrs. Ariss Thomas who was my first pattern making teacher at Evergreen Valley Community College in San Jose, California. She helped me learn the love of engineering a garment and also realize my love of teaching. Without her encouragement, friendship and positive attitude, I would not have begun my journey of pursuing a university education from which I have gained so very much.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Charles Kleibacker for his willingness to open his story to me. Oral interviewing can take some funny twists. For example, on a couple of occasions Charles described his studio at 26 West 76th Street in New York as “colorful.” I thought he meant that it was more on the seedy side or ‘rundown’ and that he was using the word facetiously. However, upon further questioning I understood that he viewed it as a lovely place. I sincerely appreciate Charles’ patience in allowing me to interview him for many long hours and double check many details to be sure that I understood what he was explaining. He is a remarkable man and I cherish the time that we’ve spent together talking.

My sincerest thanks go to Dr. Patricia A. Cunningham, my advisor for her patience and support through this process. She was always calm when I was not and helped me find solutions to the challenges that confronted me. Also, thank you to all of my committee members; Dr. Patricia A. Cunningham, Dr. Kathryn Jakes, Dr. Alice Conklin and Gayle Strege. I appreciate your insightful reading and comments on content both in the planning stages and execution. And thank you for your fortitude in staying with me on the roller coaster ride my life has taken this past year.

I thank Edith Serkownek and Tom Gates, librarians at the June F. Mohler Fashion Library at Kent State University for graciously helping in my search through their well-
organized Charles Kleibacker and Elizabeth Rhodes archives. I also thank Phillip Davis, Office of Information Technology and John Pryba, Information Technologist in Human Ecology at The Ohio State University who found the equipment necessary and did the work to transfer and save what was left of the images and sound on the decomposing ¾-inch video tapes in the archives at Kent.

I am indebted to Dr. Anne Bissonnette, Curator at the Kent State University Museum for not only helping me to photograph many of the Kleibacker garments in their collection, but also opening her home to a poor graduate student so that I didn’t have to pay for a hotel on those numerous research trips. My thanks also to Jean Druesedow, Director of Kent State University Museum for allowing the loan of the three Kleibacker muslins from which I was able to take patterns, and to Linda Claire Meisner, a former model of Charles’ who graciously loaned her Kleibacker dress to me for study.

I am also grateful to Dr. Elizabeth Rhodes, Department Head of the Shannon Rodgers and Jerry Silverman School of Fashion Design and Merchandising, Kent State University and also to Sister Mary Aloyse Hessberg in the Fashion Department at Mount Mary College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. They both graciously allowed me to interview them about their relationship with Charles and also gave me copies of their course syllabi and teaching notes pertaining to Charles’ bias construction techniques. This was an immense help. My thanks also to Carmen Maya, head of Charles’ workshop for 16 years. Her insight regarding high-end bias cut clothing construction was invaluable.

Thank you to Gayle Strege for smiling at my dreams and bringing me back down to reality. Learning from her and working with her among the “lovely ladies” of The Clothing & Textiles Historic Costume Collection for the past three years at The Ohio
State University will remain one of the highlights of my life. I look forward to further research there.

Thank you to the young women who donated their time to model Charles’ dresses for me at The Columbus Museum of Art: Jenny Fong, Kayla Malley, Kiernan Yeates, and Tiarra Harrel. I wish that I was more skilled with my camera or that we could have had a professional do the shoot.

I thank Nancy Messier with all my heart. She is a good friend and was wonderfully helpful in so many ways. Always interested in my work, she not only helped with some of the time-consuming handwork in the reproductions but also helped me with a move in the middle of all this. She was always there, willing to help and ease my burden.

This research was supported by a grant provided by The Lucy R. Sibley Endowment Fund. My thanks go to Dr. Francis M. Sibley for generously providing funds to enable me to do this work.

Finally, and especially, I thank Dr. Kathryn Jakes and my husband, Gary, whose consistent friendships, encouragement and kind support helped me to complete this last step of my journey. You know I could not have done it without you.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Charles Kleibacker was a fashion designer in New York City from 1960 to 1986, a time when major changes occurred in the fashion industry. These years brought social upheaval and turmoil; fashion reflected a large part of those changes. However, through it all Charles maintained an individual style and integrity of design. He focused on soft draping garments for women that could be worn for many years. His specialty and skill with bias designs earned him the label of ‘Master of the Bias Cut.’ (See figures 1.1 and 1.2) Through his individual design aesthetic Kleibacker earned a devoted clientele of women who purchased his designer ready-to-wear garments at top stores in New York City, or were custom fit in his atelier.

Kleibacker designed his garments so that women would be able to wear them for a number of years. He strove for a style that would flatter a woman’s figure yet be comfortable enough to allow her to simply don her clothing and forget about it. Bernice Fitz-Gibbon, the power-house of fashion retailing at Gimbels (where in 1944 and into 1946 Kleibacker worked for Fitz-Gibbon as a copywriter) said of Charles in 1967, “Today he’s conceded to be one of the top American designers – right up there next to Norman Norell, maybe alongside of Norell. Charles’s dreamy seductive dresses have made him “bias king” of the world. His fame is international. His 1965 showings brought rave reviews. His dresses retail for $500 up and on into the thousands. Charles’s especial
Figure 1.1  Charles Kleibacker, 1969  
Photograph courtesy of June F. Mohler Fashion Library,  
Kent State University
Figure 1.2  Charles Kleibacker, 1968
Photograph courtesy of June F. Mohler Fashion Library,
Kent State University
contribution to designing is his seductive silhouette that follows the feminine figure but is alluringly loose-ish around the waistline. As Kleibacher [sic] has pointed out, ‘the natural waistline is not a sudden pinching – it’s a gradual slenderness.’ As a good retail copywriter, Charles had learned to observe.”¹

When stiff mini-dresses were the rage, Kleibacker continued to make knee-length soft styles believing they were more attractive on a woman’s figure. He used mostly neutral solid colors because he felt that prints reflected more of a short fashion trend.

Though he maintained a constant design aesthetic, Kleibacker was innovative in embracing new fiber technology. He worked with DuPont Company in the development of their then new luxury nylon fiber, Qiana. In fact, he was one of the first designers to produce garments in both woven and knit Qiana.

Unlike many design operations of the time, Kleibacker did not rely on outside contractors to sew his garments. Instead, construction of his garments was produced in-house. He purposely kept his operation small to allow better control of the quality of his product.

Though Kleibacker’s business was relatively smaller than other design houses, he achieved recognition, respect, and renown in the fashion industry. He gained a reputation for high quality and flattering styles, eventually clothing well-known society women including First Lady, Mrs. Richard Nixon, Diahann Carroll, Rebekah Harkness and Mrs. Nelson Rockefeller. Although his business was small enough to be overlooked by some scholars, his skill and the quality of his garments allow him to be numbered among New York designers who influenced American fashion during the 1960s and 1970s.²
What was it about Charles Kleibacker and his way of doing business that earned him the kind of praise he received from Ms. Fitz-Gibbon? How did he attract famous and wealthy customers who could afford to purchase their clothing from anyone in the world? Charles Kleibacker was involved in all aspects of his business. His experience can serve as an excellent case study for the understanding of the development and operation of a design business. While it is not representative of all design businesses since each is unique to their specific niche market, Charles Kleibacker successfully negotiated many of the challenges that beset an operation of this type. He developed an identifiable design aesthetic and was able to maintain that individual look through two and a half decades that included arguably the most dramatic style changes that occurred in the twentieth century fashion industry. Kleibacker developed a devoted clientele in both upper-end ready-to-wear and private commissions and he gained a reputation for the qualities that he valued: fine workmanship, fine fabrics, fluidity of drape and excellent fit. His experience can be valuable to a designer at the beginning of a career.

Charles Kleibacker trained at Lanvin in Paris when couture was still strong. He built a reputation for couture quality ready-to-wear clothing while successfully operating a design business in New York. He was recognized for his use of draped bias fabric that softly followed and flattered a woman’s body. Bias is known to be the most difficult ‘cut’ to work with when constructing and sewing garments. Because of this, Charles could not rely on outside contractors who had difficulty in sewing on the bias. Instead, he trained his own drapers, sewing assistants and finishers in the exacting techniques that produced the results he wanted. Not willing to compromise his standards, he developed his patterns by meticulously draping each of his designs on
dress forms or bodies. He also draped every size of his ready-to-wear styles instead of relying on pattern graders. His attention to every detail is evident in the finished garments. This is what distinguishes his clothes as couture quality: the finest fabric, a perfect fit, and beautifully executed clean construction.

As shown by the response of visitors to exhibits featuring his designs both at Kent State University Museum in 2002 and at The Ohio State University’s exhibit in 2005, Kleibacker’s clean, flowing and minimalist designs remain current. Even though his garments were produced thirty or more years ago, many visitors remarked that they would wear his designs today.

In an era when the quality of garment construction is dwindling, Charles Kleibacker’s skill in bias techniques is unsurpassed. He has been actively sharing and teaching his very specific draping and construction techniques for more than 36 years as adjunct faculty, Designer-in-Residence, and as a visiting professor to more than twenty college fashion design programs. The techniques that Charles developed to produce clothes on the bias are important to identify and record. Few manufacturers in today’s fashion industry are able to afford the time it takes to produce high quality bias-cut garments. Workers with the skills necessary to sew bias are becoming more and more rare. Soon the special techniques that are important in construction of bias garments may be lost.

Statement of Problem

Charles Kleibacker is a readily recognized name to many: industry professionals, the women who bought and wore his designs, and the thousands of
students who benefited from his classroom and seminar instruction. However, outside of this group, little is known about Charles Kleibacker. He is included in a few scholarly studies but no major biography or comprehensive publication exists about his work. Many questions remain about him. This study examines his unique experiences that aided the development of his business and places his work in a contextual framework of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. This study analyzes Kleibacker’s design aesthetic, construction techniques, and the workings of his wholesale and retail business. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the man and his business in the fashion world.

Objectives

Four major objectives have been identified regarding this study of Charles Kleibacker’s designs and business. They are:

1. Identify Charles Kleibacker’s personal historic background and training that led him to become a fashion designer. How did he prepare for the career? What influences led him to select this path and from where did he draw his inspiration? The characteristics of his business will also be described to render a complete image of his working methods. How was he able to remain competitive producing labor-intensive bias-cut garments while still maintaining his high standards?

2. Analyze and categorize Kleibacker styles. What are characteristics of his designs? What are his design aesthetics? Did they remain constant or change throughout the years that he was designing?
3. Identify and record Kleibacker’s unique design, patterning and construction techniques, especially his use of the bias cut. What special techniques were developed out of necessity and how were the challenges of construction overcome? Kleibacker was trained in the couture tradition of Paris. How did he meld those demanding techniques with the necessity of being competitive in the ready-to-wear market of New York City?

4. For what kind of woman did Kleibacker design? Identify his target market. How did Kleibacker’s business fit into the context of the larger fashion industry of the time period?

Delimitations

A large and very lucrative part of Kleibacker’s business was his relationship with the Du Pont Company, Condé Nast’s *Vogue* Magazine, American Silk Mills and Taubman Company. While still producing designs in his studio and atelier throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Kleibacker engaged in national tours for these companies promoting fibers, explaining pattern and fitting alterations and producing fashion shows. Periodically many college fashion design programs hired Charles Kleibacker as a visiting designer to teach design and construction seminars.

Indeed, Kleibacker has been described as having multiple careers in his life. (See Time Line, Appendix A.) His first career was journalist and copywriter, the second career was designer. Overlapping with his design career, his third career was showman and educator in narrating and adding commentaries in the very popular fashion shows and sewing seminars held at fabric stores, malls and conference centers throughout the
country. This educational activity culminated in his eleven year association, from 1984 to 1995, with the Textiles and Clothing program in the College of Home Economics at The Ohio State University. At OSU, he was first brought on as visiting professor in 1984, to become designer-in-residence in 1985, charged with helping to expand the Historic Costume & Textiles Collection. A fourth career that grew out of his interest in historic garments is his current occupation as Adjunct Curator of Design at the Columbus Museum of Art. He is involved in developing exhibitions of historically important garments and of garments that illustrate how clothing designs are truly works of art. Through his involvement with the Costume collection at OSU and his continuing work at the Museum, Charles has also perfected what some would suggest as a fifth career – an extremely skilled fundraiser! Indeed, in 2004, Columbus Museum of Art initiated the formation of an endowed fund in Charles’ name.

“The Kleibacker Endowed Fund for Excellence will support Museum public programs of notable excellence that address broad issues of art and culture, including those inspired by the world of design. The Fund honors Charles Kleibacker’s commitment to Columbus and the high standard of excellence advanced by Charles in all of his endeavors.”

Due to time constraints and the need to narrow parameters, this study focuses exclusively on Kleibacker’s design career, but briefly touches on the other activities that occurred during the tenure of his design business in New York City. Kleibacker’s exhibition career is currently being researched by Mary Gray and her associates. Mrs. Gray is the Director of the Riffe Gallery in downtown Columbus, Ohio. They are preparing an exhibit about Kleibacker’s exhibition years that will be installed in 2008 with a planned opening in May.
Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach in its methodology. It combined data collection techniques for historical analysis, material culture studies, and oral history methodology. It included personal interviews with Kleibacker and those who worked with him, object analysis of Kleibacker garments, examination of newspaper and magazine articles, correspondence, illustrations, photographs and experiential learning through the recreation of Kleibacker garments.

The first objective of this study was to gather information about Charles Kleibacker’s personal history that relates to his interest in fashion and which prepared him to become a designer. What influenced and enabled him to become the kind of designer that he was in his work with bias and couture quality garments? Much of this information was collected from oral history interviews with Kleibacker. Documentary evidence was also collected from the Kleibacker archives and the Dr. Elizabeth Rhodes archives at the June F. Mohler Fashion Library at Kent State University.

The second objective of this study was to analyze the designs of Charles Kleibacker to determine their distinctive style and categorize them accordingly. This process helped in identifying any changes that might have occurred during the 26 years of his business. Kleibacker maintained an individual design aesthetic through much of his career with slight changes. A few styles, such as the mini-dress produced in 1968 and 1969 of yellow Qiana ottoman and of heavy Bianchini black silk with a stand out full skirt (see figure 1.3) seem to be anomalies within his entire body of work. Cultural forces may have influenced some, perhaps slight, style and design changes.
From Charles Kleibacker, master of the buns cut, comes a glamorous "fashion face" for 1969, a short, strapless evening dress of buttercup yellow with flounced skirt and sashed waistline. The fabric is a Jeri ottoman of Du Pont's new wonder fiber, Quimm. It looks like silk.
The methodology employed for this objective was to collect images of Kleibacker designs from magazine ads, the archives and the designer as well as photographs of the actual garments. Kleibacker garments are part of the Historic Costume & Textiles Collection at The Ohio State University, the collections at the Kent State University Museum and its School of Fashion Design and Merchandising as well as the collection at Milwaukee’s Mount Mary College. Kleibacker muslin patterns are located at Kent State University Museum and archives of Kleibacker papers, photographs, and magazines, video and audio recordings are at the June F. Mohler Fashion Library at Kent State University. Many Kleibacker designs are still owned by the designer and photos were taken of them on models as opposed to those in the museum collections that can only be photographed on dress forms or mannequins.

The third objective of this study was to record the special construction techniques that Kleibacker developed in treating bias-cut fabric. I had the privilege and advantage of working directly with the artist himself in an effort to understand the technical as well as the mental processes that he used in his design creations.

Much of this understanding also was acquired through experiential learning by recreating three garments selected by Kleibacker that represent his most popular designs and which encompass typical construction and patterning techniques that were developed and included in production of his clothing. It was assumed that the designer would be best able to judge these criteria. The selected garments were: first, a bias-cut skirt the pattern of which was used in Charles’ couture sewing classes, second, a black wool crepe late day dress with a drawstring neckline loaned by Linda Claire Meisner of
New York who was a production model for Kleibacker in the 1970s, and third, a dress with a bias-cut long sleeve which was developed into a wide variety of models and sold extremely well over several seasons from 1969 – 1973. The last garment is in Charles Kleibacker’s personal collection. The muslin pattern for each of these garments is owned by The Kent State University Museum. Constructing these garments under the tutelage of the designer enabled me to better understand the processes involved in producing the masterful bias garments.

In addition to the garment reproductions, the methodology for this objective included in-depth examination of patterning and construction techniques that were developed and used in Kleibacker’s atelier. The patterning was illustrated through line drawings and flat sketches to supplement photographs. Construction techniques were described and illustrated in text, illustrations, photographs and video. The outcome of this objective was a foundation for an instructional packet that can be used by future design students in learning techniques for working with bias.

Two professors, Dr. Elizabeth Rhodes at Kent State University and Sister Mary Aloyse Hessburg at Mount Mary College, worked extensively with Charles Kleibacker in the past and developed instructional booklets and visual resources for their courses and design students. Sister Aloyse gave me a copy of her booklet and Dr. Rhodes has graciously made her resources available as well. In addition to several boxes of course workbooks and sewn samples, Dr. Rhodes produced video and audio recordings of interviews with Kleibacker in which he discussed his design philosophy and detailed some of his construction techniques. To rescue these recordings from obscurity, I paid a professional to transfer what could be saved from out-of-date 3/4” video and cassette
tapes to digital media in order to preserve them and help make them more accessible to future students and researchers. They are stored in the Kleibacker archives in the June F. Mohler Fashion Library at Kent State University.

The fourth objective of this study was to understand the Kleibacker customer and the context with in which he sold his garments. Selling to comparably few specialty stores, Charles’ target market was small. What kind of woman bought the high-end Kleibacker label? What was her position in the tumultuously changing world of the 1960s and 1970s?

The methodology for this objective included historical data collection used in cultural comparisons. Interviews, articles, magazines, journal and book publications comprised the documentary sources.

During the 1960s, fashion journalists noted Kleibacker’s individual aesthetic and creative independence, “In an era when many designers seem to have made a point of creating shapeless, baggy and unbecoming clothes for women, Charles Kleibacker stands out for the designs he introduces that are good looking, feminine and detailed handsomely.”8 The Kleibacker label sold even when much of the world’s design focus was turned towards the popular youth movement. Much of the 1960s styles discussed in fashion history texts focus on stiffer styles than those that Charles Kleibacker produced. Yet, his was a successful and viable business during those years. It is suspected that he filled a specific niche market. Historians agree that the styles of the 1970s “caught up”9 with the softly flowing draped designs that Kleibacker focused on as early as 1958 when he was hired at Nettie Rosenstein on New York’s Seventh Avenue specifically for
his ‘soft clothes.’ Kleibacker’s target market was identified, described and placed within the fashion and retail industry.

During the time that Charles Kleibacker operated his business, fashion retail and attitudes towards traditional couture underwent a drastic change. Couture was a thriving industry in the mid-1950s when Charles was working as assistant designer to Antonio del Castillo at the House of Lanvin. By the end of the 1970s, couture clientele dropped considerably and couture houses depended heavily on income from their perfume labels and licensed products to keep them in business. In the 1950s a woman could go into a fine shop such as Bergdorf Goodman in New York City and receive individual attention from the sales associates in the store’s custom department or the ready-to-wear salon. By the end of the 1970s, the custom-made operations in such stores had almost completely disappeared. The cultural and economic changes that occurred during the focus years of this study are a part of the context of Kleibacker’s business and were considered in developing a complete understanding of Kleibacker’s work.

Charles Kleibacker’s multi-faceted career that included teaching and touring in addition to his design business and his focused aesthetic of soft bias clothes set him apart as unique among most designers. His determination and drive to learn the challenges presented by working on the bias as well as taking advantage of technological and economic opportunities establish him as an American original. Charles Kleibacker didn’t rest until he became a master craftsman, an artist capable of turning his vision of high quality graceful bias cut dresses into a reality.
1 Bernice Fitz-Gibbon, *Macy’s, Gimbels, and Me: How to Earn $90,000 a year in Retail Advertising.* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967) 280, 281.


3 Dr. Anne Bissonnette curated the exhibit in the Paige Palmer Gallery at Kent State University Museum. *Charles Kleibacker; Master of the Bias* ran from March 14, 2001 to April 28, 2002. Many images and text connected to the exhibit can be viewed at http://dept.kent.edu/museum/exhibit/kleibacker/kleibacker2.htm (accessed June 5, 2007)

4 I first met Charles Kleibacker when I was privileged to work with him in the installation of The Ohio State University’s exhibit: *Sculpture and Drapery; The Art of Fashion* shortly after my arrival in Ohio to begin my doctoral studies. The exhibit, curated by Charles Kleibacker and Gayle Strege was in the Gladys Keller Snowden Galleries and showed from January 22 to June 25, 2005. Text by Janet Ciccone, Director of Communications for the College of Human Ecology with accompanying photographs of garments in the exhibit can be viewed at http://costume.osu.edu/Exhibitions/sculpture/ (accessed June 5, 2007)

5 This was told to me by many visitors when I toured groups through the OSU exhibit. Anne Bissonnette also remarked hearing similar comments from visitors to her exhibit.

6 In 1989, the college was renamed The College of Human Ecology.


8 *New Haven Register,* January 28, 1968.

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND OF CHARLES KLEIBACKER

Recognizing the Lure of Fashion

It was a strange path that brought Charles Kleibacker to the field of fashion. Charles credits his love of fine clothes to his mother. (See figure 2.1) She appreciated dressing nicely even though they lived in the rural town of Cullman, Alabama where many of the roads were simply dirt. He says he was literally “brought up” in the women’s ready-to-wear department of the family owned store, Stiefelmeyer’s, which carried the best clothes in town. It didn’t carry “really fine clothes, but decent clothes.” His sister, Ruth and their cousin, Louise with their good figures knew how to dress and were always smartly turned out. Charles said that they stood out from the majority of the people in the town because the garments they got were better. They didn’t have more clothes than others, but they had a few really nice pieces. Charles explained that “there was something inside me, even all those years back in Alabama… there’s something about a cut – and I had no idea what that word even meant – that does define what a good garment is all about.”

Charles attended Saint Bernard Junior College in Saint Bernard, Alabama for two years, and then transferred to The University of Notre Dame where he graduated “second
in a class of 600” with a Bachelor of Arts degree in journalism on December 20, 1942.\(^2\)

After graduating, he worked as a newspaper reporter for the *Birmingham Age-Herald* in Birmingham, Alabama writing articles covering events such as a big early morning local fire and an article on Madame Chiang Kai-chek. With amusement, he recalls that he covered “everything but fashion.”\(^3\) At the same time, “listening to Uncle Carl’s work ethic,” he also worked in the advertising department of Sears and Roebuck.

Uncle Carl Stiefelmeyer, besides owning the department store, also owned the local cotton gin and real estate around the area.\(^4\) It was Uncle Carl who insisted on
carrying the quality clothing in the store, but it was Charles’ father, Charles Hudson Kleibacker, who knew what real quality was and could explain to the customers in the men’s area of the store that he ran, why and how a well-made suit was better than lesser-quality suits. He was also the one that insisted that all customers whether they were the dirt poor cotton farmers or the mayor’s wife, all get treated “like royalty” when shopping in the store. This is a quality that Charles also embraced throughout his own life.

The sales clerks were all very honest with the customers in Steifelmeyer’s. If the store felt they could alter the garment, they would, but if they could not or the garment was not right for the customer, the clerk told them. These principles are ingrained in Charles and so was retail. Within a year after graduating from Notre Dame, he decided to enroll in the highly regarded graduate program in retail merchandising at New York University in New York City.

Uncle Carl thought that Charles would “never make it” in New York. He expected Charles to work in the store in Cullman, but Charles was determined to go to New York and didn’t expect anyone to pay his way, “not Uncle Carl and not his father.” He took his savings from his two jobs and went to New York.

Knowing that he had to continue working to pay for tuition and other expenses, Charles attended night school so that he could work during the day. He got a job writing advertising copy for the famous Bernice Fitz-Gibbon at Gimbels, New York. Ms. Fitz-Gibbon remarked in Charles’ first interview with her, “From the south? Oh, to me they’re all pale, languid and lazy.” Charles is anything but lazy; she was impressed that he had finished Notre Dame early “because of the war years.” Even though she thought he was quite young at 23, she hired him at the rate of twenty five dollars a week. He started in
the proof room where he took the advertising copy around to the managers of all the
departments in the store for approvals and correction on the ads concerning their
merchandise.

After a while, Charles worked his way up to the production room, and then was
promoted to write ads for such products as automobile tires and garden accessories.
When a fashion copy-writing job suddenly became vacant, he was selected to fill it. This
was one of the top jobs in Fitz-Gibbon’s department. Ms. Fitz-Gibbon recalled in her
book *Macy’s Gimbels and Me* that Charles “was horrified” that he was selected for the
position and that they had to talk him into it. Well, he “dug in and put his finely honed
mind on fashion.”

Charles was at Gimbels, from 1944 to 1946, and then went to De Pinna, a “first-
class carriage trade” specialty store on Fifth Avenue doing similar work writing
advertising copy and promotion for boys and men. After De Pinna, he worked for a while
at Revlon writing copy that went on product packages. It was good pay, but he was bored
with the job and didn’t stay there very long. He really liked being involved with
fashion, fine fashion.

In 1948, Charles and three others took a vacation to Mexico. On their way back
they went through California and Charles decided to move there. He went back to
Alabama for a bit, bought a station wagon and drove to California. He took his writing
portfolio to Los Angeles looking for work in copywriting and “had one hell of a time
getting a job.” Some time later, on a weekend trip to visit a friend, he drove up to San
Francisco and “fell in love with the city,” so he decided to move there. He got another job
writing copy for a woman’s specialty store, Robert Kirk. The clothes were “not
expensive, but they were not by any means middle of the road. They were conservative
clothes. I think that’s what bothered me, very conservative clothes, and a lot of suits.” He
was bored again.

Shortly before Christmas in 1948, Charles decided to take a chance. He noticed
that Hildegarde was performing at the Mark Hopkins Hotel in San Francisco. She was a
very well-known cabaret singer and a radio personality of the time and was “still in a
very glorious part of her career.” As he was growing up, Charles recalled hearing his
mother in Alabama on Sunday nights shoo everyone out of the house so that she could
listen undisturbed to Hildegarde on the radio. So only with that background, he wrote a
letter to her asking for a job.11

The letter got through and Charles remembers being interviewed by Hildegarde
and her partner-manager, Anna Sosenko in the kitchen of the Mark Hopkins which
Hildegarde had to go through to get on the stage to do her nightclub act. He said that
Anna turned to Hildegarde and said, “Well, I don’t know, he seems awfully green but
maybe we might give it a try.” It was good timing; they had just fired both a secretary
and a public relations person so they desperately needed someone. Charles really thinks
the main reason they hired him was because he had a station wagon to help with
transporting all of the people and equipment that was involved with their cross-country
tour.

At the age of 27, Charles found himself part of the entourage of “The
Incomparable Hildegarde” with duties in the areas of publicity, public relations, booking,
and secretarial. They spent Christmas of that year in Los Angeles and were going to stop
next in Las Vegas where Hildegarde had a very important engagement at the Thunderbird Hotel.

Both she and Anna were very concerned about the engagement in Las Vegas and Anna said that she thought Hildegarde needed another dress. Part of the allure of Hildegarde was “the way she wore these clothes with great authority – beautiful, beautiful clothes with great authority.”\(^{12}\) So while they were in Los Angeles, they went to the Adrian salon in Beverly Hills. Charles doesn’t recall why, but he went along with them in the big chauffeur-driven Cadillac.

This visit to the Adrian salon was really Charles’ first experience in a big couture salon. He said that he “was bowled over…absolutely bowled over!” Hildegarde was a big name and “everybody bowed and scraped to her” and the salon was very, very beautiful with columns and high ceilings. He will never forget the dress that she bought there. (See figure 2.2)

“It was a kelly green silk crepe, a very slim-fitting dress with what looked like at first glance a voluminous overskirt. The intent was to pick up the overskirt and in the back wear it as a cape. On the underside, the edge of the skirt/cape was rimmed in a band of silver sequins. These became evident when the over skirt was worn as a cape.”\(^{13}\)

After Christmas, Anna flew out New York’s Bill Richardson who helped her with the lighting of the Hildegarde show. Then they all drove to Las Vegas for the successful engagement at the Thunderbird Hotel in January. After that they went on to do a month at St. Louis, then Miami and Daytona Beach, with the orchestra going along in cars. They stopped at the luxury resort, the Greenbriar,\(^{14}\) in West Virginia for two days of rest before continuing on to their May engagement at the Persian Room of the Plaza Hotel in New
Figure 2.2  Hildegarde in the gown she bought at Adrian’s salon, December 1948. Photograph courtesy of Mount Mary Historic Costume Collection.
York City, Hildegarde’s home. The end of 1949 was filled with engagements in Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Boston, Canada, Wisconsin and Tennessee.

In March of 1950, Hildegarde was scheduled for European engagements. Charles asked to go along and he recalls Anna asking him what she would do with him in Europe since he didn’t know the language. But Charles talked them into letting him continue by saying, “My salary isn’t really that much if you will continue with it. Don’t you feel that I’ve done a job for you?” He said that Anna could often be explosive and she replied, “Well, you do have a point there.” They compromised that he would continue receiving the same salary, but would have to pay all of his own expenses.

Hildegarde and Anna took first class passage sailing on the America in March with a very wealthy and influential friend, Louise Stewart. Charles booked third class passage and was given special access permission to the first class decks so that he could come and go in his capacity as their assistant. Hildegarde did three evening concerts at the Theatre du Champs Elysée in Paris. Through the influence of Louise Stewart, the Opening Night on June 3rd was a big affair benefiting the American Aid Society and Disabled Veterans (Representation au Profit de l’American Aid Society et des ‘Gueules Cassés’) with the Garde Republican lining the stairway of the theater. (See figure 2.3)

While they were in Paris, Hildegarde bought her performance gowns at the couture salons of Dior, Pierre Balmain and Bruyère. As a member of her entourage, Charles sometimes accompanied her to the fittings and he was immediately impressed by the beautiful gowns and surroundings. He spent many afternoons in the salons of Paris watching the mannequin shows and absorbing the atmosphere of haute couture. He remembers “sitting in Dior and thinking…of the sheer beauty of the clothes, of the house,
of the mannequins and the whole presentation… and thinking what am I doing? This is what I’ve always wanted!” He was impressed by all of it especially the fashion exhibition he saw that featured the bias designs of Madeleine Vionnet who was by this time retired.

After a month long engagement at the Savoy Hotel in London, they returned to New York in July of 1950. By Christmas time, Charles had made up his mind and gave them proper notice. Anna thought it was a bad decision but that didn’t stop him; he soon thereafter plunged into learning more about the world of fashion.
His First Fashion Business – Elliot-Charles, Inc.

After returning from Europe, Charles started working towards starting a business in fashion. His cousin, Louise Stiefelmeyer from Alabama had married a wealthy man named Elliot Lawes from Montclair, New Jersey and was living in Montclair and coming into New York City often. By April 1951, the three of them, Charles, Louise and Elliot became partners in a custom order house they named Elliot-Charles. Louise was to bring in the women with money, as she knew lots of women in society. Charles Kleibacker was the business manager, also in charge of publicity and sales. They hired a man that they both knew named Charles Wetmore to do the designing.

They rented a small but stylish space on the ground floor of a townhouse at 106 East 60th Street near Park Avenue in New York City. With work and money, it became a handsome salon, with a decently-sized workroom and an office space. They had some success, but really didn’t sell enough garments to pay for their location and workroom personnel. (See figures 2.4 – 2.8)

“Charles, the designer had not one red cent. He was now married with a young child; fortunately his wife was working. He was the one out of the three of us that got a bit of a salary.” In the workroom, they had a woman and a few girls under her that got paid. Charles, Louise and Louise’s husband, Elliot were the ones that were putting money into the business. Unfortunately, they weren’t making any profit. Charles watched his savings dwindle away, and Elliot was also beginning to get concerned about the whole situation.
They were still trying to keep the business going when Charles took a night job as a cashier at the Howard Johnson’s around the corner (at Park and 59th) to help pay the bills. Soon he realized that the waiters made the better money there. The first night they put him on as a waiter, he was behind the counter area and in walked Mrs. Miller, a woman for whom they were making clothes! “Mrs. Charles Miller, whose husband was a very important man at MCA (Music Corporation of America) which represented among others, Hildegarde and all the big entertainment names at that time…” He ducked down
behind the ice cream machine and begged his co-worker to fill in for him so that Mrs. Miller wouldn’t see him working there!

Soon after, they realized that they needed to close Elliot-Charles and did so after they finished out their one-year lease. Charles was adamant about not declaring bankruptcy when they closed. As he was really the only one of the three of them who did not have family to care for, he continued working as a waiter to pay off the remaining bills.

Learning the Basics with Madame Berg

The experience with Elliot-Charles helped Charles Kleibacker realize what he really wanted to do was to design. He said, “Now it was definite that I wanted to do this. I had become really entranced with the whole engineering of design.” He realized from observing the workroom that “this design area was a whole lot more than what people think”; he needed to learn that end of the business. This was very apparent to him when they hired a very proficient head of the workroom, Madame Berg to replace the first woman they had. Unfortunately she was hired too late to help save the business. Charles recognized her skill as soon as she was hired and proposed that she continue working for him. He would be her apprentice learning from her, but he would be the designer. She would work with him to develop his designs. Intrigued by the idea, she consented to the plan provided that she had no reduction in salary. Of course, he agreed.

Charles rented a very small inexpensive loft workroom (around $65 or $75 per month) at 38th Street near Lord and Taylor, between 5th and 6th Avenues. It was all he could afford on a waiter’s wage. He brought the necessary equipment from the Elliot-
Charles shop – the cutting table, dress forms and a sewing machine. Louise talked him into taking a nice mirror “just in case he needed to fit a client.” He didn’t think they would have anyone that would want to come to that place; it was very unattractive. It had a cement floor and a restroom accessible only from the outer hallway. It was 20’ x 25’ with not very attractive windows along one side and was on the fifth floor, serviced by a very crude elevator. Surprisingly, he did have one continuing customer whom he had met through Hildegard and Anna. “She was a Park Avenue lady if I’ve ever seen one.”

After a bit, Anna Sosenko invited him to stay in the enormous apartment on 33 East 70th Street that she had with Hildegard. He used one of the unoccupied maid’s rooms, had his own bathroom and came and went through the back entrance. In this way, he helped them “protect the place” and he got a bed rent-free.

Madame Berg was experienced as a skilled head of European and New York clothing workrooms. She was born in Russia, but had trained in Paris. Charles began working with her; he learned how to develop his design ideas and understand construction and the concentrated work of engineering a garment. When they had a few dresses that were ready, he took them to the buyers at the department and specialty stores around New York to try to get them to place orders. They were able to produce some very nice garments. 18 Madame Berg had no desire to design but she enjoyed the engineering challenge of creating Charles’ ideas. Both Charles and Madame Berg were very serious about the arrangement; they were a good match in this way.

Hattie Carnegie was the first to buy something from him. It was a three piece wool day-time ensemble consisting of a skirt, a bolero jacket with a gusseted sleeve and a cummerbund. All three pieces were reversible from a solid to a plaid. Carnegie bought
two, and they sold, and they reordered – a total of about twelve or fifteen outfits. This made Charles think that they were “on their way.” They did small groupings of three or four garments and Charles would take them around to the specialty stores to try to get orders. Lord and Taylor also bought some. (See Design Chronology, Appendix E.)

Together Charles and Madame Berg constructed most of the garments they produced. Sometimes if they needed to get something out quickly, they brought in a few free lance people that Madame Berg knew. Once Charles hired a contract sewing shop to produce an order for two linen designs (see figures E1.2 and E1.3). They had an order from a store for a few dresses, but the owner of the contract sewing shop would only accept an order for producing a large number of garments; Charles talked him down to doing eight in each of the two styles and sizes – size 10 and size 12. That was an order for 32 garments and Charles had to “scramble to get the money together to pay for it.” It was definitely a risk to take at this point, but it worked out.

Selling a few orders and working at Howard Johnson’s brought in enough money to pay for rent, Madame Berg’s salary, and the fabrics to continue. Charles also was able to get a couple of free-lance jobs. There were a number of custom design houses in New York City at that time. Bessie Kugeloff had an impressive couture salon in a big building at 16 East 52nd Street. It must not have been an ideal work situation. “She always had to have her hand in the designs” and frequently argued with Charles over the designs he wanted to do. He was successful in producing a variety of clothing, evening and day dresses as well as suits and coats.

One design was a dress of black and white piqué with a black velvet band that extended down from one side under the armseye and cut across under the derriere (see
Charles loved the dress, but Bessie “hated it – absolutely hated it.” Another dress he said that he fought over with her was in regards to a full-skirted off the shoulder black silk taffeta party dress (see figure E1.19). It had some handmade fringe with jet beads that was inset around the neckline and from neck to hem in the front princess seams. “She went crazy about those”… meaning the handmade fringe trim. A suit with very narrow skirt and short-sleeved jacket with piped trim and an extremely flared peplum was done up in a thistle print (see figure E1.10). Bessie loved prints but Charles really disliked them; he had to use fabric that she already had. He did like the wools; they were okay for the suits and coats, but he didn’t really like the other fabrics. A gown that she “fought like mad” over was a long white cotton piqué gown that had one shoulder strap (see figure E1.11). It had a black fringe placed diagonally from waist to hip echoing the neckline. Under the approximately twelve inch-long fringe is sewn tiny black beads.\footnote{19}

Bessie really knew how to sell clothes, but she was a difficult woman to work for. Perhaps she was objecting to details that were labor intensive and was just being a shrewd business woman. Charles admits that some of what he designed did not fit with the clientele that she had, but he was insistent in their creation as he wasn’t getting paid.

In fact, Charles got no money at all for doing what he did for her shop. His only compensation was that he was credited as the designer. Also, he was able to have access to the garments that he designed to take photographs of them – at his expense. Still, it was a good experience both in working with her very good workroom staff and in defending his design ideas.

Another free-lance job came from Ben Shaw\footnote{20} in early 1954. Charles got an introduction to Mr. Shaw from a friend. He had an artist friend draw up some nice
sketches of some of his ideas to present in the interview.\textsuperscript{21} Ben Shaw liked Charles’ designs and since he had an interest in a number of design businesses on Seventh Avenue, he hired Charles to do some work for one of them, Elfreda Fox. Two of Charles’ designs were put in the Fall line that year, a ¾ length coat which became a best seller (the design of which started while he was working with Madame Berg – see figure E1.23) and a long ball gown. The ball gown was not what was normally offered at Elfreda Fox, but Ben Shaw wanted Charles to design something that would be a bit out of the ordinary to spice up the offerings at that store. The ball gown was “somehow put on the line.” Charles did the original sample in a satin fabric of a silk/rayon blend. Later the gown was resewn in satin acetate fabric and was featured in a double page ad for Celanese Acetate in the November 15, 1954 \textit{Vogue}, but he never saw the ad.

Charles sailed for Paris in October 1954 and only recently in 2007 saw the 1954 advertisement (see figure E1.22).\textsuperscript{22} He never saw the ad because, despite the warnings from Anna, Uncle Carl and Bernice Fitz-Gibbon who told him he was “making a tremendous mistake,” something inside him “said, no, you’re not. Stick to what you feel is right and go.” He was on his way to fulfilling his dream of becoming a part of Paris couture.

\textsuperscript{1} Unless otherwise noted, all phrases and statements within quotation marks throughout this paper are the words of Charles Kleibacker as told to me in interviews spanning December, 2006 through June, 2007 or in an interview with Dr. Elizabeth Rhodes done in March of 1993. Transcripts of all interviews can be reviewed in the Charles Kleibacker Archives at The June F. Mohler Fashion Library, Kent State University.

\textsuperscript{2} Charles was born on November 20, 1921. Charles was in the class of 1943 at Notre Dame. As a result of the United States entering World War II after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, many universities accelerated their programs to allow men to finish their degrees quickly to be available to serve in the armed forces. Charles attended classes through the summer and finished his degree six months early.
at the age of 21. He was inducted into the army in January of 1943, but was not allowed to serve because of his flat feet.


4 Uncle Carl was a “wealthy kind of tycoon” in this small town. He bought a chauffeur-driven Lincoln (with a dividing window between passenger and driver) and would “pile his rather impressive-looking self into the back seat” to have a man from the store drive him where he wanted to go.

5 The subject of this paper, Charles Kleibacker was named after his father, but given the full name of Charles John Kleibacker.

6 Charles Edwards was head of the graduate merchandising program at the Wall Street Branch of New York University when he attended from 1944 to 1946. Charles Kleibacker said that he “could not have been dumber” in not finishing the degree. He was just a few credits shy of completion. “I was coming out with ‘A’s all the way through there. I should have made up my mind to come out with a ‘C’ and finish it. It would have made that much difference.”

7 Charles told me (with a laugh) that he “would never get that out of [his] heart.”

8 Even today at the age of 87, he never stops; he is always involved in a project or preparing an exhibit.

9 Bernice Fitz-Gibbon, *Macy’s, Gimbels, and Me: How to earn $90,000 a year in retail advertising.* (New York: Simon and Schuster,1967), 280. When Charles left Gimbels, Ms. Fitz-Gibbon threw him a “big going away party – a luncheon at the Hampshire House which was at that time one of those elegant places on Central Park South.” He saved a poster from there that has all the names of everyone who was in attendance at that event. It is in his archives at The June F. Mohler Fashion Library at Kent State University.

10 They were marketing makeup with the name of ‘Hildegarde Rose’ at that time as “hers was such a big name.” He later developed a life-long association with Hildegarde.

11 Charles uses this as an example that we should all take these gambles sometimes.

12 A dress that Hildegarde had custom-made for her at Hattie Carnegie’s in 1940 was embroidered with 75,000 real pearls. “It was valued at $250,000 and toured the country before being auctioned off for charity.” Caroline Rennolds Milbank, *New York Fashion: The Evolution of American Style.* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989), 149.

13 An original photograph of Hildegarde in this dress is part of the Historic Costume Collection at Mount Mary College.

14 The Greenbriar had recently hired the well-known decorator Dorothy Draper from New York City to redo much of the interiors.

15 Charles received a very strong lesson about appearance; when they arrived in Paris the first night and they were going out to dinner, Anna said to Charles, “My God! Is that the coat you brought over here with you? I can’t be seen with you in that coat!”

16 Elizabeth Taylor and her first husband, Nicky Hilton were also on the ship.
This particular Howard Johnson’s was open late at 59th and Park Avenue. People would come in after the theatre for ice cream and such. Most of the customers were very good tippers; Charles recalls waiting on Marlene Dietrich!

They did not put labels into the garments that they constructed during this time. That would have cost money that Charles did not want to spend.

Charles is not sure if that one ever sold even though he loved it. He had the dress for a long time and eventually had it dyed entirely black because it became so soiled. The Mount Mary Costume Collection at Milwaukee, Wisconsin now owns this dress.

Ben Shaw’s son Gerald (known as Jerry) and Jerry’s wife later became partners with Oscar de la Renta in his design business, Oscar de la Renta until he later bought them out.

Charles always says that he had no talent for sketching but there were a few of his sketches in his archives at the June F. Mohler Fashion Library at Kent State University which convey the style very clearly. They are included in this paper (see figures E1.5 – 8). One is paired up with the Bessie Kugeloff garment that was produced from his sketched idea.

Vogue, November 15, 1954, 28, 29. In recently reviewing letters from Paris to home, Charles found reference to the ad and contacted someone at Vogue who graciously found and sent copies of the pages to him!
CHAPTER 3

LEARNING THE BUSINESS

During the years that he was working with Madame Berg and since experiencing Paris with Hildegarde and Anna, Charles Kleibacker decided that he really wanted to be a part of Paris Couture. The time spent learning couture sewing techniques from Madame Berg helped him acquire an understanding of garment construction. Learning to develop his own design ideas under her tutelage, along with the few free-lance jobs he had, helped him gain a sense of confidence and also put together a “very decent” design portfolio. At this point Charles felt confident enough in his skills and believed that he was ready to go. He wanted to get further training and polish to eventually open his own design house; Paris was just the place that could give him that training.

Training in Paris – Lanvin

In October of 1954, he bought a one way ticket and got on a ship going to Paris. With just $400 in his pocket and with halting language skills, he took his portfolio to several couture houses looking for a design job. Chanel and Dior wouldn’t even look at him. They didn’t believe that Americans were designers; they felt that Americans coming from the ready-to-wear focus of the United States market could only be pattern makers. Finally Galleries Lafayette, a huge department store in Paris was interested and offered
him a position. This was fortunate for him as he was almost out of money and since they paid him a good wage, that job allowed him to stay in Paris a bit longer.

Charles said “my French was so negligible at this stage of the game, that when they offered the money that they offered, my eyes went to heaven because this was a God-send!” He didn’t really understand what Galleries Lafayette wanted from him. They put him in a big, wonderful space with dress forms. They gave him muslin and said, “Let’s see what you can do.” Eventually, Charles figured out that they wanted designs from him, but also wanted him to give them patterns – “since all Americans must be pattern makers.”

This was the first time Charles had even played around with muslin on a dress form! Madame Berg had done that entire step in their work together and had not taught him anything about draping a design on a form. She didn’t really know flat patterning techniques, but would develop something on the dress form and ask him if what she had done was what he had in mind for his designs. Though he was untrained in this, Charles didn’t give up; he thought that “maybe they knew what they were doing, because [he] didn’t.” It didn’t take Galleries Lafayette very long to realize that he didn’t know anything about making patterns. That job lasted only about a month and he didn’t really produce anything for them!

Undaunted, and with a little bit more money in his pocket, Charles next got a job for a dress maker in Paris. One of the workers at Dior was sneaking in muslins and the shop owner wanted Charles to take the pattern from them for her. She wised up faster than Galleries Lafayette; he only lasted a week or two with her.
Soon after that Charles managed to get an interview at Lanvin. He still had his portfolio which always drew interest because the photographs were very good.\textsuperscript{1} Antonio del Castillo was the head designer at Lanvin at that time and after looking at Charles’ portfolio thought that he might fit in as an assistant designer.

Castillo turned him over to Madame Becagli, a Lanvin cousin who ran the studio and who made the financial arrangements. To get the permit card to stay in Paris, Charles needed someone to certify that they were willing to hire him. They gave him an offer letter on Lanvin House stationary (see figure 3.1). Still, it took a year and a half to get the papers processed and Charles had to leave the country by going to Belgium every three months and reenter as a tourist until he got the work permit. In the mean time, they paid him with petty cash. It was not much, not even as much as Galleries Lafayette had paid. But he didn’t mind, he was not there to get rich; he was there to learn.

Antonio del Castillo (see figure 3.2) was born in Spain, and had worked in New York. He could speak very good English (with a heavy Spanish accent) so Charles’ poor French was not an issue. In fact, everyone in the house spoke some English, except for the ladies in the workroom; he can recall hearing no English spoken there. Charles did enroll in a French language class right away to augment the small bit he learned from Berlitz, a language school in New York that “supposedly taught French” where he had gone to learn “to at least to open my mouth a little bit… I was still very withdrawn at that time, quite shy.” In working at Lanvin, being quiet was a positive characteristic, he was not regarded as “one of those loud ugly Americans” and they knew that he would not be talking about the business to their competitors.
Figure 3.1 Letter of appointment from House of Lanvin, dated December 3, 1954. Scan courtesy of June F. Mohler Fashion Library, Kent State University.
One of the main duties that Charles and the other assistant, Jacques, carried out for Castillo was to go into the large fabric room and select fabrics that they thought would go well with the mood and look of the line that Castillo was developing. When the textile sales people came and showed Castillo large swatches of fabrics they had for sale, sample bolts of the fabrics that he selected went into the fabric room for storage. When a particular fabric was chosen to go on the line, the house would then purchase the fabric from the textile wholesaler.

Another part of his work was to develop design ideas that would stay in conjunction with Castillo’s ideas for the entire collection. (See figures E2.1 – 8 for designs done mostly by Charles alone). Castillo designed by sketching as did Jacques; they both sketched very well. Charles never felt he was a good sketcher, so he had a dress form in his office and now he really started draping. “He had a little bit of an idea by now,” so he would do something on a form and then Castillo would come in and look at
it and they worked it out in that manner. At that point “there was nothing in [his] mind that was really remotely bias” and Castillo didn’t really do bias designs.

Something else that Charles ended up doing was checking the live mannequins when they “passed the collection.” This was the process when the collection was modeled in the salon for buyers or prospective customers. During the first ten days of introducing a new collection, with the press and the buyers in attendance, the mannequins were very good about wearing the correct hat, shoes, gloves and jewelry. However after a bit, they often began to get sloppy. The collection was passed every day at three o’clock. Also at other times; if there was just one customer in the salon that wanted to see the garments, they showed the entire collection, in the exact order that was established, including the furs. So the models waited and had to be ready when they were required.

The models were different sizes (8, 10, 12) and different heights so that the customers would be able to identify their own body type with the different models that came out. There were three or four of a certain size so if perhaps the star mannequin, Nadine might have come back from lunch a little bit late or someone might have gotten sick, there were fewer girls than in the regular line up and someone had to move quickly to change. There was a woman in charge of the cabine where the mannequins waited. Having ten models was a lot to manage and Castillo was very definite about all the accessories so, every afternoon Charles stood in the little hallway that they had to pass through from the cabine to the salon and was adamant about not letting those girls out unless they had everything on properly. At the end of the season, Charles was gratified that Castillo announced to the entire ensemble that the collection was finally passed properly “…grâce à Charles!”2
Even though he was firm, the models liked Charles. One of the models, Dani worked at Balenciaga before going to work at Lanvin. She and Charles became friends and she explained to him what it was that made Balenciaga such a master at his designs. Charles remembers Castillo saying to him one time, “When the suit silhouette has changed, Balenciaga will do the changing.” Balenciaga was the recognized master of couture in the city of Paris.

The girls in one of the sewing workrooms also grew to like Charles. At that time in the House of Lanvin, there were seven workrooms:

“There was a work room for the flou, the soft clothes which was the big workroom. Then you had the tailleurs, the tailors for the coats and suits. Then there was a workroom for evening coats alone – Castillo did a lot of evening coats. Then there was a workroom for what was called demi-couture for the boutique on the main floor. For demi-couture we did a collection that reflected a bit of the couture but the clothes were much, much simpler and the client can have only one fitting.”

The custom-made store for men was across the street where they also had the workshop for the furs. “Lanvin at the time was an empire in its way” taking up the entire building at 22 Faubourg St. Honore and some of the surrounding spaces. It was and still is right across from Hermes and down the street from the American Embassy.

The workroom that really fascinated Charles was the flou. He was determined to get in there to observe and learn all that he could. Madame Janine was the head of that workroom and “liked the idea that [he] was interested in construction”; he didn’t disturb the girls and he only asked questions judiciously. By now he knew the French terms for most of what they were doing and the fabrics that they were working on. The girls were kind of pleased that he took an interest in their work as Castillo never went in there. In fact, one time Antonio said to Charles, “Charles, you are of the studio. Why do you go...
into the workrooms?” Well, he did not object that Charles went in there as long as he had his work done and was available when he was needed. And since the flou was on the same floor as the design studios, it didn’t present a problem.

In the atelier flou, Charles said that he really began to “see the different techniques that they were using.” Madame Berg had been trained in Paris and much of what she had taught him he observed in that workroom. He was familiar with techniques like hand basting seams together from the right side of the garment and hand-overcasting a seam. But being a full couture workshop of course, they were using other techniques that she had not taught him such as hand rolling a hem. Castillo liked to design gowns in chiffon. If there was a chiffon hem that needed to be sewn, apprentices were paid so little at that time that it didn’t really make a difference in the total price of the garment for them to sit around a big table and hand roll the hem of a dress for three weeks. Charles was able to learn additional techniques in that workroom just by observing and seeing how they did everything.

Being a couture house, they were very concerned about their designs being copied. As Janine, the head of the flou developed a toile or muslin from one of Castillo’s sketches, she would sometimes want to consult with him a bit on it. To get to Castillo’s studio, she would come from her workroom down a long hallway, past Jacques’ and Charles’ offices, past Madame Becagli’s office to where Castillo’s studio was at the end of the hall. To protect the muslin and keep it secret, Janine would always have the model who was wearing the muslin wrapped up in a sheet. Then when they were in his studio, the model would discard the sheet and parade on the big stage area at one end of the studio where she would move for Castillo to see how the muslin worked. In the mean
time, Jacques and Charles would bring in the fabrics and suggested which fabrics to use in making the final garment while decisions were made regarding adjustments to the muslin.

One time Charles got involved in a situation that gave Castillo concern regarding the security of his designs. Along with buyers from stores, the American chemical company Du Pont came to Paris regularly to buy couture as did Celanese and other companies in the business of producing synthetic fibers. They basically bought samples so that they would be current with what was happening in couture while the scientists and engineers back in Wilmington, Delaware developed new fibers and test fabrics. Du Pont executives would have the Paris sample garments or toiles sent to their offices in the Empire State Building in New York City and discuss the current silhouettes and how their new fibers would fit with the look.

One day in Paris, Helen Gray who was in charge of the couture area for Du Pont met Charles at Lanvin. Delighted that he was American, she asked if he could help her. As was done by so many at that time, she wanted to borrow a dress in the evening for a photo shoot in a photographer’s studio or on location around the city and then get the dress back to the design house by the next morning for the fashion show that day. This was at the beginning of the shows when new collections were introduced and everyone from around the globe was there trying to get access to the new designs; it was a frantic time.

Charles was interested in learning about that aspect of the business. He was able to use a bit of influence on Percy, the attaché de presse who worked at Lanvin, to check out the dress for Du Pont and take it to the photo shoot. There was also a dress from Dior
at the photo shoot and a woman who was a friend of Castillo’s reported to him that Charles was there where the photographers were also working with Dior samples. “[Castillo] was saying… what were you doing where there was a Dior dress?” So Charles had to reassure Castillo that he was not giving away any of Castillo’s designs, but that he was just observing the Du Pont photo shoot.

Castillo did trust Charles. One time when he wanted to go to Spain to visit one of his houses, he asked Charles to stay in his Paris apartment while he was away. This was to help with security as he had been having some trouble with a former chauffeur and was afraid that he would try to break in while he was out of town. The two and half weeks that he stayed in Castillo’s apartment was a luxury he was not used to.

When Charles first arrived in Paris he stayed in the little hotel, the Chambiges where he stayed when he came with Hildegarde and Anna. But he soon realized his funds would not let him afford to live there so he found a small maid’s room. It was in a garret on the Rue Vineuse. It had no facilities; the running water was out in the hall and the toilet was just a hole in the floor. To bathe, Charles had to go to the public baths; these were very frugal accommodations. Later he managed to move out of the maid’s room and into a large wonderful room in an expansive apartment at 176 Boulevard Saint Germain on the left bank.

All of the experiences at Lanvin helped Charles to realize “what a complicated business this design world was.” Charles worked at Lanvin for about two years when he decided that he had learned just about as much as he could there. “Castillo was not going
to turn over any primary work of designing to either Jacques or myself.” Charles wanted to go further and they parted amicably.³

At that time in France, it was considered very wrong to search for a new position until after you had left the old position. In the design industry, one would not even visit a competing house while employed in another. Charles wasn’t ready to leave Paris, “the one I really wanted to work for was [Madame] Grès” because of “the way she was doing beautiful, lyrical, lilting soft body clothes,” often using bias.⁴ After he left Lanvin, he went to her building on the Rue de la Paix and was granted a short interview with her, but she didn’t hire him. This is when he followed up on an offer from someone that he had met earlier in New York.

Experience in Rome – Antonelli-Kleibacker⁵

Prior to going to Paris in 1954, when Charles did the free-lance work for Bessie Kugeloff in New York, he worked with Mr. Antonelli, the head tailor of her custom house. While on a visit from Paris to Rome, Charles was approached by Mr. Antonelli with a business proposition. Antonelli had moved back to Italy where he and his wife had been born and where his son had settled with his wife and their children in Rome. He suggested that if ever Charles was done in Paris and wanted to do so, they could open a custom house together in Rome.

After Charles finished up at Lanvin, they made arrangements. Antonelli⁶ was to get the work room together and Charles went back to America to collect some equipment and dress forms that he still had there from his earlier business, then he sailed from New...
York to Genoa and on to Naples. From Naples, he took a train to Rome, hauling the dress forms with him all the way.  

Unfortunately when he arrived, the living accommodations and pay arrangements were not what he expected. There had been a mix up in communications and everything had been arranged for him in a local manner, which was not in a way that he desired. He almost turned around and came home right away, but ended up staying for a year.

Antonelli was a very good tailor and with Charles designing, they produced what he considered very beautiful clothes, especially the suits and coats. The fashion photographs that were taken in the dramatic locations around Rome are stunning. Another successful venture during that year was with Reader Mail.

Reader Mail first started doing business with Charles when he was operating Elliot-Charles. They were a very large company that published garment patterns by advertising them through municipal newspapers. They made it very easy for the designer. A representative from Reader Mail came to the designer or manufacturer and selected the garment or garments they felt they could sell. Then the company made up the pattern and sold it. The designer did not have to do anything except loan a garment for pattern purposes and collect the royalties on the sales! They had published a pattern from Elliot-Charles (see figure 3.3) and another one while Charles was in Paris that he had developed with Madame Berg (see figure 3.4).

One of the garments that Antonelli-Kleibacker developed in Rome was a high-waisted slim skirt in wool jersey paired with a silk chiffon blouse that had a sailor collar. The pattern of that outfit became Reader Mail’s best selling pattern at that time. (See figures 3.5 and 3.6)
Charles headed back to New York in late 1957. The next few months in New York were difficult for him. He got a small workroom on Lexington Avenue and scrambled for free-lance work to get going once more. Reader Mail published a pattern for him during this time; it was a maternity dress.\(^9\) (See figure 3.7) This is a very unusual kind of garment for Charles, perhaps his only maternity garment. He thinks that he had a client at this time that was pregnant. It was certainly not the kind of design that interested him, but at this point he was “a designer who had not got fifteen cents in his pocket trying to work some free lance jobs” and he was taking whatever would pay. Probably getting that pattern into Reader Mail so soon during this time must have been due to the fact that...
Figure 3.5  Publicity Release for Prominent Designer Pattern Antonelli-Kleibacker, 1957
June F. Mohler Fashion Library

Figure 3.6  Antonelli-Kleibacker, 1957
Photograph courtesy of June F. Mohler Fashion Library, Kent State University
the pattern from Rome did so well, Reader Mail “was really for [him]” and sent their representative, Virginia to see him quite soon.

In order to earn extra money prior to starting Elliot-Charles and prior to going to Paris, Charles had done some copywriting every now and then for a woman named Gladys Steiner. She was a publicist and took care of the fashion accounts at a large advertising firm called Lester Harrison Inc. located on 210 East 50th Street. Through his friendship with Gladys and her husband Aaron, he got a free-lance designing job for Huntleigh Suits and Coats. One of Gladys’ accounts was the French Leather Industry and she did an ad campaign promoting women’s purses shown with suits and coats that Charles designed for Huntleigh. (See figures E4.6 – 9). Charles really enjoyed working with this company. "Huntleigh was very good with me – actually they wanted publicity, you can see we got some” with Gladys’ promotion of the handbags. Unlike the prior free-lance jobs, Charles was paid well for the work he did there. He could draw
upon the fact that he worked in Paris and was starting to get a name that meant something.

He also did a few designs on his own that featured lace.\footnote{11} One big skirted dress that had the lace panels doubled back on itself was sewn entirely by Charles (see figures E4.2 and 4.3). Another dress made up in jersey with a lace shawl attached to the back of the neckline was featured in a preview of Easter fashions at The Manhattan Savings Bank on March 28, 1958. Sammy Kaye, the famous swing band leader did the commentary for the show and Sally Robson, modeling Charles’ design was photographed with Mr. Kaye and the bank president Willard K. Denton. Charles was getting good free publicity and even better, great publicity.

Charles didn’t retain Gladys Steiner and in fact, never paid anyone to do publicity for him. He said that he would have liked to, but didn’t have the money so he always did the publicity himself and feels that he did a good job of it.

After some months, he was hired by Charles Gumprecht, President of Nettie Rosenstein. Nettie Rosenstein opened a small business in New York City in 1921. By 1942, hers was a highly successful operation with a distinctive space at 550 Seventh Avenue comprising an entire floor. Nettie and her sister-in-law Eva Rosencrans were the designers. They made beautiful ready-to-wear and custom clothes, including Mamie Eisenhower’s inaugural gown and gowns for Hildegarde. They had accounts with Bergdorf-Goodman, Bonwit Teller, I. Magnin, all the top stores. The key to their success was the management by Charles Gumprecht. By the 1940s they were also designing and producing quality accessories and perfumes.
Charles Kleibacker was introduced to Charles Gumprecht through Gene Moore, a friend who designed the windows for Tiffany and Bonwit Teller. Nettie was no longer active with the company as a designer, but the company was starting to get back into the business of designer clothes after the war. Eva was now the only designer. In 1958, Gumprecht specifically brought Charles in for a fresh look and to design more of the soft, figure-defining clothes for the line.

Charles Kleibacker worked with Eva Rosencrans for two years draping muslins in the Rosenstein space at 550 Seventh Avenue. There were two big ateliers at Rosenstein’s: one for the dresses and the other for the tailored garments such as suits, coats or tailored dresses. The firm had private customers but mostly produced expensive ready-to-wear.

At Rosenstein, Charles was given a big room with dress forms and he would once again drape. Eva Rosencrans would come in periodically and give suggestions; theirs “was a good rapport.” It was while working at Rosenstein, that Charles first started trying to develop bias designs. “Now having worked [in Paris] at Lanvin and having seen Vionnet clothes from time to time, I knew that’s what I wanted to try to do.” He would try something and Eva would say, “Well that looks different, let’s try it.” But, “bias at Rosenstein did not work because I didn’t know enough and the sample hands there knew nothing whatsoever about bias. So, whatever I tried on bias usually got tossed off the line.” Something was not right and he really didn’t figure out the solution until several years later. Like the designs that he did for Castillo, everything that he successfully designed for Nettie Rosenstein was on the straight of the grain. (See figures E5.1 – 3).
At this time Nettie Rosenstein dresses had quite a distinctive mood: a big skirt with a narrow waist very much along the lines of Dior’s New Look introduced in 1947. Charles said of their designs… “I can’t tell you that that’s the sort of garment I really loved, but that’s the kind of garment they sold.” One dress that was completely Charles’ idea was something that Eva was not so sure of to begin with. It was a linen dress with a big bow positioned diagonally across the breast with the shoulders coming over and buttoning in position with three big buttons in back. “…it sold, really sold, especially in black!” (See figures E5.4 and 5.)

By the end of the 1950s, the years of hard work running the company was taking its toll on Gumprecht and Rosencrans. Charles said that Gumprecht realized the direction that fashion was going in the sixties. Together, Gumprecht and Rosencrans decided to close the clothing part of the business continuing only with the accessories and perfumes. So in 1960, Charles and Edna Broglio, one of the head drapers, ventured out on their own. Together they began business under the name of Kleibacker.

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1 One of the photographs that Charles said was in his portfolio when he went to Paris and that helped him get the job with Castillo was the big silk gown that featured a diamond pattern across the top of the bodice and the hips (see figure E1.4). The subtle contrast was achieved by using the back side of the fabric for the diamonds. This design was one derived from the sleeve gusset idea that he explored with Madame Berg and that they were able to sell to a few stores.

2 “…thanks to Charles!”

3 Charles was hired to replace a man named Dominique who later went to America and eventually worked for Maddy Talmack. Charles said that the person who was hired to replace him at Lanvin when he left was Oscar de la Renta. However, Oscar did not leave his apprenticeship at Balenciaga to join Lanvin until 1961.

4 Charles said that he didn’t think he had enough experience to try for a job at Balenciaga.

5 Charles does not like to talk about this part of his career as it was “not exactly the ideal situation.” I’ve included a bit of the story here to provide some background for the wonderful designs that he developed in
Rome and which were photographed so beautifully. He is very proud of the garments that were produced there.

6 Don’t confuse this Mr. Antonelli with the long and well-established House of Antonelli in Rome that also produced women’s clothing.

7 He still curses those dress forms today! It must have been a very trying trip with them.

8 One of his favorite photographs from this time is the big white cotton dress on the Spanish steps.

9 The Ohio State University Historic Costume and Textiles Collection has a copy of this pattern in their collection. It still has the mailing envelope and the postmark is stamped June 12, 1958.

10 Charles told me on multiple occasions how much he loves to design coats, but he didn’t actually produce that many of them in his own business later “because [he] could never make any money on them.”

11 To contribute to Gladys’ account with the French Lace Industry. At one time she also represented Pierre Balmain.

12 The addresses around 550 were all good, but 550 was, and still is, the premier address on Seventh Avenue. “… 550 always had the Norells, the Rosensteins, the Trigeres… and [Rosenstein’s] had the entire floor.”

13 Here as was the case with Castillo, Charles has not saved many photographs of his designs during this period because much of what was accomplished was a cooperative effort between himself and the designer who he was working with, i.e. Castillo or Rosencrans. What are included in this paper are images of designs that he said were his ideas and “pretty much taken intact” without a lot of changes by the head designer.
CHAPTER 4

THE KLEIBACKER LABEL

Early Years – Getting the Business Going

In 1960, Charles Kleibacker took an inexpensive space in a townhouse at 26 West 76th Street on the west side of New York City. It had been a very elegant townhouse at one time. The space he took on the second floor rear was graced with a room with an enormous large fireplace and tall ceilings. The one large room served as the workroom, design room and showroom combined. Off to one side of that room was a small step up “to a round solarium area with five windows and a roof that was stained glass” where the two sewing machines and a sturdy ironing board were set up, all from Rosenstein’s. Located directly off the small entryway were a “decent” bathroom and a small kitchen both recently updated which was convenient because, as he did at Elliot-Charles, Charles slept in the space. He bought a handsome daybed for the purpose which was also nice enough to seat buyers when they visited. Each morning he would arise early and fluff up the cushions to “let it not be known that [he] spent the night there.”

Starting with cast-off equipment from Nettie Rosenstein “we were definitely on the most limited kind of budget.” When most American designers agreed that it took about $150,000 to $200,000 to start a successful designer-owned business, Charles started his business with $10,000 and “tremendous courage.” Charles did all the cutting
and Edna did the machine work. On a limited basis, Edna’s assistant from Rosenstein would come in and help. They couldn’t afford to pay her full-time. Neither Charles nor Edna took any salary.

By this time, Charles “pretty much had an idea of the way [he] wanted to go, with soft clothes more than heavily tailored.” Once again Charles began taking samples to stores to try to get orders; they also found a few private clients. “That really was the beginning of my being a serious designer.”

Charles was determined to sell his designs. He called and called buyers from various stores. Most of the replies were, “Who? Never heard of you. Dresses? Oh, they’re the last thing we need.” One of his first orders was with Lord and Taylor. It was for a silk ball gown and “a short silk dress with a black skirt and a white top (see figure E6.2) – no bias at this stage of the game.” Dorothy Ross, the buyer at Bonwit Teller, also bought a few pieces.

With a lot of talking, Charles finally got in to see the buyer at Bergdorf Goodman. “I kept calling and I finally said, ‘Why don’t you let me come down at your convenience… before the store opens or after it closes with two models? In fifteen minutes I’ll show you our designs.’ Finally they said to me, ‘Okay come down.”’ He was determined; “I learned that you hold people on the telephone until finally they say yes.” Two styles in a few sizes were bought. They sold and were reordered. Geraldine Stutz, the president of Henri Bendel was also willing to take a chance and bought a few dresses. “Well, the minute the clothes sell, then you begin to be in a bit!” As the smaller orders sold, the buyers started placing more substantial orders.
By 1963, the business began to grow and Charles could see more space was needed for the Kleibacker label. Twenty-six West 76th Street was small and would be too cramped for the increase in personnel they would soon hire. A nice reception room or salon would also be a benefit where the buyers and private clients could come and see the Kleibacker clothes without being in the middle of the workroom as was the case at 26 West 76th Street.

Charles looked around and although the West Side of town was definitely second rate at that time, he found a sizeable space at 23 West 73rd Street in the old Hotel Park Royal. “It was, by comparison, a tremendous space. It was on the ground floor which was already an asset; the other place was on the second floor.” The entry was a long hallway with the showroom off to the right and two workrooms in the back. One was used as a cutting room and the other larger one was the sewing room. There were two bathrooms and a fairly decent kitchen, as well as another room used as storage. A large walk-in closet space was used for fabrics. The owner of the building was very glad to rent the ground floor space. Charles signed a three year lease starting at $225 a month including electricity and water. The owner was quick to say, “it didn’t matter if they kept the lights on all night!” The space was not in great shape; it had to be carefully cleaned and freshly painted. Ultimately the showroom was quite presentable with the silk upholstered daybed and the beautiful triple mirror brought from Nettie Rosenstein.

Middle Years – Growing the Business

In describing 23 West 73rd Street, Charles said, “while it was nothing fancy, the buyer and their assistants could come in and be comfortable. We could dress the model in
the cutting room. By now I’d learned to make decent coffee and to buy decent croissants; the buyers usually came in the morning.” Charles had learned what was expected and how to play the game to be competitive.

Overcoming Challenges

In the meantime, Charles was very definitely trying to figure out how to successfully produce bias garments. He would try something and ask Edna for her opinion and he realized “something’s wrong in my thinking. What was the matter at Rosenstein with the clothes I tried on the bias?” He said, “I can remember one day, looking at a sewn muslin and noticing the bias seam was already puckering next to the fabric that was stretching. Why are we not doing that in the seam? Well, that’s when it dawned on me.” The seams on the bias were being sewn in the normal construction manner for stability, while the rest of the garment was continuing to flow and drape downward as bias will do. As soon as he realized that bias seams needed to be stretched while being machine sewn, he understood his answer.3

This was around the time that Charles confronted a staffing challenge. Edna “was a terrifically nice woman and a uniquely talented draper. Working with her assistant draper at Rosenstein and under the head of the workroom, they produced beautiful clothing. However, fitting was a challenge for her and in fairness to her was not her work at Rosenstein.” When they sold the black and white dress to Lord and Taylor, the store had a customer for the dress but it needed fitting adjustments due to the low back. “The store called us and asked that our fitter come to the store and do the adjustment.” Charles
sent Edna, but no matter how Edna tried, she could not find the solution; it needed to be stayed by ‘holding-in’ the fabric.\textsuperscript{4}

Though Charles was not in charge of fittings at Lanvin, he had learned a great deal about the process while observing the \textit{mannequins} being fitted in Castillo’s designs. Charles had always been in the Kleibacker workroom when he and Edna fit the samples on models. With his eye and love of ‘engineering,’ he was able to suggest various solutions to fitting challenges. However, as head of the Kleibacker workroom, the position of chief fitter was Edna’s. She tried her best, but after a long while they both agreed fitting was not her strong point.

By now Charles had more clearly thought out the kind of bias dresses that he wanted to design and he said to Edna, “I’m beginning to see that the clothes I envision are really going to need fit.” Charles really liked Edna and valued her skills, but the business needed a different direction. He was determined to be a success at this endeavor and also to do the clothes he had in mind. It would be no easy task to fit bias garments properly. Though Edna was not happy with the solution, together they decided in 1964 or 1965 that Charles would buy her out of the business and he would continue on his own.

Charles had also had conflicts with some of the people that Edna hired. Most of the valued and experienced hands working for Charles and Edna were quite set in their methods and unyielding in trying new techniques. They were excellent seamstresses but they “didn’t want to hear about doing their work in any different way.” This was when he had begun to experiment with the bias seams. He needed more flexibility in finding the solution to the challenges that bias was presenting.
About the same time Edna left, the remaining staff left with the exception of one woman, the finisher who did the hand-overcasting. She was very good at that job and was really not interested in doing anything else.\(^5\) This was fine from Charles’ viewpoint; it was the normal way a workroom operated, with everyone doing the tasks at which they were best skilled. Faced with rebuilding his workroom Charles took another gamble; it was a smart step.

Training the Workroom Staff

Through some of the young people that he hired, Charles heard about a vocational school in the Bronx, Jane Adams Vocational High School which had vocational programs: cooking, nursing, beauty school and dress making. He needed someone who knew about sewing and construction of garments, but who was also teachable and willing to do things his way. He called the teacher there and in 1967 she sent him 16-year-old Carmen Maya.\(^6\) He could see right away that she had potential. She brought in more young people she knew. From there he built up his workroom, training all of his hands in the particular methods applicable to his bias cut needs. They were all delightful young people mostly of Spanish speaking origin, fresh out of school, willing to try anything. Also, with them Charles could more comfortably take on the role of employer and verbalize his expectations more directly.

Charles recalls having what he called “knock downs and drag outs” with Carmen when he would have to tell her to “leave her problems at the door.” If such problems were having an impact on their work, he could be quite firm. “I can remember one time when she said something and I slammed the dress form up against the wall and said,
‘There’s no reason for you making mistakes like this!’ In the long run it was for their own good and the good of the business.”

Charles didn’t often lose his temper enough to yell at his workers. Sometimes Carmen gave it right back to him. Carmen recalled a situation where during a dress rehearsal for a fashion show at the St. Regis Hotel, a model would not listen to her and went out onto the runway with the garment on wrong. Charles came back stage and was furious with Carmen for letting the model on stage like that. (Carmen had no way of knowing that Charles had taken pride in performing a similar task years earlier.) Her response to his yelling was to tell him that she was quitting and started walking out. Charles quickly apologized and they went back to working amicably.7

Charles was the workroom supervisor in addition to being the designer, salesman, delivery man, and business manager. This was not an easy time. He worked day and night training his new workroom hands and keeping everything going.8 Working long hours was not new to him; he had done it for years: working two jobs in Birmingham, Alabama, going to New York University at night after work when he first came to New York. Even at Lanvin, it was considered nothing to work weekends, often to 2:00 am or later when presenting a new collection. It didn’t matter how long the hours they worked, he said, “if you have a love, you kind of forget” all the effort and the time involved.

Charles did have a love for what he was doing. He had come quite a long way from where he began. During an early very short free lance job (before the job with Elfreda Fox) the business owner told him, “We’re losing money with you, I can tell that right now; you need to learn how to control sample workroom people. What are they really good at? Are they meant to be drapers or should they really be hand finishers?” In
all of his various positions working for other people, he observed and learned so that now when he was in his own business he knew what was needed to develop an effective and efficient workroom. This is a major key to running a successful business of this type: having “a workroom of talented dedicated people who love what they are doing.”

Charles has great respect for the people in the workroom. A friend in Montgomery, Alabama recently asked him if he was still designing. He said to his friend, “No… there’s a misconception here. The designer is one thing, but the equally talented people: the drapers, the sewing assistants and the finishers are the people who make the garment a reality.” Without a really great workroom, Castillo could not do what he did at Lanvin. And designers like Galliano at Dior today would not be able to do what they do. Likewise, Charles Kleibacker could not do what he did so well.

Designers such as the ones who are in the Paris couture have very well-trained and experienced workroom staff. The head of the workroom such as in the case with Madame Janine working with Castillo would have developed an understanding with the designer to the level that she would be able to simply take his sketch and sense what he was envisioning. She could develop the muslin on her own, and then together they would critique and adjust this ‘first draft.’ Antonio del Castillo never had to go into the workrooms; the head people of each workroom came to him.

In smaller operations, the designer has to work more closely with the workroom, especially the head draper in order to get across the design ideas. The people may be very skilled, but they don’t have the experience and understanding of interpreting the designer’s ideas. In a free lance situation, the designer is at a greater disadvantage with
the staff not knowing him at all, so it is all the more important for him or her to be able to know how to work well with the people in that workroom.

Charles knew that he needed a high caliber workroom staff to be able to produce the difficult bias cut dresses he had in mind. At this point of his business, he knew he needed to invest the time and effort to make that a reality. Quite quickly, Charles was able to entirely rely on Carmen. In about 1970, Charles’ assistant, Gordon suddenly quit. Carmen recalls that Charles was quite concerned that the business would suffer, but she assured him that she was capable. He continued doing all the fittings, but she became head of the workroom and she stayed with him until he closed the business in the mid-1980s.⁹

Increasing Sales to the Stores

At this stage of Charles’ career, his business really started taking off. They were in the new location, Charles had “pretty much thought out” how to construct the bias cut garments he wanted to design and he had a workroom that could produce them. Also around this time, the buyer and staff at Bergdorf Goodman really liked what Charles was designing and each season would order multiple sizes and colors for several dresses. Ordering each season was very important to his success; it kept the workroom going and brought in consistent revenue.

Charles started selling to more stores. Martha Phillips, the owner of the specialty store in New York known as Martha, asked Charles not to put his label in the garments he sold to her. “We had done it, we had delivered it, and now it was a Martha original.” She would put her own label in them and the designs that she bought were reserved
exclusively for her stores. Mildred Finger, the merchandise manager at Bergdorf Goodman also wanted the same arrangement. She said to him, “Charles, this is a Bergdorf exclusive. I don’t want it to be sold to another store. I don’t care whether you change a button. I don’t care if you change the fabric. It is not to be, if you ever expect us to buy again.” His was a small company and needed the business. Also he wanted them to reorder, so he “really respected that and confined those designs to Bergdorf” and Martha’s by taking the garments they wanted off the line.

About this time Charles started to get some publicity from Women’s Wear Daily (WWD) and other newspapers. On December 2, 1966, WWD wrote, “Charles Kleibacker – designer-owner – goes his own individual fashion way… a way that has a couture character derived from his early training in Paris… (he) motivated the smashing spring collection now being shown – elegantly – in the Ritz Towers.” The New Yorker on October 23, 1965 wrote, “Charles Kleibacker, whose skill approaches divinity…” Cue published in March 30, 1968, “I sat and viewed Charles Kleibacker’s stunning collection of dresses. He’s a master of the bias cut, of soft body-shapes, and of some of the most subtle, intricate seaming to be seen these days.” In December 30, 1969 WWD wrote, “Charles is not one of the biggies on SA [Seventh Avenue], but he always comes up with significant fashion news. And he’s another designer who’s quick to translate that easy ‘30s look for the ‘70s in his own way.” From Kay Thomas at the New York Daily News on October 9, 1970, “Certain designers always seem to be with it, no matter what the current fashion. Charles Kleibacker is such a man.” And on April 5, 1972, Eugenia Sheppard’s Inside Fashion Column for the New York Post said, “A great individualist among the American fashion designers is certainly Charles Kleibacker, whose ultra-
simple, bias-cut black crepes, and the marvelous, flowing blond cape over a long powder-blue crepe dinner dress, stood out with the same distinction as a Mme. Grès collection in Paris.”

As a result of this press coverage, Charles started getting some calls from specialty stores outside of New York. Clare Perone in Detroit bought clothes for her shop. She “spoke with a definite European accent” and bought the sophisticated styles that WWD was at that time calling “hard chic.” Virginia DeVoy who owned Julie’s in Detroit also called. She was “the most feminine of women, small, rounded, beautifully dressed, beautifully coiffed, who wanted a garment that was very, very feminine.” She mostly bought for debutantes and special events and selected the fabrics that she wanted her dresses made from. Charles was supplying two shops in the same city with very different looks.

Charles was not successful at getting Hudson’s or Marshall Field’s to buy from him, but he did get Bonwit Teller in Philadelphia to buy. Then when Mildred Custen transferred to the Bonwit Teller in New York, his label was added to the offerings at that location as well.

When talking with Charles, it seems that out of all these shops that carried his clothes, he views the business at Bergdorf Goodman as being his most valued business, having consistent orders from them and most importantly, reorders. Bergdorf also had “what was called a special order girl”; she would call Charles’ studio to request slight modifications in the design for a particular customer such as doing Style 312 in pink with perhaps the neckline raised two inches or three inches added to the hem length. It was all
part of the special service that Bergdorf offered and Charles, being a small operation was very glad to oblige. He “loved working with them.”

Bergdorf reciprocated in their appreciation; they showed his dresses in their exterior display windows on Fifth Avenue or 58th Street (see figure 4.1). They also gave

Figure 4.1  Pictures of Bergdorf Goodman windows with Charles’ dresses. Courtesy of June F. Mohler Fashion Library, Kent State University

him a full-page ad in Harper’s Bazaar and Vogue (See figure 4.2) along with other ads in the New York Times. Usually the design house would be asked to contribute towards the cost of a magazine ad, but Charles realized they knew his was a small operation running on a tight budget and they simply ran the ad without making the usual request. Charles did enough business with Bergdorf Goodman and the other stores on two small collections a year to keep the business going. He wasn’t making a lot of money, but he was paying the bills and “doing clothes that [he] felt had something to say.”
Figure 4.2  Press release of Bergdorf Goodman ad featuring Kleibacker dresses. Ran in *Vogue*, February 1970, page 1. Courtesy of June F. Mohler Fashion Library, Kent State University.
In the early years, he didn’t worry about doing a large line every year with a big 
fashion show production. He simply developed some looks, “twelve or thirteen pieces to 
show [the buyers]… well, usually they could find something.” Later, as he became more 
successful, he staged showings with three models to be able to keep the pace of the show 
flowing. He mostly showed his lines in the salon at 23 West 73rd Street simply by calling 
people he knew in the press and at the stores to let them know when he was ready.

Once in 1966 he did do a showing “at the Ritz Tower (on 57th and Park) where I 
took a big suite. This departure did help generate business and it did help generate 
publicity. I never attempted… a big press opening.” In general though, he showed his line 
individually to editors from *Vogue, Harper’s Bazaar, WWD, New York News, New 
York Post, New York Times* as well as many out-of-town newspaper editors… and of 
course, to the buyers from Bergdorf Goodman, Martha, and others.

At the height of his business, Charles employed 12 hands in his workrooms and 
supplied garments to Henri Bendel, Bergdorf Goodman, Bonwit Teller, Saks Fifth 
Avenue, Nan Duskin in Philadelphia, Martha in New York, Toby Lerner in Philadelphia, 
Clare Perone’s and Julie’s in Detroit, Neiman Marcus in Dallas, I. Magnin in California, 
and Hirschleifer’s in Long Island.

Early Private Clientele

Charles was very open to any avenue that would bring in revenue. He accepted 
private clients right from the start and served many prominent personages over the years. 
They came to him in a wide variety of ways. Rebekah Harkness at that time was a very 
wealthy woman and “a presence in the city.” She bought and transformed an old theater
on the West Side in conjunction with starting up the Harkness Ballet Company. Around this same time Mrs. Harkness went into Bergdorf Goodman and “ordered 59 Pauline Trigères at one sitting! And Bergdorf personnel, being very good at selling, as the Trigère clothes started coming in to the store and they were fitting her, said [to her], Mrs. Harkness, have you ever heard of Kleibacker?” So Charles took some of his clothes to the store to show her and she ordered six. They were all to be custom made of course.10

Charles had some interesting stories about working with Mrs. Harkness. He said of the initial session with her, “I was really not into ball gowns, but to me I had one long dress that I would qualify to be a ball gown. It was made of two layers of silk taffeta, one on top of the other, just the same cut, so when the dress moved, there was a lot of fabric and rustle. Mrs. Harkness looked at it and said, ‘Oh, it is the kind of dress we wore for dinner in St. Louis! So this gives you an idea of [what she was like]. Wow!’” One time a while later, Charles was fitting her in a long dress for an opening.

It “buttoned all the way down in a beautiful pale peach shade of silk crepe. It had buttons and loops down the front to the knee revealing a show of leg. Over the dress was a capelet just to the waist in front and then descended to a long train in the back. This was to be an outfit to be worn in May – now here I didn’t use my head. She said, ‘I think it’s really wonderful, but what I want you to do, is to edge this entire cape in sable.’ And I said, ‘Well, if that’s what you want, we will do it, but I do remind you, your opening is in May. Are we going to be quite right with that fur?’ The people around her said, ‘Mrs. Harkness, I think he really has a point.’ Well, that knocked me out of her wearing the dress for the opening. She wore a white Pauline Trigère with white fox fur all around the hemline and around the sleeve edges.”

Doing custom clothes could be quite a challenge working with individual personalities and individual bodies. One client was introduced to him through a model he knew at Chez Ninon named Ingrid Deutsche. She also did some modeling for Charles and
brought Mrs. Robert (Renee) Unger to see him. Her father-in-law “founded the business of frozen foods so the money was unending. She would arrive with the driver in her elegant town car and always with enough food for me that would be a great help, let’s face it. We made clothes for her unending. She was a beautiful, beautiful woman. It was not easy to fit her because she was probably a size 16 at the time; to engineer bias cut clothes on her was not simple. Sometimes that sizing, if you wear clothes with authority, and if they’re engineered properly, can show bias cut to its greatest advantage. She was very, very much a favorite client.” The Historic Costume & Textiles Collection at OSU has a red silk taffeta three-piece outfit that was donated to them by Mrs. Unger. I was interested to notice many outfits comprised of separates with Kleibacker labels owned at OSU and at The Kent State University Museum collections. Charles told me he really didn’t sell separates to the stores at all but separates were popular with his private clientele.

Another private client was Ruth Feldon. She had married into an enormously wealthy family, but it ended in a divorce. When she became an assistant buyer at Henri Bendel and saw the Kleibacker label, she then became a private client. Anna Sosenko brought Jane Pickens Langley Hoving to Charles. Jane was part of the singing duo ‘The Pickens Sisters from Georgia’ who married a very wealthy man named Langley. Then after he died, she later married Walter Hoving, the president of Bonwit Teller and also president of Tiffany. “As a matter of fact, when they got married, she wore one of the daytime dresses we made for her.” (See figure 4.3) Private clients came to Charles from a variety of paths.
Fitting The First Lady

Part of retail business includes personal shoppers, people who as a service and for a fee find whatever their clients need. Often they provide this service with respect to clothing and sometimes also provide image consultation along with the shopping service. They hold a resale number and act like a middle man just like a store only reselling to their individual clients and therefore dealing with a much smaller quantity. A personal shopper called Charles “from time to time and [said] I saw your style 312 in Bergdorf Goodman. Could I have it for one of my customers in a size 10?” Charles was glad to comply, his was a small operation and could accommodate single orders; he sold it to her
at wholesale since she had all the right paperwork. After a bit, Charles learned that she was shopping for The First Lady, Pat Nixon! The buyer had been retained first by Lady Bird Johnson when she was First Lady and continued in that service to Pat when Richard Nixon became president.

When the personal shopper\(^\text{11}\) next called, Charles said, “How about getting me to your special customer?” And she said, ‘Well, who…?’ ‘I mean Mrs. Nixon, of course.’ ‘Oh, she would never pay your prices.’ Now I don’t know what the story was. Pat Nixon was wearing primarily Adele Simpson and Mollie Parnis clothes.” One time after Charles did a big favor for Mrs. Nixon’s shopper, he asked again if he could meet her client; this time she relented.

Mrs. Nixon was coming into New York the next week; she and the President stayed at the Pierre Hotel when they came to New York. She had a full day of appointments including seeing the designers, Adele Simpson and Mollie Parnis, but Charles was given an appointment time and was told very firmly by the personal shopper, “Do not sell her more than one dress and it will be at wholesale.”

Charles arrived on time and was passed through the secret service routine. When it was his turn, he took in the seven or eight garments to find Mrs. Nixon in a robe. “As I pulled [the garments] out, she said, ‘Oh, I like it but I think it’s more for Tricia.’ Then I pulled out a long black gown of silk crepe with lace. The bodice had crepe in front and the back was of lace, with the sleeves really a checkerboard of lace and crepe (see figures E8.95 – 98).\(^\text{12}\) Mrs. Nixon tried on the dress saying, ‘I really do like it but I would never wear black in The White House.’ She decided on a kind of old rose color.” She liked another dress of silk crepe also.
Charles said to her “condescendingly” that he planned on doing custom-made garments for her and could he take measurements? “She turned to the people and said, ‘That makes sense. How can he do correct clothes if he doesn’t have my measurements?’ She got out of the robe, under that slip I could tell she was wearing another bunchy slip... but I could see that Pat Nixon was one of the few private people I knew who was one side like the other. Her figure was beautiful. She wasn’t even an eight. At that time in the early 1970s, in contrast to today, a six was considered a very small size. The stores seldom ordered size sixes unless it was a special order.” Charles felt that Mrs. Nixon was simply charming and wonderfully cooperative, not at all like her buyer.

Charles found a fit model that was very much similar to Mrs. Nixon in size and shape. He developed the muslin and started working on the fabric when the buyer called and told him a train trip was scheduled in a couple of weeks to go to the White House where they would be doing the fittings and that he was responsible for his own fare. In the interlude between her phone call and finishing the dresses for the trip, Charles called the buyer to ask a few questions:

“...does Mrs. Nixon wear slips all the time?” [She replied,] ‘I don’t know!’ And I said, ‘Well it really would help me to know because our dress is underlined so there’s no reason for her wearing a slip.’ And then in the next breath I said, ‘Do you have an idea of that bra she wears...’ She said, ‘I’m not doing the work you should have done at the Pierre!’ Boom! went the phone. She was rough!”

When they arrived at the President’s private quarters of the White House, it was suggested that Charles go first since they had all been there before and Charles had never seen the White House. In this way, Charles was able to have a tour of the place after the
fitting. Charles thought that was “lovely of them. To me, The White House was absolutely beautiful.”

Charles was escorted into the Queen Elizabeth Suite where Mrs. Nixon was attended by two secretaries who were poring over stacks of newspapers reporting on what the press had written concerning the previous evening’s event, a White House dinner with Frank Sinatra as the entertainment. As they were getting ready for fitting the two dresses, Charles said to her, “Mrs. Nixon, could I explain please that the way the dresses are constructed you really don’t need to wear a slip. Could we eliminate your slip for my dresses?’ She said, ‘Why yes, of course.’ And I said, ‘I don’t know what your wardrobe with bras might be, but I ask please that you get into one that would not be heavily boned because the silk shows the boning in bras.’ And she said, ‘Of course.” Charles left the room while she changed her bra and after coming back in and fitting the two dresses was very pleased that they both fit superbly.

On the train trip down Charles had overheard the buyer telling someone that she wished she could get Pat Nixon to buy a pair of pale-colored shoes. After the fitting Charles said to her, “Mrs. Nixon, you do have a pair of pale pumps to wear with these dresses…” And she said, ‘Well, aren’t the black going to work?’ And I said, ‘Well, not really.’ She then said to the two people, ‘Why don’t we buy a pair of pale shoes?’ She was delightful. She could not have been nicer.”

During the train trip back to New York, the buyer approached Charles and said, “I do remind you. I asked you to have her buy only one dress from you. You sold her two.’ And I said, ‘Was that such a horrible sin?’ By that time, I was a little more aggressive. Then she said, ‘You did accomplish one thing. I understand that she’s going to buy a pair
of pale shoes.” She was a bit nicer to him after that. However he was never able to sell to Mrs. Nixon again because it was not long afterwards that “everything blew up [with the Watergate conspiracy]…it was sad for that lady after that. It was very sad.” Charles sold the gowns to Mrs. Nixon in 1972; the Watergate break-in occurred on June 17, 1972.14

Charles was very grateful for the opportunity of fitting The First Lady in the White House. A prominent client of this caliber is something that doesn’t come along very often. Publicity gleaned from prominent people wearing a designer’s clothes is a highly desired coup for any fashion business and can measurably affect the success of that company.

From the earliest years of couture, courting famous clientele, has been a major objective for most design houses. In this way, the clothes can be seen by other wealthy but not-so-famous people who can buy and who want to imitate the famed and thereby increase sales by word of mouth. To achieve that objective, designers often attend with their favorite socialite wearing newly developed styles those events or venues frequented by the rich and famous.

Publicity and Opportunities for Growth

Designers in Paris knew how important it was that they go out on the town to the right parties and be seen in society with the right people, those who can afford to buy their clothes and who look fabulous wearing their designs. Castillo knew this and went out often. He also had “a very superior kind of vendeuse, a salesperson” whose role was to go to parties and events and report back to Castillo on who was wearing what. Her name was Bettina, Madame Bergery. She was a tall, handsome, elegant American woman.
who had married a French man who had a very important job on one of the prestigious newspapers in Paris. At one time “she was employed by Schiaparelli, but by now Schiaparelli’s big day was over, we’re talking about 1954. She was working with Lanvin. Her role was to intrigue the people in the top echelon to wear Castillo’s clothes.” As Lanvin was not quite one of the top couture houses in the city at that time – Dior and Balenciaga were at the top – Castillo relied on Madame Bergery to help get the wealthy clientele. Together she and Castillo went over the previous night’s events and discussed who and how they could influence particular people to become a client, perhaps by loaning a gown. One time they were discussing the Duchess of Windsor and Bettina said, perhaps they could get the Duchess as a client. But Charles remembers “Antonio saying at the time, ‘Forget it. You know very well we’re never going to get her as a client.’ I don’t know if she ever really bought anything,” meaning that many of her clothes were gratis.

This part of the design business was seriously competitive. Castillo really wanted Mrs. Arturo Lopez as a customer; she and her husband came from South America “with tons of money.” Castillo would ask Bettina what she was doing about getting Mrs. Lopez into the house to at least see the clothes. If Bettina was working towards this goal and saw that a vendeuse from another house was becoming competition and that vendeuse was wearing a gown that was loaned by the other design house, Bettina did not think it was out-of-line to let an ash from her cigarette fall onto that woman’s gown and burn a hole in it. Accidents happened to these expensive loaned couture gowns such as spills or tears, and the house simply wrote it off as cost of doing business.
I asked Charles if he ‘did the party scene’ and had a ‘Bettina’ to get clients and publicity and sales in that way. He said that he “was not equipped to get into that party line. You really needed to have the sums of money that let one frequent the best restaurants and take people to these restaurants.” He really wanted the clothes to speak for themselves. “What astounds me to this very day is that somewhere along the line, the clothes did work. Otherwise would Bergdorf Goodman have taken that full-page ad? Would the clothes have sold and be kept in women’s wardrobes year after year? You know this pleases me to no end.”

A few of his private customers over time grew to become good friends as well as clients and invited him to events. Mrs. Joseph B. (Helen) Zeigler “for whom we did many, many clothes including coats… as we became friends would say, ‘There’s going to be that opening of the Costume Institute. Why don’t you come along with me?’” She was a dedicated member of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. So he did start to get around a bit, but not specifically to build up hype for his collections. He didn’t have that kind of personality and he knew it.

Oscar de la Renta and Arnold Scaasi are two designers who Charles credits as knowing how to get publicity and attention by working the social scenes. “Oscar de la Renta is magnificent at it, a wonderful looking man and beautifully spoken … always well turned out for the social scene.” Scaasi was good at it too. One season for a big opening at Bonwit Teller in Philadelphia, Mildred Custen, the store president, brought a number of New York designers down by train. Ben Zuckerman’s designer and Mollie Parnis and Charles were among them, but Scaasi was not. During this trip and at the
store, Mildred said to them, “I’m really very happy that all of you came, but I must say to you, the one who is really the great salesman is Arnold Scaasi.”

Although not participating in the ‘social scene,’ Charles did have a knack for getting good publicity. Prior to working at Nettie Rosenstein, Charles received billing in a fashion show on June 18th, 1958. *Fantasie de Sac Francais*, produced by Gladys Steiner, Lester Harrison, Inc. featured the French Federation of handbag and Leather Goods Manufacturers with costumes by Kleibacker for Huntleigh, Inc. He was in good company; Jeanne Campbell for Sportwhirl, Inc. who won a Coty Award in 1955, Ceil Chapman who began her business in the 1940s and was by now well-established, and Scaasi who recently open his own workshop were featured along with Charles.

Through the years, Charles participated in a variety of special publicity events to obtain recognition for the Kleibacker label. In 1961, he designed a garment modeled in the high-exposure yearly Ebony Fashion Show (see figure E6.6). On Sept 12, 1979, he was one of twenty in a group of ‘top American fashion designers’ commissioned by the New York Racing Association to portray ‘That Belmont Look’, ‘a thoroughbred look’ from ‘racing colors’ inspired by America’s famous racing stables with fabrics provided by American Silk Mills Corporation. Charles had the racing colors of Mrs. Winston Guest of Long Island, red and old rose. He designed a long red silk taffeta gown belted with a bias sash in old rose. The red gown could also be worn flowing open as a long elegant coat over a very bare look of bias pants and a bandeau top.

Other publicity events Charles participated in included the 1984 Annual Awards Luncheon Fashion Show for the benefit of Catholic Charities, Diocese of Brooklyn. This was a big event held in the Grand Ballroom of the Pierre Hotel honoring prominent
community women. The honorary chairperson was Mrs. Matilda Cuomo. Charles also received good publicity when he was asked to provide dresses for two 1970 Miss America contenders. Miss Delaware, Linda Sue Hitchens chose two Kleibacker labels to be among her competition gowns (see figures 4.4 and 4.5) and Miss Alabama, Suzanne Dennie selected a Kleibacker gown to wear as well. All of these events helped to boost the public’s awareness of the Kleibacker label.

Charles’ was the kind of ambition devoted to goals, achieved through a low key but determined personality. He had learned to overcome his shyness and sell his clothes through determination. Certainly there is no doubt that he was driven in some way, taking the steps and gambles that he did to get him to this point in his career. It was the kind of ambition that drove him to learn how to create the bias garments that he loved so much and how to beautifully produce them so they left the selling floor.

When Charles’ business was starting to get publicity, a young man of means who could get good money for backing approached Charles and asked him about investing in his business. Charles was very interested. He asked the young man if in the future plans were they “going to hold on to the integrity of the garment? Well, he couldn’t quite give me that [assurance]” so Charles sent him away.

The Warner Company, who made lingerie, also thought that they could help Charles’ business expand. Charles did not like the strapless bras on the market. “I complained all the time about women who were wearing strapless bras. Forget it, they don’t work on you!” The Warner people paid him “some decent money to do a strapless bra for them.”15 He had worked with them at their Connecticut company headquarters and the bra turned out “semi-okay.” So, when the Warner executives “thought that they
Figures 4.4 and 4.5
Miss Delaware, Linda Sue Hitchens in her Kleibacker gowns of hyacinth blue jersey Qiana (above) and yellow, orange, blue printed Qiana matte jersey (right).

Both photos from *Wilmington Journal*, September, 10, 1970.
could do my bias garments, and I said, ‘Let me see what you’re talking about.’ Well, you’ve never seen such a disaster in your life!” The way they were approaching the mass production of the bias construction was never going to work. “So I stuck with what I felt was the right way to produce bias clothes whether or not I was ever going to make a ton of money… I could see that I wasn’t.”

Mass production was something that Charles never believed could work on his designs. All of the big name design houses produced their very special and very expensive evening clothes in-house. However, for the production of their more wearable designer ready-to-wear lines, they used outside contractors. Very fine outside contractors, but outside contractors nonetheless. “Initially I tried these contractors. Bias cut was simply not their thing. I knew my key was in-house production. This decision would be my headache and my salvation. We did in-house production of sizes 8 – 14, with an extra fee for sizes 6 and 16. I am eternally grateful to those New York production fit models, handsome women who become tremendous allies in helping maintain the integrity of the sample size 8 to the larger sizes.”

Later Years – Retail Climate Brings Changes

The fashion retail business started changing in the mid-1970s due to an economic downturn. The stores no longer were stocking multiple sizes. Now the stores developed the designer trunk show idea as the selling tool for designer ready-to-wear. Store buyers scheduled a main event with the designers to appear at the specialty stores or in the case of Saks Fifth Avenue or Neiman Marcus, at a flagship store. Customers who had made a reservation were treated to meet the designer and view a fashion show of the current
collection. The stores would have bought a few model size clothes for windows and publicity. Now they relied on the trunk shows to generate special orders. Where once a store ordered the entire range of sizes from 8 to 14 in two or three different colors, now women placed the special order for their size, waited often too long for the clothes to come in, hoping that alterations would not be too extensive. Smaller design businesses did not have the capital to operate this way.

As a result of the retail changes, Charles found that he had to rethink how he would do business. The stores were not placing the kind of orders that they had once done and Charles could see that “he had a problem.” I asked Charles if he made some efforts to try to keep up and change the way he did business to stay competitive with the stores. He replied, “I didn’t really, Joycelyn because I was seeing the clock on the wall… It never occurred to me that I would do a trunk show. I didn’t have that big of collections.” His way of designing was to focus on a small collection very specialized in design and he didn’t want to change that. The women who bought his clothes were not looking for “a name” but “bought because they liked the clothes.”

At about this time Charles also found alternative ways to earn very good money, better pay than what his design business brought in. This was through his association with Du Pont. After helping with the last stages of developing Qiana, Charles did two national tours promoting Qiana. By 1975 he had also done two promotional tours for Condé Nast’s Vogue. Additionally, Charles started to work with fashion departments at universities and colleges teaching week-long couture workshops. (See Chapter 5 for more information concerning these activities.)
Charles said, “I knew that I wanted to continue to make my signature line of clothes.” He decided to become an entirely custom-made studio and stop selling to stores altogether. Therefore, Charles pared down his workshop keeping only a few key people. He continued developing two small collections a year from which he hoped private clients would order. This was certainly a harder way of doing business but it had benefits; you produced less, but were paid more per garment.

Charles could “make much more money on the custom-made clothes than I did on the wholesale ready-to-wear clothes.” Around the time that Bergdorf was giving Charles windows on Fifth Avenue and 58th Street, wholesale prices on his short dresses that didn’t require a lot of fabric were around $195 to about $225. When Charles first started his business, the four-ply silk crepe from Bianchini was “in the neighborhood of $8.75 a yard and the labor costs were not that much, so if I sold the dress for $195 and cleared $90, I was doing very well.” Retail prices were double that and ran from about $400 early in his career to quotes about $600 to $3500 for a more elaborate evening gown sold later in the early 1970s. (See Table of Kleibacker Garment Costs, Appendix F).

“I had always had private clients, but more often than not they were of model size buying the sample clothes.” Selling to private clients “was a stretch for me. Trying to concentrate on a serious fitting while carrying on chit-chatty conversation with the private client was difficult. I always had Carmen nearby to pick up a thread of conversation with the client while leaving me free to cope with the intricacies of fitting.”

In serving the private client, Charles had to handle her individual preferences and her individual idiosyncrasies.
“When you’re dealing with a private client, you’re into more work actually because this is a woman who may cancel the appointment at the last minute, and you have the rest of the day to think, ‘How am I going to make up that money?’ Or when she comes in, maybe things have not gone so well in her house and she’s in a tizzy. These are women who, as I see it, have the money to cope with several homes and staffs. They really are in the business of taking care of their husband’s entertaining and their husband’s anticipation of how a house should be run. Under the circumstances, one gets some very nervous ladies who can get all bollixed up over an eighth of an inch of fabric when you… don’t always find it necessarily a problem.”

There was also the complicated issue of fitting the woman’s individual physical irregularities. In the case of a beautiful model, she is “someone who has not only come into the world as a beautiful creature, but one side of her body is exactly the same measurement as the other side.” The production fit models that designers use in developing larger sizes for ready-to-wear are also the same measurements from side to side. When Charles was selling to the stores, he would re-drape a complete muslin in the larger size, and then bring in the fit model. She would work very closely with him, coming in a couple of times in the process to help him finalize the garment for the best possible fit. Most people are not the same both sides; they have at least some small irregularity. Charles is himself an inch higher on one shoulder than the other.

As an example, the private client may have one hip higher or her bust line may be lower or different side to side. Perhaps she is very long-waisted or just wants to look that way. When the client is not the same from side to side, “you’re really doing two dresses… and so there is the extra time in adjustments for the proper fit on each side.” Sometimes the client might say, “Oh, did I really say that I wanted the neckline that low? No, no, no, I want it higher. I always allowed an excess of fabric just in case.”
Custom fitting for one individual is really couture. Charles “resents the designers in this country calling their work couture when it really is beautiful designer ready-to-wear. Custom-made couture means you’re engineering a garment on an individual human anatomy. Doing a custom-made dress is a major project.” Carolina Herrera says that she does designer ready-to-wear, except in the case of making Caroline Kennedy’s wedding dress, since that was specifically fit to her; then Herrera called it couture. This is what Charles turned his small business into after about 1975. It is what Paris does very, very well. Of course, they are doing haute couture; that is in a class all in itself.

*Haute couture* as done in Paris really translates into “high or superior sewing.” It means making a garment with perfect fit on the individual client, using “painstaking” construction, with the finest fabrics and distinctive styles. It is not the kind of garment that is generally available. In that regard however, Charles came very close. Though he would not say so, what he was offering his private clients at this point in this business career was very much all of the elements that constitute *haute couture* “without the fanfare.”

Mrs. Harvey S. Firestone Jr. was a lovely petite woman and entirely a couture customer. The Ohio State University Historic Costume & Textiles Collection owns quite a few garments custom-made for her in Paris in the 1950s and 1960s at Dior, Balenciaga and Patou. In New York, she also patronized Sophie’s Saks Fifth Avenue Salon Moderne and Bergdorf Goodman’s highly regarded custom department. Mrs. Firestone had a very high expectation for precise fit. Charles told me that “Andrew Goodman [at Bergdorf Goodman] finally said to her, ‘We love you, but please don’t come back because we simply lose money on everything we do for you.’” Apparently she would keep requesting
adjustments in her fittings until they were spending so much time on the adjustments that
they were losing money.

Charles said that “Paris with its years and years of experience and fussing was a
little more accustomed to all that fiddling. Or, they knew how to say with great
diplomacy, ‘But Madame, we did that correction. Your eyes are just so impeccable.’”

America’s greater focus was always on ready-to-wear.

In the mid-70s, Andrew Goodman told Charles that he would be closing the
custom department at Bergdorf Goodman because it was losing a million dollars a year.
In New York, many of the established couture houses such as Mainbocher and Chez
Ninon also closed their operations in the years to come. By 1980, there were many
changes in the entire fashion industry. A number of Paris couture houses were producing
more and more prêt-a-porter, ready-to-wear. (Think of Yves St. Laurent’s highly
successful Rive Gauche line.) Only through ready-to-wear, the licensing of designers
names, and the sales of designer perfumes were some houses able to continue with the
expensive process of haute couture.

Not all clients were as hard to please as Mrs. Firestone. When asked what his
typical custom-made customer was like at this time in his business in the mid-1970s,
Charles described first Mrs. Reinstein who came from Jacksonville, Florida.

“Part of her family had been owners of a fine specialty store down
there and as it developed, Mrs. Reinstein had entrée to many of the
designers in New York City over the years. She had gone into Bergdorf
Goodman and had bought one of our dresses. Having this entrée into
manufacturers and designers, she had called me and in her very beautiful
way of speaking and of doing everything, asked would I receive her. And I
said, ‘Well, Mrs. Reinstein, how do you know about me?’ She said
through Bergdorf Goodman. And I said, ‘Bergdorf is a very good
customer of mine and I don’t really feel that I have the right to say that I
may receive you, so to speak.’ … I didn’t think that it was quite right. But then, when we got into the pure custom-made, I did contact Mrs. Reinstein, who became a very favorite client and would come in two or three times a year and would usually buy about three things each time.

[She was] a wonderful size 6 who could care less where somebody had said the hemlines would be. This woman had great legs, and feet and ankles. Delman was still custom-making her shoes at that time so she always wore her dress, whatever the category…just below the knee, unless it was a long dress. Mr. John always made her hats and this woman always wore hats.”

Cynthia Palmer, who later became Mrs. Edward Lasker, was another client. Charles had met her when he was working at Nettie Rosenstein. Later when she was shopping at Henri Bendel, she saw “one of my garments and said, ‘Kleibacker! Is this Charles?’ And so she called me.” Cynthia had worked on Seventh Avenue and bought everywhere so Charles didn’t feel like he could put her off because she was a Bendel customer.

Dr. Mathilde Krim also came to Charles for clothes. She was a medical research doctor involved in AIDS research at the time. Her husband, Arthur Krim was involved in the Democratic Party during President Johnson’s term. One time she wore an outfit she bought from Charles, a big black silk organdy evening coat with a silk dress of black and white underneath, to an evening event and then afterwards on the president’s jet, Air Force One to Texas. She told Charles, “After wearing that coat all night long, at the party and on the plane…What did you do with that coat? It really never did wrinkle!”

This report pleased Charles very much. He never strove to create a design in the way that some designers made “some strange kind of statement that [the woman] really can’t move in.” Charles Kleibacker’s aim was to design clothes that served the person
who was wearing them. He wanted a woman to be able to put on a Kleibacker dress and
forget about it.

The people who came to Charles for custom-made clothes knew “what good
clothes were all about” and what characterized a well-made garment. They appreciated
fine clothing and expected their attire to work with them in the way that it complemented
their appearance and was suitable for the occasion. The social events they attended
demanded them to be at their best; that meant not being distracted by what they were
wearing. They were women who placed an importance on clothes and invested the money
and time it required for the fittings.

By the time Charles closed his business in 1986, the Kleibacker label had been
worn by well-known names: Diahann Carroll, Mrs. Nelson Rockefeller, Mrs. Richard
Nixon as First Lady, Hildegarde, Mrs. Irving Berlin, Isabel Eberstadt, Mrs. Alfred Drake,
singer Mary Travers of the group Peter, Paul and Mary, Jane Pickens Hoving, opera stars
Regina Resnik and Marilyn Horne, Rebekah Harkness, and Dame Alicia Markova
(premier ballerina).

Other changes came about in the 1970s that affected Charles’ business. When he
moved there, the West Side of the city was the inexpensive side. By the late 1970s, The
West Side was experiencing a tremendous rebirth, with prices becoming increasingly
upscale. The beautiful buildings along Central Park West, around the corner from
Charles’ space took on their former luster. They were now in demand.

“Prices were nothing when I went to the West Side in 1960. I went there
because I thought I could really take care of the expenses and 26 West 76
showed that we could. We had a very, very small space there, but then we
made the move to 23 West 73 down the block from the Dakota
Building…where among others lived John Lennon, Lauren Bacall, and Eugenia Sheppard.”

In 1984, the owner of the building told Charles he would have to move him to an upstairs space because he could get a great deal more money for the ground floor space Charles was in. Over the years the rent had increased marginally. Charles was now paying around $600 a month. “I moved upstairs to very cramped quarters. Soon the owner was getting somewhere near $7,000 monthly for my space!”

At this time in 1984 though, Charles “was making no attempt to sell to stores at all. But we still had some private customers.” Business had slowed down so much that he was able to produce what he needed with Carmen alone, so they could manage with the smaller space. He stopped doing business by around 1985, but kept the space as an apartment until 1990 when he bought a home in Columbus, Ohio.

Starting in 1967 when he began working with Du Pont, Charles had been able to earn much more money in alternative venues than he was ever able to make in his design business. He increasingly became know for his nationwide tours and began offering couture sewing clinics to fashion students and home-sewers. Throughout the 1970s, with the changing atmosphere of the industry, Charles turned his attention increasingly to these alternative income methods expanding on his relationship with textile mills and connecting with academia.

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1 He still has this couch in his townhouse today. It’s kind of like an over-sized fainting couch (no back) with arms and bolsters at each end. It was used in several fashion photographs of which some are included in this paper (see figure E8.26 and figure E6.9 shows the fireplace).

When asked, Charles is always reminding the questioner that his bias designs are not on true bias but a next to true bias that follows female curves with a center front seam.

This is a technique that Charles likes to use and it was one used often at Rosenstein. See Chapter 8 for detailed explanation.

This lady lived in the neighborhood close by and Charles found out much later when he was invited to her apartment that she was so wealthy that she “could have supported us all.”

In a phone interview with Carmen, she told me her mother was very upset that a girl of 16 was going to a man’s apartment everyday. (Charles’ studio was also his apartment.) But Carmen reassured her that he always treated her with respect as she did him. In fact, Carmen still refers to Charles as “Mr. Kleibacker” and has long viewed him as a father.

Phone interview with author on November 20, 1007.

In this new location Charles graduated to sleeping on top of the cutting table. He was definitely there night and day. He had a small mattress that he hauled up and down which simply leaned against the wall, camouflaged with draped fabric during the day. Charles didn’t really want me to put this fact into the paper, but I explained to him that it really shows the reality of trying to make a success of a business like his. Besides, he’s not the first designer to sleep in the cutting room; Charles Frederick Worth slept under the cutting table when he first started in fashion upon his arrival in Paris! Jean Philippe Worth, A Century of Fashion, Translated by Ruth Scott Miller (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1928).

Just this year he sent a dress to her in New York to be repaired. The teeniest organza bias strings on it had frayed and become worn from models wearing it over the last 30 years; she replaced them for him.

Charles laughed at this point and said here, “I did have that much sense in those days…” meaning he charged Bergdorf more than wholesale for doing the custom fitting to her.

For someone who is amazing at remembering names, it is noteworthy that Charles does not remember this woman’s name. She gave him such difficulty he “put her name out of his mind.”

This sample garment was donated by Charles to The Historic Costume & Textiles Collection at The Ohio State University.

Charles simply hates foundation garments such as loose slips and bras with lace, wires and bows that disturb the smooth lines of his designs. Most of his dresses are underlined so the wearer has no need to wear a slip.

Even though he was re-elected in 1973, the two years from 1972 to Richard Nixon’s resignation of his presidency on August 9, 1974 were filled with rumors, speculations and scandal. “Watergate: The Scandal that brought down Richard Nixon” (accessed July 15, 2007) http://www.watergate.info/

Charles thinks that he may still have one of those bras that he helped Warner develop.

I had a client myself once that was a B cup size on one breast and a D cup size on the other! With the dress that she wanted, I couldn’t just have her put in padding on one side of her bra to make it look equal.
As told to me by personnel at *le Chambre syndicale de la Couture Parisienne* when I visited their offices in 1998, they have control over whether a particular designer may take on the title of *Haute Couturier* and a designer must be *invited by them* to show a collection during that time when all the couture houses in Paris show their collections.

Now Charles likes to remind people “that there was superb custom fitting in this country at one time… there’s very little of it these days.”

Dr. Krim is the noted founder of amfAR, The American Foundation for AIDS Research. She was included in a book of outstanding women over the age of 69 by prominent photographer Joyce Tenneson. In her photograph, Dr. Krim wore her Kleibacker coat. *Wise Women; A Celebration of Their Insights, Courage, and Beauty*. (New York: Bulfinch Press), 98.

Though Charles Kleibacker is too much of a gentleman to say this, I include Charles James in this category. For opinions from his clients in this regard, see Elizabeth Ann Coleman, *The Genius of Charles James* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1982).

The Dakota Building is at the corner of Central Park West and West 72nd Street. Charles’ studio was located around the block at 23 West 73rd Street.
CHAPTER 5

OTHER CREATIVE ENDEAVORS

From his earliest years in fashion, Charles Kleibacker was involved in a variety of revenue generating activities besides designing and manufacturing clothing. These included evaluating fabrics made from a newly developed fiber by Du Pont, and traveling on nationwide tours promoting fabric and sharing sewing construction techniques with the home-sewing market. He also produced fashion shows featuring his historic clothing collection and toured the nation with that venue. While he continued his New York workshop and did the national tours, Charles offered couture sewing seminars for university fashion design programs. His was a very busy schedule during this time.

Reader Mail

The earliest way that Charles earned extra income beyond his clothing business was through his relationship with Reader Mail. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Reader Mail was a huge company. It was owned by King Features Syndicated, Inc. which was formed in 1915 by William Randolph Hearst to publish comic strips in newspapers.¹ Its origin is not surprising knowing that the patterns that Reader Mail offered for sale were advertised through major metropolitan newspapers.² “Prominent designers” were approached by a Reader Mail representative and offered the option of receiving royalties on every pattern
sold if they would be allowed to borrow a garment and take the pattern from it. The designer’s name was featured on the pattern and in advertisements. Charles said that it was “the easiest way in the world to make money.”

Charles developed the new garment, and then Reader Mail did the rest. Charles simply collected the royalty checks. Reader Mail paid him approximately 60 cents for every pattern sold. An advertisement from the *Birmingham News* in 1976 lists the selling price of a pattern as $1.25 plus 35 cents postage and handling.

Since the Antonelli-Kleibacker pattern from Rome became Reader Mails’ best selling pattern, they were especially happy to continue their business arrangement with Charles upon his return to New York. Virginia, the representative for Reader Mail, often came to see him in his New York studio to look at the designs that he had developed. When she saw a style that she thought could be something from which they could make a potentially saleable pattern, she borrowed the garment.

If a dress was a favorite in the stores and sold for multiple seasons, occasionally the pattern might have had a concurrent offering. Although many designers were very concerned about having their designs stolen, for Charles it was not a problem. When I told him of my surprise at the patterns being published so quickly, Charles responded very strongly. “Think about it! This was going to bring me in money. I mean I was not that concerned about people copying us. [My dresses] were not that easy, and if the pattern company wanted to do that, I was glad to let them.” He knew how challenging it was to construct his garments. The probability of someone knocking-off his designs was very low.
The possibility that the clients who purchased clothes from him would be unhappy to see the patterns being sold in this manner was very unlikely as well. They knew the value of the Kleibacker label and were happy to pay whatever price he asked. Indeed, the Bergdorf clientele and the women who purchased his patterns from the newspapers were most likely not the same type of women. Through the pattern company, Charles was able to reach an entirely different market that would otherwise have remained untouched by him.

Charles’ expectation for the dresses that he sold to the stores and to his private clientele was certainly of the highest level of fit and construction that he could achieve. It was an entirely different matter when it came to the Reader Mail patterns. “They did the pattern, not always to my way of thinking. There were a couple of them in there that I thought they did a lousy job.” Small changes like putting a dart in where there had been none was not a serious issue with him. On the whole, he felt that the company did a decent job of interpreting his garments and the women who bought the patterns were happy to be participating in a small part of designer fashion.

Working with Du Pont

Besides paying very well, Charles received great satisfaction when he worked with E. I. Du Pont de Nemours Co. Inc. In the mid 1960s, Du Pont was culminating twenty years of development work on a synthetic silk substitute fiber they kept so secret that it was only referred to as ‘Fiber Y.’ The fiber was later christened Qiana, a word derived from “a computerized combination of random letters.” This ‘wonder’ fiber was developed to look and feel like silk. It had a similar weight, drape, and luster but had an
advantage over silk in that it was machine washable and when allowed to drip dry it was free of wrinkles. It was truly a miracle fiber.

Having reached the point of successfully making the fiber, Du Pont needed to test it by having garments made out of the sample fabrics they manufactured from the new fiber. Helen Gray was the executive in charge of the couture area at Du Pont and had met Charles when he was working at Lanvin. Lyn Stevenson worked under Helen and was in charge of publicity in the couture area. Mrs. Stevenson got to know Charles when she went to his studio on 23 West 73rd to take photos of garments he produced in Du Pont fibers, a jersey of a wool/Dacron blend and other Du Pont fibers including nylon (see figure E6.19 from 1964). Just as Helen Gray had done with the garments she borrowed from Lanvin when she first met Charles in Paris, Du Pont and other fiber manufacturers continued to photograph designers’ garments made from their fiber products for use in magazine advertising layouts and other publicity.

Lyn Stevenson suggested that Charles would be a good candidate to make up sample garments to test the new fiber. For this crucial last phase of development, Du Pont needed someone who knew “how to keep his mouth shut” and since he was not on Seventh Avenue, the sample garments would more easily be kept secret with him than with someone in the midst of other design houses.

Thus in 1967, Charles was hired to work with the engineers in Du Pont’s Wilmington, Delaware location to see how the fiber performed when produced into garments. His “little business was the first one that ever made garments of the Qiana fiber which… had not [yet] been named.” There were no problems found by him when sewing and working with the knit jersey, the first fabric they sent him. However, when they made
up woven fabrics from the fiber, it was another matter. The fabric made from Qiana was very dense and Charles found that in the weaves the seams tended to pucker unless sewn with cotton thread and they “needed to take extra care in the sewing.” It puckered even more when being sewn on the straight grain. Much more successful results were achieved when the garment was cut on the cross grain or cut on the bias. The engineers at Du Pont didn’t understand how the grains could perform differently, so Charles had his workroom staff sew up two identical garments, with one cut on the straight and the other on the cross grain. When he showed the people at Du Pont these two dresses, it was then quite apparent to them and they understood what he was talking about.

During the last week of June, 1968, Du Pont unveiled its long-anticipated secret fiber with a huge press conference at Manhattan’s First National Bank Building. “Six models wearing Qiana garments were escorted by armed guards to prevent any over anxious competitor … snipping a sample swatch.” In the September 15 issue of *Vogue* that year, Du Pont ran a multi-page advertisement focused on Qiana. The ad featured designs by Paris couturiers: Dior, Ungaro, Givenchy, Cardin, Courrèges, and Chanel.

The cost of developing Qiana dictated that it was to be a luxury fiber. Since they had invested $75 million in the development (compared with $27 million for nylon), Du Pont was aiming for what they considered the ‘top fashion markets.’ Woven Qiana was introduced at the Monte Carlo market in Monaco the following season targeting important textile mills in France for consumption by the couture houses in Paris. Charles made a special dress of brown satin Qiana for Lyn Stevenson to wear to the opening in Monte Carlo. It was a very dramatic silhouette, made from the pattern for the only
bias design that he had ever created. (See figure E8.28 and Chapters 7 and 8 for more discussion on bias and this design by Charles.)

Abraham, Bianchini, Bucol, Nattier, and Staron were the European fabric houses that were given the privilege of producing the Qiana fabrics. Marc Bohan at Dior designed a Qiana wedding dress valued at that time for $4,437 which was given to New York’s Metropolitan Museum. In exchange for their promotional support, Dior expected Du Pont to financially assist them with two shows in the United States, costing between $15 and $20,000. Ungaro made up ten garments of Qiana and several Dacron worsteds. For this effort, he wanted Du Pont to finance a ten-minute film on his working methods and business. Both of these proposals were recommended to be accepted by the writer of a report submitted to Du Pont on August 8, 1968.

Parisian ateliers struggled with Qiana. The fabric was easily melted and scorched requiring iron temperatures be kept low. Balmain’s salon reported severe static with an incident where “a wedding dress in Qiana was said to have ‘electrocuted’ the model.” Many designers believed that Du Pont was using their names and couture houses as vehicles to introduce the new fiber cheaply through editorials instead of paying for endorsed advertising and some couturiers demanded larger endorsement fees than that which Du Pont was willing to pay.

All was not calm on the American side of the Atlantic either. Promoting first to the Paris markets was not a move that endeared Du Pont to the New York market. Charles said that “the New York designers were furious when [Qiana] was introduced in Monte Carlo” instead of its home country. The following season when Qiana fabrics were made available to the good houses in America and they started to produce sample
garments of the fiber, all the sewing challenges that Charles struggled with came to the fore. Du Pont sent scientists and engineers who had worked with Charles to the New York workrooms to offer assistance. When they suggested to those very experienced sewing hands to adjust the tension on their machines, they were met with indignation and were basically told to “Get out of here!”

Making a profit on producing garments is challenging enough without having to take extra care and use special procedures for a difficult fabric. In this case, the benefits were not enough. Primarily due to the challenges in sewing, woven Qiana was taken off the market quite quickly. However, Qiana jersey continued to be sold and became very popular.

In June 1970, Charles sent a letter to Mr. Gomer H. Ward, Retail Marketing Manager for Du Pont’s Textile Fiber Department proposing an idea (see Appendix B). They liked his plan. To increase the sales of Qiana, Du Pont hired Charles to promote the fiber in seminars at high-end department stores that sold fabrics and to quality fabric specialty stores. They specifically targeted the over-the-counter home sewing market, one of the ten fastest-growing businesses in the U.S. at that time. In 1971 and 1972, Charles did two tours traveling widely across the country, stopping in a total of thirty different major cities. He talked to home sewers and those who were custom seamstresses.

Basing their efforts on the theory “that women who sew seriously want to sew better and that such women won’t waste their time on low-end fabrics,” Charles presented Du Pont’s Couture Sewing Clinics with the theme, ‘What makes a dress cost $500?’ He did the commentary on a Qiana fashion show to start the clinic. The rest of the
time was spent in an “informal, sometimes rollicking atmosphere” explaining construction techniques and fit while fielding questions from the packed audiences. (See figures 5.1 and 5.2) As he explained the techniques, he turned a few of the modeled dresses made in his own workroom inside out then tossed them into the crowd for the women to pass around and inspect up close. “These women know the difference between a well-made dress and a thrown-together garment. In fact, it’s often poor workmanship in ready-to-wear that inspired their commitment to home sewing.”

In San Francisco it was standing room only for Mr. Kleibacker’s Couture Sewing Clinic held at Britex Fabrics. The Qiana fashion show was held in the shop’s display window.

Figure 5.1  Kleibacker DuPont Couture Sewing Clinic at Britex Fabrics, San Francisco. (Sew Business, January 1972, p31)

Figure 5.2  Qiana fashion show during the Kleibacker DuPont Couture Sewing Clinic at Joseph Horne, Pittsburgh. (DuPont Magazine, March – April, 1972, p19)
The tours were very successful and some stores reported a dramatic increase of thirty-five percent in the sales of Qiana. *Fabricnews* in October, 1971 reported, “The drawing power of the Charles Kleibacker road show for Du Pont’s Qiana was considerable – even greater than anticipated. He attracted standing-room only crowds.” *WWD* in November 1971 printed, “One of the most popular attractions on the home sewing fair/seminar circuit these days is couturier Charles Kleibacker and the Qiana show.”

Du Pont’s association with Charles continued through the next years with his involvement in their promotional advertisements for a variety of magazines. The Spring 1972 issues of *McCall’s Pattern Fashion* and *Simplicity Fashion Magazine* ran an ad that said, “If Kleibacker uses it in $600 couturier clothes, shouldn’t you at least ask to see Qiana the next time you’re buying fabric?” (See figure 5.3)

Anyone who sewed for themselves in the 1970s speaks high praises and wistfully wonders ‘whatever happened to Qiana? That was the best fabric…’ As quickly as Qiana became popular, it fell out of favor. Several factors led to its demise.

Du Pont followed a common marketing strategy, to introduce at a ‘skimming price’ then switch to a ‘penetrating price’ to maximize profits. They introduced their new product, Qiana at a high price for several reasons. Those who are first using a new product are less sensitive to costs and it helps portray a high-quality image to attract market segment. Using the French couturiers to introduce Qiana was the strategy Du Pont used to help develop a favorable identity with their product. Higher initial price helps to recoup research and investment expenses quickly when competition is low.
Kleibacker's couturier clothes are included in the wardrobes of some of the most fashionably dressed women in the world. And very often, they're made from fabric of Qiana® nylon.

But in addition to designing clothes for his exclusive clientele, Kleibacker also devotes a great deal of time to conducting home-sewing seminars in department stores throughout the country.

One of the things he's often heard to say is, "I don't use second-rate fabrics, and, with all the time and effort you put into a dress, neither should you."

All of which is why we think the next time you're shopping for fabric, you should take the opportunity to find out more about "Qiana"... how it looks, how it feels, how it taints and sews, and how very easy it is to take care of.

Remember, Kleibacker makes clothes for the very well-dressed, fashionable women. But then again, so do you.

*DuPont registered trademark. DuPont makes nylon, and it makes Qiana.

If Kleibacker uses it in $600 couturier clothes, shouldn't you at least ask to see Qiana® the next time you're buying fabric?
Later, after the initial market is saturated, the ‘skimming price’ strategy can be switched in a favorable price reduction to a ‘penetrating price’ market strategy. This is the stage where the manufacturer responds to increased market demand and with a lower price point, expands total sales volume. Du Pont’s profit at this point would have been lower per pound, but because of increased production and sales, their goal was to gain an overall net profit that was higher. They expected the intermediary expenses of production to drop over time, but they didn’t. For one year only, in 1977 when Qiana was at its most popular, sales increased to a high of $79 million, Du Pont almost broke even.

The price of Qiana was first introduced at $5.95 to $8.95 per pound. Over the next five years, they dropped the price by 35 percent. Mass production fabric and garment manufacturers were able to acquire Qiana fiber at the lower price. Charles recalls that Ship ‘n Shore negotiated a special deal to manufacture large quantities of blouses and shirts of Qiana. Over-production made it too common in the public’s view to justify spending high prices for it. Charles feels that if Du Pont would have only sold the fiber to the high-end houses and the top manufacturers, it would have made a difference in how the public viewed the product. Instead, many low cost manufacturers were using lower quality fabrics that filled the market. Fiber manufacturers developed a dangerous blind-spot: “quantity was everything, regardless of the quality or long-term merits of the fabric.”

Nearing the end of the 1970s, Qiana was at the height of its popularity. It was made into unending numbers of men’s shirts to be worn with the then popular man’s polyester leisure suit, a look frequently associated with the film, Saturday Night Fever. This fashion was prominent for a time but soon took on an aura of bad taste at the same
time polyester began its rapid decline. Like the polyester manufactured at that time, the dense Qiana didn’t wrinkle and was very soil resistant, but it held in perspiration; it didn’t breathe.

Social factors also affected the popularity of not only Qiana, but polyester and all synthetic fibers. Mass-produced, cut-price fashion had flooded the market in response to the consumerism that grew from the young pop culture embraced by designers in the 1960s who thrived on throw-away designs such as paper dresses, cardboard tables and inflatable polyvinyl chloride (PVC) chairs. Fake fur, PVC as well as wash-and-wear, brightly dye-able, low-cost synthetics were embraced as the trendiest looks. Fakeness was flaunted in an abandonment of the traditional status symbols of the rich. Expensive real furs and natural fibers such as silk and linen which require high maintenance were replaced with the miracle convenience fabrics available to all. By the end of the 1970s, the anti-materialistic counter culture of the hippy movement (which started around 1967 in California) began to spread beyond that group. Expressed in the mainstream by the philosophies of ‘naturalness,’ a growing ecological consciousness arose at the same time and were perhaps triggered by sky-rocketing oil prices and major natural disasters in the form of oil spills. “At the beginning of the 1980s the ‘back to nature’ movement really kicked in, ‘the granola-head’ arrived and chemistry-set clothing fell further out of fashion.”

Over-production led to an over-saturated market and too many homogenous clothes. Their success brought about their down-fall; fiber manufacturers had huge economic reversals with the loss of the credibility of synthetics. After spending $200 million to develop and market in addition to the precommercial research and
development costs, Qiana went out of production in the early 1980s and became something that “Du Pont would like to forget… [It] was abandoned for natural fibers and died barely a decade [after its introduction].”

National Tours

Condé Nast’s “Kleibacker tips”

During 1972, Charles was hired by Condé Nast to “write the editorial and to work with the fashion and picture editors and writers in a ‘Sew-It-Yourself’ story layout” published in the *Vogue* July, 1972 issue. Around this time, Du Pont was so pleased with Charles in his 1970 and 1971 tours they “suggested to *Vogue*” that they use him as a salesperson to help promote fabrics. At that time *Vogue* was devoting considerable advertising space to fiber and fabric manufacturers, and since “Du Pont was spending a lot of money on advertising, *Vogue* listened to them.” In 1974 and also in 1975, they again published a ‘Sew-It-Yourself” spread, but this time, following Du Pont’s recommendation, Condé Nast expanded that earlier association with Charles to include nationwide tours to promote the sale of fabrics advertised in their magazine.

“Sew-It-Yourself” was a special feature with multi-page spreads highlighting *Vogue* patterns and “Kleibacker tips.” The fashions were sewn and provided by *Vogue* and photographed on well-known models. The published tips suggested various ways that women sewing for themselves could get a better fit and a more professional couture look to the *Vogue* patterns shown in the article. Charles also gave tips on how to best handle
the variety of fabrics used in the construction of the garments featured. This was an important factor as the ads were paid for by fabric manufacturers.27

Charles’ role in the tours in conjunction with the July 1974 issue and the March 1975 issue was to conduct in-store seminars that focused on good fit and good sewing techniques. They “did a wardrobe of Vogue patterns, but I was allowed to say, “perhaps if you did this to the patterns, it might look a little bit better, or could we think about this fabric, or maybe if you could get a good hand, you could hand roll this.”

Much of what Charles was presenting was a familiar subject having shared many of the same construction techniques in his Du Pont tours. This time, however, he talked more about different fabrics, pattern alterations and fitting. “I would say to the audience out there, ‘You know, Vogue can’t custom fit you. And I’m here to really talk to you about fitting…so that if you do this and that and the other, then we’re going to have something.’ And then I would also get into my techniques about how to hold in that neckline….” (See Chapter 8 for that technique.) And he would also say, “Don’t expect pattern companies to custom-fit you. You must do that. In my home-sewing clinics, I’ve been telling audiences across the country: do not follow a pattern slavishly – almost all of us have body irregularities – go that step further. When possible, leave more than that 5/8-inch seam allowance…just in case.”28

American Silk Mills Tours

In 1976, John Sullivan hired Charles to continue the sewing seminars he had been doing for Vogue except now he would be promoting silk. Mr. Sullivan was president of American Silk Mills. Mr. Gerli, his grandfather, owned the company and “had worked
with the Chinese years and years ago in the production of silk. When trade with China was again opening up “in about 1975, he went back there” and re-established a business relationship with them. “American Silk Company was about the only one that had held onto the machinery that would produce silk. Everybody else had pretty much turned to polyester.”

At this time, American Silk Mills was also producing cloth from Qiana fiber they bought from Du Pont, but the focus on these tours was mainly silk. It’s interesting; Charles was hired to help re-introduce silk after he had previously promoted the silk substitute! Charles did five tours in 1976 to 1980 all over the country, again targeting the over-the-counter market in high-end department stores that also carried fabrics. His schedule was such that he visited 23 cities “from Jan 30 to April 7 with only three weekends in New York during that time. But I love it. I love the theater of staging the shows and meeting the people.”

The Milwaukee Sentinel published a long article by Anita Black (April 3, 1976) beginning with,

“Charles Kleibacker is about to do it again. He is going to give Milwaukee women another lesson in his personally conducted continuing education program in the field of home sewing. This time the subject will be silk. … He teaches the art of creating beautiful clothing to women who can’t afford the hundreds of dollars his originals cost.”

Anita ended her article with, “Kleibacker’s know-how and easy to follow hints are designed ‘to move your clothes into the designer category’ and away from the ‘loving hands at home’ stigma.” This last phrase could really be called Charles’ favorite theme in his teaching efforts. I heard him say it often and I’m sure he emphasized this theme in his university and college workshops.
Leigh Lecture Bureau

In 1974, Charles was added to the roster of the W. Colston Leigh Lecture Bureau. (See figure 5.4 for mailer of promotion.) For about three years, this company obtained periodic bookings for him to do fashion related lectures around the country. He talked to such groups as the Atlanta Historical Society and women’s groups such as Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) and the Women’s Club of Lynchburg, Virginia. He also appeared in lecture series sponsored by newspapers such as the *News American* in Baltimore, Maryland and the *Advertiser-Journal* in Montgomery, Alabama.

The appearances that he made during this time were similar to those that he had been doing. The events included a designer fashion show and a question-and-answer session in which Charles explained the techniques of proper fit and adjustments to mass-produced patterns. Sometimes women members of the organization modeled the Kleibacker labels that he brought and also garments by other top designers which Charles had started to collect.

Taubman Fashion Shows

The last of Kleibacker’s national tours was for the Taubman Company who built huge shopping malls across most of the United States. Charles met Roxanne Rausch in New York; she was doing some free lance work for Taubman. When she saw the historic clothing that Charles had been collecting over the last decade she had an idea. She said to Charles, “What if I presented to the Taubman Company the idea of a ‘then’ and ‘now’
Figure 5.4 Promotional mailer with Leigh Bureau, mid-1970s.
Courtesy of June F. Mohler Fashion Library, Kent State University
using your clothes and commentary for the ‘then’ and if the Taubman Company would be
interested, pulling clothes from the stores, their tenants, for the ‘now’ part?” Charles
thought that sounded interesting.

Roxanne presented the idea to her supervisor, Pat Goldman, the merchandising
director for Taubman who came into New York to talk with Charles. “I think what really
was the clincher there, was Pat seeing the clothes. Pat was one of those people who love
clothes, and she responded a bit to costume history and seeing the things I had collected
from the ‘20s, ‘30s, ‘40s and the ‘50s. She said, ‘I think we have some excitement here’
and bought the idea.”

Charles went to Detroit for an initial meeting with the people with whom he
would be working. The group included the Taubman people and others they hired to help
produce the shows: models, lighting and sound. Working with Taubman “was one of the
highlights of my traveling days.” The fashion shows were staged in the huge central area
of the malls with Charles narrating. The show was called “Trends: Then and Now,” with
the historic clothing being the ‘then’ part of the show and the mall clothes the ‘now’
part.30

This 1980 tour was a huge success and drew large audiences wherever they
appeared, ten stops from August 15th to October 4th. It was so successful after the first
season, that the Taubman executives asked Charles if he had another idea. Among the
ideas that he presented was something which centered on a few clothes he had picked up,
clothes once owned by celebrities: a garment of Joan Crawford’s and a Jacques Fath
gown that had been owned by Rosalind Russell along with one from Hildegarde. “Pat
decided to take that theme which left me in a bit of a spot because I did not have enough
clothes from these kinds of personalities. So it became a search and spending of money to get enough clothes together, which we did.”

The fall, 1981 production was an intense schedule having 27 performances at 10 different malls in less than two months, between August 20 and October 10. It was called Fashion Hall of Fame, which “was really a then and now situation [also] but following color themes. As I recall, we brought the ‘then’ up to current [time] with a garment by Gianfranco Ferre made for Farrah Fawcett. Then, again, the ‘now’ section from [the stores in the mall] wherever we were appearing.” The color themes coordinated with the colors that were currently in vogue to help the specialty and department store sales.

In preparing for the production, Pat Goldman asked Charles if he knew of some good photographers. Charles selected the best, Neil Barr and Horst. “That was exciting to do the publicity shots with those great photographers, to have them select the clothes and see what they felt would photograph well.” (See figure 5.5, photograph by Horst of Charles and a model wearing one of his designs from 1977.)

Charles had always been able to find photographers who took good photos, but he had never gone to the best in the industry. The photographers he had used were those who were perhaps just starting out and who needed to develop their portfolios. They were glad for the opportunity to work with the beautiful models and his fine garments so Charles had never paid a fee for the work. Sometimes if Charles trusted the model, he would let her borrow garments for a photo shoot that she set up herself to add to her own modeling portfolio – on the condition that she give him a copy of the photographs. Sometimes his garments were taken to photographers by the company that was doing the
Figure 5.5  Charles Kleibacker, 1977. Photograph by Horst, 1981. Courtesy of June F. Mohler Fashion Library, Kent State University.
promotional ad such as in the case of Du Pont; in these occasions, Charles did not work with them. The opportunity to work with these two top photographers was indeed a pleasure for him.

Taubman had some of the photographs blown up to larger-than-life size to use as a backdrop for the show. They had “the photograph of the Joan Crawford dress, of the Marilyn Monroe dress, of the Hildegarde dress as backdrops, music that was coordinated, and we really spent time on rehearsals. The Taubman Company knows how to stage things with a certain kind of quality. It was exciting.”

With the center of the malls filled with “wildly enthusiastic audiences” and all of the professional preparation and presentation, Charles very much enjoyed working the shows. A Taubman publicity release stated,

“Kleibacker’s showmanship has placed him in great demand on the lecture circuit. He loves to teach and encourage his audiences. In addition, he has served as visiting artist at many universities and colleges across the country.

As consultant to New York’s American Silk Mills for the past six years, Kleibacker has toured cities throughout the United States and Canada presenting fashion shows and seminars to inspire and motivate standing-room-only audiences in the art of sewing silk fabrics. He has appeared nationwide on television shows including ‘Good Morning America’ and ‘A.M. New York.”

The showman that Charles Kleibacker had become at this time was far, far different from that extremely shy small-town boy he had once been.

Teaching

Besides becoming a showman, through the 1970s Charles had also built up a reputation for teaching in seminars offered through fashion departments in colleges and
universities. His first teaching really started when he began hiring the “young people from the school in the Bronx” to work in his workrooms in New York. With Carmen as his first student, he “saw the potential there immediately and the interest in trying to get a garment together. Yes, she was the first one.” They were very teachable and had a great desire to learn.

Charles taught the young people he hired to build on skills that they had, to fill the positions that were needed in the workroom. There was a “young black man who helped me for a while…he was very, very good at the iron.” He “would have loved to have become a designer. The other people there [working on the machines], with Carmen I don’t think the idea of designing ever occurred to them.” He has often given the advice to students to “don’t be afraid to become a sample hand then you can work up to being head of the workroom and then take over as designer.” He feels that it is very important for young people who want to design to have a good foundation with clothing construction and to also know what happens in the workroom.

Charles has an intense interest in helping students learn not only the basic skills needed to establish a good foundation to be successful, but also the extra and fine construction techniques that will help them stand out in the industry. He also has a desire to preserve the high quality construction that goes into couture type garments. This is what he regularly teaches to students at Mount Mary College.

In 1968, Sister Aloyse Hessburg, the head of the fashion department at Mount Mary College in Milwaukee, approached Charles with an idea. They wanted a designer from New York City to come out and be a consultant to the senior students in their design program. That summer she visited Charles in his New York studio and together they
planned the course. Charles went out once a month during the semester to work with Fashion Design seniors. He helped them from the conception of their ideas in sketches to creating muslins and fitting the final garment in fashion fabrics. Sister Aloyse spent a month working in Charles’ studio in New York so that she would be able to work with the students during the time between his visits (see figure 5.6).

Figure 5.6  News article covering the visit of Sister Aloyse to the Kleibacker studio in 1969. (*New York Sunday News*, February 2, 1969)

The partnership worked out so well, Charles has recently completed his thirty-eighth year at Mount Mary College. Working with the students at Mount Mary “was very fortunate for my life. After that initial situation, I started going to more colleges and universities on a consultant basis. Then that developed into one week workshops.”

Besides Mount Mary College, throughout the years, Charles consulted and/or taught courses at Pratt Institute in New York, Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Drexel University in Philadelphia, University of Cincinnati, the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) in New York, Columbus College of Art and Design, and
Kent State University. At these institutions he was designated as Visiting Professor or Adjunct Professor in his capacity as instructor for a full-term class. Throughout the years he also was a Visiting Designer to eighteen other universities in presenting his week-long participatory workshops; “Advanced Draping and Design” and “Couture Techniques Involved in Construction of Designer Garments.” (See Appendix C.)

Week-Long Couture Sessions

The March 1977 issue of Threads Magazine carried an announcement of a course at Kent State University:

“Couture Draping with Charles Kleibacker, a one-week class at the Shannon Rodgers/Jerry Silverman School of Fashion Design and Merchandising, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio, is an advanced course on bias draping. Designer and teacher Kleibacker, known as the “master of the bias,” is a superb instructor, patient and exacting, whose boundless knowledge and enthusiasm for the subject is infectious.”

Dr. Elizabeth Rhodes, currently Professor and Director of The Shannon Rodgers and Jerry Silverman School of Fashion Design and Merchandising at Kent State University has known and worked with Charles for many, many years. She commented on the first time she met him which was “at Drexel University when he was on the stage doing his show-and-tell. He was in that stage of his life, other than being a designer when he was very rentable. You know, ‘rent a professor…’ By the time I met him in 1977, he was doing less and less of his business and more tours and workshops.” She said that she went up to him after the show and said, “Mr. Kleibacker I’m very intrigued with some of the things you’ve said, but I’m a hands-on person. Do you ever teach anything?” He told her about the workshops scheduled that summer at The Ohio State University and one at
Colorado State University. Besides coming up with the travel costs and the course fees, Elizabeth had a three year old child and a small infant. So attending four weeks of Charles’ workshop was “like a dream I can’t have right now.”

In 1977, Elizabeth was teaching at Georgia College. Thinking more about it, she said that she wondered if Charles would come to her campus for a workshop. She realized that Georgia was nowhere near the size of an Ohio State University or Colorado State. It was a very small college and she was a junior faculty member not even tenured. She recalled thinking, “He’s going to laugh at me, but I’ve just got to try.” Nervously, since she didn’t know him, she called to ask if he would come and what his fees were. “I don’t remember to this day what he was charging at that time, but I remember when he told me I caught my breath! In relation to money of the day, it was a lot!” Covering her astonishment, she calmly said “Thank you, I’ll get back to you if I can make it happen.”

Through much effort and investigating on her campus at Georgia College, Elizabeth finally figured out how to be able to offer the class. In the end there was such a tremendous response for enrollment in the class, Charles taught two sessions one week after the other.

The next year, they offered two different classes. In the draping and design class, the student was able to develop their own original bias design by draping on a dress form using muslin while learning the draping techniques for bias perfected by Charles. For the construction class, Charles developed a skirt pattern that included many sewing techniques he used in his couture garments. The student went home with an original Kleibacker sewn by them, but supervised by Charles.
The two week courses were so popular, they continued to be offered year after year. Students who took the draping course one year returned to take the construction class the next. Eventually they added a third week just for students to be able to have a week of consultation with Charles. When Claire Shaeffer wrote about the class in Sew News (Dec. 1985), Georgia College received enrollment from all over the United States, even attracting two women from Australia! Claire wrote, “A charming, unassuming gentleman who thrives on sharing his expertise, [Charles] gives each student the same individual attention accorded his wealthy clients in New York.”

The summer classes were offered every year at Georgia College until Dr. Rhodes joined the faculty at Eastern Michigan University in 1986. By then, Charles was busy at The Ohio State University and had time only occasionally for a week-long course. Today, in her position at Kent State University where she was hired in 1994, Dr. Rhodes continues to draw upon Charles’ expertise. Besides offering periodic seminars to the department faculty, he is adjunct faculty to their program and has often been invited as an outside critic to evaluate the senior design students’ projects of developing and constructing an original fashion line. He has also been pleased to assist in the role of commentator for their highly popular yearly fashion show and has often had this honor at Mount Mary College as well.

Charles virtually thrives on sharing his knowledge. He enjoys invitations to talk to design classes and will also talk to any one who is interested in his designs and techniques. Martha Espedahl, the fashion editor of the Morning News in Wilmington, Delaware wrote:
“Probably the most unaffected designer in the clothing industry is Charles Kleibacker, and he is one of the most talented. Some editors gussy up their stories in hopes of winning favors from the demi-gods of Seventh Avenue, but I can truthfully say that Charles is a ‘real’ person who has not been swayed by any of the Seventh Avenue false fronts, fashion decrees of skimpiness on cut, design and work. Charles makes time to show his line to anyone from an old friend to a fashion magazine editor to a small town fashion writer to a metropolitan fashion editor.”

Charles shared his knowledge and time to not only the students who enrolled in his classes, but also with people who he just briefly met.

Kathleen Koontz taught sewing as a business in Denver and attended a “Qiana Show” in 1971. Charles was “gracious to [her] for a few minutes before one of the showings.” Since he “personally gave [her] his address,” she wrote to him requesting some time at lunch or dinner on his next visit to Denver. She needed some advice regarding her business and he was “the only professional she knew.” Her thank you letter of March 11, 1972 begins, “Dear Charles, I’m still in the clouds after yesterday. I could have talked all night and I’m ashamed; you were so tired; so generously patient with me. I am more convinced than ever now that I want to go ahead…” Even though 1972 was a very hectic production schedule, Charles allowed her to come observe his workshop in New York that summer.

Generously patient is an accurate description of Charles Kleibacker’s teaching. He critiques in a way that is gentle on the ego, but he is very insistent on quality. *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* printed on September 6, 1981, “When a college instructor demands 110 percent from overworked seniors, he risks forfeiting any admiration. But, Charles Kleibacker, one of the few Americans who is considered a practitioner of haute couture, is so passionate about engineering flawless clothing that students do what it
takes to gain his favor.” He is graciously charming, remembering names amazingly well, but he maintains a strong determination.

During our conversations, Charles often inserted advice to students. He counsels:

– When starting out in their careers, students should “work for someone else first.” There are “so many facets of this business” they can’t possibly know it all. In this way they may avoid making mistakes in their own company.

– You have to buy enough fashion fabric to experiment with. A muslin is good to start a new design with, but the fashion fabric will change it on you. You have to get it to fashion fabric to really know, then you can experiment and tweak the design until it is right. Sometimes the first versions can be saved and turned into a sample, but often you have to have enough fabric to produce multiple garments before the design is perfected. Sometimes the whole needs to be scrapped and started over. That’s just the cost of development.

– “I can’t exist aesthetically unless I can exist economically.” There is more to the fashion business than aesthetics; one can’t forget about the economics. In the end you have to sell your garments and make a profit. “When students say to me, they didn’t have any inspiration today… putting the right garment together is indeed work, but no two ways about it, wait until you try to sell it. That is the true creativity.”

– Sometimes you have to take a gamble and go for what your instinct tells you is right, even if all around you are saying otherwise. Risk is a large factor; you have to be willing to take risks.
Charles Kleibacker has consistently reached out to share his experience and skills. He encourages young students to continue striving for their dreams in the fashion industry and has regularly supported their efforts through scholarship donations. In the past he sponsored the Charles Kleibacker Most Promising Young Designer Award given by the Professional Association of Custom Clothiers (PACC), and the Charles Kleibacker Fashion Design Scholarship at Drexel University. A Charles Kleibacker Scholarship is offered at Mount Mary College “awarded to a design or patternmaking major who exhibits an aptitude for the high standards of design, fit and technical proficiency that Mr. Kleibacker’s work has symbolized.” In 1997, Charles and his sister Ruth Richard (who is now 97 years old) established an endowed scholarship at Kent State University in honor of their mother, Frances Kleibacker, an Ohio native and “a woman of great style and fashion.”

Through the years, efforts have been made to record Charles’ skills and techniques to be able to preserve and share with a wider audience. In 1975, Charles was featured in three segments of the television series “So – You Want to Sew.” In these shows he discussed and demonstrated how to press seams when sewing, using grains of fabrics, and altering a bodice for closer fit.

In 1979, the Extension Service in connection with the Home Economics Department at Iowa State University produced a series of short videos they called “Think Couture with Charles Kleibacker” and “Couture Close-Up with Charles Kleibacker.” In the eight segments produced, Charles talked about his philosophies of fashion and garment engineering. He discussed how he worked with fabrics and developed a cohesive line. He discussed couture techniques such as working with printed fabrics, fitting the
anatomy, constructing his signature bias strings, and the proper way to handle hems in bias-cut garments. It is unfortunate that the 3/4-inch Beta tapes on which the Iowa State videos and the 1975 series are recorded have deteriorated. The audio is good, but the visuals are now very distorted and indistinct.

Fortunately, there are later recordings of interviews with Charles which are still intact. In 1993, Dr. Elizabeth Rhodes and the oral-historian, Stanley Garfinkel, Professor of History at Kent State University produced a video entitled, “Kleibacker Talks about Couture.” Many of the topics included in the previous recordings were covered as well as interviews with Charles about his life. Although the finished published recording is only about 17 minutes in length, the rough cuts containing more in-depth material have all been preserved. These and other audio and video recordings are part of the Charles Kleibacker archives at the June F. Mohler Fashion Library at Kent State University. All of the VHS and cassette tape recordings along with what could be saved from the old, out-dated media have now been transferred onto digital media.

Designer-in-Residence

In the early 1970s, word started getting around the world of academia that Charles Kleibacker enjoyed sharing his work and his knowledge. Work study groups consisting of students from fashion classes began coming to visit in his New York studio. He showed them his workrooms and shared his designs with them along with advice on how to be a successful designer. It occurred to him when he was talking to the students “that I really should be talking a little bit about costume history. That’s when I started collecting just a few garments” to show styles and illustrate workmanship during the visits. His
collection “mushroomed” over the ensuing years and became the foundation of his Taubman tours.

Through his experiences working with students in the university and college settings, Charles realized that he very much enjoyed working in that kind of atmosphere. He appreciated how the faculty in the fashion departments and the students thought about design and “felt they understood how interested I was in the construction and the engineering of a garment. The fact is that I still feel that way about it.” In 1984, Charles accepted an offer to be Designer-in-Residence for the winter session at Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri.

At this point in his life, Charles was looking for something to do in his life that would be “broader, be a bit more meaningful. He says, ‘It occurred to me…am I going to make another expensive dress for a woman who already has a closetful?’” During this time he wrote letters to nine museums and college campuses explaining his desire for a position and listing his qualifications as well as noting his extensive costume collection. He received an offer from University of Wisconsin, Madison, but accepted another offer from The Ohio State University. After having taught one of his week-long couture courses at OSU, he was very attracted to the fashion department in the College of Home Economics there largely because he felt a good connection to the dean, Dr. Lena Bailey. He also enjoyed the atmosphere of the surrounding community.

After a six-month assignment in the autumn of 1984, Charles accepted the offer of a full-time position as designer-in-residence to the Department of Textiles and Clothing at OSU. He enjoyed working with Dr. Bailey as dean and with Dr. Lucy Sibley when she
became the chair of the Department of Textiles and Clothing. “They were two of the most astute, understanding, smart, and remarkable women I have ever known.”

Charles occasionally guest lectured in design classes, but his major role was to build an important historic clothing and textiles collection for the University. During the period of his assignment at OSU, he loaned his own collection of more than 200 garments. It was extensively used in outreach to the community and was featured prominently in exhibits and fund-raising events to promote the expansion of the OSU Collection.

With the help of community volunteers, and through many major special events and openings, The Historic Costume & Textiles Collection at OSU grew to over 8,500 items. A new state-of-the-art wing with temperature and humidity controls was added to the building for the specific purpose of storing and exhibiting the collection safely.

By the time Charles resigned his position in 1995, he had also curated many costume exhibitions. One particularly noteworthy exhibit was installed in the Wexner Center for the Arts on the OSU campus in 1992. “In Black and White: Dress from the 1920s to Today” featured 175 couture and ready-to-wear garments. The majority of those on display were part of the OSU collection, but many were loaned from other prominent museum collections around the country as well as from various fashion houses. Paris’ famed interior designer, Andrée Putman designed the exhibition space which filled two huge galleries and was composed of eight different scenes. The exhibition drew more attendees than any previous Wexner Center exhibition. 39
Today the legacy that Charles Kleibacker helped to create at The Ohio State University continues. Through select purchases and continuing donations, the collection now contains more than 11,500 pieces and is valued at 3.5 million dollars.

Charles’ love of beautiful, well-made, artistic, quality clothing continues in his work as Adjunct Curator of Design at the Columbus Museum of Art. In May 2008, the Ohio Arts Council’s Riffe Gallery in downtown Columbus will open an exhibition devoted to Charles’ past exhibition work.

With the often grueling travel schedule that was involved with his tours and workshops, I asked Charles how he found the time to continue developing his twice yearly lines and maintain his business in New York. His answer was that he fit it in! It was sometimes hectic, but doing the tours and the workshops really paid him “the good money.”

Making his beautiful bias garments gave him entrée into the tour circuit. In turn, the money earned from the tours and workshops allowed him to continue making the dresses that he loved as long as he did. Charles feels very fortunate to have had the benefit and privilege of working with so many wonderful people and companies through the years. As he was reviewing the text for Chapter Four, he wrote down his feelings in this regard. These are his words:

“I now feel the intensity I felt (and the hardships involved) in designing garments of purpose – timelessly designed clothes in beautiful fabrics with an engineered construction I gloried in. It was what ultimately provided me with a trade-off to make decent money. Working with important companies that had an exploratory attitude in their rise to fame was my good fortune. Somehow we meshed.

Working in the later 1960s with the Du Pont Co. and their scientists and engineers in Wilmington, Delaware on a fiber that was ultimately named Qiana was the start… and a tremendously valuable start.
Then in the early 1970s and for some subsequent years, there was the association with Condé Nast’s *Vogue* magazine (thanks initially to a recommendation from Du Pont). The promotion of fabrics in presentations around the country was the theme. I vividly remember a what-will-his-salary-be meeting with then editor-in-chief, Grace Mirabella and Si (S.I.) Newhouse, Jr., chairman of Condé Nast Publications.

It was on to working with American Silk Mills and its dynamic young president John Sullivan in the promotion of silk fabrics. Five tours across the country for American Silk Mills was an exciting work-out. (Let me insert here that thanks to these associations, I was making with my in-house Kleibacker staff, the wardrobes for these tours – some very good money indeed.)

The Taubman Company next came into view with contracts that resulted in the shows (and their preparations) in the many Taubman malls around the country – a tour in 1980 and another in 1981. Among the preparations included my selecting and working with great photographers for promotion purposes. These photographers included especially Horst and Neal Barr.

In the 1970s, I was taken on by the prestigious W. Colston Leigh Lecture Bureau. The Leigh Bureau, with offices at the time in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, booked me for presentations related to the fashion industry. And so, another source of income. I was in heady company with the Leigh roster.

The association with academia through the years combined a special love and good fees. I have to feel it was these experiences I derived from the design-years with its small scale of profit that landed me in the laps of some extremely important associations.”

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1 “1915: A Crowning Achievement” (King Features History), http://www.kingfeatures.com/history/historye1915M.htm (accessed July 10, 2007)

2 Simplicity Patterns eventually bought Reader Mail which was then bought by Consew International in the 1960s. When Consew wanted to get rid of the company, an accountant that worked for them bought it. He then eventually sold the company to Sally Richards in Ludington, Michigan who melded it with her on-line business PatternCentral.com. (as told to me in phone conversation with her on June 20, 2007).

3 In my interview with Dr. Elizabeth Rhodes concerning her long-time association with Charles, she recalled an instance when Charles was furious with a pattern company that changed the pattern, printing the dress to be on the straight of grain instead of being on the bias. She thought this event occurred with Vogue Patterns. Charles assured me he talked with Vogue, but it never got very far. The instance Elizabeth remembered was with Reader Mail. There are several reasons why the pattern company may have changed the pattern in this way. The main reason is likely that having the dress on the straight reduces the amount of paper needed in the printing process and therefore reduces cost.

Ibid. – Charles didn’t remember anything about the event or these garments and thinks this statement sounds like “overblown publicity hype.”

Mrs. Stevenson later donated this dress to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art where it is still.


When Charles was at Lanvin in the mid-1950s, they still used irons heated on a hot plate!

Handley, *Nylon*, 94.

Charles couldn’t speak for the European ateliers’ experience in sewing the woven Qiana. He wasn’t there and didn’t hear anything about it. Perhaps with their emphasis on hand sewing and individual fit, the stitching problems were not as apparent as compared to producing ready-to-wear.

Appendix B contains a copy of Charles’ letter proposing the idea. There is also a copy of a letter from a Du Pont sales rep expressing gratitude for Charles’ help in the tours.


*Sew Business*, January 1972, “The Forgotten Woman in Today’s Home Sewing Market,” 30-31. All of the quotes in this paragraph were from the article, not an interview by the author.

Even in the process of writing this paper, a friend remembered sewing an incredible formal dress of Qiana to attend a wedding with her fiancée in 1975. She told me she was determined to be sexy for the event even though the fabric was torturous to sew on. “It slipped like crazy and I had to stay up all night to get it done, but I was HOT!”


26 This is the fashion magazine, not the Vogue Patterns magazine that was owned by a different company. Condé Nast did own the pattern company at this time but later sold that division.


30 Most of Charles’ venues were on the east coast and in the Mideast. But I was surprised to see on his itinerary that Charles had also come to the mall close to where I grew up, Eastridge Mall in San Jose, California. I watched the contractors plow up the apricot orchards and build this huge mall with four anchor stores. Similar events were happening all over the country. Eastridge in San Jose was a huge mall but not the largest in the world. At that time it was Whitfield in Chicago and yes, Charles did appear there.

31 On this particular show, Charles appeared with the star fashion model, Cheryl Tiegs.

32 This is the skirt pattern I used for my first Kleibacker reproduction. The Five-Day Skirt Construction Course is available on-line at http://www.fashionschool.kent.edu/kleibacker/index.htm (accessed November 11, 2007).

33 A complete copy of both letters from Mrs. Koontz to Charles can be read in Appendix B.

34 Amelia Johanson, “Master of bias design shapes a new generation” The Plain Dealer (Cleveland, OH) September 6, 2001.


38 A copy of the curriculum vita sent with Charles’ letters of 1983 to universities and museums later updated to 1991 is contained in Appendix D.

39 Catalog of the exhibit is In Black and White: Dress from the 1920s to Today. Ann Brenner, editor. (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, 1992).
“Hailed by fashion authorities for his individuality and fine workmanship, Kleibacker is known as ‘the master of the bias,’ the cut he considers the most flattering to most women. Because of his fondness for the bias, Kleibacker frequently is compared to Vionnet, the Paris designer of the 1930s. He considers this a compliment. ‘Vionnet is, to me, the very special one of all time,’… Kleibacker believes in simplicity, fit and comfort. His designs may be dramatic looking, but they are never flamboyant in silhouette or color. He never chooses bold patterns and colors always are in the neutral range. He believes he designs for the woman ‘who is very sure of herself… She wants a dress as a background for her… She doesn’t want a knock ‘em dead dress.’”

Influence of Vionnet

Charles Kleibacker’s favorite designer was Madeleine Vionnet. Though he was impressed by the couture fashion houses in Paris when he first visited them with Hildegarde in 1950, it was a Vionnet exhibit that really inspired him. In business from 1912 to 1939, Vionnet more than any other designer of that era, defined and embraced the flowing, molding and shapely silhouette that best represents the decade of the 1930s. She is credited with being the first to pioneer the simple-looking yet intricate cut of a dress on the bias.

Prior to Vionnet, fabric in dressmaking was mainly positioned on the body straight up and down or going around. Anything that resembled bias was applied to a
foundation and used as adornment in the form of flounces, drapes, and edgings. It was Madeleine Vionnet who turned fabric onto the diagonal for shaping around a body.

In a weave, yarns are positioned in the lengthwise and crosswise directions, warp and weft. There are no yarns in the bias direction, only airspace. When a square of fabric is turned onto the bias at a 45° angle and held up by one corner on the diagonal, without a yarn in that direction to stabilize them, gravity pulls the crossing yarns into the airspace and the square distorts into a diamond shape. It is the fluid distortion of fabric cut on the bias which, with the help of gravity, flows around the curves of the female body. The distortion and fluidity – the instability – is also what makes bias cut so challenging. (See figure 6.1)

Vionnet developed her designs out of muslin draped on an articulated half-size wooden doll. She said, “The couturier should be a geometrician, for the human body makes geometrical figures to which the materials should correspond.” Using this idea, she used geometric shapes for many of her pattern pieces, then on the wooden doll, she pinned, tucked and snipped until her ideas took shape. A sketch was made before the design was removed from the doll after which the tiny muslins were taken to one of her ateliers to be made up into full-sized toiles, tried on a (live) mannequin and perfected before being sewn up in fabric for a client.

Issey Miyake, a Japanese designer famed for his unique approach to fabric and shapes on the body, wrote the forward for the book, Madeleine Vionnet by Betty Kirke. He said,

“Today it is common understanding that one of the fundamentals of dressmaking lies in the relationship between the human body and the fabric itself. But as the designer turns more and more professional, it
becomes tempting to head toward style, decorations, and the current trend, and easy to forget the body beneath. Vionnet... never forgot this basic concept."

Every element of Vionnet’s garments, the drape, the design, the cut, the fabric and the embellishments all emphasized the body and especially the body in motion.

Charles Kleibacker regarded the comparison of his designs to Vionnet as a great compliment. Kay Thomas wrote in the *New York Sunday News* on May 4, 1969,

“While most women rave about beautifully bred Mainbocher evening gowns, it’s the silk day dresses which are unlike any you see about today. With the exception of Charles Kleibacker, no one seems to make those beautiful short silk crepes any more, those with easy bodices and fluid skirts, such as marked the French couture in the days of Vionnet, Patou and Lelong.”

Always striving to improve and perfect his designs, he went in search of Vionnet garments to study at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.
In 1958, the costume collection at the Met was supported by donations from the designers on Seventh Avenue. Nettie Rosenstein was a supporter and as an assistant designer for that house, Charles Kleibacker had entrée into the collection. He called and received appointments to study dresses by Vionnet several times. When he arrived, he was shown into a room where he was able to carefully examine the garments to his heart’s content. He sometimes turned them inside out and a couple times he took a model with him.\(^5\) At that point, Charles wasn’t examining the dresses for specific construction techniques or cut. Rather, he was gleaning inspiration related to the designs and lines.

Vionnet garments were part of an exhibition Diana Vreeland curated at the Met from December 1973 to September 1974, *The Tens, Twenties, Thirties – Inventive Clothes: 1909 – 1939*. The exhibition focused on five designers of the early 20\(^{th}\) century; Paul Poiret, the Callot Soeurs, Madeleine Vionnet, Coco Chanel, and Elsa Schiaparelli. While the exhibition received worldwide attention, it was the section of 41 Vionnet dresses that drew overwhelming attention. Reviewers of the exhibit reported admiring and thoughtful comments “especially by the [Seventh Avenue] boys.”\(^6\) Valentino remarked, “So now, you can wear them today – the softness – the beauty – the simplicity…”\(^7\) Molly Parnis said, “The collection gave us all a lot to go home and think about.”\(^8\) Charles was not surprised by the impact of Vionnet’s designs, he had been under their spell for decades by this time.

Like Vionnet, Charles Kleibacker also always remembered the body on which his garments would be worn. He strove for fluidity of motion and a flattering flow of fabric that emphasized a woman’s curves.
“What I have in my mind and in my eye is pure and simple: A woman’s lovely figure. And this to me means beautiful rounds. If my clothes make a woman want to walk a little hippier, move a little more seductively, sit with the legs a little more archfully crossed, dance a little close, I am all for it.”

Kathy Larkin wrote in the New York Daily News on Tuesday, April 21, 1970, “The Trend is no surprise to lean, dark-haired Charles Kleibacker, whose clothes range from $395 to the $900 mark. Charles … loves soft clothes. And he understands how to make them. A bias-cut Kleibacker dress, like this black and white silk crepe, doesn’t just fit a figure. It’s so fluid, it almost pours around the woman who wears it.”

Master of the Bias Cut

Charles Kleibacker recalls that the title, “Master of the Bias Cut” first came from an article in Women’s Wear Daily (WWD), written by “a woman named Tibbe Taylor who had been working for Women’s Wear for years and knew the industry backwards and forwards. She was an exceptional writer.” The first collection she saw of Charles’ designs was the collection he created for Huntleigh Suits and Coats. Charles remembers she wrote “… a collection that bypasses the clichés of the season is this one done by Charles Kleibacker.” Later when he started his own label, she again came around to see his clothes.

Charles credits much of his success in those early years to Tibbe’s enthusiasm and her faithfulness in coming to see everything he designed. She had an eye for style and recognized good clothes when she saw them. “It didn’t make any difference if your showroom was pretty bedraggled or was the most elegant. What did the clothes have to say? And she saw that it was reported that way.” She brought Steven Stipelman or
Kenneth Paul Block with her to do sketches of the dresses so that illustrations could accompany her editorials.

When she labeled Charles as ‘master of the bias cut,’ he says that he was “amazed, surprised and delighted… I was absolutely elated at what I felt was recognition by a senior editor at the stellar newspaper for the industry.” Charles said that Tibbe Taylor became “probably the best friend I’ve ever had in my life.”

Ms. Taylor’s good reviews encouraged other editors to come and see Charles’ offerings, among them both *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*. “Master of the bias” was quickly picked up by other fashion writers. By the time he had been in business for a decade, ‘master of the bias’ or ‘master of the bias cut’ were phrases regularly connected with him and his designs. In press releases and publicity mailers which he produced himself in connection with the Leigh Bureau, the title was always prominently placed in bold letters. The bias cut was his identifying style and it set him apart from other designers in New York, especially in the 1960s since no other designer was making garments in bias cut fabrics at that time.

**Importance of Cut**

Charles’ designs depended not on construction, but cut for their distinctiveness. They were engineered to a person’s anatomy always remembering the woman and seeking to flatter her and help her feel at her feminine best. “He is the master of the fluid line. Charles Kleibacker knows about clothes that show the body. He does it with bias, with seaming that makes a dress fit like a second skin.”

It was the precise cut in his designs that allowed him to achieve his aims. A quarter of an inch too high or too low
would throw off the hang of the fabric and distort the design. The pattern needed to be
developed and cut so that the hang of the fabric on the body was in the most flattering,
gracefully falling position. Most people today do not have an experienced enough eye
that would even recognize what the difference is, but they could see that there is a
difference between a garment with perfect cut and one that is off. It is the master cutter
and the couturier who can recognize that difference and correct the hang. Charles was a
master of cut and knew how the fabrics he used behaved.

A favorite fabric for both Vionnet and Charles Kleibacker was crêpe. A relatively
new fabric in the 1920s, crêpe yarns have been twisted more times along their length than
regular yarns; there are up to three thousand twists per meter of yarn. When the highly-
twisted kinky yarns are used in weaving, the resultant fabric has a pebbly surface and a
softer drape than a similarly woven fabric without crêpe yarns. The twist of the crêpe
fabric gives it more extensibility compared to other fabrics. This was the perfect medium
for bias cut garments. This fabric flows and moves with the wearer.

The direction of the twist in crêpe yarns has an effect on the hang of the bias and
the cut. Vionnet used crêpe that had alternating S and Z twisted yarns which balanced the
hang of the warp and weft. On a bias garment, much of the gown flows from the waist
level down to form beautiful ripples. The curving ripples or cascades formed along the
lower edge of the fabric that is hanging on bias drape were called *jabots*. If the warp and
weft yarns along the waistline are not even in numbers, the ripples will not be even on the
right and left side of the body. Vionnet was very aware of this fact in the development of
her designs.11
Working in *haute couture*, Vionnet’s *ateliers* produced garments for individual clients. Although she was able to draw from the large pool of experienced sewing hands available in Paris, the challenges of sewing a bias cut garment were such that she had to train her seamstresses to sew it correctly. She set up a school in her establishment wherein the students underwent a three year training program, then began as apprentices in one of her multiple *ateliers*. One of her seamstresses recalled having to take apart and redo the same muslin seventeen times before she was able to “see the fall” and get it right. \(^{12}\) With much care and precise construction the challenges presented by bias could be overcome.

How the garment hangs on the body, the cut, is paramount to a good bias design. In developing his designs in the fabric he was using, Charles Kleibacker noticed that there was a distinct difference between how the warp yarns behaved in bias as compared to how the weft yarns hung. In the weaving process, weft yarns are slightly looser in their position of the finished fabric than are the warp yarns which are held on the loom with greater tension. The tension of the yarns within the fabric affects the softness of the drape and the resultant balance of the bias hang. This is especially noticeable on asymmetrical bias designs where the pattern piece extends from one side of the body beyond the midpoint to the other side of the body. In explaining this concept, Charles likes to take a square piece of muslin or other fabric and hang it from one corner with the true bias on the center front of a dress form. The resultant folds formed by the draping fabric are not even from side to side because one side “hangs from the lengthwise grain, and the other falls from the crosswise grain.”\(^{13}\) (See figure 6.2.)
Skirt hems of bias cut dresses fall forming graceful folds that Charles called godets. A skirt that has a large circumference in the hem will fall with more godets than one which has a smaller hem circumference. In pattern making books, godet commonly refers to a v-shaped insert with extra fullness along the bottom that is added into a hem section edge of a garment. In this instance the bias is present only in the inset section – the godet. I know of no Kleibacker garments where the godets were formed by inserted v-shaped sections; the hem fullness was always achieved through bias cut patterning.

Charles was aware that the hang of the godets were affected by whether the bias was falling from the cross grain or the lengthwise grain. They were also similarly affected by whether the fabric he was working with had a balanced weave (having the same number of warp and weft thread count) and how the fabric was positioned on the body. Asymmetric bias requires adjustments in the cut to make up for the differences in the two sides of the drape.
Charles worked hard to be sure that the designs he developed resulted in graceful *godets* which fell evenly on both sides of the body. He was producing his bias dresses for ready-to-wear. Though his workshop could produce *haute couture* quality clothing, he couldn’t spend the kind of time needed to produce asymmetric bias designs. The stores would not pay the cost of producing them. To overcome the differences in the hang, and to maintain a competitive price, Charles designed his garments with a center front seam. This ensured that no matter what kind of fabric he used for the garment, the *godets* formed by the drape of the bias were always equal one side to the other. It also allowed him to develop his ideas by draping only one half of a garment instead of needing to drape the entire garment. Because most ready-to-wear is patterned with the right and left sides exactly the same, when fitting and perfecting the new design, he would also only have to adjust one side and then simply transfer the adjustments to the other.

Kleibacker bias garments are not true bias, but “nearly true bias.” Charles often mentions that he only developed one true bias design, the design that *Vogue* featured in their December, 1965 edition. This pattern was initially developed before Charles worked in Paris at Lanvin, when he was working with Madame Berg. An early sample of this design in plaid wool tweed produced in 1962, belongs to the Mount Mary Historic Costume Collection (see figure 6.3). This true bias garment has a strikingly dramatic silhouette and was admired by many. The fabric wound around the body and was asymmetrical.

All other Kleibacker bias garments have a center front seam on a nearly-true bias that follows the curves of a woman’s figure. Many of his patterns fit closely around the breast and curve in under the breast through the mid-section, then gracefully flare out
Figure 6.3  Charles Kleibacker, 1962
Photograph courtesy of June F. Mohler Fashion Library,
Kent State University.
above the hips for a smoothly skimming silhouette that flatters. Often pleats and tucks were skillfully included as part of the design and provided fit while increasing the flare and quantity of flowing godets at the hemline.

Some of his designs featured the bias in the back. These designs were always his versions of ball gowns, elegant evening wear that flowed behind the woman with perhaps a small train for an added effect. Charles recalls Castillo saying to him, “I’m at my best when I just stop short of being theatrical.’… His dresses that were in black with lace were what I thought were his most beautiful clothes. But he would say, ‘Yes, but they’re not the jolting clothes.’ They’re not the clothes that the press wants to go after.” Every designer needs to have garments that “spice up the line,” clothes that grab attention. Usually the ‘jolting clothes’ of a designer’s line are the ball gowns. Charles’ ball gown designs were eye-catching, but not in a jolting way. They had an understated elegance due to “simple-looking draperies resulting from the intricate cut,”14 as did all of his designs.

Charles’ collections consisted mostly of day dresses with a few long dresses for spicing up the line. “I was not really selling that many long dresses, and when I did and Harper’s Bazaar or Vogue came along to do an editorial, they had to work very hard for somebody to take in credit on that bias dress.” Since Charles did not pay for magazine editorials – a feature selected by the magazine, stores paid for the layouts by attaching their names to the garment as a source for the style. The long, true bias dress that was featured in December, 1965 Vogue was a favorite of Diana Vreeland’s. She liked that dramatic look. “I loved the fact that she used it, but did we do a lot of business with that dress? Private customers, to a degree, yes. Stores, absolutely not.” Though there were
always one or two long styles for buyers and private clients to select, short crepe dresses were the most popular of the Kleibacker labels.

Elements of Kleibacker Designs

Underlying all of Charles’ design decisions was the need to sell. If his designs didn’t sell, he couldn’t stay in business. Though he maintained his individual design aesthetic of flattering and flowing styles, he also focused on simplicity, fit and comfort. His goal was for a woman to feel so comfortable in one of his dresses, that she would be able to put it on and forget it. It would fit so well, that she would have no need to constantly tug here and there; it wouldn’t bind or ride up when she sat. She would not have to be constantly mindful of her dress as it would not be the focus, but she could be the focus with the dress complimenting her, helping her to be at her most graceful ease. Every element of Charles’ designs was calculated to satisfy these characteristics: flattering simple designs, fit to perfection and comfortable. When a woman feels that she looks good, she can relax in society, be comfortable, confident and at her most attractive.

Fabrics that Flow

During the mid-1960s – and even more so by 1968, many garments that came from designers’ studios were designed in stiff styles that hid the body. (See figure 6.4 showing Kleibacker compared to Courrèges and St. Laurent designs.) Women wore mini dresses and flare-legged pantsuits matched with tunic tops. Pierre Cardin and André Courrèges designed their ‘space age designs’ which were stiff and sometimes incorporated plastics and vinyl. Madame Grès continued to do great bias garments
Figure 6.4 Publicity release for 1992 Wexner Center exhibition, *In Black and White: Dress from the 1920s to Today*. Photograph shows Kleibacker from 1976, Courrèges from mid-1960s and St. Laurent from 1965. Courtesy of Charles Kleibacker.
through these years, but she also designed large sculpted garments similar to some by Balenciaga. Charles never liked the stiff mini dresses and made no effort to keep up with that trend. Through it all, Charles maintained his focus on flowing soft bias dresses, convinced that the flattering lines he loved would not miss in finding a market of women who still wanted to show off their curves. On January 28, 1968, The New Haven Register reported,

“In an era when many designers seem to have made a point of creating shapeless, baggy and unbecoming clothes for women, Charles Kleibacker stands out for the designs he introduces that are good looking, feminine and detailed handsomely. ‘There’s nothing wrong about looking like a female,’ could well be Kleibacker’s slogan. To prove his ideas, he puts emphasis on curves, flattering shapeliness and beautiful fabrics. The results? Clothes with his labels are downright good looking, wearable and make women look womanly instead of like beanpoles, scarecrows or escapees from an op art fashion binge.”

Charles’ garments were usually made of silks and quality woolens that reflected his Paris couture experience. Like Vionnet, Charles favored four-ply silk crêpe and wool crêpe for their drape-able characteristics. He also liked silk jerseys for the same reason.

His experience at Lanvin and also the experience he received at Nettie Rosenstein taught him about a wide variety of fine fabrics and about their various uses. He learned about silk crêpe at Nettie Rosenstein and when he first went in to the Bianchini-Ferrier wholesaler in New York some time around 1962 or 1963, the President, John Griffin wanted some assurance that he was going to pay his bill since he had never bought from them before. This is not uncommon for a new account. Charles’ typical honest and direct reply was,

“Well, if you’re asking me if I have a lot of money, I don’t. I said [to him], I really like that fabric and I feel I can do something with it so let me show you what I’ve got in a savings account.’ I had my savings book with me.
Joycelyn, I think I had maybe 600 dollars in it. He said, ‘That’s not going to buy you much fabric.’ And I said, ‘No, it isn’t going to buy me much fabric, but what I’m asking of you is, would you sell me some sample yardage?’ And he looked at me and he said, ‘Well, you can pay for that can’t you?’ And I said, ‘I’ll pay for that immediately.’

Silk crêpe, especially four-ply silk crêpe, became one of the fabrics that Charles most enjoyed using for his designs. The four-ply crêpe had a heavier fall and emphasized his designs in a more dramatic way than a lighter fabric yet it maintained the flow that he desired.

Kay Thomas, fashion writer for the *New York Daily News* (April 1, 1970) praised Charles’ skill and choice of fabric. “When one can cut a dress on the bias as beautifully as does Charles Kleibacker, it’s not surprising that he leans to silk crepes. For what fabric looks more fluid in motion than this? Sitting, standing, walking, the bias-cut silk crepe dress draws the eye every time.”

John Griffin was the one who made Charles aware of the differences between the straight and cross grain of fabrics. He confided to Charles that if he was going to work with the four-ply silk crêpe, he ought to know that it was best used on the cross to give a softer fall in the clothes, exactly what Charles wanted. This was a trick that he took very much to heart and from that time, seriously studied the draping characteristics of the fabric that he was considering for his designs prior to their development. Always economically minded, he draped his ideas in muslin instead of the expensive silk fabric, but he kept the selected fabric characteristics in mind while he was draping.

Notably, the only synthetic fabrics that Charles used for his designs were those made from the nylon fiber Qiana; he would have nothing to do with polyester. Qiana was in his opinion, “marvelous.” He loved the fact that he was able to just ball up a dress
of soft, drape-able Qiana, throw it in a shopping bag and pull it out later with no wrinkles. Spills and soil didn’t permeate the fabric, they just rolled right off. To demonstrate this ease of care, Charles went with his model who was wearing one of his Qiana gowns outside in the middle of winter for a snowball fight photo shoot. (See figure 6.5)

![Figure 6.5](image)

**Figure 6.5** Charles with model midwinter in Central Park.
Qiana was amazingly soil resistant.

This care factor was just as important to him as the fact that he underlined his dresses instead of lining them so that his clients or their dry cleaners would be able to get inside and easily press under the seam allowances for a fine finished look. He wanted his garments to look good – while being worn – for at least ten years.

While Charles was working with Du Pont, they really pushed woven Qiana. It was first produced in a wide variety of luxury weaves prior to being made into jerseys
and other knits. Eventually Charles would come to really love the Qiana jerseys, but in the beginning he created designs with fabrics such as Qiana taffeta that had a crisper hand.

A bias garment of taffeta, chiffon, broadcloth or organza has more body. Charles describes this stiffer bias, one that “lifts” or “floats.” The bias that “drags” or “drips” is achieved with crêpe, jersey or charmeuse fabrics that really can delineate the female curved figure. Bias that lifts can camouflage the figure a bit more and is sometimes nicer to use on the slightly larger figure. As Charles started working more and more with private clients in the later 1970s, he began to develop more voluminous lifting bias designs. Though it was also cut on the bias, the flattering lines of lifting bias floated around the figure, rather than flowing over the figure.

Styled to Endure

The colors that Charles selected most often were such that the dress would not overpower the woman. Kleibacker garments were often neutral in colors such as black or beige. He believed that prints were often reflective of shorter fashion trends and wanted his garments to be worn for many seasons, outlasting the trends. When he did select a print, it was often a bold print to add an element of “spice” to the line… “smart without looking as if they had been swiped from circus posters.” More often than not, when he did use a print, “most of the stores and private customers would put it right back into a solid saying, ‘It’s beautiful in the print, but I think I’ll be able to wear it longer if it’s in a solid.”

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Typical colors that were used in Kleibacker dresses are: ivory or candle light, taupe, gray, navy, “subtle gray-greens, like celadon and shrimp, banana, blue… and, oh, yes, a beautiful mauve in a bias-cut dress with fitted bodice is the kind of romantic dress a man never forgets.”18 Charles likes “not strident color but pastels that are daring. They have an intensity that is not timid or pallid. I like coral and apricot together.”19 He will take a peach wool and combine it with a lemon yellow stole or put a flowing blonde cape over a powder-blue crêpe dinner dress.

Charles especially loves black. He believes that women are really at their best in black. “In color – no matter how beautiful you are – you walk into a room and you’re competing with the draperies, the carpet, the art on the wall… you become just another piece of furniture. In black, I see you – just you.”20

The ideal woman that Charles designed for perhaps did not have closets full of clothes, but she invested in a few very fine garments that could be worn for many years mixing and matching accessories or adding other separates later as he introduced them.

“I think the women who responded most to the look of the garment I did were the ones who thought of it as timeless and how it would go on in different seasons… especially if it was silk crepe. It didn’t make any difference whether it was January and she was under a fur coat or whether it was an air-conditioned day in July. She could really wear that dress. It kind of became a background for different accessories and for good jewelry.”

Some women who bought his garments often could afford closets-full of clothing, but they held on to his designs and wore them many years. Indeed, Charles’ designs could be called timeless. One style, #312 was a big seller for over four years, from 1969 to 1973. The pattern for this design was still being sold by Reader Mail as late as 1976 (see figures 6.6 – 6.8).
Figure 6.6  Charles Kleibacker, 1969, style 312. Photograph by Calvin Edwards. Courtesy of June F. Mohler Fashion Library, Kent State University.
Figure 6.7  Kleibacker, 1969 – 1972
Photograph by author.
Sculpture and Drapery exhibit
at The Ohio State University
Gladys Keller Snowden Galleries
January to June 2005.

Figure 6.8  Bergdorf Goodman ad,
Illustration by Esther Larsen.
Charles also often reintroduced previously developed designs. He would change the neckline from modest to plunging or high up on the neck. He would change a bare cut-out sleeve to a sleeve cap or long bias sleeve, lower the zipper to the back waist line and leave an open slit down the center back seam closing the back neckline with just a hook and eye. He would change any of these elements and offer the garment in a different fabric or even add a long flowing chiffon cape to the back shoulders and buyers would snap it up again in a successive season. He would also bring back previous styles with a new accessory such as a new shrug top, cape or a bandeau. A skirt that Charles designed in 1969 was used later to complement a bandeau top designed in 1981 (see figure 6.9).

**Designed for Comfort**

Charles used soft fabrics that are never heavily constructed. He used “one layer, or at the most two layers with the second layer as an underlining that simply gives a little bit more body to the outer layer.” This resulted in a dress that was easy to wear and very comfortable.

Another comfort feature in a Kleibacker design that was also a cost-saving factor was to always place his zippers on the straight of grain. Inserting a zipper on straight grain is much simpler and less labor intensive than inserting a zipper on bias cut fabric. Many of Charles’ dresses had the center back seam and zipper placed on the straight of grain. The fabric then flowed seamlessly around the side to join with the center front seam on the bias. Charles explained that this allowed the woman to have a lovely bias
Figure 6.9  Kleibacker, 1981
Photographs by Kevin Fitzsimon.
Courtesy of The Historic Costume & Textiles Collection,
The Ohio State University
drape in the front to flow when she walked and draped nicely over her knees when she sat and crossed her legs. Having less fabric in the back is more comfortable for sitting. Besides paying attention to economics, he always remembered the woman and her comfort while maintaining a focus on the body and what he felt was most flattering.

Charles often explained how he thought about a woman’s body when he was developing his designs. He liked to have the armseye cut up close under the arm to cover that fleshy part that looses its firmness on women who are starting to age. It is also important to cut the armseye close so that the woman may raise her arm without the lines of the dress being destroyed by rising up with the sleeve as will happen with a lower armseye. The front neck might be covered while leaving the outer shoulder tip bare because he felt that this was a place that maintains its attractiveness longer than other areas. (See figure 6.10) A bare back is another area he believed stayed lovely longer.

Charles never placed a hem slit in a skirt at the center back; he “hates center back slits… He thinks it’s the worst view of a woman’s legs he’s ever seen. Now he loves slits, the higher, the better, but not center back.”21 Very often the hems of his skirts are three quarters of an inch longer in back than in front because he also feels this is more attractive.

Any opening such as a plunging neckline or a low cut back received special attention in construction so that it would lie close to the body.22 (See figures 6.11, 6.12 and 6.13) Charles wanted his clients to avoid that uncomfortable feeling of cutout gaps that reveal more body than desired. His dresses were designed with revealing features, but always with the comfort of the wearer in mind.
Figure 6.10  Kleibacker, 1982
Photographs by Kevin Fitzsimon.
Courtesy of The Historic Costume & Textiles Collection,
The Ohio State University

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Figure removed for lack of copyright permission.

Figure 6.11  Kleibacker, 1969. *WWD* editorial, Dec. 30, 1969. Drawing by Kenneth Paul Block


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Above all, Charles was particular about fit. The customer needed to be able to move and sit comfortably. “A dress fit to perfection gives the wearer bodily comfort for ease of movement while providing that essential felling of grace and well being.” Much of his fitting skills he learned from observing the process at Lanvin and continuing to observe and improve through the years with his own designs.

Charles tells a story of the fit model at Lanvin, Dani. Having worked previously at Balenciaga, Dani knew good fit. One time when a tailor was having difficulty with a sleeve fit, another fitter was brought in to help. After the hand basting was snipped and the sleeve reset, Dani was able to “really start moving.” Recognizing the beautiful fit, “she turned to the man who was the head of the suit atelier and said, ‘And where did you learn your fitting? At the Paris Unique?’ …which is like the ten cent store, the Woolworth’s.” Today, it would be like saying, where did you learn good garment construction, at WalMart?

Charles relied heavily on his fit models. Through the development of a new design in a sample size and for each size that was ordered by the stores, the process was the same. The first muslin was hand basted together and tried on a fit model who moved and sat in it and discussed with him where the garment was too tight or uncomfortable. He looked at the hang and adjusted the hand basting until everything felt and looked perfect. Then the adjustments were transferred to the pattern and a sample made up in the fabric. Sometimes, a second or third muslin was tested before making up in the final fabric if there were many changes needed. Because each particular fabric has a great effect on the garment’s outcome, the fit model was called back in again to perfect the design in the fashion fabric before the pattern became finalized and ready for production.
With so many elements taken into consideration, the fabric, fit, cut, sale-ability, comfort, aesthetics and quality finishing, it is easy to understand why Charles calls the process, the “engineering” of a garment. It is those elements that can take a design from being simply “a garment into something that has a bit of an art approach to it.” It is precisely those elements that constitute the engineering which so fascinated him and still does.

Charles feels that what he offered stores and private clients was unique in that it was a complete garment, in design and with all the right engineered elements that combine together to become the perfect beautiful dress. “I feel that what kept me in business both with the stores and some private people is what I had to offer as an entity dress – not something taken from here, there and everywhere and not something watered down for production purposes.” His dresses had a distinctive style and did not consist of elements borrowed from the runways of his peers.

Charles was recognized by Norman Norell as “one of a dozen American designers ‘with their own creative look.’”24 Having a unique style was important to Charles. He feels that stylists are those who simply interpret the fashion mood of the moment. They observe what is going on around them and pull elements from a variety of sources. In contrast, true designers such as Grès, Balenciaga, and Trigère hold on to their own design aesthetic. Their unique individuality influences the fashion mood. This was certainly the case when the fashions of the 1970s “caught up with Charles Kleibacker” who had been doing soft clothes for over a decade.25

into the ‘70s, he sees soft, fluid-like clothes; ‘this is how they should be. But don’t make
the mistake of calling them unconstructed. Soft doesn’t imply that. Instead, it means an
awful lot of work done very well.”

Charles doesn’t like to use the word, “fashion.” To him, the word doesn’t convey
the “idea of the dignity, the tremendous work, the tremendous engineering, the whole
situation of how in a fitting, a garment may change completely and become something
very beautiful.” When a dress is done superlatively well, it can be “worthy of a higher
distinction. ‘I don’t know if you can put it in the category of a Picasso, but some fashion
is definitely art.”

5 Charles was perhaps a bit ahead of his time in appreciating the precious garments as works of art and
history to be preserved. The Costume Institute didn’t become its own department at the Met until 1959.
Prior to Diana Vreeland becoming Special Consultant in 1972 and staging fabulous costume exhibits such
as her first one on Balenciaga in 1973, most people viewed the garments as just old clothes which made up
part of a study collection. Thankfully, today, much greater care is taken to preserve these fragile treasures
for the future.


20 Marshall Hood, *The Columbus Dispatch*, ‘Master of the Bias’; Museum endowment celebrates designer Kleibacker, a Columbus ‘treasure.’ June 2, 2005. Charles does qualify his preference for black saying that the woman must also do their makeup really well to complete the look.


22 The technique he used for this is called “holding in” and is described in Chapter 8.


24 *WWD*, June 21, 1965. During this interview by *WWD*, Norman Norell was praising designers with original looks and sharply criticizing those American designers that “take the line of least resistance” in following Paris. “True designers do not need the Paris collections.”


CHAPTER 7

KLEIBACKER DESIGNS

Chronology of designs

The first dresses that were a part of Charles Kleibacker’s career were not designed by him but rather by a designer hired by his company, Elliot-Charles. These were not what Charles considered “really great clothes.” However, the experience at that first company ignited a passion for designing and for the business of engineering outstanding garments.

Early Designs

Starting in 1952, while working with Madame Berg in his tiny loft workroom on 38th Street, Charles produced some clothes of which he could be proud. These designs were a preview of what was to become the Kleibacker signature look. They were figure revealing with flared skirts. They had simple lines with subtle – and sometimes not so subtle – complexity in cut.

An early design that sold wholesale for about $89 to Nan Duskin in Philadelphia and also to a store in Rhode Island had a gusseted sleeve and insets on bias. They produced it in beige wool tweed with a brown wool jersey inset, black and in black & white. (See Design Chronology, Appendix E, figure E1.1). Charles carried the gusset idea
forward and from playing with it developed the linen dress with the diamond inset patterns across the chest discussed in Chapter 2 (which was produced by a contract sewing shop) as well as the ballgown with the diamond insets which was included in his portfolio when he went to Paris (see figures E1.2 and E1.4).

Working for Bessie Kugelhoff and “her great workrooms” in 1953 gave Charles a good opportunity to develop more designs than what he could do with just the help of Madame Berg. He was able to develop quite a few of his ideas (see figures E1.9 – E1.20). Though Charles says that “bias was not at all in my mind until I was working at Nettie Rosenstein,” it is interesting to note that a news clipping found in the Kleibacker archives point out many features of the designs for Bessie that would also be noticed by fashion writers when he became known as the ‘master of the bias.’ The article cited intricate cuts and described the collection as “often on the bias.”

“ ‘Line’ Interest, Petites, Misses, At New Source
Intricate cuts that give advantage to every part of the body, mould an interesting new collection by Charles Kleibacker for Bessie Kugeloff, Inc., uptown custom salon… ‘Line’ is the keyword here. All sorts of inconspicuous while intricate cuts emphasize the word. Silhouettes consistently have outlines of contrast cording or inserts that play up the form divine… These, and many other intricate cuts, are often on the bias. One of the evening gowns goes bias from head to toe, framing a bias hipline hand [sic] of tiny black beading topped by deep fringe with a low flounce at the hemline and a one-shoulder bias band at the top.” 1

While Charles was in Paris working for Antonio del Castillo from 1954 to 1956, he primarily contributed to ideas that originated with Antonio and added to the vision of the line for that season. Some of Charles’ design ideas that were taken “mostly intact” show a very feminine curvaceous figure. A dress in Staron fabric of chiffon and wool designed by Charles shows the curve of shoulders and arms through sheer chiffon yoke.
and sleeves and included lots of movement in the flow of the skirt (see figure E2.1). During this Paris period, but not on Lanvin time, Charles designed and had sewn a bias dress. It was of black and orange wool crepe with self-fringe at the neckline – one side orange and the other side black; he was already at that time deriving inspiration from the fabric (see figure E2.10). These early designs include elements that Charles would later perfect: the flared skirt on bias, flowing skirt movement and a silhouette that emphasized female curves.

All of the Antonelli-Kleibacker garments produced while Charles was in Rome from 1956 to 1957 are interesting designs (see figures E3.1 – E3.11). They were feminine and displayed a woman’s figure but not to the extent of Charles’ Paris designs or those he did prior to Paris. These designs also don’t seem to have the graceful flow in silhouette that was evident in what he did with Madame Berg and for Bessie Kugelhoff.

Instead of emphasis on feminine curves and cuts that allowed the fabric to flow from the figure, much of the emphasis of the Roman designs seemed to be on contrasting textures and added elements. A velvet ribbon of lemon, lime, orange and apricot color was used to sash a voluminous white French lace summer ball gown (see figure E3.3). A long straight-skirted red linen gown ending in self-fringe contrasted with a black tiny-striped silk organza coat and a black band encircling a waist fitted through the use of tuck darts(see figure E3.10). Long black fringe was added atop a yellow strapless jersey dress (see figure E3.8). The dresses in the collection relied on straight seaming; there is no hint of a graceful bias flow in the shaping of the bodice or in skirt fullness. The designs made in Rome seem to stand alone more than any others produced by Charles throughout his career.
When Charles did free-lance work after returning to New York, the designs he produced were in many ways similar to what he did in Rome. An Italian silk linen three-piece suit designed for Huntleigh Suits and Coats’ fall 1958 line sold well and featured that same self-fringe positioned this time along the hem of the sleeveless top (see figure E4.15). All of the designs of the collection had good lines and used interesting high-quality fabrics, but they were mostly straight seamed patterns. The garments didn’t include that element of grace and flow that would eventually come to be identified as a Kleibacker, except for two.

The two designs that stand out most strikingly among the photographs from the Huntleigh collection by Kleibacker are the unlined lightweight wool coat (see figure E4.13) and the perfectly matched plaid coat (see figure E4.8 and E4.15). Interestingly, these two designs are the ones that Charles is apt to quickly point out when discussing what he designed for Huntleigh. Both coats have a lovely graceful rhythm in the flow of the fabric. The design interest didn’t rely on added belts, ribbons or fringe. The lines of these coats were pure simplicity with an elegance derived from the flow of the fabric and careful attention to the cut. They could easily fit into any of the Kleibacker collections that came later. These two examples illustrate clearly what Charles often said, “he loved to design coats.” Unfortunately, he didn’t produce that many because he wasn’t “able to make money on them.”

Working with Eva Rosencrans from 1958 to 1960 was another period in which Charles was an assistant designer working with the ideas and the line that was envisioned by the head designer. The style of the house was focused on the full bouffant skirt of the time and that’s what Charles designed (see figures E 5.1 – E 5.3) though he was now
experimenting with bias as much as he could. A design that was uniquely Charles’ idea was one that went on the Spring 1960 line. This was a black linen dress\(^3\) with a big bow positioned diagonally across the chest in alignment with the vee neckline edge. The shoulders draped from the front to the back to overlap and close in back with three big buttons. This dress also exhibited simplicity and flow of fabric in the relaxed skirt with slight fullness released in front by a center inverted box pleat (see figures E5.4 and E5.5).

Charles’ early years as an assistant and free-lance designer were ones in which he was learning and growing – experimenting with styles and ideas. In working with Castillo and Rosencrans, his own design ideas were subjugated and side-tracked, but they were always simmering and evolving, waiting for the opportunity to be realized. In 1960, when he started his own label, Charles finally gained that opportunity.

The Kleibacker Label

Charles did not keep a record of everything he produced. Therefore, this is not a comprehensive listing of all Kleibacker designs. However, all designs that could be found have been added to the design chronology included in Appendix E.

Images of Kleibacker designs were collected from a variety of sources. These include professional photographic images from the Kleibacker archives at Kent State University’s June F. Mohler Fashion Library. I also photographed garments in various collections and those that are still owned by Charles. Sketches and photographs from newspaper fashion editorials were also collected.

Newspaper sources were the easiest to date accurately. The exception to this was where the copy was focused on a topic other than the current season’s line, as was the
case of some articles published in the late-1970s when Charles was becoming known in a more educational capacity through his lectures. In those instances, the garment photographed may have been one that had been produced years earlier.

Most of the glossy prints of fashion photographs filed in the Kleibacker archives at Kent State University have dates marked on the back. The notations were made by Charles, and are only approximate such as ‘early 1960s’ or ‘mid-1970s.’ Dates of his garments available from Kent State University Museum’s website from the 2002 exhibition and the gallery guide (prepared by Charles) from The Ohio State University’s exhibition in 2005 in some cases cite a different date from those given on the archived photographs.

Precise dating of the designs was difficult to determine. Charles looked through many of the photographs collected and very often gave a specific year for the design and at other times gave an approximate date. Newspaper advertisements and editorials helped to more closely pinpoint the dates for many of the designs, but there were other confounding factors involved in determining a precise date on many of the Kleibacker designs.

Some designs sold for longer than one season. Designs produced one year were brought back on the line a year or two later with minor alterations. Charles could make an adjustment to a few style lines and a change of fabric and “the buyers didn’t realize it was not an entirely new design.” This was a purposeful economic decision on his part. Altering a previously perfected design was far easier than developing an entirely new idea. In doing this Charles could capitalize on the high cost of time invested in draping and developing the original new idea. Also the workroom staff was already familiar with
the construction of the original design, and therefore could sew the adjusted design more quickly.

The 26 years during which the Kleibacker label was produced were divided into segments of a few years each; 1960 – 1964, 1965 – 1967, 1968 – 1972, 1973 – 1976, and 1977 – 1986. The years of division were determined by factors that impacted business production and/or design. Features and elements of the garment styles included in the Kleibacker designs were identified in each section to highlight the changes that evolved and the typical styles of that period.

The beginning, 1960 – 1964. This section addresses those designs that were produced prior to the time when Charles hired Carmen and the other young people from the school in the Bronx (see figures E6.1 – E6.19). It was a time when he was trying to get his business started. He was also experimenting with bias cut, trying to learn the idiosyncrasies of working with it and the necessary methods required to successfully produce bias cut ready-to-wear. It was a period of immense intensity and great sacrifice, both financially and in investment of time.

Charles says that he didn’t really figure out all the methods for handling construction of bias cut designs until about 1964 or 1965. However, during these early years (1960 – 1964), he did produce beautiful garments both on the straight-of-grain and bias cut. Knowing of the difficulties he had with bias during the first years of his business, it is remarkable that it was as early as 1961 that Tibbe Taylor, an editor at WWD, recognized Charles’ focus and skill with bias cut designs and nicknamed him the ‘master of the bias.’
One of the first dresses he sold, to Bonwitt Teller in Philadelphia, had a bateau neckline and fitted front with an entirely open back framed by rolled drapery and accented at the back waistline with a self-fabric rose. The bodice was white and the skirt was black (see figure E 6.2). Another very early dress from 1960 had the huge bow concept that he developed for the Spring 1960 line at Nettie Rosenstein, but every other element was changed. The skirt was full and there was a flowing draping back with the waistline fitted to show the figure (see figure E6.1).

Designs from 1961 were varied. There was a design with a very flared skirt, designs with straight skirts and one with a very full skirt made from silk jersey. Waists were positioned at the natural waistline, at empire level and between. He designed lantern sleeves for several dresses but also eliminated sleeves entirely with cut-away shoulders. Short capes made of crepe and tied at the neck in front were used as accessories. It was a time when Charles was searching for his own individual look (see figures E6.5 – E6.8).

In 1961, Charles sought more exposure by contributing a design to the Ebony Magazine Fashion Show, a huge affair held annually. His design was a very elegant black columnar silhouette with fringe similar to one of the embellishments that he used on a Bessie Kugeloff design, but in this gown it had long strands of the fringe hanging to the ankles all around and also included an elegant waist length cape that was cut on the cross grain in front, but curved around the shoulders on the bias, and extending with straight-of-grain at the ends that flowed down the back forming a train. The cape was held in place at the center back with a big fluffy self-fabric bow (see figure E6.6). This long cape was an accessory that Charles used again and again over the years.
Several successes marked Charles’ endeavors of 1962. Felicia Saunders, a famous stage personality, referred to his business by Anna Sosenko, bought a custom designed gown in red silk crepe (see figure E6.13). This is the earliest example of the tiny bias strings that eventually became one of the Kleibacker signature elements. It had double bias strings serving as shoulder straps with a columnar skirt. Added interest was provided at the bodice through a drape that hung down at the waist.

The other noteworthy design of 1962 was a bias cut wool plaid. For this shapely “un-waistline dress that molds the body, keeps its shape, [and] is superbly feminine,” Charles was named a winner of Woolens and Worsted of America Design Awards (see figure E6.10). This award was presented annually “in recognition of imaginative and creative use of American-made wool textiles in fashion design.”

More recognition came to the Kleibacker label in 1963 when Charles was selected by the Jewelry Council as one of the designers whose garments would appear in a fashion show at the Pierre Hotel. The show had a dual focus, fine garments complementing fine jewelry. One of the dresses in the show was a backless long halter dress in a cotton and silk textured weave (see figure E6.16). It had a matching sleeved coat cut on the bias which had no front, but held to the shoulder giving a trained cape effect. A huge emerald necklace was paired with the outfit. A black and white version of this same gown with fringe hanging down around the knees was later purchased by the famous actress, Cyd Charisse who was photographed in it in 1965 (see figure E7.1).

Charles’ designs also were featured as the perfect background for fine jewelry at a luncheon hosted in the New York Hilton Penthouse suite by the Cultured Pearl Association during the Retail Jewelers of America convention in 1967 (see figure
E7.13). He was again invited by the Cultured Pearl Association in 1969 where they showed “ropes and ropes of pearls accessorizing Kleibacker’s” mid-calf length crepe dresses. Charles often commented on how he created beautiful dresses as a complement to a woman and as a background for her jewelry.

*Women’s Wear Daily* also gave Charles coverage on June 3, 1963 showing a black silk crepe dress and coat designed to be worn “starting at lunch, going on to dinner and the theatre” (see figure E6.15). Done in Bianchini’s four-ply silk crepe, this is one of Charles’ first coats under his own label. Another very early coat with very similar lines in apricot wool ratiné was given coverage by *WWD* on December 2, 1966 (see figure E7.10), though Charles says that it was designed in 1961. This sample is now owned by Kent State University Museum.

In 1964, Du Pont came around to see what Charles was creating with fabrics made from their fibers. Lyn Stevenson, the Du Pont couture specialist sent Charles a photograph copy and press release of his dress done in a “rich blue, green and metallic, embroidery on nylon - - a cocktail dress with deep décolletage and tilted hemline” (see figure E6.17). Though the synthetic fabric was not what would become his signature fabric, the silhouette was familiar. A new feature on this dress was very closely fitted cap sleeves, an element that would often be repeated.

The silhouettes of 1960 to 1964 were varied. Some skirts were full and flared on the bias while others were straight. Bodices were fitted skimming over the bosom and curving in at the midriff through darts or shaping of the cut, and others fit more loosely. Waists were at the natural waistline defined by waistline seaming or a tied bias sash, while others were positioned higher under the bust. There was a strapless design, designs
with bias strings as straps, a design with a halter neckline and another with long full sleeves. The early Kleibacker label offered a variety in designs and silhouette always made of quality fabrics and quality construction.

Recognition years, 1965 – 1967. This was the period that brought major attention and public recognition to the Kleibacker label (see figures E7.1 – E7.18). For the first time, a prominent fashion magazine featured one of his designs. Diana Vreeland of *Vogue* used the true bias design in a full-page editorial in December 1965. Originally made of red rayon in 1958 (see figure E4.1) and of wool plaid with a navy silk lining in 1962 (see figure E6.9), the 1964 version was made of ivory silk crepe. The same dress in 1966 was produced of paperweight silk taffeta (a soft grey) faced in caramel. The ivory version, with an added bias tie at the neck with silk flowers falling from the sash was again featured in *The Washington Post* on March 10, 1968 (see figures E8.28 and E8.30). That same year Lyn Stevenson wore a brown satin Qiana version to the Du Pont opening in Monte Carlo. This reuse of a design shows that a good design remains good for a very long time and each development is an opportunity for a designer to make minor changes, adjusting it aesthetically or practically to bring it to even greater perfection.

The second garment selected for a full-page *Vogue* editorial, in 1966 had “white silk chiffon, floating from the Empire waist of a bias cut white silk crepe dress. At the top and high-slit hem: deep bands of lace”⁹ (see figure E7.5). In 1967, a coat dress with narrow leather cinching the waist was featured in a third full-page *Vogue* editorial.¹⁰ This was the same year that Bergdorf Goodman started placing advertisements featuring Charles’ designs. A merchandising report in *Retail News Bureau* shows two dresses
sketched by Esther Larson. They are the same illustrations from a full-page ad in the February 1970 *Harper’s Bazaar* (see figure E4.1). We can thus conclude that both dresses were carried at Bergdorf’s at least as long as those three years. The dress sketched on the left with a full front and shaping front darts releasing skirt fullness at the hipline was featured as a coat dress with a small loop detail at the base of the front button closure a year earlier, in 1969. Charles said that this dress sold better without the front button closure; it could be priced lower with the front simply sewn on a center seam.11

An unusual design for Charles (in 1966 or 1967) was a cotton wedding dress requested by a company that sold cotton (see figures E7.9 and E7.10). It had bloused elbow-length sleeves, a fitted bias bodice and slim long skirt. It featured a bow across the shoulders from under which the tulle train extended. The pattern was published by Reader Mail.

Appearing in 1967 is a bloused sleeve with squared neckline. The body of the top was also bloused with the flounced hemline worn over a skirt. “Kleibacker puts his delicious coloring to work with turquoise silk crepe girdled on a high curve in brown.”12 Here, the bias blouse was matched with a straight skirt. Later similar blouses with varied necklines were paired with a long full skirt of 12 yards cartridge pleated to a fitted yoke.13

Two other very new silhouettes appeared in *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* on April 3, 1966. One, a “younger, snappier bias cut done in a new way… espresso brown for the top and cream silk crepe for the easy dirndl skirt” that buttoned up the front and had a tie knotted at the point of the vee neckline. *Vogue* selected this dress for a full-page editorial
in March, 1966 in conjunction with a huge layout featuring dresses by American designers. 

The other new silhouette was a cape dress. The arms of the wearer extended through slits in the cape effect instead of sleeves. It had self-fabric buttons down the front where it was held close to the waist by a bias string that passed inside the dress in the back and came out through slits at the side seams to tie in front. It held the front of the dress close to the body, but allowed the fabric in back to flow free. Though the dress “didn’t really sell well,” the ‘tied-in-the-front-but-not-the-back’ concept was something that Charles carried forward to a variety of other designs that sold very well throughout the remainder of his designing years.

Nineteen sixty seven also was the year that Charles showed his first very full-skirted short ballgown. It was for the 1968 spring line and was made of black silk organdy, had bared shoulders with bias string straps and a snug sash. It was again offered in 1968 in black silk gazar. This time, it was strapless with a tulip bodice and a patent leather belt that sold very well, especially to young women. In 1969, the same design was offered with a more fitted strapless bodice in buttercup yellow snugly sashed with blue-edged yellow bias. “The fabric is a Jeri ottoman of DuPont’s new wonder fiber, Qiana.”

This short design was the closest that Charles ever came to doing anything that resembled the mini-skirts worn during these years. Usually, when he talks of that popular fashion, it is in stating that a well-dressed woman would “have the good sense to never have gone in that direction.” Though the skirt was a design element that wasn’t continued, the bodice development was used by Charles again in 1970 on an elegant full-
skirted bias ballgown of navy *gros de londres* Qiana. It was photographed for a full-page editorial in the October, 1970 *Vogue*.

I don’t know which dress was described by *WWD* on November 29, 1965, but this passage exemplifies the added attention that the Kleibacker label was receiving during these years.

“SILVER SLEEPER; Smart women looking for a beautiful out-of-the-ordinary dress have discovered this model in a soft silver fabric that clings and moves at the same time…it’s a sleeper that’s coming up steadily at Bendel’s, stood out in the crowd at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre opening, worn by Mrs. Otto Preminger, was taken to Washington by Mrs. Arthur Krim for the White House ball for Princess Margaret, appeared on TV last week on Diahann Carroll. It’s by Charles Kleibacker and Bendel’s describes it as “a marvelously elegant dress not sexy, but close to it. It can be kept in the wardrobe for years.”

Designs from this time period included the shaped and fitted full-front bias with skirt fullness released at the hipline as well as the bias coat dress and other full designs tightly sashed or belted at the waist. All of the silhouettes now have the defined look of a Kleibacker; fitted at the waist with a flared bias skirt. The silhouettes were varied, but nearly always done on the bias for a soft flow of fabric.

In color usage, only one news article referred to “printed, summery and in the new hyacinth colors with white… one of the many pretty-girl dresses that Kleibacker makes so well.” Another news article described a short evening dress in fall of 1967 as being made of an imported silk print in green and aubergine (eggplant). With the exception of the turquoise blouse, all the other sources show solid fabrics in neutral colors: pale bone, grey, white and black. In colors and in silhouette, Charles had by this time found and established “his own creative look.”
The Qiana years, 1968 – 1972. Starting in 1968, Charles began designing with a wider variety of fabrics than those he had used earlier. While in the past he had been using almost exclusively soft drapable fabrics that molded to and revealed the figure underneath, in 1968, designs done in crisper fabrics and having a more voluminous silhouette began to play a greater part in his lines. Charles credits this new direction largely to his association with Du Pont; one of the first Qiana fabrics they gave him to work with was a crisp taffeta weave and he continued pulling inspiration from other woven Qianas that became available. One of the first Qiana dresses he designed after the testing years was from a taffeta print he bought from Bianchini. All bias with a nearly bare back, it featured wide straps over the shoulders connecting with a horizontal band that buttoned over and hid the bra strap in back.

Taffeta is a lightweight fabric with a crisp hand. Other fabrics such as chiffon, broadcloth, and organza are fabrics that Charles categorizes as those that “lift” or float when used on the bias; they tend to conceal the figure. Crepes, jerseys and charmeuse used on the bias tend to “drip” and reveal the figure.

Prior to 1968, Charles had not focused exclusively on “dripping” bias. The bias cut coat dress designs made of wool in the mid-1960s had a crisper hand and relied on sashes for shaping at the waist. He used a somewhat crisp reembroidered black French lace cape as a dramatic contrast to the candlelight body hugging bias cut four-ply silk crepe dress worn under it. And there were other designs already discussed.

In the next few years, after 1968, in addition to his popular bias cut day dresses (what he called his “little bias dresses” because they took much less fabric to produce than other designs) his designs became more extreme in two categories. Taffetas were
used in very full and more concealing designs, while jerseys, especially with the introduction of Qiana jersey, conveyed extremely “dripping” body-hugging styles and many designs revealed more bare skin than ever before. A photograph from the Kleibacker archives illustrates the beautiful fullness of “lifting” bias achieved with silk taffeta. In contrast, a photograph taken in 1969 shows an example of a gown that is so body-hugging, it looks poured over the model. It is made from a double layer of Bianchini’s candlelight Qiana jersey and the back is entirely bare.

Widely cuffed full sleeved “poet shirts” were popular in 1968 and 1969. One of Charles’ more concealing dresses was a bias cut version done in silk taffeta fitted with a contrasting bias sash wrapped extravagantly three times around the waist. The same silhouette was offered with lace sleeves, sleeveless, or in a day dress also worn with the back flowing freely, tied in front but not in back.

From 1968 to 1972, although the majority of the designs were made of neutral solid fabrics, prints were used more in Kleibacker collections than they had been previously. In 1968, two different Bianchini panel prints on silk crepe were featured prominently in long skirts. When Qiana was available to designers later that same year, because it was so easy to dye, it was offered in many brightly-colored prints which became a very popular fashion trend. Charles used a Qiana taffeta printed in a bold geometric pattern of red, navy and yellow for a day dress in 1969 and a turquoise, hot pink and white floral Qiana taffeta for several additional designs. Du Pont advertisements which ran in 1970 and 1972 featured bright swirling prints in blue, yellow, orange and orchid. A sapphire blue silk crepe “tea length” bias dress shown with a wide and very long scarf of sapphire, lavender, pale blue and orange silk print appeared
in his Fall, 1969 and Spring, 1970 collections. This scarf was not the only accessory designed by Charles.

Around this time a variety of wraps were introduced in the Kleibacker lines. Stoles, shrugs, frontless coats as previously noted, small jackets and capes were produced in contrasting and matching fabrications. A very prominent accessory during these years was a cape. Made from silk and wool crepes, even chiffon, Charles offered both short and long capes. Later Qiana jersey was used for very flowing long capes. The inclusion of a shaped yoke as part of a design first appeared at this time; this element eventually became recognized as a Kleibacker signature design feature. He used the shaped yoke with the buttons in front and also turned it around with the button closure in back. Eventually this yoke was a part of day dresses done in a wide variety of colors as well as long gowns and capes produced from 1970 to 1977.

In 1968, the yoke was shown with a short cape. It also appears to have been used in an “enormous dance gown with the freedom of the wind”\textsuperscript{23} and was featured in a *Vogue*, January 1970 editorial.\textsuperscript{24} This design had very full bias panels hanging from the yoke front and back and was unseamed at the sides. It was worn with a long bias skirt which was the same color (putty) as the front panel while the back panel was black. This same design, though seamed on one side and having a row of small self fabric buttons down the other side was worn by Miss Delaware, Linda Sue Hitchens to the Miss America Pageant in September, 1970.\textsuperscript{25} This design and a version with a larger yoke and with a straighter skirt having a very high side thigh opening became very popular throughout the 1970s. The pattern also was sold by Reader Mail.
Contrasting panels and contrasting bands with different colors and fabrications were elements often featured throughout these years. Versions of a gown with the bias in back, shoulder bias strings extending through a front casing to form gathers over the bust to tie at the center front neck, and buttons at the front waist was sold long, short and mid-length. First seen in July, 1967, variations of this design included one shown in 1968 made in white crepe with a bronze silk satin band extending from the knee. Another had a black silk satin bodice contrasting with a black wool crepe skirt. In 1970, a version with shaping darts at the sides was being produced long and short. One of these made up in 1972 had a brown silk satin bodice with candlelight (cream-colored) four-ply silk crepe from the hips down.

Granddaughter of Schiaparelli, and voted best dressed woman in France by Paris *Match* magazine, Marisa Berenson was co-starring with Liza Minnelli and Joel Grey in the Allied Artist/Bob Fosse musical hit “Cabaret” at the time. She was photographed in this gown for the promotion of the show. The Kleibacker label was selected for this promotion because the dresses often evoked the feelings of the 1930s, the time period in which the production was set.

A gown that Ms. Berenson also wore in the photo session exemplifies another Kleibacker design feature that became prominent during this time. This garment had tiny bias strings forming a web over a bare back with multiple bias strings dripping at the center front of the gown as well. By this time, Kleibacker designs often included bias strings as straps for bare shoulders or as an alternative to a belt tied at the waist. They were used singly or double, often as a fitting aid for low backed halter dresses where the strings cross in back and hold the sides of the front secure just under the armseye.

Wonderful examples of function combined with design include the black Qiana jersey
gown with horizontal French braid insets designed in 1971 (still owned by Kleibacker),
the pink silk gauze surplice wrap top of the same year (now in the OSU Collection), and a
brown silk charmeuse with French lace trim with matching capelet edged in sable
produced in 1983. Sometimes made from self fabric, the tiniest bias strings were made
from silk organza and added an element of delicacy to the already elegant gowns.

A few designs from 1968 and 1969 stand out as very unusual compared to other
Kleibacker garments. Colorful hand beading was applied to cover the fitted yoke of one
of the earliest versions of the yoked day dress and gold beading covered the yoke of a
gold and silver midi-length evening dress with scalloped hem. These are the only
examples found with beading and a scalloped hem. On January 16, 1969, WWD featured
a gown with long fringe hanging from the knee and bias cut pants! Fringe was a rarity
and this was the only time that Charles included pants in his line; he said they just didn’t
sell.28

Another unusual design from Charles Kleibacker was done for the “No Skin Off
Their Backs” design show in 1970. It was sponsored by the World Wildlife Fund and in a
promotion of Reigel-La France’s fleece fabric of a Dynel and mohair blend developed to
be a substitute for natural fur. The June event was a response to the need to protect
endangered animals. Animal populations were facing extinction in part because of their
use in fashion, especially snow leopards, cheetahs, tigers, ocelots and jaguars. The
message was to urge women to buy manmade furs; “You don’t have to kill ‘em to wear
‘em.” Along with a fashion show featuring designs by Kleibacker, Adolfo, Jacques
Kaplan, Ilie Wacs for Originala and David Kidd for Marquise, the program included an
address by a prominent conservationist, a performance by an African dance troop and a
visit from a live Bengal tiger from the Boston Zoo. The bias faux fur gown by Kleibacker features his familiar bias strings and also a silk taffeta band that pulls the front and back bias close to the body.

With the exception of these few oddities, the Kleibacker designs developed during these years continued to build on the figure-flattering bias cut day dress. By now, Charles’ design aesthetic was very well established and his “own creative look” was recognizable and familiar to buyers as well as to those “in-the-know” in the fashion world. These years were his busiest production years.

New directions, 1973 – 1976. Starting in about 1973, Charles developed fewer new designs than in earlier years. He was booking more nationwide tours, and stores were not ordering as many garments to keep in stock. With orders declining and both labor and the price of fabrics dramatically increasing in these years, he relied on his speaking engagements to keep his small business going.

A simple lightweight wrap, developed in the mid-1970s used both sides of the unfinished selvedge. Its sleeves were simply formed from a button and a loop along the selvedge with shaping achieved in the back by gathering along the model’s neckline. It was made short and long and with minimal labor, and thus was one that Charles said he could “really make money on.”

During the early 1970s, Charles also developed a blouse pattern that used the gathered selvedge along the neckline and shoulder extending to the cap sleeves. Made from a lightweight silk satin directional print, the pattern had fitting darts and a side zipper and was made to accompany the separates that his custom clientele desired. He
made a blouson dress from a similar pattern; the dress and wrap patterns were sold by Reader Mail.

Several other patterns were offered by Reader Mail through these years. Two different long versions of the yoked dress were offered as well as the very popular vee yoke (#312) done with lace inset and with a variety of necklines and sleeves first sold in 1969 at Bergdorf Goodman.

Many earlier styles continued to be adapted and produced in these years. The yoked gown, fuller and more flowing received a lettuce edge on the hem. A short version of the very flared 1969 dinner dress (described below in favorites) was done in 1974. A silk crepe “fit-and-flare” short day dress, sold at Bendel’s in 1968, was done in Qiana shantung and was featured in an ad for American Silk Mills in 1974.

Silk taffeta continued to be featured in the Kleibacker lines as well as both silk and Qiana jerseys. *WWD* featured an article on how New York designers were interpreting the popular Yves St. Laurent gypsy silhouette of 1976. The Kleibacker example used in the article was a design he created in 1973. This illustrates what Kay Thomas from *The New York Daily News* noted in 1970: Kleibacker was one of those designers who “always seem to be with it, no matter what the current fashion.”

Even with his time divided by tours and teaching commitments, these years were not spent simply remaking and adapting old styles. Charles explored and produced several new ideas in these years though they stand as singular concepts. They appear to be ideas that were new yet not carried beyond one or sometimes two garments.

The fitted yoke design was adapted to a short cape made up in heavy wool of a black and white bold floral print with matching skirt. Another yoked short cape was made
up in a bold stepped geometric, with the pattern reversed on the coordinating dress. Both of the prints are unusual for a Kleibacker design, as is the dress pattern. Another unusual design from these years is a black four-ply silk crepe dress, strapless except for twelve bias strings over the shoulders and also featuring a zigzag detail around the front and back upper edge. One more unique design from this era is an extremely full bias skirted strapless short gown. The skirt is done in brown silk jersey with the bodice of black French lace underlined with pale blue. This dress is remarkable because the lace motifs were not cut straight off at the center back zipper closure, but their shapes were maintained, snapping over the zipper and hiding it completely with an undisturbed pattern. Similarly, a section of the floral printed heavy wool cape was also hand appliquéd onto the yoke to maintain an uninterrupted pattern. This is a technique used by the highest quality couturiers.

Not all new designs from these years were oddities. Several new day dresses retained the same flowing silhouette of earlier Kleibackers. Two have cap sleeves: one with a key-hole front neck detail and the other with multiple fitting seams meeting at the center front bust. Two others were black and white contrasting designs, both with center front bias ties. A white sleeveless neckline features an inverted U front midriff in black with black skirt. The other, has ¾ sleeves and shoulders in white with a black skirt joined in a smooth curved waist seam front to back. A beautifully flared coat was designed with black for the top and white for the skirt to coordinate with an opposite contrast; it is stunning in its simplicity, cut and engineering.
Extravagance and luxury, 1977 – 1986. Compared to the adapted multiple designs from earlier years, the designs from these years seem to stand out as individual masterpieces. Some dresses were ordered by stores, but most of the lines developed by Charles through these years were small ones augmenting earlier designs. They were usually shown to individual clients when they came to order each season.

A few new day dresses and a couple of interesting tops to accompany skirts and jackets popular with private clients appeared during these years. However, the important new looks notable in Kleibacker designs for these years were in his use of luxurious fabrics, both in the type of fabric and in the large quantities required by the designs.

Three new very full-skirted looks appeared in 1977. Two made from silk gazar (one a moss green and the other a sapphire blue) feature interesting necklines, one with ¾ sleeves and the other sleeveless. Silk gazar is a bit stiffer than fabrics that he used earlier so the skirts look much fuller. Another gown, designed for the 1977 wedding of Charles’ niece, Ruth Anne Richards, was made of white silk faille. The bridesmaids’ gowns were made of brown silk taffeta. These garments featured his signature yoke with long full sleeves and a flowing back that formed the train.

The late 1970s brought the introduction of a variety of unique fabrics. A bias skirt and cape were created from Bucol’s satin striped silk chiffon and another yoked gown was made of Bianchini’s silk crepe and satin checkerboard fabric. Crepe-backed satin was used for a short backless dress that featured diamond insets around the low fitted waist for the very full lively skirt.

The New York Racing Association sponsored “the first American Designers Day at Belmont Park” in September, 1979. Charles was among seventeen top designers

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invited to design in the racing silks of the various stables. Using old rose and red silk for C.Z. Guest’s Templeton stables, Charles produced a three-piece outfit. It was a pair of bias pants with the same fitted and shaped waistband used on his skirts, a bandeau bias top worn in place of a bra and a very full bias cut button front shirtwaist dress with convertible collar that could be worn open or tied closed with a bias sash.\textsuperscript{36}

In 1981, the same bandeau top design was paired with a skirt that was designed a decade earlier. Made from fourteen yards of silk taffeta cartridge pleated onto a fitted yoke, the skirts were sheer luxury of extravagant fullness that moved with graceful fluidity. A vast amount of yardage was also used in another very full garment. This garment, from 1982, was made of a blue metallic moiré fabric in silk and Lurex. When the wearer moved, the lower layers of blue and purple silk organza showed beneath the blue moiré skirt at the high side slit.

Extravagance and luxury were the objectives in 1982 when Charles used black silk chiffon over a skirt of nude silk shantung. The extremely full body joined the sheer one-layer chiffon bodice, back and gusseted long sleeves along the top of the bust where it was delineated with a strip of black bias satin. A wide four-inch black patent leather belt cinched in the body fullness at the waist.

Silk charmeuse and silk jersey were used for another extremely luxurious design developed in 1981. This style completely envelops the body with yards and yards of fabric, but its asymmetrical drape reveals every curve as the wearer moves. It is reminiscent of drapery seen on Greek statues and vases and is a striking design.
Charles’ Favorite Designs

A few favored dresses stand out in Charles’ mind as being very special designs. One of his best-sellers was a luncheon or late day dress that was attractive on many women and sold from 1969 to 1977. The dress used about seven yards of fabric, was cut on the bias, and hung from a shaped and fitted yoke. It had a three-quarter sleeve, shaped pleating around the waistline and was worn with a wide belt. Some stores ordered a three-inch belt and sometimes he produced the dress with just a skinny bias string that was wrapped around a couple of times at the waistline, but Charles liked it best with the wider four-inch belt. This dress only had one layer of fabric hanging down from the yoke, but the yoke had four layers of fabric that he worked hard to shape and which closed in the back with some self-fabric buttons. This design was originally produced in four-ply silk crepe, but was also made from silk crepe de chine, silk jersey, wool jersey and also a “kind of a mohair fabric.” It was available in many colors.

The true bias design is always one that Charles includes in his list of favorites. He was never able to sell it to stores, but did produce them for private clients. This long dramatic dress was “pure bias in the front… completely asymmetrical.” It was backless with a halter top. The fabric spiraled around the body exposing the leg above the knee in back and ended with “a bit of a train.”

The first version of this dress was designed very early in Charles’ career, he doesn’t recall exactly when, but it was possibly as early as when he was working with Madame Berg. After Paris and prior to Charles’ employment at Nettie Rosenstein, this gown was made up in red rayon with self-fringe and photographed for one of Gladys Steiner’s accounts. The publicity release read:
“Drama Undiluted….. in Belding-Corticelli’s fabulous new rayon fabric with the look of silk linen. Kleibacker, imaginative New York-Paris designer, makes the most of this wonderful fabric with a dramatic gown cut entirely on the bias. Moulding [sic] the figure to a fare-thee-well, it’s all very much in the mood of opulence and marble staircases.”

Mount Mary College’s Historic Costume Collection owns one of these gowns made in 1962 and photographed in his first studio on 26 West 76th Street. It was made up in a navy, white, and orange wool tweed with the train faced in navy silk satin. The December 1965 Vogue shows it made up in white wool crepe. Still later, Charles produced it in a medium grey silk paper taffeta and lined in brown silk taffeta with the brown silk taffeta turned up so that it rimmed the skirt all the way around. A brown satin Qiana version was made for Lyn Stevenson to wear to the Du Pont Qiana premiere in Monte Carlo in 1968. Charles modified and slightly adjusted this design over the years. A muslin of one permutation is part of the collection at the Kent State University Museum. Though this design did not have the fluidity that was normally part of a Kleibacker label, Charles considers this one quite special because it is his only true bias design.

Another of Charles’ favorite designs was a dress that sold very well and appeared in a Bergdorf Goodman window display that featured Kleibacker labels. Designed in 1978, it was a black silk crepe dress that had a lace banding across the bust area. Although it sold well, the reorders were for a solid crepe rather than with the lace inset. It was a dress that could be worn during any season and with a variety of accessories and jewelry. It was the kind of dress that appealed to women as being very wearable.

The first dress that Charles described when asked about his favorite designs is the one I feel is one of his most important designs. It is because of the beautifully engineered cut and has an amazing flow of bias in the skirt.
Charles introduced this dress in 1969. Of all of his designs it is the closest to a ballgown; he called it a dinner dress. It had a lot of intricate bias seaming which defined the figure nearly down to the knees where it then spread out into an extremely full skirt to the floor. The fullness was not achieved with inset godets, but was actually “released from the seaming itself,” from the fitting darts and pleats front and back as well as the center front seam. As with so many Kleibacker designs, this dress has only three pattern pieces; the front is entirely draped in one with only two pattern pieces for the back which form a diamond cut-out. It has a cap sleeve, “so it still worked for a woman who was beginning to fall apart at the armpit and the upper arm.”

The sample, now part of the Ohio State University’s Historic Costume & Textiles Collection, was made up in a candlelight (cream) color of Bianchini’s four-ply silk crepe. It was produced for Bergdorf Goodman in beige, black and a blush pink. With the flow of the full skirt and the play of the bias cut according to Charles, “that dress, when it moved, really moved. That was one of my favorites.” This dress, more than any other Kleibacker label examined, is impressive for the perfection of its draping and the amount of bias control achieved. It is truly engineered for a perfection of fit and drape.

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1 No source information or date was included on the clipping. The Charles Kleibacker Archives, The June F. Mohler Fashion Library, Kent State University.

2 I only know of two extant examples of Kleibacker coats, one at Kent State University Museum and the other at The Ohio State University Historic Costume & Textiles Collection.

3 Vogue, Mar 15, 1960, 118.


5 Photograph by Peter Fink in his studio in the Dakota Building, 1965.
Both versions of this dress were shown side-by-side at the OSU 2005 exhibition. The blue grey silk lined with navy dupioni silk is now part of the OSU Historic Costume & Textiles Collection.

Kent State University Museum has an outfit of this design.

A 1972 newspaper editorial (The SouthofBoston Patriot Ledger, January 12, 1972) shows a gown of this print and quotes Charles as saying that the fabric was made to order, but it wasn’t. He told me he bought it from Abraham.

This sample is now owned by The Historic Costume & Textiles Collection at The Ohio State University.

This sample is now at the Kent State University Museum.

In 1979, Charles did include bias pants in the ensemble designed for the event, “That Belmont Look” discussed later in this chapter.

Women’s Wear Daily, June 19, 1970; The SouthofBoston Patriot Ledger, July 3, 1970; The Fayetteville Observer, June 22, 1970. – Suzanne Dennie, Miss Alabama also wore the Kleibacker faux tiger fur design

30 It is unfortunate that at the time Charles and I were looking at some of the design photographs from the Kleibacker archives, we were running short of time. When we came to the photographs of this design, I forgot good interviewing skills and said that it was just “too funny.” Charles agreed and nothing further was said about the design.


33 The floral print three-piece ensemble is now a part of The Historic Costume & Textiles Collection at The Ohio State University and the geometric cape and dress is owned by The Kent State University Museum.

34 This sample is now owned by The Historic Costume & Textiles Collection at The Ohio State University.

35 This sample is also at OSU.

36 It is a shame that there are no photographs of the entire outfit. I was able to catch a glimpse of the stunning visual effect of this ensemble modeled at Iowa State University; it was recorded in 1981, but the tape was badly decomposed. The socialite who modeled the outfit at the Belmont event was not so bold and wore the overdress buttoned up.
CHAPTER 8

READY-TO-WEAR BIAS PRODUCTION TECHNIQUES

“Couturier Charles Kleibacker is that rare designer species: he does not think sitting down and stitching a seam is un-fashionable. Kleibacker knows sewing techniques, fitting techniques, cutting techniques, draping techniques, finishing techniques. His is not the ‘studio’ method. His is the ‘work-room’ method. That is why fashion’s Kleibacker relates to the home-sewer, the student, the teacher, the educator… ‘I don’t believe a dress is fashionable unless it moves, is comfortable, is flattering,’ says Kleibacker. ‘That means dressmaking, a word too often ignored these days. Dressmaking means beautiful cut, not faddish trimmings. Beautiful, timeless cut means perfection in fitting and finishing and sewing --- how to pull a bias seam under the machine, why not to stitch over darts, why hand-overcasting is the only fine finishing method.”

The expertise that earned Charles Kleibacker the kind of recognition displayed in the article quoted above was not something that came easily. Charles was not able to go to a published source to see the methods that Madeleine Vionnet used in her ateliers to work with bias cut. He had to teach himself through trial and error and thinking hard about what was happening within the garments. By careful observation, he had to decipher what happened when he adjusted the cut, the hang, the angle of the bias. What was occurring when the seam was applied? How could he prevent the inevitable puckering and the hanging hemlines? “When I went into my own place and was forced to really think, that’s when I began to really love it and say, well this is what it’s all about, this is really thinking work.”
Charles likes to note that a class on logic he took at Notre Dame gave him a basis for thinking out problems in a positive way. He certainly had to apply logic to figure out the processes by which he could produce the kind of bias cut garments he envisioned. Many aspects of normal garment production had to be adapted to do so. Madame Berg exposed Charles to many couture construction methods. Observing the workrooms at Lanvin and also working with the staff at Nettie Rosenstein’s certainly helped him gain understanding of even more couture techniques. These were the skills he drew on and adapted to achieve his desired results.

This chapter addresses only the specific techniques that are required for successfully working the bias. Couture construction techniques and general sewing techniques are easily available in many published books. Those techniques, even though they were regularly used in the Kleibacker workrooms have not been included in this study.

Pattern Development

Designers fall into two categories, those who design by sketching and those who work directly with the fabric to develop their ideas through draping. Charles preferred to drape directly onto a dress form taking inspiration from the selected fabric, “Balenciaga-style, not Castillo-style, working right with the material without sketches.” Much like a sculptor in his methods, Charles starts out with a mental picture that may change as he is working with the fabric. Since he never learned flat pattern methods, the final form of his patterns are in muslin traced directly from the completed toiles.
When Charles first bought the four-ply silk crepe from Bianchini, John Griffin told him that the fabric “was really meant to be cut on the cross. Now I hadn’t even thought about that before. After that, every time I bought a piece of fabric, as long as it was a woven, I would gather it on the straight grain in my hand and on the cross grain in my hand and what ever felt better, then I would use that grain. Then, I was thinking, what is going to happen if we do a long dress? He said, ‘I’m not saying that it doesn’t work on straight grain, I’m just saying to you that it is much better. And I think as long as you’re doing a short dress, you’re probably going to have a chance of making it work better on the cross grain.’” It was after this advice from John Griffin that Charles started really exploring fabric qualities.

Before Charles did any cutting, he researched the fabric. He sewed seams on the straight of grain, the cross grain and bias and gave the fabric a thorough steam bath to learn its characteristics. His designs were “achieved with a great deal of pinning, basting, pressing and coaxing of the material.” The more he knew could be expected from the fabric as he was working, the greater his chance of success.

The development of his designs was a very labor intensive process. Keeping the fabric that he wanted to use in mind, he draped half of the pattern in muslin on a dress form. Watching Charles drape amazed me because he did something different than what I would have thought was allowable by draping standards. He cut short slashes into the edge of the muslin along the center front bias seam to release the seam allowance. Because he intended to stretch that seam at the sewing machine in the final product, he also stretched that seam in the muslin on the dress form as he was draping, pinning the fabric onto the dress form to hold the intended stretch. This was so logical! Charles said
that whatever you will do in the finished garment, do the same in the muslin. At first I thought that he was referring to constructing and fitting, but he started that process right from the inception of the design.

When the half pattern was fully developed on the dress form, it was taken off and the lines trued up. This half was used to trace a reversed pattern for the other side on more muslin which was then cut and basted together with the first half to make a toile of the new design. The toile was then tried on a fit model who worked with Charles telling him where the garment was binding or uncomfortable, adding information to determine corrections for a better fit. At this point, a new toile was made with the newly adjusted pattern, basted together and checked again on the fit model with the entire process repeating until a perfect fit was achieved. “One half of the muslin then became the pattern for the final fabric; the fabric was then cut and assembled into the garment. The fit model was brought back for any further adjustment.” Charles said that it was an expensive proposition for him. This finished product became the sample garment that was ready to be shown to the store buyers and private clientele.

Most designers would take their original pattern to a grader who would generate the various pattern sizes desired by the stores. Working with bias complicated this step; grade rules don’t behave the same when applied to a bias design. Holding onto the integrity of a garment design as it is translated from a size 8 to a 16 is a challenge, even more so in a bias cut. “It’s not just the inch and a half difference [in size measurements]; it can be an altogether different look. For example, we had an empire line which had to be lowered and modified in the bigger sizes because it made the girls look top-heavy.”
Considering the perfect fit expectations that Charles demanded, having his patterns graded was not acceptable. He purchased different sized dress forms and draped each size individually. That meant that the process was repeated just as he had done for the first sample garment: draping in muslin to obtain a pattern, duplicating it in the reverse for the opposite side to be made into a muslin toile, hiring fit models to perfect the fit, translating into the final fabric, and again bringing in a fit model to see that the fit and movement on a live person was perfect. All these steps before each size pattern was perfected and ready to be used in producing garments in the final fabric and delivered to the stores. Advising the home sewing market, Charles noted, “Absolute, perfect fit has got to be done on the human body. Pin, baste, release, take in, rip, pick up, hold. Engineer that fabric until it becomes a part of your body.”

Charles credits his time at Lanvin for learning about fit. “While I didn’t have that much to say about the fit because Castillo was the supreme ruler certainly, and should have been, but little by little I began to learn. This is where I really learned what great clothes were all about. And there is a dignity – I don’t even like the word ‘fashion’ any more because I do not think it gives any idea of the dignity, the tremendous work, the tremendous engineering, the whole situation of how in a fitting, a garment may change completely and become something very beautiful.”

*WWD* categorized the designers of the late 1960s into two groups: Spirit versus Seams. “One keeps reworking a basic shape season after season while the others move as today’s Spirit frees them.” Yves St. Laurent lead the way when he said, “Fashion is not a new dress. It’s a new attitude. It’s the Spirit of the clothes – not the rigid seams and
contrived construction.” He was not suggesting that the clothes are not well constructed, but rather that the designers were more involved with the mood of the times than the “perfection of a seam.” Rudy Gernreich, Mary Quant and Emilio Pucci were listed in the article as those who offered women “uncontrived dresses.”

Charles described the 1950s, when he was in Paris, as the time “of construction.” Following the exemplary lead of Balenciaga in that decade, even the lightest, airiest dresses had inner structure and often complicated construction to maintain the seams in the position determined by the designer in order to achieve perfection of form. The article in WWD listed designers who were inspired by “seams – that old Balenciaga school.” Among them were Courrèges, Ungaro, and Beene. Grès, Galanos and Kleibacker were identified not as seam tailors, but as soft seamers who “are involved with seams but their constructed shapes take a soft turn.”

If one element of Kleibacker designs had to be selected as paramount to his look, it would have to be seams. The positioning of the seams within the bias and the placement of them on the body were very important. From just a cursory look at Charles’ designs, they look quite simple. However, when the cut is analyzed and carefully evaluated, the garment patterns are very complex. For example, his long dinner dress with diamond cut out in the back has multiple shaping seams down the front of the bodice with a graceful flaring full skirt to the floor. Instead of the easy approach of shaping the front of the garment with separate pattern pieces sewn together, Charles draped this garment so that the entire body of the garment, from the front around to the back, is one piece. He employed the shaping seams to serve as darts. This allowed the full skirt to flow smoothly without seams to break it up! It is a masterpiece!
The seams in Kleibacker designs have a dual purpose; they shape the garment but also serve as style lines. Looking at the silhouette of many Kleibackers, they appear to be quite similar, but upon a closer examination one can see unique differences in the positions of style lines and shaping seams in each design.

**Construction**

Yes, Charles was definitely of that ‘old Balenciaga school’ where seams and construction played a very important role. “Soft fluid-like clothes; this is how they should be. But don’t make the mistake of calling them unconstructed. Soft doesn’t imply that. Instead, it means an awful lot of work done very well.”

**Table Work**

After the muslin pattern is perfected and the design is ready to be produced, the first steps of construction on bias cut garments need to be done while the fabric is still on the cutting table and before a pair of shears even touch it. Cut two equal lengths of the desired fashion fabric one to two yards long as required for the pattern; preshrink it with lots of steam. After being sure that the grain is straight and lined up the same on both pieces, pin the fabric right-sides-together having the nap laying in the same direction. Place pins perpendicular to the edge about two inches apart along the edge of the entire piece of fabric to ensure that there is no subtle shifting of the grain. Slip a sheet of white dressmakers tracing paper face up on the table under the pinned fabric. Lastly position the muslin pattern on top with the selvedges and grain perfectly aligned to the fashion fabric. Pin the muslin selvedges to the fabric selvedges. Charles always retained a
section of selvedge on each muslin pattern piece so that he would be able to align the grains accurately; this is important.

Use a tracing wheel to transfer the pattern onto the bottom layer of fabric. Hold the wheel firmly in one hand while the tips of the fingers of the other hand lightly press and hold the layers in position slightly in front of the wheel as you go around the pattern. Don’t allow the layers to shift. When the muslin pattern has been traced completely, remove it, turn the fabric layers (still pinned together) over to the opposite side. Be sure that the grains are perfectly straight and square again. Use the markings on what was the bottom layer to wheel the pattern onto the other layer of fabric which now lies against the tracing paper. Do not remove the pins yet. Slide the tracing paper out and be sure the pinned layers of fabric are still smooth and straight.

Because bias grain is so fluid, it is important to keep seam lines aligned as much as possible. Once they are cut, seam allowances relax and open up, stretch and become distorted making it very difficult to sew an even seam line if the cut edge is the sewing guideline. Charles overcame this challenge by basting the bias seams together before the garment was cut. In this way, he could maintain the correct position of the seam before the grain became distorted.

Baste the center front and/or center back seam lines, especially those on bias by sewing a running stitch. Do not knot the end of the thread and sew overlapping five to six inch sections leaving cut thread ends between each section. Because the basted seam is not a continuous thread, the seam can be stretched later as it is put through the sewing machine without breaking the basting. For ease of removal, baste with a thin A-sized silk thread of a different color than the garment.
“He would always say in the classes, ‘Think through what you are about to do. How much can you do before you cut it?’ Because it’s not yet bias then, you’ve got a square fabric lined up and you’ve drawn a diagonal line on it and you’re stitching through – it’s a lot of handwork, but you can manage. To stitch it before your scissors actually cut that diagonal line, you’re ahead of the game.’”

At this point in the process, because his was precise couture sewing, the remaining seam lines on each layer of fabric were traced with a basted line of silk thread. Only those seams that would be stretched when sewn need be done with the segmented and broken basting stitch. Finally, after this step was complete, the pattern pieces were cut out with two inch seam allowances.

Slip Basting

Next the entire dress was hand basted together from the right side (a common couture technique) to be ready for fitting on the client. To hand baste from the right side, when a lower skirt piece is joined to a piece in the bodice, the skirt seam line is folded along the thread tracing and pinned precisely in position on top of the joining flat piece with right sides together. The seam is slip basted together taking stitches that are 1/4 inch apart. By hand basting the dress together, it is an easy process to do any needed adjustments, simply snip and re-baste in the proper position.

Basting from the right side ensured that every seam was accurately matched. By following the adjusted, perfectly fit basted seam line, the final machine stitched seam is also accurate. This is especially useful when sewing on bias as the cut edge of the seam allowances cannot be used as the sewing guide since they are so easily distorted. The two
inch seam allowance preserves some stability, but the basted precisely positioned seams keep the construction aligned properly.

Stretching Bias Seams

Clothes designed on the bias are notorious for having sagging uneven hemlines. “To most women, clothes designed on the bias mean that hemlines will sag. For mass produced clothes, that is generally true. The art of cutting on the bias belongs in the realm of great couture dressmaking, and consequently, it is disappearing like the bald eagle. But not for Charles Kleibacker.” A major objective in bias construction for Charles was to overcome that uneven sagging hemline so common in bias garments.

Charles solved this problem by taking the basted bias seam and “stretching for all it’s worth” while it was being sewn on the machine. The rest of the fabric along the hem stretches as it hangs; stretching the bias seam as it is sewn helps the whole garment stretch consistently and hang evenly.

Some construction methods recommend that after the garment is sewn, weights should be hung along the hem spaced every six inches. The garment is then left overnight to stretch out the bias prior to marking and turning up the hem. Vionnet used weights in this manner, but stretched the bias prior to cutting and stitching the pattern together by mounting the flat fabric pieces on a large wall. The method Charles used was quicker and more efficient. He still let the garment hang overnight prior to marking the hem; this was to allow the rest of the bias to relax and catch up with the stretch introduced into the bias seam.
Amazingly, only one garment examined in this study had an uneven hemline due to the bias in the skirt stretching after production was complete. It is in the Ohio State University collection and is a dress with a strapless black lace bodice underlined in blue silk. It has a brown skirt made of a vast amount of high quality very stretchy knit silk jersey. The skirt was not underlined and had a simple unfinished cleanly cut hemline. Gravity pulled on the fabric over the years causing the hemline to become uneven. All other garment hems examined by me were as even as they were originally produced, even after hanging for nearly fifty years.

Understructure

The strapless dress with brown jersey skirt never actually sold to stores and was never produced for a private client. Charles had it as part of the line to add spice and variety. The silk jersey was very expensive and done with so much fabric that the cost of the garment would have had to have been rather high, so Charles didn’t push sales on it. The bodice on this dress was also unique in that it had so much labor involved in the lace sections. It is really a “showpiece” with the lace shaped over the back zipper so that the lace pattern was not interrupted, but snapped in place hiding the zipper.

Being strapless, this dress also required more understructure than was common for a Kleibacker label. It had an inner bodice with commonly used spiral bones for inner support. The strapless Qiana gros de londres gown with the tulip front bodice from 1970 also had to have similar inner boning structure to be held in place. That material was very heavy and Charles also used several layers of silk organza slips with horsehair braid along the hem to hold the skirt out. Charles mentioned that he didn’t really sell many of
this dress either though Bergdorf Goodman took the credit on the *Vogue* editorial. He designed the gown of Qiana as a way to say to Du Pont, “thank you for engaging me.” This one and the jonquil (yellow) ottoman Qiana were done as show pieces in Qiana fabric that Charles purchased from Abraham when it became available for retail.

I asked Charles if another Kleibacker design with a very full skirt had silk organza slips to support it: the dress was done of green silk gazar with 3/4 sleeves and a ruffle along the low square-cut neckline. It was worn with a four inch wide ostrich belt. He said, “no, but it was underlined in silk organza,” and he did use a bit of wire in the front ruffle to keep it standing up straight, but other than that, there was no other understructure. It was rare for Kleibacker dresses to require inner support.

Rather than layers of understructure, Charles’ dresses had little or none. Other than those just mentioned, if there was any understructure used, it was likely one layer of silk shantung or a second layer of the fabric as an underlining, a common couture construction technique.\(^{13}\)

Charles carefully tested which fabrics had compatible drapes and could be used together. If the underlining fabric was different from the face fabric, after it was made up and gravity started to take over, it would be disastrous if the underlining piece stretched more than the face fabric. In the case of silk jersey, Charles could only use the same fabric to underline as there was nothing else with the same drape.

Underlining helped in maintaining the clean look of a garment’s shape, giving the fabric a bit more support. Charles used it if he thought it was needed. Underlining also helped in keeping a garment wrinkle free when worn and was easy for the dry cleaner to get inside and press. If the garment was lined, a hot iron can easily leave seam allowance
impressions on the right side. Underlining allows access to the inside where the garment can be pressed under the seam allowance avoiding the possibility of leaving impressions. A clean look and ease of care were both features important to Charles.

Charles used a strong transparent underlining fabric, called nylon soufflé used in theater costuming to support a delicate French lace he used in yokes and accents in some dresses. Charles wanted his dresses to last for years since he felt that they were quite an investment at the retail prices for which they sold.

Elizabeth Rhodes recalled an event which occurred during one of the early sessions offered at Georgia College. Charles always brought muslins and finished garments from his workshop in New York to show as examples to the students. When a student asked if she could copy one of Charles’ muslins, he let her do so. Later in private, Elizabeth said to Charles, “You don’t have to give your designs away like that. Don’t feel obliged to have to do that.” And he said, “Oh, Elizabeth, if they can make it and compete with me, just let them go ahead.” The pattern that she wanted was one that looked good on almost all body types and Charles made it up in many different fabrics and models. The dress included his signature yoke that he used both backwards and forwards and also in capes. Elizabeth said, “The dress that she was copying had that yoke. But, you know the way he made that yoke, I never was able to duplicate myself – and I tried. He had four layers of four-ply silk crepe that he would wet and nail down to a board and take all the stretch out of it and then cut that… [the student] wasn’t going to be able to duplicate what he did. There’s those little things behind his garments that he does.”14

I asked Charles about the construction of this yoke. When he made it in Qiana jersey or silk jersey for a dress or a cape, he used one layer of jersey for the outside layer,
two layers of silk shantung for the inside and silk satin as the inner lining layer. Only the outer jersey layer needed to have the stretch taken out. He did this by giving it a good steam bath and then pinned it stretched to its maximum onto the cutting table where it was left to dry. When he made the yoke up in wool crepe, he didn’t have to go through this process. This was one of the little tricks that Charles applied to the insides of the bias garments that “made a world of difference.”

Not everything Charles tried turned out well. He produced a yoked long cape of silk jersey and it “was awful.” The fabric stretched all wrong and he was never even able to show it. When he talked to fashion design students, Charles often told them even if you get the muslin looking good, it may not translate into fashion fabric. Sometimes all the investment of time and money for fabric just has to be scrapped because it just isn’t right.

Holding-In

Another little trick in the inner construction applied to the Kleibacker garments was what Charles called “holding-in.” If a bias seam tended to stand away from the body and Charles thought it would look better snug up against the skin, he applied a “stay” inside along the seam line to prevent the seam from having any give. In many cases, he took out ease. This is a technique used in tailoring to produce a good roll line on the front of a jacket. It works well for that purpose, but Charles found many other applications for it.

The technique of “holding-in” requires using the thinnest rayon twill tape or the selvedge from chiffon to avoid adding any bulk in the seam allowance. Pinch out and pin the unwanted fullness from the targeted seam line. Measure the new length of the seam
and cut the tape to match. Unpin the pinched section. Distribute and pin the unwanted fullness evenly through the length of the tape. Hand tack in place using a short needle and silk thread with the tiniest stitches just inside the seam allowance. Last, using a good amount of steam and a press cloth, shrink the fullness out until the seam is smooth. After it is smooth, it can then be joined to the matching seam or if along an extended facing pressed in position.

An area that always received the “holding-in” treatment was the low-cut vee necklines. This was necessary to prevent gaping when the wearer sat down and relaxed her shoulders. Using this trick in the waistlines of his backless designs helped the back edge contour and fit smoothly to the body. Charles also held in any cut out edges that tended to gap when the model moved and any bias seams that he wanted to fit close to the body. In this way, his designs could be revealing without the wearer feeling exposed.

A funny story that Dr. Elizabeth Rhodes shared with me highlights the flexibility Charles had in using the “holding-in” technique. During one of the week-long couture classes at Georgia College, Charles was fitting a student in the final fashion fabric in front of a three-way mirror while Elizabeth was holding the pins and observing. The student had a lovely slim figure; her garment design had a long snug skirt. The student, Rae said,

“Should it be a little tighter Charles?” It was a slim design, and he was looking at it and I ventured to say, ‘Rae, I don’t think so because even with your great figure, I think you can just get things too tight.’ And I do feel that way, that you can just be too tight and not have as good a look as you would want. And so Charles said, ‘Well, haven’t we gotten to be a prude, Madame Elizabeth! If the lady wants it tight we should give it to her.’ And I said, ‘Well, Charles, you’re the designer, but I still feel it’s tight enough.’ …It must have had a side slit to allow her to walk it was that tight. [The slit] wasn’t at center back; Charles will never allow a
center back slit… Well, Charles opened up the center back seam line for about four or five inches just below the curve of the derriere and had her hold in a bit of the ease. Not enough to look puckered. When you looked at the seam, it looked like a straight seam, but it wasn’t tighter so it wasn’t pulling, but it got part of the look of showing off her flesh. And Charles said ‘Now I can please both of you.”

Many of Charles’ clients wanted that daring look which showed off their curves; bias was ideal for that purpose.

The Bare Look

Though quite a few Kleibacker labels could be worn without any undergarments at all, *Corset and Underwear Review* noted that most of his customers were

“the type of women who like the idea of nudity but want it translated in a modest way… ‘I know of two or three women who have a beautiful enough figure to reveal the bosom but the others are better off if it remains a mystery. This does not mean that they can’t wear beautifully draped clothes that give the illusion of nudity without revealing the bosom… Many of these women do need some kind of foundation but it’s very hard to find something that not only looks natural but also doesn’t show.’”

Charles was quite frustrated with the selection of bras available to his customers. “First of all get rid of those bows on bras… In all these areas lace has got to go. It’s pretty but every little wrinkle shows.” For those women who still wanted the bare look, but couldn’t go without a bra, Charles removed the straps from their bras and replaced them with the same bias string he used in the gown. This added to the look of the design while maintaining the client’s needed support.

Sometimes Charles added a layer of fabric for modesty. One news article in 1972, focused on the unstructured soft styling of Kleibacker clothes describing how Charles had added a dab of crepe around the bosom area of an unlined lace halter gown to ensure
propriety. Diahann Carroll bought one. When Charles went to see her perform, he was surprised. “She had turned down the crepe so that you could actually see! There are times I wish I were as brave as my customers.”18 Many Kleibacker labels are designed to be worn over very little – no slip and over very smooth naturally shaped bras or worn without a bra entirely. Worn with only pantyhose, they were “all part of fashion’s liberation movement”19 in the 1960s.

In order to maintain that smooth uninterrupted look in Charles’ bias cut dresses, and to prevent any unwanted hold or even the slightest tug in the garment interior, no seam or dart was ever crossed over by another seam. Each seam was sewn and ended where it met another. He was also very particular about the seam finish that was used inside. Only hand overcasting was done because this finished the raw edge neatly yet was soft and flexible enough to still allow the bias to drape and move. Don’t trim all the seam allowances until the fitting adjustments and final machine seaming is complete. When you are ready to hand overcast, trim the seam allowance to 5/8 of an inch for a short distance, then overcast for a short distance. Alternate trimming and overcasting as you proceed so that the bias cut edge has less time to loosen and open up. Hand overcasting is a technique that Charles felt very few ready-to-wear workrooms used; it is a couture technique that is very time consuming.

Bias Strings

The last construction technique included in this chapter is how to construct the tiny bias strings that were featured on many Kleibacker dresses. Though not exclusive to the Kleibacker workshop, bias strings are difficult to do well and his workshop did them
the best I have ever seen on any garment. Bias strings on his designs are never misshapen or lumpy. They are always an even diameter the length of the entire string and never twist as so many tend to do. They are stable and hold the garment snugly in position.

Take a perfect 45° bias strip cut 7/8 inch wide; measure equal distance from the corner along the selvedge and across a filling thread. The perfect bias is important or else the finished tube will twist no matter how careful you may be. Fold the strip in half lengthwise and baste in the center of the strip using the same broken overlapping basting technique that was used for basting the center front bias seam. Machine stitch (12 – 15 stitches per inch) a seam 1/8 inch from the folded edge stretching as much as possible as you sew. Trim the seam allowance to 1/8 inch. Don’t trim it any closer or the edges will fray out as it is turned. Use a loop turner with a hook on the end to turn the tube inside out. Maintaining tension on the loop turner helps this step go more smoothly. Starting the seam slightly more than 1/8 inch from the folded edge also helps the turn start more easily.

After the tube is turned, pin one end of it on the ironing board to secure and hold in place. While pulling to stretch the string, steam with an iron. Don’t press; just give it a good steam bath. Make sure the seam is lying straight as you do this. Pin the opposite end to the ironing board to hold the stretch. Continue stretching, pinning and steaming until the string is to its maximum length and won’t allow any further stretching. Leave the full length of the stretched string pinned on the ironing board until it is completely dry. This process stabilizes it and also takes all the bias give out. Because of the nature of the bias, the tube will shrink in diameter as it is extended and the seam will not break since it was stitched while stretching. This process allows the string to become much thinner and
smoother than it would be without stretching. The result is a stable string that can securely hold the garment in the position desired.

The size of the string is determined by the thickness of the fabric used and the distance away from the folded edge the machine stitching is done. Using a light weight fabric such as silk chiffon can produce very thin strings.

Charles’ company was always small. This was the case in part because of the exacting construction that went into his clothing. He produced his dresses in his own workshops where he could keep an eye on the quality. I asked Carmen if she thought that the construction of bias cut clothing really required *every* step Charles included; were there no shortcuts? She replied no. A few times in the past, she had tried to skip a step or two even though she knew better than to do so. The result was that it took longer because she had to take it all out and redo it correctly.

Carmen had learned how to do a hand rolled hem from her mother. But, with the tricks that Kleibacker taught her, “it was more perfect and much better.” After Charles closed his business, Carmen got a job at another clothing manufacturer, but she said it only lasted one week, “I couldn’t do it. It made me crazy. They were doing so many things wrong!” and they didn’t want to hear about doing it better.

Carmen continued her education while working for Charles. By attending at night, she graduated from FIT (Fashion Institute of Technology) and eventually taught sewing students herself at a variety of institutes. When she has seen students from Parsons or FIT on the streets in New York, she has engaged them in conversation. Appallingly, when she discussed construction techniques with them, the students told her, “That’s old fashioned;
we don’t use that technique anymore.” They think these skills are not important to know. But her trained eye can see the difference. Now when she goes into Bendel’s or Bergdorf Goodman, she looks at the clothing for sale there and can see that they aren’t as well made and don’t hang as well as the ones produced by Kleibacker.

Charles said, “The workroom is the heartbeat of fashion and that’s where I am at home. Fashion is a science. It is engineering and it takes a lot of thinking, discipline and a tremendous amount of hard work to get results.” In the hands of a master craftsman or artist, like Charles, hard work brings forth amazing results. To those who can see and understand, the results are worth all the effort for a superior garment. In the hands of a highly skilled dress maker, a beautiful dress is a work of art.

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1 Taken from an undated press release copy found in the Kleibacker Archives at Kent State University’ June F. Mohler Fashion Library. Since the article refers to “the past two years” flying to Mount Mary College “as a guest lecturer,” and appearing at the week’s “Apparel Design Forum at the University of Wisconsin in Madison,” I am assuming that it was copy prepared in 1970 for The Milwaukee Journal.


3 The SouthofBoston Patriot Ledger, September 6, 1966.


7 WWD, January 3, 1969.

8 WWD, September 17, 1968.

9 Ibid.

10 Alice McKee, Fort Lauderdale News, January 8, 1970.
11 Elizabeth Rhodes in January 31, 2007 interview with author at Kent, OH.

12 Dorothy Le Sueur, The Washington Post, July 5, 1967. Hyacinth writing for The Cleveland Plain Dealer, April 5, 1966 also referred to Charles’ skill in construction being able to avoid the drooping hemlines “a traditional hazard of bias clothes.”


14 Elizabeth Rhodes in January 31, 2007 interview with author.

15 Ibid.


17 Ibid.


19 Ibid.

20 Phone interview with author on November 20, 2007. When she started working for Mr. Kleibacker, she hated handwork, now she loves it. She said with pride that her “hand rolling is best; no one is better. I can do a rolled hem as thin as a thread.” Wow!


22 Charles considered the term “dress maker” as highly complimentary. Madeleine Vionnet also preferred to call herself a dress maker.
The years that Charles was working in the fashion industry (1950s – 1980s) were marked by dramatic changes in style influenced by the tumultuous political, social and economic events which occurred throughout that time. The 1950s saw an economic boom with increased production in consumer goods, but was also influenced by major concern over the “Cold War” and the threat of a nuclear conflict. During the 1960s, baby boomers were coming of age and suddenly the voices of rebellious youth were insisting to be heard, finding their own sartorial identities. In the 1970s, more women entered the workforce. They wanted to be taken seriously and adopted more conservative clothing than the previous decade. By 1980, the economy, after having recovered from the recession of the 1970s, was on a wave with the “yuppies” riding high, spending their wealth on luxury items and extravagant clothing.

Though many fashion labels reflected much of the turmoil, the Kleibacker label consistently offered a soft figure-flattering silhouette while maintaining pace with the current trends in subtle ways. His clientele were mostly those who patronized the Establishment led by designers such as Norman Norell, Pauline Trigère, and Mainbocher.1
In the 1950s when Charles Kleibacker was at Lanvin, Paris had regained the role it had lost during World War II as the leader in the fashion industry. The world once again was able to look to Paris for direction of styles and trends. Buyers eagerly came from all over the globe to see what the top designers had to offer each new season.

Balenciaga reigned supreme with Christian Dior as his greatest competitor. Dior and Balenciaga, along with other Parisian designers, Jacques Fath, Jean Dessès, and Pierre Balmain, dressed women to be “hothouse flowers,” perfect in form and beauty, admired for that perfection. They wanted to forget the ugly war years and did so by enveloping women in vast quantities of luxurious yardage.

Dior’s ‘New Look’ in 1947 took the world by storm; his name quickly became known worldwide. Where Balenciaga was classic and sculptural in his design approach that slowly evolved over time, Dior introduced a new silhouette every year until his death in 1957. The H-line, the A-line and the Y-line were nicknames for a few of his lines. With the variety of silhouettes available to women during this decade, the predominant silhouette remained an adaptation of the ‘New Look.’ Tiny waists held snug with “waspie” girdles, voluminous skirts, white gloves, and stiletto heels imparted an exaggerated femininity that women and their husbands loved. Ultimately, it was their “husbands for whom [they were] dressing.”

At the end of the war, men returned home and most women gratefully left their wartime jobs to marry and start families; their children became known as the ‘baby boomers.’ These women bought into the message that television, radio and even
governments were saying, the most important occupation for women was raising a family and keeping a lovely home. A Gallup poll in 1962 reported that 96% of 2,300 women surveyed reported themselves fairly to extremely happy. Even working women looked forward to when they would be able to take on the role of housewife and mother.

Many women in America moved with their husbands to homes in the suburbs bought with the G. I. Bill, and filled them with all the latest modern conveniences. In the economic boom of the 1950s, a vast array of consumer goods became available to the masses. Washing machines, television sets and kitchen gadgets abounded. This was ostensibly to ease the burden for housewives, allowing them to be “attractive and attentive mothers.”

Fashion also became a high-volume consumer item. An average middle-class American woman’s wardrobe in the 1950s consisted of a winter coat, a spring coat, a raincoat, housedresses, dressier afternoon dresses, suits, skirts, blouses, sweaters, slips, petticoats, nightgowns, panties, brassieres, girdles, robes, stockings, socks, dress gloves, a bathing suit, play shorts, and slacks as well as accessories: hats, shoes, handbags, scarves, belts and jewelry. The upper middle-class and upper-class housewife was also attending and hostessing corporate cocktail parties that were becoming more and more important to the advancement of their husbands’ careers. She was also participating with community volunteer and charitable organizations. These women’s wardrobes also included cocktail dresses, dinner dresses and one or two ball gowns with their requisite accessories, evening coats and wraps.
For a woman who was basing her self-esteem on “her husband’s opinion of her,” pleasing her husband was paramount. The American Institute of Men’s and Boy’s Wear published an advertisement in the 1950s which read, “Wherever you go… whatever you do… whether you know it or not… You’re being watched! Dress Right – you can’t afford not to!” Highlighting the subtle undercurrent of the Cold War attitude during the time, the ad also illustrates the importance men and women placed in their personal appearance and clothing selection.

An American fashion designer, Anne Fogarty wrote a book in 1959 entitled *Wife-Dressing* that was quite popular. Though a successful career person, she considered herself first and foremost “a wife.” She wrote, “The first principle of wife-dressing is Complete Femininity – the selection of clothes as an adornment, not as a mere covering.” The selection of clothes was serious business. Specific rules for dressing according to the season and occasion were adhered to carefully. Until the late 1960s, when dressing became more casual, books such as *Wife-Dressing* and *Elegance* (1964) written by the *directrice* of Nina Ricci’s couture house, Madame Geneviève-Antoine Dariaux helped women navigate societal expectations on the topic and were in great demand.

In the 1950s American ready-to-wear fashions quickly filled the high demands for specialty and every occasion clothes. European houses looked at the success of the American fashion system and began to add ready-to-wear, prêt-a-porter lines to their own offerings. Through the process of licensing, even Parisian couture designs became more available to women who could not go to Paris. Though Seventh Avenue led in producing ready-to-wear and top American fashion magazines included coverage on
American designers both established and emerging, many buyers still looked to Paris for style and design direction.\textsuperscript{18}

In addition to their own couture departments, boutiques and department store buyers from around the world went to Paris and purchased finished models or toiles along with the specific information and rights to reproduce the garment. On the twice yearly trip to Paris, Hattie Carnegie was known to bring back 200 models to copy for her ready-to-wear and custom salons. Bergdorf Goodman, Chez Ninon, Saks Fifth Avenue, and Bonwit Teller also bought and produced Paris couture for their salons.\textsuperscript{19} In this way, a “Paris Original,” with the couturier’s name, could be produced by the thousands. They sold for a tenth of the couture cost.\textsuperscript{20}

At the same time couture-caliber in ready-to-wear was being offered from the top American houses by designers such as Pauline Trigère, Nettie Rosenstein, and Traina-Norell. Sophie Gimbel of Saks’ custom salon began designing ready-to-wear and Scaasi, Sarmi and Galanos were among the young new American designers doing high end ready-to-wear who became popular during the decade.

Fashion for the masses truly became a reality in the 1950s.\textsuperscript{21} Proving this point, in 1959, the first manufacturer of women’s clothes to be listed on the New York Stock Exchange was followed soon thereafter by two more the next year. At that time, it was required to sell twelve million dollars in annual volume to be listed. Offering clothes priced for between twelve and twenty dollars, one $150 million company, Bobbie Brooks based in Cleveland sold 18 million garments produced by 15 factories and 30 contractors. A computer at headquarters (which took up an entire air-conditioned floor) helped with distribution to the 7,000 store locations nationwide which carried their
garments. By contrast, Maurice Rentner, a Seventh Avenue ready-to-wear firm with Bill Blass as designer produced in the 1960s about 28,000 garments with total sales of $3.5 million. During Charles Kleibacker’s busiest years between 1969 and 1971, with 12 employees he made three to four dresses per week. Using 1970 prices, they cost from $395 to $895 each (see Appendix F). His highest annual sales volume was about $120,000.

Snug-fitting, small-waisted styles were adopted for everything from house dresses to swimwear. Women’s clothes at that time, both Paris couture and American custom and ready-to-wear, were made with a large amount of inner construction. A girdle was recommended to be worn with everything. Anne Fogarty advised her readers, when fitting clothing, women should not wear their clothes so tight that it is painful, but it should be snug enough for them to feel “constraint rather than comfort.”

Anne Fogarty’s advice can be used as a metaphor for women’s lives throughout the 1950s and 1960s. In Feminine Mystique (1963), Betty Friedan observed that there were few people who were as satisfied as the suburban housewife; “she had found feminine fulfillment.” This idealistic attitude, the “feminine mystique,” continued for the majority of women through the decade. Many women would not admit to discontentedness; it was “an emotion which most could not afford to express… akin to evil, ingratitude, haughtiness, and pride.” However, as their children reached the teen years and beyond, housewives (especially educated housewives) expressed frustration and boredom with their lives. Women filled what they felt was missing by returning to the workforce; some divorced.
Friedan’s book became a best seller. Its message along with other voices awakened Americans to the deflated position of women in the U.S. Even still, change in the majority of women’s attitudes “came slowly if at all.” A “major task of feminists was to convince women themselves that they had a right to their freedom, and that women’s issues were justifiable political objectives.” Throughout the 1960s, though national movements had begun organizing to push against the limitations, most women maintained a focus on their husbands and their homes.

The Kleibacke Customer

This then is the kind of woman who Charles Kleibacker first came to know in the fashion business. His focus on her began with writing fashion copy for the “carriage-trade,” to traveling with Hildegarde and even with serving the “Park Avenue” ladies in his first business, Elliot-Charles.

In Paris, in the world of haute couture, the women who came to the salons were quite wealthy. They were wives of top executives in business worldwide as well as daughters of titled nobility; they were socialites whom the world watched. With the increasing accessibility of fashion to the masses during the 1950s, even women who were not quite as wealthy could gain entrée into the top houses. Charles spoke of the boutique on the first floor at Lanvin where a woman could buy a custom gown for less; the cost allowed only one fitting. With the popularity of Dior’s name, newspapers featured articles such as “How to Buy a Dior Original” in Paris and assured husbands that it was worth the cost.
When Charles began his own label in 1960, the same type of women was his customer. Charles’ private clients and those who bought his dresses at Bergdorf Goodman and other top department stores were women who had the time and the money to have clothes custom-made and also bought high-end ready-to-wear at top boutiques. She was the wife of a powerful executive; she juggled house, family and staff in her business of being a wife. She was the wealthy wife who was highly concerned with dressing properly for her husband’s career as well as presenting the proper image in her participation with charitable organizations in the community and societal events. The Kleibacker customer was also the young working woman who was conscious about her social position and who desired to marry well. Well-paid working women in the fashion industry also bought his dresses.

Prices for American couture in the mid-1960s started around $250 and could go as high as $3000 for a Norell beaded evening gown. A Kleibacker ready-to-wear dinner dress listed for a similar starting price, $210.75 in 1969 (see Appendix F). Charles included middle-income women as his customer also; they bought his garments as an investment believing that they would be able to wear the items for many seasons. Indeed, articles in Women’s Wear Daily often mentioned this feature as a selling point for the Kleibacker label. With the then average wage of women at about $40 per week, the woman would have needed to be quite comfortable with a husband’s salary contributing to the monthly expenses in order to pay more than a working girl’s entire month’s wage for a dress.
1960s – Youthquake

The early part of the decade brought John F. Kennedy to the White House and First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy became an instant icon with her clean, fresh charm. Her simple sophisticated styles designed mainly by Oleg Cassini were easy to imitate and were a marked contrast to the previous First Lady, Mamie Eisenhower. Later Jackie also patronized Hubert du Givenchy as did another icon of the 1960s, Audrey Hepburn. They dressed in a liberating style compared to the highly constructed exaggerated styles of the 1950s.

While the 1950s was a time of conformity and great concern for societal status, the 1960s by contrast was seen to be a time of immense political, social and sartorial upheaval. The expanding media brought the unrest of the world’s events to every living room influencing others to join in the expanding circle of protests and sit-ins or else responding in fear that the world as they knew it was falling apart. Witnessing the civil rights movement, women identified with the oppression of African-Americans and began to organize to form a feminist’s movement. Their daughters would not yet understand and join in the efforts; they were young yet and concerned with their own lives.

The baby boomers were in high school and entering college and represented a full third of the population. Not yet old enough to vote, they had a huge impact on society. Vogue called it a “youthquake” as young people the world over gained an identity of themselves as a unified group capable of responding to the mess of a world situation they blamed on the “establishment” – anyone over thirty.
Growing up with fallout shelters in their back yards and schools in real concern for a nuclear attack, this generation saw the Berlin wall built, experienced the Cuban missile crisis and the assassination of President Kennedy. Though the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1960, they saw the sit-ins and demonstrations throughout the south as well as the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. With escalating casualties and continuing military stalemate in the Vietnam War, growing numbers of youth (joined later in the decade by adults) held sit-ins on college campuses and staged anti-war rallies that often escalated into riots.

This generation also saw America land the first man on the moon. Satellites, lasers, microwave ovens, robots, mainframe computers and micro chips were developed during these years as well as the first indoor shopping mall and credit cards. Lung and liver transplants and the first heart transplant were performed and an effective, easy birth control pill became legal and available to all. It was a decade of conflicting emotions.

In the late 1950s, groups of young people had identified with the rise of rock and roll. The hipster look, copying jazz styles of black musicians influenced the biker look that was in turn portrayed in such films as Rebel Without a Cause with James Dean wearing the “universally recognized symbol of rebellious youth,” the black leather jacket. From the left bank in Paris came the beatnik or existentialist looks of wearing black by artists and intellectuals and identifying with jazz sounds. The teddy-boy look came from England with long jackets sporting velvet collars. There were “dressed up” looks and “dressed down” looks, “duck tails” and “bobby-soxers.”

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Despite the varied styles, most mainstream fashion offered to young people in the 1950s and into the 1960s was a version of what their parents wore. The youth look was just a “minor sub theme” in fashion with variations. Overall, the youth look was a message of non-conformity worn by a few. Most young people of the 1950s and early 1960s wore by contrast, very conservative styles.

By 1960, the youth culture in London was strong and vibrant. King’s Road in Chelsea was a Mecca of fresh, constantly changing fashion ideas. Mary Quant and her husband had opened a boutique in 1955, early on supplying the “mods” (short for moderns) and “rockers” with fun and inexpensive clothes based on the “Chelsea girl or art student” look. By 1962 she had signed a contract with J. C. Penny in New York to mass manufacture her ideas and to sell her look all across the United States. Styles for the youth in the 1960s increasingly embraced a youthful look with short shift-like dresses, slight figure, angled haircut and with an emphasis on long legs as epitomized by the fashion model, Twiggy whose hem line reached high above the knee in 1965. The look was not one of innocence, but more closely embraced the “Lolita” feel of a young girl with an abundance of sex-appeal. The emphasis was on showing legs and what was just beyond view under the short skirts.

In 1961, the year that the Beatles were discovered, funky clothes incorporating Pop Art began to appear with Op Art shortly afterwards. Anything brightly-colored, bold-patterned, fun and inexpensive was an instant fashion hit. Vinyl, nylon, polyester, brightly-colored fake fur, and paper were all used in clothing. Michèle Rosier, nicknamed The Vinyl Girl because of her clothing choices said, “Everything beautiful
has the right to exist, the eccentric as well as the rational, provided it’s cheap.”⁴³

Popular culture embraced consumerism entirely.

Boutiques in London and New York became the “fashion laboratories” instead of the couture houses. New fashions showed up nearly every day at boutiques like Paraphernalia in New York with in-house designers such as Betsy Johnson.⁴⁴ International music stars like the Beatles, the Who and the Rolling Stones bought their colorful, sexy, mod or rocker clothes at places like Carnaby Street in London. Their fans, boys wanting to be like them and girls wanting to attract them, copied their sartorial statements.⁴⁵

Though still offering sophisticated styles for their older clientele, Parisian designers also started showing street-based styles which the French called “yé-yé” after their pronunciation of the Beatles’ lyrics. Couture acquired the reputation of being for old ladies.⁴⁶ Boutiques offered the “hip” styles. Paris and Vogue had to scramble to keep up-to-date. Diana Vreeland had by this time become the fashion editor of Vogue. She helped in bringing dramatic, exciting fashions and layouts to keep the look of the magazine current and to help educate their readers on the most recent looks happening in boutiques. This emphasis, an effort to “catch up” was added to the normal fare of covering the more staid offerings of the established Parisian, Italian and American designers.

Marc Bohan at Dior declared in 1966 after visiting London, “A couturier’s job is dressing a woman, making her elegant… Our client cannot wear those things and look beautiful.”⁴⁷ Seventh Avenue, including Charles Kleibacker, responded to the drastic changes by simply shortening hems a few inches. The Seventh Avenue customer
acknowledged the various youth and style movements, but none of it affected her or her apparel choices.  

Designing for Dior, Yves St. Laurent offered his “beat” collection in 1960 showing that couture can take street fashion and transform it into something elegant for a more sophisticated market. Under his own label after 1962, St. Laurent showed Mondrian dresses in 1965, pop art dresses in 1966, and included African art inspiration for his 1967 collection. Soon his clothes replaced that of Balenciaga as the favorite of American retailers. He said in 1966, “My trick is to bring the couture up to date but still not make it look boutique.” He had to make some changes, anyone who was watching knew that many of the ideas done in the couture during this period originated several seasons earlier in the boutiques. Wanting to go further with young ideas, he feared couture would not pay the price (“Why should anyone want to pay $1,000 or more to own a rehash of a $60 fashion?”), so he poured that creativity into his highly successful ready-to-wear line, Rive Gauche.

Some of the couture customers were older than Mary Quant’s customers but they still wanted to look young. Maureen Cleave, of the New York Times Magazine summed up Quant’s attitude in 1967, “the young should look like the young… The old could, if they wished, look like the young, but the young must not on any account look like the old.”

Couture society in New York, as always followed the Paris lead. There were always enough conservative offerings for older women to select from without having to be mods, though there were complaints about grandmothers wearing fashions too young to be tasteful. American ready-to-wear included both the more conservative fashions as
well as offering young fashions for the increasingly recognized youth market. Paraphernalia put out 500 new designs per season by its group of designers, showing new styles weekly in its 20 stores nationwide. Twiggy wrote in her autobiography that the clothes that sold in boutiques of the time “were never in fashion long enough for the fashion people to catch up.” Some fashion ideas crossed over to the couture market as in the instance of Mrs. Rebekah Harkness wearing a paper ballgown to the Wadsworth Atheneum Paper Ball in 1966. A paper dress worn to a “Paper Ball” must have seemed appropriate.

With the space race in the 1960s, high-tech and futuristic styles was another direction in which fashion reflected the times. Andre Courrèges’ “Space Age” collection with go-go boots and helmet and stiff A-line dresses and jumpsuits in 1964 brought him to the fore. Pierre Cardin, also inspired by futurism, experimented with plastics, synthetics and stretch fabrics. His molded “Egg Carton” dress is an iconic image of the era as are Paco Rabanne’s plastic “Chain Mail” go-go dresses. Emilio Pucci in Italy contributed easy-to-wear knits with wildly imaginative colorful kaleidoscopic prints. Despite these developments, Seventh Avenue designer Donald Brooks was reported by WWD in 1967 to say that his customer will not dress for the moon until “she takes her first trip to the moon. In the mean time she will go on enjoying her Impressionist paintings and her 18th century furniture.”

By mid-decade many young people were becoming frustrated and angry over the injustices they saw in the world. Much of the music of the 1960s was a reflection of that anger. Another response was a counter-culture that emerged as the hippie movement in California during 1967, the summer of love. Where mods had favored
bright colors, geometric shapes, neatly trimmed hair and amphetamines, the hippies enjoyed exotic, colorful psychedelic styles and let their hair grow long while getting high on marijuana and LSD. Mods liked plastics and synthetic disposable furnishings and fashion. Hippies embraced naturalism – along with nudity such as going bare-breasted with flowers painted on their skin. They pulled their wardrobes together from thrift shops borrowing ethnic styles in natural fabrics and musical sounds from third world countries such as India, Nepal and Peru. They accessorized with beads, leather fringe and headbands borrowed from the Native American culture. Love, freedom and unity was their message as well as “Turn on, tune in, drop out.”

High fashion, if it acknowledged the movement, responded by including “hippie chic” in their collections, expensive couture with elements of hippie styling sensibilities. Some young designers embraced the new attitudes by offering see-through fashions, longer hemlines as well as peasant and ethnically inspired collections. Nudity or semi-nudity received a good deal of attention as styles became more and more revealing. Rudi Gernrich, a counter-culture designer from Los Angeles introduced a “no-bra bra” in 1964 along with his top-less bathing suit. He also worked to develop tights into pantyhose. More and more skin was exposed as the decade progressed. It was a “long, slow stripe-tease with the summer of 1970 named the nudest ever.” Women replaced the numerous under clothing of the 1950s and early 1960s with a light weight natural shaped bra, bikini underwear and an occasional half slip. By 1968 radical feminists dumped their bras into garbage cans in protest at the Miss America pageant. The same year see-through blouses were a part of St. Laurent’s runway collection and hippies were wearing halter tops.
Charles Kleibacker responded to the mid-1960s style changes by offering hemlines two or three inches above the knee. These were also the years that he offered less fitted designs such as his bias coat dresses with a simple belt to fit at the waist. He never offered stiff A-line dresses. *WWD* reported in 1966:

> The last of the Shapes?: Every once in a while you hear a lady whimper longingly for a shaped dress…listening closely at Wednesday’s lunch for the AWVS (American Women Voluntary Services) to hear Mrs. John R. Fell in her shapely bias crepe say ‘It’s a Kleibacker, thank heavens for him. he’s the only one left making a dress with shape.”60

He had included backless designs the first year he began his label but as the decade progressed, he edged his way to more revealing styles similar to other designers of the era. In 1968 and 1969, he offered his very short ball gown, coinciding with the year that the shortest micro-minis were available in stores.

In 1968 hems were offered at many lengths. The midi dress appeared first in 1965 and was offered in many designers’ collections in 1968.61 Kleibacker didn’t offer a midi dress until 1970, two years after Milbank says that it was “featured in almost every collection”62 and the same year it was declared a flop.63 A newspaper article of 1976 stated that custom couturiers in America “almost went bankrupt when the 1970 midi disaster struck” and quotes Charles as saying, “That stupid controversy nearly wrecked the fashion world… I never talk about the midi.”64

Designers had predicted women would buy the midi, but women didn’t really want to give up their short skirts. This was in part due to an economic recession and replacing an entire wardrobe was out of the question for many women. The response also related in part to the attitude espoused by feminists who declared to be in control of their own fashion choices rather than kow-tow to the “whims of designers.” Ultimately
any skirt length became acceptable, from floor length to the very shortest styles. Though he delayed offering the midi, Charles was far ahead of others in offering figure revealing styles that required women to leave off their bulky girdles and slips, emphasizing their natural form.

Along with bare skin, mini skirts were paired with maxi coats, women declared that they wanted to “do their own thing.” Pants also became common for women. Norman Norell was adamant that pants on women be worn privately only and shuddered at the thought of both men and women putting on their pants to go out to a restaurant.65

Trousers were being worn by girls in the streets early in the decade. Mary Quant showed her designs for a “trouser suit” in 1962 while St. Laurent didn’t show his dressy trouser look until 1967. Though styles first appeared in the streets, many women waited until they saw variations of the looks (both pants and other free-spirited styles) on the Paris runways until they would adopt it themselves.

Though couture, of which Charles was a part, was “for kept women”66 and the New York Times labeled Norman Norell’s clothes, “Social security for the rich,” still, the “chic” clothes found on Seventh Avenue never acquired the “in” look. The more extreme street styles worn by young women never got beyond the runways, with the exception of pants.

“Although sixties revolutionary fashions, the mini-skirt and the topless look, quickly passed from vogue, the long quest for women to wear pants for proper occasions in public places, periodically pushed since the mid-nineteenth century, met with success. By 1972, even middle-aged, middle-class women Middle America were regularly wearing pastel polyester pants suits and that generation continues to do so today.”67
1970s – The Me Decade

A Cornell study on women in 1952, 1968-69, 1974 and 1979 revealed that women students of the 1960s had a “dominant mentality towards engagement with large social problems.” By contrast, the woman of the 1970s, like 1952, tended towards concerns of family, leisure, and career. Espousing “privatism,” they were generally “oblivious to broader social or ideological interests” such as ecological responsibility or “social betterment.” Like the 1950s woman, the majority of the 1970s women reported an objective of attaining prosperity in life. Unlike those in the 1950s relying on marriage to achieve it, women in 1970 were “striving for individual success.”

During the 1960s, as young women came against barriers in education or careers based on gender. They realized what their mothers had been advocating in the women’s and feminist movements. The efforts of those widely varied organizations finally gained momentum in the 1970s as greater numbers of younger women became aware of their cause and added their voices in support.

Adopting the slogan, “the personal is political,” the women’s movement brought to the governments’ attention such inequalities as sexual relationships, sexual harassment on the job, child abuse, incest, wife battering, rape and pornography. Though many women were not part of the movement and were apathetic to the cause, there was a great impact in their lives due to awareness achieved through efforts of women’s organizations. By the 1970s women were able to more easily obtain education and job opportunities than had ever been possible before. Doors were beginning to open. The 1970s not only brought Watergate, the energy crisis, and the jogging and health food craze, it also brought women who achieved renown in their fields.
“Inflation in the 1970s made two incomes especially essential for families who wished to buy a house, so that mothers of young children had the strongest incentives to work.”\textsuperscript{70} An article in \textit{WWD} on December 8, 1970 referred to the “current labor problems on [Seventh Avenue]” and that soon the only way a woman would be able to have a well made dress was to sew it herself. In questioning Carmen about this report, she assured me that it was not a wage dispute causing the problems, but a shortage of skilled workers capable of sewing to the level required by Seventh Avenue.\textsuperscript{71} The above article refers to what I believe was the first sewing workshop that Charles presented a week earlier at the Good Companion Center of the Henry Street Settlement to an audience of 100 women. All through this decade particular attention was given to the home sewing market.

Many women sewed their own clothes due to the economic depression, but girls were encouraged to gain an education and become a professional of some kind instead of embracing “traditional women’s work.” By 1976, when Charles was asked the question of why “good” clothes cost a fortune, he sighed and said, “It’s a question I can’t escape.”\textsuperscript{72} He explained that the cost of fabrics ran $50 to $60 a yard, the inside seams were finished by hand, that his outfits were painstakingly fitted and that styles were designed for long-term wear rather than “seasonal obsolescence.” A major cost factor was the long hours of labor involved in producing his high-quality dresses.

Fashion reflected the freedoms achieved in the 1960s. Both the drug culture and the sexual revolution continued and spread throughout society. Charles mentioned that at one photo shoot in 1970, they had an awfully hard time with the model because she was on drugs. “If the hippies had one irrevocable effect on culture, including fashion, it
was to destroy every rule, except the injunction to please oneself.”73 The look for women was still a clean natural look, but in the 1970s, Charles said that women were saying, “The hell with it. We’ll wear whatever we want.”74 And they did.

Called “the Decade that Taste Forgot,” conspicuous outrageousness such as hot pants and platform shoes matched with a crushed velvet maxi coat was worn by some in 1972. Men wore extremely wide and loud ties with even wider lapels and louder colored suits with wide bellbottoms. Retro fantasies revived soft Edwardian and 1930s bias styles through films produced at the time. Charles’s bias designs received much attention due to the popularity of a 1970 French film set in the 30s called, The Damned. Ethnic design also influenced dress with African elements and Orientalism, especially when President Nixon went to China in 1972.75

“Funky chic,” a black sub cultural style popularized by “blaxploitation” films like Shaft (1971) and Superfly (1972) included the dressed up look of tight pants with wide bellbottoms, a black leather midi-length coat and the wide-brimmed, high-crowned Pimpmobile hat. Adopting a deliberately “revolting” style in the late 1970s, “Punks” responding to the hopelessness of economic depression and I.R.A. bombings were recognizable by their Mohawk hairstyles, ripped T-shirts with grotesque messages, Doc Marten boots, and safety pins worn through a check, ear or lip. Their confrontational style was anti-establishment and anti-fashion.76

Punk style was translated by designers such as Vivienne Westwood and in a lesser degree by Zandra Rhodes. The seventies had a strong thread of violence connected to even high fashion. This was reflected through sub themes in the fashions, the runway shows and fashion photography layouts. These fashions were adopted by the
sub-cultural movements. Through all the “terrorist chic” one of the strongest fashions
trends was the working woman’s uniform.⁷⁷ Most American ready-to-wear focused on
manufacturing conservative styles.

As more women entered careers, competition for positions and advancement increased. Beige and subdued neutral colors became the basis for natural fabrics and separates easily mixed and matched. The blazer became the staple of women’s wardrobes during the decade as they paid careful attention to the rules outlined by John T. Malloy in this book, *Dress for Success* first published in 1975 for men and followed by one for women in 1977.⁷⁸ To be taken seriously, women needed to dress seriously. Along with reviving sales of men’s suits for companies like Brooks Brothers, new businesses focused on filling the demand for women’s business wear such as Jones of New York and Liz Claiborne.⁷⁹

The preppy look of tailored skirts and shirts with jackets was advocated by big business. Since designers such as Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren had moved on from the highly tailored looks to include simpler designs and simpler tailoring, it was available at moderate prices to everyone and was very popular through the end of the decade.

Styles were versions of suits or were soft fashions such as Diane Von Furstenberg’s highly popular wrap dress, introduced in 1972 that took advantage of the new synthetic fibers being produced. Simple lines and ease of wear were hallmarks of the soft 70s. Simple styles and designs were a favorite look by milliner-turned-fashion designer Halston who began his rise to fame in 1968 and became known for his ultrasuede shirt dress designs. No other designer of the time did simplicity better than
Halston. “Though his designs could only be worn by young women with beautiful bodies,” like Kleibacker, he often used a bias cut.

Like Kleibacker, Halston’s garments were deceptively complex in conception but when produced resulted in remarkably simple designs. And like Kleibacker, Halston viewed bias as “more sexy” and took his direction from the fabric with many evening wear looks in his lines. Unlike Kleibacker, Halston’s dresses were often true bias. One very popular dress was sewn with one seam spiraled around the body two and a half times. He had the capital to find a textile manufacturer in Italy who was capable of weaving fabric wide enough to accommodate this bias design without the necessity of piecing. In order to have only one seam, it was cut on a ninety-nine inch wide silk crepe which cost two hundred eighty dollars a yard. Also unlike Charles, when sewing this particular bias, when “they were replicated in mass production, to prevent stretching and rippling, they were stitched on paper that was then torn away.” Then they were hung for several days to allow the bias to grow before hemming.

Always showing simple elegant designs, the simplistic fashions of the 1970s melded perfectly with Charles Kleibacker’s design aesthetic and brought an increase in his market in the early years. However, with inflation hitting so hard by the mid-1970s, stores had pretty much stopped ordering since they increasingly relied on the trunk shows from designers. Besides his signature soft silhouette, in keeping with the vogue for women’s suits, Charles offered a softer, more feminine and dressy version of three piece outfits usually made from luxurious fabrics such as four-ply silk crepe or silk taffeta.
1980s – Greed and Excess

As women became successful in their careers in the 1980s, they could afford both financially and socially to be more adventurous in their wardrobes. To bring about an increase of prosperity in response to the inflation experienced during the 1970s, deregulations and tax reforms were approved by President Ronald Reagan in the U. S. and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the U. K. Designed to encourage economic growth, the plan was to enrich the higher income levels of society so that the increase would trickle-down to the lower economic levels in the form of jobs through increased spending. It worked – for the wealthy; now they had vast sums of disposable income and conspicuous consumption was the “badge of personal achievement” by yuppies.83

Through the influence of Nancy Reagan as First Lady and others like her, the American clothing industry received a jumpstart in the 1980s. Wealthy women were once again interested in dressing up and attending charity functions. Christian Lacroix was the premier couturier in Paris designing fanciful, daring, over-the-top splendorous styles that one journalist described as not being seen since the days of eighteenth-century French aristocrats. Television shows such as Dallas, Dynasty and Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous also highlighted the rich look.

Exaggeration was revealed in fashion also through fitness. Jane Fonda who was famous for protesting the Vietnam War now became famous for her aerobic exercise videos. Fit, sexy bodies were now the vogue and focus of designers. Not interested in modifying the silhouette as was done for so many centuries in the past, they sought to reveal the body as it was never before done. Clothes showed off the body in the form of leggings and tight designer jeans.
The most important designer of the early 1980s, “Azzedine Alaia’s body-worshipping designs used spiral seams, curves, and darts to create an ultra feminine silhouette.” He accented with stretch fabrics, belts and corsets. Halston’s simple elegant styles were also very popular. In the 1970s androgynous fashions for women were in vogue. The 1980s saw not only the return of the female form, both men’s and women’s ideal image was young, slim and muscularly fit. Fashion embraced this attitude and spandex was a part of every woman’s wardrobe. Though spandex was not included in any of the Kleibacker lines, the designs Charles developed in the 1980s definitely reflected the attitude of opulence conveyed by fashion in general while maintaining the familiar Kleibacker aesthetic and silhouette.

Turning his business exclusively to serving private clients until he closed in 1986, Charles continued serving the same kind of woman that he had when he began. They were strong women who knew who they were and maintained along with Charles an individual sense of style and aesthetic that would stand the test of time through the changing tides of fashion.

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10 This list was generated by an IBM machine at the 1959 U.S. trade exhibition in Moscow. Quoted in Steele, *Fifty Years of Fashion*, 1997.


15 Charles recommended to Mrs. Rebekah Harkness that wearing a sable trimmed gown after March was “not quite right,” but she was an eccentric personality and flaunted that convention by wearing a fox-trimmed gown by Trigère to the opening event in question.


17 Ibid.


21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.


Charles paid the girls in his workshop a similar wage.

54 Ibid, 238.

55 Ibid., 134.


59 Ibid.

60 WWD, October 27, 1966.


64 *The Buffalo Courier Express*, July 20, 1976.


68 Ibid, 444.


71 Phone interview with author, November 20, 2007. Seventh Avenue’s concern for finding adequate new skill in workers was also mentioned in Daves, *Ready-Made*, 1967.


73 Steele, *Fifty Years of Fashion*, 1997, 80.


76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.


81 Ibid.

82 Ibid., 117.


84 Ibid, 121.
Charles Kleibacker operated a clothing business in New York for 26 years from 1960 to 1986. The clothing that he designed and produced was of the highest quality. Indeed very few designers in New York can claim to come near to the perfection that came from the workshop of Kleibacker, especially since he chose to work with garments on the bias, a highly challenging form of construction. His dedication to learning the business and his love of teaching those skills to others set him apart from most designers.

Charles said that the path that led him to fashion was “in no way normal.” However, it seems that when looking back over his early years, most of the time he was surrounded by fashion in some way: his fashionable mother, sister and cousin, writing copy for fashion, and the glamour of Hildegarde’s wardrobe.

For being a shy, withdrawn person who “had to be encouraged to open his mouth,” he was very determined and took quite a few “gambles” in his life: breaking away from Cullman, Alabama, writing to Hildegarde for a job out of the blue, starting Elliot-Charles, working with Madame Berg and selling the clothes himself to the shops, then leaving everything he knew and going to join Paris couture! All these choices took courage.
Preparation

According to Charles, starting his first business, Elliot-Charles was really “an anticipation of learning,” to get a feel for what a fashion business had to offer. He said that the main reason for the failure of Elliot-Charles was that none of the three of them had any proper experience. Neither Louise nor Charles had run a business previously, nor had they worked in the operation of a business, let alone a fashion business. They paid too much to decorate the studio and paid too much in rent. Chuck Wetmore was inexperienced at running a workroom. The first woman who served them as head of the workroom was not very experienced either and by the time they hired Madame Berg, they had already come pretty close to the conclusion that the business would have to be closed. It was a tough lesson, but Charles did not let this failure deter him from pursuing his goal. Instead, he dug in his heels and worked harder. He began again, at the bottom.

Taking the cheapest workroom he could find, he started the challenging task of learning clothing design and construction while working nights to help pay bills. Madame Berg was very skilled. With her help as instructor and through more determination, Charles sold enough garments to pay her salary and buy more fabric. Eventually he landed a few free lance jobs that taught him the importance of knowing how to run a workroom. This was an intense learning period.

Experience

A woman Charles met in Paris once told him, “If you want the real looks, you come to Paris. Everything else fades by comparison.” He still believes that. Since he
had high expectations, he wanted to learn from the best. Having worked in Paris, Madame Berg had taught him many couture techniques used there, but the assistant designer position at Lanvin-Castillo was where Charles really began his education.

As an assistant to Antonio del Castillo, Charles learned not only the workings of a complete and great couture house, but he also learned what it took to develop and produce “the real looks.” A good design was just the starting place; one also had to have quality fabric and a skilled workroom to produce a garment that was cut to hang perfectly and fitted precisely so that the wearer can move comfortably.

Besides the garment production aspect, at the House of Lanvin, Charles was also able to observe the intricate and complicated operations of running a successful fashion house. From showing the models in the opening runway shows, to selling to clients, to photographing them for publicity, Charles was able to observe it all and soak it all in.

Prior to going to Paris, Charles did not consider himself a “final designer.” He was a designer in name and had some good ideas, but not until he had gained the experience at Lanvin and especially after working under Eva Rosencranz at Nettie Rosenstein did he consider himself a “full-fledged designer.” A final designer is able to envision an entire season’s collection: dresses, coats, suits, ball gowns, furs, etc. and have the ability to get it into production. As a final designer, “you must really be steadfast to your ideas and believe in them strongly. And you’ve got the people underneath you [in the workrooms] who have been with you long enough to know” how to do what is envisioned. It was a full ten years after opening Elliot-Charles until Charles was ready to start the Kleibacker label.
Determination

Even with the ten years’ experience he had, Charles faced challenges and sacrificed much to build his business into a successful one. It took determination and real creativity to get buyers to be interested in his lines. He had to learn what was expected and the common way of doing that aspect of the fashion business.

After working for others, Charles now understood how to develop his workshop into a reliable group of skilled workers. This took much time and energy to train them to the skill level he needed to produce difficult bias cut garments.

With very little starting capital, Charles sacrificed financial compensation and personal comfort for the sake of the business. He saved expenses by living and working in his studio nearly the entire time he had his company. This more than anything allowed him to produce competitively priced ready-to-wear garments with couture quality construction.

Charles worked long hours to build the business into what he envisioned. Even after it attained a measure of success, rather than turning various duties over to someone else, he maintained personal control over every aspect of the operation. This was not unlike many designer-owned firms in New York at the time.¹

Charles knew that he was not going to get rich from his business. He sacrificed many opportunities for growth and expansion in favor of maintaining the high quality of garment he envisioned. For the love of creating beautiful dresses that served the women who wore them, Charles stayed true to what he felt was necessary to make that a reality. He was willing to invest the time needed, even if it meant long hours and getting out of the studio only for a swim at the YMCA and an occasional theater performance. He
said, “There has been sacrificing and thin ice – but the business is there, and it is worth it. So many people think discipline is a burdensome thing – but it becomes less so as time goes on. And it’s made me sharpen up.”² He loved what he did and he loved the challenge of it.

Charles recognized that he did not have the charisma exhibited by many of the big name designers who were famous and at the top of their field at the time. He knew that one aspect of the fashion business beyond his skill was to work the social scene. Drawing attention and publicity in this manner could have contributed to greater success, but it was really not his style nor did he have the money.

All things considered, if Charles’ business had become larger in any way, it would have become an entirely different kind of company. Control over the workrooms would have needed to be delegated to someone else. Also hiring a fitter, a salesperson, a cutter, and a bookkeeper would have been necessary to free Charles to focus exclusively on designing a larger line. These changes were something that Charles was not willing to make. His goals did not include all that; he simply wanted to produce beautiful bias gowns.

A wonderful characteristic of Charles is his “drive for a perfect product. That’s part of what you have to respect and admire in him. In his work he doesn’t compromise, whether it’s an exhibition, or a workshop that he’s teaching, or a dress that he’s designing. You know, whatever he thinks is the best way to do it, is the only way to do it.”³ And, he did do it so well. Borrowing his words, nearly every design he produced “became something very beautiful.”
Focus

Charles focused on bias, particularly bias dresses. If he had been a more prolific designer developing 200 or 300 designs a year as other designers, he would not have been able to do what he did, become the “Master of the Bias Cut.” Because he focused on the one area of design, he gained a thorough understanding of his specialty.

Only slightly bowing to the prevailing winds of popular fashion trends like raising or lowering his hemlines a bit, Charles remained up-to-date in elements of his designs while he maintained his “own creative style” through great sartorial changes. He consistently produced flaring, flowing, soft dresses that emphasized a woman’s curves.

Like any great master artist, Charles worked and reworked his designs. He revisited designs developed earlier and took the time to make minor adjustments to aesthetically or pragmatically improve them. This reworking is required to develop and really perfect a good design. When a good design remains a good design for a long time, it is recognized as a classic.

Charles has maintained contact over the years with some of his former clients. When he was developing the Historic Costume & Textiles Collection at The Ohio State University, Charles asked some of these ladies if they would consider donating their Kleibacker labels to be a part of the collection. Nearly all of them refused to give them up! They still treasure Charles’ designs even after nearly 50 years. Arguably the garments that Charles produced have become classics.
Skill

Isabel Toledo is a friend of Charles and a successful designer of her own label who was recently named as creative director of the Anne Klein Designer Collection. She said of Charles, “He has ‘the hands’ and all those secrets in his head. There are not many designers who have the knowledge to create what he has.” Charles’ skill in producing amazing bias designs began with an extraordinary comprehension of how the fabric he used was going to perform. Whether a garment was cut on the cross grain or the straight-of-grain, he also understood how both the cross bias and straight grain biases behaved to give him the results he wanted. And he had a thorough knowledge of how the hang of the design was affected by the slightest change in positioning a seam. Madeleine Vionnet acknowledged the same when she said, “You have to know the obedience of the fabric.” This kind of skill is necessary to achieve what Charles called “a good cut.”

By observing carefully how fabric responded to various techniques applied during construction of the garments helped Charles realize the proper methods necessary in constructing garments cut on the bias. This one skill, understanding the fabric, is the most important of all Charles’ “secrets.” It is the foundation upon which all his other secrets rely. In draping, patterning, cutting and construction, understanding the fabric – how to handle it and how to make it do what was desired – contributed more than any other skill to the success of the Kleibacker label.
Loyalty

Like Madeleine Vionnet who inspired his work, Charles never forgot the woman for whom he was designing. He draped to compliment and enhance her figure. He selected fabrics that would not overpower or detract from her face. Her comfort while wearing his clothes justified the cost of working with fit models in multiple sessions to perfect each pattern. The care used in the design and construction of his garments evoke the “hothouse” attitude of 1950s designers, creation of perfect garments to compliment the perfect beauty of each woman who donned a Kleibacker dress.

Charles designed for a very specific woman. He knew exactly who she was and she recognized the fact that he focused so much of his energy on them. Many clients reciprocated by remaining loyal clients for years, buying multiple garments each season. She was a woman

“who approaches her manner of dressing along with the way she conducts her household and the way she thinks about her jewelry as being right for ‘her,’ not being influenced about what is the mood of the moment. In our discussions I don’t think you’ve heard me mention the word fashion. It is one that is not really in my vocabulary because I think it implies ephemeral, ah, it’s in this season and it’s out the next. I don’t think that’s what the well-dressed woman is all about. She’s buying some very handsome clothes that work for her.

A private customer that I had from St. Augustine, Florida to me was one of the best-dressed women in the world. She was between a size 6 and 8, she was a little bit askew but we could always do a garment so that it looked very straight. She had wonderful feet, legs, and ankles. She always wore a garment right in the middle of the knee to show off those great legs, even when it went to a Maxi length and when it went to a Mini she had the good sense not to go there. She had a very classic kind of bone structured face and she always wore a hat. And I tell you that woman stopped traffic anytime I was with her. She was completely herself. To me this is what a well-dressed woman is all about.”
Advice to Students

“Couturier, teacher, or sewing expert? Charles Kleibacker is all three.”

Teaching is part of who Charles was and still is. Even as early as 1966, Charles was sharing bias sewing techniques with news reporters. Rather than being fearful of having his designs and techniques stolen, his priority was sharing his knowledge.

One would think that a sewing teacher who allowed no talking in his classes would not be favored. But on the contrary, Charles’ students adored him. One of the students from Mount Mary told a reporter, “If you do something he isn’t completely satisfied with, you feel terrible. You don’t want any criticism. Not because you are afraid of what he will say, but because you want it to be perfect for him.”

Frequently Charles interspersed our conversations with advice for students. He enjoyed working with young people, especially students and loved teaching at various programs around the country. “I remember one of the girls looked strangely at me when I once stressed the romanticism of sewing a dress. But sometime later, she came to me and said she understood what I meant. I’ve gotten a great deal from my contact with students.” Some of Charles’ advice to students who would like to become a designer in the fashion industry is:

- Starting any business is a gamble; you must have the courage and ability to take gambles. Every fashion house gambles every season on their new collection.

- Learn the business by working for others. If you want to be at the top of your field, work for those who are at the top already.
• Paris continues to be the premier location in fashion; no other city can compare. New York and other cities in the U. S. can offer good opportunities for learning and growth, but students with the most drive, skill and creativity would still benefit from going to Paris.

• When you find you have a particular skill for a certain area, focus on that. Hire others to do those aspects of the business that can take advantage of their talents and augment where you are less skilled.

Charles has often told students that the challenge of the fashion industry, is the combining of four elements. Aesthetics is important in developing an attractive design. Pragmatic considerations cannot be ignored as the garment must fit properly and allow the wearer to move comfortably. Economic realities are clearly apparent; if the product doesn’t sell, you can’t stay in business. Lastly, logic is required in figuring out the best way to overcome the unending challenges, both in relation to the garment development and in running the business. Most people specialize in one or two of the areas but Charles did it all. The exciting and creative challenge of doing it all gave him particular satisfaction.

I have often heard fashion teachers say students don’t need to sew or that they just need a “basic understanding” of how a garment goes together. Expensive construction programs are cut from budgets with the justification that jobs in the industry don’t require knowledge of clothing construction. Above all, Charles is a firm believer that fashion students who want to become a designer need to know garment construction; it is a necessity. “If they can only sketch, they cannot make [a garment] look right.”10 Making a sketch of an idea is far different from translating that idea into a
garment. Some clothing design sketches are impossible to produce. The limitations of fabric, closure and fit have specific requirements that cannot be ignored. One may become an assistant to a designer or a stylist that combines elements of various trends, but never a final designer with an individual aesthetic conveyed throughout the entire line. “Knowing good construction is the difference that makes one a designer rather than a stylist.”11

Charles Kleibacker’s career success is not measured by large scale distribution of mass manufactured designs nor is it measured by the extent to which his name became known throughout the world while he was producing. It is based on his contribution of design, construction and sale of clothing that satisfied the ideal of his aesthetic and that of the women who bought and wore his clothing. With singular determination, he quietly and steadfastly pursued his passion and his vision, developing and reinterpreting his body of work. He is truly an artist who’s beautifully fitting and flowing dresses are his medium.

Charles Kleibacker was an American original. With journalist roots, his path to the fashion industry was not ordinary. Unique in his approach to design, his ready-to-wear business, the way he shared his knowledge, and his individual design aesthetic, Charles Kleibacker reached the pinnacle of the fashion world through his artistry and drive for perfection.
Future Research Directions

Though many questions about Charles Kleibacker’s fashion involvement have been answered by this paper, much information still remains to be uncovered. There are questions relating to specifics about Charles’ relationship with Du Pont in testing Qiana prior to its industry release. What was made from the new fiber and how did the engineers respond when Charles told them of the challenges he had in sewing the woven Qiana fabrics? What was the larger picture of the Du Pont Qiana story involving the other design houses?

Vionnet, Kleibacker and Halston all produced garments cut on the bias, yet they used entirely different construction techniques for handling the challenges presented by bias. Are there any visual differences that can be seen in their extant clothing which remain? Have all three of these designers’ clothes maintained an even hemline over the years as Kleibacker dresses have remained even? Testing can be done to determine which of the three methods are most effective in relationship to ready-to-wear or in relationship to couture. What bias construction techniques are now being used in the fashion industry?

Further questions remain about Charles’ true bias design as well as how true bias behaves in construction of various garments, symmetrical and asymmetrical.

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3 As told to me by Charles’ good friend Dr. Elizabeth Rhodes in an interview with her on January 31, 2007.

5 Madeleine Vionnet as quoted by Betty Kirke in *“A Dressmaker Extraordinaire: discovering the secrets of Madeleine Vionnet’s Creativity.”* *Threads Magazine*, February/March 1989.


8 Daniell, “Couture Designer Excels.”


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APPENDIX A

TIME LINE
EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF CHARLES KLEIBACKER

November 20, 1921  Born Charles John Kleibacker, Cullman, Alabama
December 20, 1942  Graduated from Notre Dame University

1944 – 1946  Worked for Bernice Fitz-Gibbon at Gimbels, New York City
1944 – 1946  Attended New York University

Christmas of 1948  Hired by Hildegarde and Anna Sosenko
March to July 1950  Hildegarde’s European engagement

April 1951  Opened Elliot-Charles with one year lease
April 1952  Hired Madame Berg and began “apprenticeship”
1953  Free lance for Bessie Kugeloff
March 1954  Free lance for Elfreda Fox and Ben Shaw.
October 1954  Sailed to Paris

December 3, 1954  Hired by Antonio del Castillo, House of Lanvin
1956 – 1957  Antonelli-Kleibacker partnership in Rome
Late 1957  Returned from Rome

Spring 1958  Free lance with Huntleigh Suits and Coats for the fall line
Mid-1958  Began working at Nettie Rosenstein with Eva Rosencrans

Spring 1960  Started Kleibacker label at 26 West 76th Street
Fall 1963  Moved business to 23 West 73rd Street
1967  Du Pont, Qiana fabric evaluating
1971, 1972  Du Pont Tours/ Over-the-counter fabric market
1974, 1975  Condé Nast Tours, Sew-It-Yourself/Kleibacker Tips

~1976  Retail changing, Bergdorf Goodman not ordering stock
Kleibacker focus moved to serving more private clientele

1976 - 1980  American Silk Mills Tours
1980, 1981  Taubman Fashion Shows

Fall 1968  Began consulting at Mount Mary College
mid-1970s  Began week-long couture classes
1984 - 1995  Designer-in-Residence, The Ohio State University

1996  Adjunct Curator, The Columbus Museum of Art
APPENDIX B

PERSONAL AND BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE

June 22, 1970 to Gomer H. Ward, Du Pont Textile Fiber Department


February 20, 1972 from Kathleen Koontz, Denver sewing instructor.

May 11, 1972 from Kathleen Koontz, Denver sewing instructor.
June 22nd, 1970

Mr. Gomer H. Ward
Du Pont Company
Textile Fibers Department
Nemours Building
Wilmington, Delaware

Dear Mr. Ward:

I'd like to outline for you an idea I have. It has been in the back of my mind recently. It was brought to the front very strongly on Friday June 13th when I was part of the week's Apparel Design Forum at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

The idea has been brewing because of what I hear about and see in the home-sewing field and its related over-the-counter sale of fabrics. I would like to become a part of this lively field—one that seems to have untold potential.

My idea is this:
1. That Du Pont let me make five or six model dresses in fabrics of oxi or Perlon or Orlon.
2. That Du Pont book me into fabric stores or stores' fabric departments and let me do a show-lecture, publicizing the show-lecture to get as many home-sewers as possible into the department at the given time.

For the past two years I have flown, once a month, to Mount Mary College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin as guest lecturer and critic to the Fashion Design School there. I have been asked back again next year. I feel that speaks for the results. I feel because of my interest in and my knowledge in the actual technique of dress-making, I have been able to bring something special to the students in their design approach.

This past Friday at the University of Wisconsin in Madison I spoke to a group of clothing-and-textile professors, teachers, lecturers—a group who buy fabrics in stores, who make their own clothes, who teach design and sewing. We had a great session. I went on at 9:40, to be off by 10:10. At 11 o'clock I was still going. These people (home-sewers) and I were speaking the same language. I was able to say why I did a seams this way, why a dart was stitched that way, why a hem was put up this way. We had along four of the dresses we are selling to Bergdorf-Goodman, Henri Bendel, etc. We showed the clothes on a live model, then passed the dresses inside-out through the audience. I made it a question-and-answer session to a large degree.
Mr. Gomer N. Ward—2

I feel such a program could do a great deal to help sell Du Pont over the counter, especially. One of the four dresses I had was of Qiana. The audience ate up every word I had to say about it...and asked extremely good questions.

The important thing, too, is that I am a designer-manufacturer, selling the clothes I showed to fine stores at from $400 retail. The fashion message I brought meant something special to the audience. I was not a home-economist. While I understood their problems, the audience knew I was not thinking in terms of home-sewing or hands-at-home.

There would be an outlay of money for Du Pont—-for my making the samples, for my appearances. I firmly believe we could sell fabrics of Du Pont fibers and sell Du Pont's over-the-counter story in a very solid way.

I was at a home-sewing session at Altsman's (New York) fabric department in April or May. The place was jammed with customers. I listened to the speakers from the fabric sources, the notions' sources, the publications, etc. There was no one there with a combined authority in 1. sewing-technique 2. fashion design.

Thanking you for any time you can give this idea, and with best wishes,

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Charles Kleibacker
July 7, 1972

Mr. Charles Kleibacker
Hotel Park Royal
23 West 73rd St.
New York, N.Y. 10023

Dear Charles:

I would like to express my appreciation, on behalf of DuPont, for the outstanding work done by you during the '71-'72 season, in helping us increase Qiana®'s share of the O-T-C market. Your personal efforts and enthusiasm during your personal appearances at Britex, Macy's, Sanger-Harris, May D & F, Sakowitz and Frederick and Nelson, have helped increase "Qiana's" recognition in our markets.

I am now responsible for the entire Country west of the Mississippi. In addition, I am required to get to New York City once a month. During these trips, perhaps our paths will meet again.

It was a pleasure working with a professional!

Sincerely yours,

STEPHEN C. HILDRETH
West Coast Marketing
Retail Rep.

SCH:pas
Mr. Charles Kleinbacker
Hotel Park Royal
25 West 73rd St.
New York, New York 10023

Dear Mr. Kleinbacker,

During your last trip to Denver with the Quiana Show, you were very gracious to me for a few minutes before one of the showings. Since you personally gave me your address, I have a request.

I recently contacted the denim representative for this area to inquire about you possible return and learned that it will be March 16th and 17th.

I realize that you are pressed for time before and after the shows, so would you consider having lunch, or preferably dinner one evening? What a bold request! Your graciousness and generosity were not forgotten.

You encounter so many people that I wouldn't expect you to remember, but I am the mother of six children who teaches sewing. It is imperative that I work since my husband's illness and I am contemplating the expansion of my teaching. Experience and hard work have been my only background and there are a few "loose ends" I would like to tie in home sewing. You are the first true "professional" I have had the opportunity to meet and I know that you could have the answers at your fingertips.

If you feel my invitation would be possible, I would be most grateful; if not, I certainly do understand.

Yours very truly,

Kathleen Koontz

Denver phone 922-0797
Charles C. Koontz
1666 South Ingalls Street
Lakewood, Colorado 80226

Saturday Mar. 11th

Dear Charles,

I'm still in the clouds after yesterday. I could have talked all night and I'm ashamed; you were so tired; so generously patient with me.

I am more convinced than ever now that I want to go ahead. I'm not afraid of work, nor the many mistakes which I usually manage to turn into stepping stones. But my inadequacies, frustrations, and inferiorities are something else.

Charles, when I think of the market potential of this (and I'm speaking on the national level) it staggered my imagination. After only a short time with you, I can see why you professionals are confused as to how to tap the market------ you are just too professional; you cannot relate your knowledge, experience and training to the homemaker. We can't hope to make her a professional, Charles, we (and she) must be content to only make her garments look more professional.

It was soon quite obvious that you rely almost exclusively on draping to establish your master. My limited knowledge is in flat pattern drafting, and, because this is the manner in which the commercial patterns present their product, I definitely feel that this is the door opener to the home sewer. Once she is trained to interpret design and handle acceptable fitting techniques, half her battle is over. Once she gets the hang of this, even she, untrained as she is, can play around with draping. It is ironical that you cautioned me about being "flexible" yesterday. That became my byword in my classes last fall and will get you out of every corner. (And these petty little women love to push you into those corners hoping to get you to "snap", Again, courses must present "acceptability" and "flexibility" not "perfection".)

Charles, I have run the gamut of this home sewer. I feel there is a great deal to be said for this. I know her as you only think you know her.

You haven't a phony bone in your body. (maybe a few lonesomes, but not phony) You were sincere in your invitation to your workshops, weren't you? I don't expect explanation, lengthy details, just let me roam and observe. After yesterday you probably have your doubts that I can keep my Irish mouth shut for very long, but I assure you I can. My knowledge is so limited and many of my techniques so crude and awkward by your standards, but, for me, one picture is worth a thousand words. May I come the latter half of May or the first week in June? You mentioned that you might be done with duPont by then. Anytime, but the sooner the better. My tailoring techniques are not polished either. I have the chance to go with Marjorie Arch in late June in San Francisco, but the material isn't that good which I think of what New York may have. Is there a chance in a million that you could get me a day, or two, in the workshops of a friend who does suits and coats for high quality stores without them knowing why? I'm sure it would be more beneficial not to mention saving the expense of a trip to the West coast, plus a $100.00 tuition fee for each course she presents.
I have done more living in my 42 years than most people see in an entire lifetime. The past ten years, as I look back, seem to have been one continuous trip through Hell. Charles is a Pygmalion in my life; it is very difficult to watch that fine mind and kind heart live with a crushed ego. How can a man be old at forty? I need to succeed and he needs it too; not to forget the children.

I am petrified to come to New York. Just too much "hayseed" in me. Is there a hotel (reasonable) near your workroom? Use you own judgment. I'm not hard to please when it comes to accommodations.

Keep my ideas secret. I can't fight the "biggies". It is only a matter of time until they, too, figure all this out.

I'm sending out the gift that I mentioned. How you gone all these years and not possessed it?

And Charles, dear Charles, I am quite aware of how that Serpico can sting in the pressure and perfection of the workroom; it will take more than that to discourage this Gemini.
APPENDIX C

CHARLES KLEIBACKER’S UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

1968 to Present: Fashion Design Program, Mount Mary College, Milwaukee. Consult monthly, teaching advanced design seminars and advising on curriculum development: narrate annual fashion presentation.


1975: Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia. Visiting Professor, Fashion Design; taught senior design studio class.

1977: Pratt Institute, New York. Taught beginning design and research classes.

1978 – 79: Drexel University, Philadelphia. Critic/consultant to junior tailoring class.

1980: Drexel University, Philadelphia. Team taught senior design studio.


1984 – 85: The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio. Visiting Professor, Department of Textiles and Clothing: initiated development of Historic Costume and Textile Collection and taught advanced garment construction.

1985 – 95: The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio. Designer-in-Residence, Department of Textiles and Clothing.
1973 – present: Week-long participatory workshops; “Advanced Draping and Design: and “Couture Techniques Involved in Construction of Designer Garments” presented at:

Mount Mary College, Milwaukee 1977
Colorado State University, Fort Collins
University of Missouri, Columbia
Stephens College, Columbia, Missouri
University of Nebraska, Lincoln
University of Texas, Austin
North Dakota State University, Fargo 1979, 1980
University of Wisconsin-Stout, Menomonee
Georgia State College, Milledgeville 1977 to 1985
Adrion College, Adrion, Michigan
Wayne State University, Detroit
Midway College, Midway, Kentucky
University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa 1988
Mansfield State College, Mansfield, Pennsylvania 1977
The Ohio State University, Columbus 1988
University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio
University of Wyoming, Laramie
Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti
Southern Institute, Birmingham, Alabama
APPENDIX D

CURRICULUM VITA

Cover letter attached to curriculum vita originally composed in 1983
in connection to obtaining a university or museum position.

CHARLES KLEIBACKER
Park Royal Hotel
23 West 73rd Street
New York, N.Y. 10023                (212) 873-7602

The attached resume outlines my professional experience. In my twenty-three years as owner of the
Kleibacker Design Studio in New York City, the work schedule has been an intense one. Its devotion has
been to a fine garment…timeless in its bias-cut design, with the construction and fit of haute couture. The
approach has been one of ENGINEERING a garment to perfection of fit and comfort. My current
collection continues in this mood. I have my own museum of Kleibacker designs from over the years.

For the past seven years I have been assembling a collection of vintage clothing. The original idea in doing
so was to have beautiful examples of garments of the various decades for my work with students. These
garments (for the most part, of the 20th century) have, unexpectedly, turned into a money-maker for me…
in staging shows around the country, to big audiences.

I have been described as unique in combining abilities that cover the diverse fields of designer, teacher,
lecturer, writer, showman, producer, narrator, actor. I feel these abilities and experiences, along with my
collection of vintage clothes and the samples from my couture collection, have the potential of serving a
university, college or museum in a decidedly meaningful way.

The Kleibacker vintage collection includes beautiful clothes from Balenciaga, Mainbocher, Dior-Paris,
Mme. Grès, Norell, Balmain, St. Laurent (a beaded jacket that belonged to actress Jean Seberg), Venet,
Fath (a silk dress from the personal wardrobe of Rosalind Russell), Adrian, Irene, Charles LeMaire,
Valentina (a 1930’s dinner dress that belonged to Gloria Swanson), Tassell, Sarri, Carven, Clare Potter,
Anthony Blotta (a silk satin jacket and dress that belonged to Gloria Swanson), Travilla, Nina Ricci, Callot
Soeurs, Maggy Rouff, Lanvin, Schiaparelli, Drecoll, Eleanor Garnett, Chanel, Stavropoulos (bias-cut
chiffon used as a show-gown by singer Hildegarde), Oldric Royce (a design sold to Marjorie Merriweather
Post), Clara (a dress that belonged to Mrs. Vincent Astor), Courrèges, Madeleine de Rauch, Maurice
Rentner. There are other garments or designs worn by Joan Crawford, Marilyn Monroe, Mrs. Richard
Nixon, Diahan Carroll, Gene Kelly, Carly Simon.
Charles Kleibacker’s Curriculum Vitae
(Updated through 1991, Columbus personal contact information omitted)

KLEIBACKER UPDATE:

Jan.-May 1984     Designer-in-Residence
                  Fashion Department
                  Stephens College
                  Columbia, MO

Sept.-June 1984-85 Designer-in-Residence
Sept.-June 1985-86 The Ohio State University
Sept.-June 1986-87 1787 Neil Avenue
Sept.-June 1987-88 Columbus, OH 43210
Sept.-June 1988-89
Sept.-June 1989-90
Sept.-June 1990-91 Primary Duty: Assembling a Historic Costume and
                          Textiles Collection for the Department of Textiles and
                          Clothing, The Ohio State University.

Education:

1943          Graduate, University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Ind.
              A.B. in Journalism

1944-1946     New York University. Graduate work toward a master’s in
              retailing (a few hours short of a degree).

1954-1956     Alliance Francaise, Paris, France
              Study of the French language.
Design Experience:

1959-1986 Sole owner of Kleibacker, a design studio devoted to specialized, couture clothes. From its beginning to 1975, the Kleibacker firm designed and manufactured clothes at wholesale to be sold at retail from $450. Kleibacker customers included Bergdorf-Goodman, Bonwit Teller, I. Magnin, Neiman-Marcus, Saks Fifth Avenue, Martha, etc. Beginning in 1975, the house of Kleibacker has served a private clientele in a most careful, painstaking “custom” manner, attracting personages such as the late Rebekah Harkness, Marilyn Horne, Hildegarde, Diahann Carroll, Mrs. Richard Nixon (when she was the First Lady), Isabel Eberstadt, Mrs. Alfred Drake, Mrs. Nelson Rockefeller. Throughout these years I have been in charge of all operations: design, making the clothes, selling, public relations, staging shows, working with an accounting firm in business matters. I supervised as many as 16 in-house personnel when Kleibacker sold at wholesale.

1957-1958 Designer with Nettie Rosenstein, 7th Avenue, New York City

1956-1957 Designer with Antonelli, Rome, Italy

1954-1956 Designer with Lanvin-Castillo, Paris, France

1950-1953 Partner in Elliot-Charles, New York...custom-order house for women’s clothes, with a designer ready-to-wear line.

1948-1950 Assistant to singer Hildegarde and her partner-manager Anna Sosenko. My work was in the publicity, public relations, booking, secretarial areas. Duties included traveling cross-country and overseas for the singer’s engagements. It was my introduction to the world of superb clothing.

1946-1948 Advertising copywriter for DePinna, specialty store, New York City.


1943-1944 Reporter for *Birmingham Age-Herald*, Birmingham, Alabama.
Free-Lance Experience:

My job was to produce and narrate fashion productions in Taubman shopping centers across the country (including Northridge and Southridge in Milwaukee, and Woodfield in Chicago, the world’s largest shopping center; also in Washington, D.C., New York, Hartford, Detroit, etc.). In these productions clothes from my vintage collection were used. The first production was entitled “Trends; Then and Now”; the second, “A Fashion Hall of Fame – Designs Worn by Famous People.”

Nation-wide tours to re-introduce silk and to sell silk fabrics via fashion shows starring silk wardrobes, in leading department stores and fabric specialty shops.

My job was to write and work with the fashion editors and writers on the “Sew-It-Yourself” editorial for these issues (the promotion was fabrics), and to travel across the country in conjunction with these Vogue issues, presenting and narrating fashion shows and couture sewing clinics in leading department stores.

The promotion was “Qiana” (Kleibacker was the first company in the world ever to make garments from fabrics of the Qiana nylon fiber. I worked with the scientists and engineers of DuPont, Wilmington in 1969 in a highly secretive way to make test garments from fabrics of the fiber later to be named “Qiana” – they had developed). The “Qiana” promotion for DuPont-with-Kleibacker was designed to present and narrate fashion shows and conduct couture sewing clinics in leading department and fabric specialty stores, appealing to those sewing for themselves.

My job was to write the editorial and to work with the fashion and picture editors and writers in a “Sew-it-Yourself” story.
University and College Experience:

Autumn 1984     Visiting Professor, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.


1968 to present   Mount Mary College, Milwaukee.
Monthly visits of one or two days to work with the Fashion Department as critic-consultant for the senior couture classes.
Narrator for Annual Fashion shows.

1980   Drexel University, Philadelphia.
Team-taught the seniors in the Design Studio Class.

1978-1979   Drexel University, Philadelphia.
Monthly visits to work as critic-consultant to the Junior Tailoring Class.

1977   Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, N.Y.
Taught the sophomores in the beginning Design and Research class.

Spring term, 1975   Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond.
Visiting Professor in Fashion Design. Spent 3 days a week at the University from January 14 to May 15. Taught the senior Design Studio Class, with emphasis on couture fit, construction, draping, bias-cut. The senior garments for the Annual Fashion show were made in this class. Also critiqued juniors and sophomores in their draping classes as well as the “fit” of the flat-pattern classes.

Fall term, 1973   Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, N.Y.
Spring term, 1974   Taught the seniors the couture Fashion Design course for the two semesters, with emphasis on fit, construction, draping. The senior garments for the annual fashion show were made in these classes.

I have conducted week-long draping or couture-technique workshops, as well as some one-day seminars at sixteen colleges and universities. Among them are the following: Colorado State University, Fort Collins; University of Missouri, Columbia; University of Nebraska, Lincoln; University of Texas, Austin; Iowa State University, Ames; The Ohio State University, Columbus; Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan; University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa; North Dakota State University, Fargo; University of Cincinnati; Stephens College, Columbia, Missouri; Mount Mary College, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
APPENDIX E

KLEIBACKER DESIGN CHRONOLOGY

(Figures removed for lack of copyright permission.)

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APPENDIX F
KLEIBACKER LABEL RETAIL PRICING

Since no records listing sales were saved from the years that Charles Kleibacker was doing business, an understanding of the price of his garments have been arrived by other means. The retail prices listed here were collected from newspaper and other sources that quoted the price range of the Kleibacker label for the benefit of the public in advertisements and reviews of his lines throughout the years.

The cost of four-ply silk crepe was about $8 or $10 per yard in 1960 when Charles first started his business. Carmen Maya was hired in 1967 at the rate of $1.10 per hour. She also received good end-of-the-year bonuses and health insurance. When she left around 1983, she was being paid $10.00 an hour and fabric costs had risen 10 times what they were. It took about 80 hours to construct an average day dress, not including thread tracing and cutting which took an additional day and it does not include the time involved with developing the design and perfecting the pattern.¹

1968  “The designs retail in shops for $325 to $950.” ²
1969  “…starting from $210.75”³
1970  “…small but successful collection each season, which sells in the best shops. Prices are $395 to $895.”⁴
1975  “$500 to $1000 or $1200”⁵
1976  $700 to $1500
1979, May  $450 - $1200
1979, Aug  $600 to $1500
1981  “…start at $900 for the short dresses; $1100 for the two long black dresses in the styles show. The long green dress was about $2000. The fabric was silk and wholesaled for $110 a yard.”
1985  starting at $400
1986  $950 - $2500

1 Phone interview with Carmen Maya by author, November 20, 2007.
3 Merchandising Motivation Inc. (MMI), advert. (see figure E8.??), July 1969.
6 *Buffalo Courier Express*, July 20, 1976.