

HISTORICAL & CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

MICHAEL MAMP

Central Michigan University

SARA B. MARCKETTI

Iowa State University

Mildred Custin: Bonwit Teller's *Man of the Year*

ABSTRACT

Mildred Custin served as the President of New York City-based retailer Bonwit Teller from 1965 to 1970. The 1960s was a period of rapid cultural change fuelled by multiple social paradigm shifts related to concepts of gender, race, sexuality and age. Fashion of the era reflected these changing ideals. During this time, Custin introduced European designers such as Pierre Cardin and André Courrèges to the American market. In the United States she placed the first major order of up-and-coming designer Calvin Klein. The introduction of menswear under Custin's leadership to Bonwit's previously women's only assortment fuelled the spread of the Peacock Revolution in the United States. As a woman with a gentle voice but clear fashion vision, she embraced styles of the era and successfully led Bonwit Teller through a turbulent period of social history.

KEYWORDS

Mildred Custin
Bonwit Teller
Peacock Revolution
Pierre Cardin
André Courrèges
Calvin Klein
Bill Blass
S'fari Room



Figure 1: Portrait of Mildred Custin, President of Bonwit Teller by Kenneth Paul Block, American, 1925–2009. Charcoal and white paint on paper, gift of Kenneth Paul Block, made possible with assistance of Jean S. and Frederic A. Sharf. Photograph © 2014, Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

INTRODUCTION

Mildred Custin served as Bonwit Teller's President from 1965 to 1970 (Schiro 1997) (Figure 1). Bonwit's, which operated from 1895 to 1990, was a unique retail establishment, executed on the scale of a traditional department store but with the merchandise focus of a specialty boutique for women. By 1965, Bonwit's was facing new challenges. In an ever-changing fashion landscape, shifting ideas of gender and multiculturalism increasingly influenced society. Custin, a soft-spoken, fashionable Bostonian, interpreted the Zeitgeist of the time and offered assortments of product that reflected the era. She placed Calvin Klein's first major order, introduced the American male consumer to

Pierre Cardin and metaphorically took customers to the moon with the futuristic space travel-inspired fashions of André Courrèges. Custin's choices as a merchant and business leader served as a microcosm of 1960s popular culture and testament to her success. Custin was the second female President of this major American retailer; Hortense Odlum had been the first from 1934 to 1940 (Mamp 2014). As such, she continued a history of successful female leadership at Bonwit's in an industry that was still dominated by men.

After 70 years of business, Bonwit Teller was a major force in the luxury retail landscape of America. Total revenue in 1964 was 54 million dollars in twelve locations throughout the East, the South and Midwest (Sloane 1965). Although Bonwit's was a long-established retailer, the organization was nimble and realized that change was necessary to survive in an evolutionary climate fuelled by shifting and varied consumer needs. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, fashion dissemination and consumption changed dramatically with the advent of mechanized production (Abelson 1989). The industry was now poised for yet another evolution as women achieved greater influence in the public sphere and men, in particular, embraced new creative modes of expression in dress (Kutulas 2012). Mildred Custin successfully shepherded Bonwit's through this culturally burgeoning era; she improved and helped evolve the store's reputation as a fashion leader.

EARLY CAREER

Mildred Custin was born on 25 January 1906, and spent her early life in Boston where she attended and graduated from Simmons College (Schiro 1997). Early rejection of her application to the R.H. Macy & Company executive training programme did not deter her, and she instead took a clerical position with the retailer in 1928 (Schiro 1997). She worked for several other retailers in Boston before accepting a position in 1935 with John Wanamaker of Philadelphia. Here she fine-tuned her skills as a merchant, initially working as a gift buyer and then as the chief buyer for a moderate women's specialty fashion department called the Tree Booth Shop (Custin 1989). It was in the Tree Booth Shop that Custin first bought apparel starting in 1945, and learned how to diversify her assortment with colour and sizing. According to Custin, 'I never had less than 36 of a style, no matter what the price [...] when that shop opened it was very successful from day one because we had every size and every color' (1989: 11). Her success with the Tree Booth Shop led to her promotion as first merchandise manager of ready-to-wear in 1947 and then in 1951 Vice President of the Wanamaker's organization (Anon. 1958). When Custin was approached to become the Regional President of Bonwit Teller's three stores in Philadelphia in 1958, at the age of 52, she had already spent 30 years working in the retail industry. However, her influence in the American fashion and retailing industry would gain her even more prominence.

By 1965, Custin's efforts had raised sales at the Philadelphia division of Bonwit Teller by 26 per cent through the creation of eye-catching windows, and the design of luxurious store interiors (Anon. 1965b). In fact, she was seen as such a success that the Philadelphia Merchant Association named her *Man of the Year* in 1963. *Time* magazine reported on her being referred to as a *man* as 'one of the crosses successful women must bear' (Anon. 1965b: 72). To be successful at work, Custin explained, 'there isn't room for a husband and children in the kind of job I have, retailing is a full time job' (Anon. 1965b: 72). *Time* further described Custin as belonging to a special group of female executives in retail such as President Dorothy Shaver at Lord & Taylor and President

Geraldine Stutz at Henri Bendel who if 'content to wear a costume ring instead of wedding band can rise to rule the executive suite' (Anon. 1965b: 72). Custin and Shaver never married and Stutz only briefly in the 1960s; none of them had children (Wilson 2005).

Custin served as Regional President in Philadelphia for Bonwit's until 1965 when she was offered a promotion to President of the Company based out of the New York flagship store located at 56th Street and 5th Avenue. She accepted the position at a salary of \$60,000 per year, which accounting for inflation equates to approximately \$448,000 in 2014 (HBrothers 2007). In this new role of expanded responsibility, Custin led a multi-million dollar fashion retailer, which like other stores of the era needed a fresh approach to navigate the turbulent social climate of the 1960s. Custin proved to be just the woman for this job.

1960S STYLE

Kaiser and Bernstein described the 1960s as 'a period that is particularly compelling as a time of rapid cultural change [...] challenges to authority were abundant, and so were dramatic attempts to impose authority' (2014: 98). Youth culture exploded in the 1960s in a mode not previously seen since the Roaring Twenties. Michael Kammen (1999) described how during the 1960s newly affluent young people adopted a variety of personal styles and approaches to consumption from the clearly anti-establishment viewpoint to a more conservative approach that ultimately led to the development of yuppieism. This increasingly diverse and youth-focused culture went shopping in a way no previous generation had ever attempted, creating a new mass consumer culture (Kammen 1999).

A growing middle class in the United States comprising more liberated and racially diverse consumers found ways to display individuality through the varied fashion styles of the era. Mods, hippies, liberated women, groovy men and persons of colour all demanded more choice in clothing styles, which prompted the launch of new fashion businesses around the world. Internationally, London became the centre of all things swinging and modern as the fashion boutique counter-culture of Carnaby Street supported new stores by the likes of mod queen Mary Quant and purveyor of the men's style revolution John Stephen (Breward 2003). Boutiques offered fashion forward-focused style choices at price points that were made more attainable through offshore production and an ever-expanding availability of new synthetic materials (Aquilina-Ross 2011). Fashion and music dissemination fuelled each other through mass media elements such as television and print magazines as youth scrambled to adopt clothing styles of their favourite groups such as the Beatles or the Rolling Stones (Breward 2003).

The American consumptive spirit, in particular, was fuelled during the era with the advent of shopping malls made possible through de-urbanization and white flight as countless families sought a better life in the suburbs of cities such as Chicago, Detroit and Los Angeles (Farrell-Beck and Parsons 2007). This better life was expensive and achieved in part with a buy-now, pay-later attitude as credit cards allowed for immediate gratification. Credit usage also provided valuable consumer data to advertising and marketing firms, which in turn developed consumer-focused campaigns in print, radio and television (Kammen 1999). Data-rich consumer profiles partially fuelled the establishment of the distinctively American approach to the advertising of products and services via print

media and television. The 1960s was a period when a person with an idea for a new product could connect with more potential consumers than ever before.

Vogue magazine dominated the delivery of fashion editorial under the watchful eye of Editor Diana Vreeland for most of the decade. Vreeland celebrated the unique and believed the 1960s was a time of revolutionary style as different became, in her opinion, for the first time, beautiful (Vreeland 1984). In one memo dated 1 February 1965 she wrote, 'how boring to copy the past with all the magnificence of today and tomorrow' (Vreeland 2013: 102). It was Vreeland that first embraced the influence of celebrity culture at *Vogue*. Her 1966 cover that featured the uncommon beauty of Barbra Streisand, with her exaggerated make-up and substantial nose, contributed to a new understanding of what beautiful was or even could be (Figure 2).

Vreeland embraced the new, different and somewhat obscure and used the pages of *Vogue* to communicate her unique point of view throughout the



Figure 2: *Vogue* March 1966 cover that featured Barbra Streisand. Streisand's physical features were considered exotic and unconventional. Diana Vreeland's choice to feature her on the cover of the magazine personified changed concepts of beauty and fashion for the era. Image © Richard Avedon Foundation.

1960s. Vreeland's *Vogue* allowed the outsider to shine. Her exotic demeanour and embrace of the avant-garde eventually led to her abrupt dismissal, but *Vogue* undoubtedly became a powerhouse under her leadership and a beacon of style and fashion for the 1960s and beyond.

It was in this climate of cultural diversity, mass consumption and shifting beauty ideals that Custin took the reins of Bonwit Teller. Like Hortense Odum before her in the 1930s, Custin immediately set about renovating stores, which created appropriate spaces to highlight new and modified product offerings. However, Bonwit Teller of the 1960s was strikingly different than when Odum started in 1934 with a single store (1939). By 1965, Bonwit's was a twelve-store chain with locations in New York City; Manhasset, Long Island; White Plains, NY; Short Hills, NJ; Philadelphia; Oak Brook, IL; Chicago; Palm Beach, Florida; and Boston. Custin was apparently not intimidated and set her vision in motion immediately, and the first six months of her tenure was the most financially successful in the company's history (Barmash 1965).

In July of 1965 Custin announced a two million dollar renovation plan that would focus primarily on the Boston and New York City stores. This renovation allowed the sixth floor of the New York store to be completely repurposed. Custin stated that she wanted to 'remove the drawing room look and instill the atmosphere of small intimate shops' (Barmash 1965: 21). Custin was aware of the urban boutique culture emanating from London, but perhaps more importantly recognized the value of the suburban customer, and stated that assortments in those locations would be 'tailored to the needs of the community' (Sloane 1965: 23). To better understand the needs of these branch locations, in February of 1965 Custin created a new executive position of Director of Branch Stores to supervise merchandising activities outside of New York, which she filled with Robert Einstein, a 38-year-old Harvard graduate (Sloane 1965). Through store design she organized Bonwit's to allow for the introduction of new lines from American and European designers alike. Custin realized the differences between urban and suburban customers and made renovation decisions to support long-term growth in both venues. She laid the foundation for the creation of unique in-store boutiques that reflected the diverse style choices and shopping preferences of the era for both women and men.

Competitors of the period also scrambled to represent the plethora of clothing styles that developed out of 1960s counterculture. Custin's approach was not necessarily different than others of the time. At Henri Bendel, another large New York City store that catered to fashionable women, President Geraldine Stutz also considered her square footage and how best to use it for things to come. In 1958, almost in prediction of what the 1960s would offer in terms of style and choice, she redesigned the entire first floor of her store to create a u-shaped branded Street of Shops, which has since been acknowledged as a predecessor of shop-in-shop and designer boutique merchandising (Wilson 2005). However, if Stutz was an example of being ready for change, in 1965 Bonwit's was somewhat behind the fashion and retailing curve. It took a woman like Custin, who unlike her male predecessor was able to analyse and interpret the cultural and consumer trends of the period in a way that satisfied existing customers and also attracted new shoppers. She continued a Bonwit's female leadership tradition in her ability to be a woman of the times. In the 1930s Hortense Odum diversified pricing and welcomed all women, including those who were cash strapped, in direct response to the Great Depression (Mamp 2014). Custin's focus was no different, and is evidenced in her immediate drive to ensure that the needs of diverse customers across the chain

were met. The renovation and reorganization of physical space that Custin undertook starting in 1965 allowed for product introductions that not only generated volume but also created a style for the store that she referred to as the 'Bonwit Teller Touch' (Anon. 1965b: 23).

PEACOCK REVOLUTION

Custin was 59 years old when she arrived in New York to take on the role of running all of Bonwit's. Yet her sensibility was far from that of the establishment, which, if defined by age alone, the youth of the 1960s would have associated her with. Custin had an appreciation for the melding of both high- and low-brow popular culture even in her own style choices. One reporter noted Custin's outfit during an interview, and the choice personified this melding – 'a brown jersey Cardin dress splattered at the hem with white plastic circles' and a 'Mickey Mouse watch encircled her left wrist' (Bender 1969: 68). Perhaps it was this ability to meld diverse styles and cultural references that made it possible to introduce a new fashion category for an entirely different gender of customer to Bonwit Teller. Her mix of a high-end dress with a watch linked to American popular culture personified Custin's distaste for what Levine described as 'class bound definitions of culture' (1988: 255). Masculinity had been strictly defined in dress in the United States for over a century. In introducing male customers to a store dominated by woman's goods, Custin supported new ideas of what it meant to be a man of the era.

According to Aquilina-Ross, John Stephen's shop, which began on Carnaby Street London in 1956, flung open the door for the male fashion revolution of the 1960s: 'Until his arrival, even if men had wanted colorful clothes, there was little available that was ready made; stagnation in men's style was due to lack of opportunity' (2011: 15). Kutulas stated that prior to the 1960s 'fashion was a female realm and shopping-consuming-a female activity. Women used clothing, hairstyles, and make-up to construct identities and attract male attention. Only gay men and other masculine outliers followed fashion' (2012: 167). Wilson's novel *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (1955) personified masculinity as conformity in clothing style during the 1950s. Conversely, during the 1960s, London boutique culture led the way for men to embrace fashion as a means of individual expression, and those who did so were universally referred to as *peacocks*. By 1965 the Peacock had emerged from urban London roots to flourish in a frenzy of individualized exploration of colour, silhouette and fabrication. The ready-to-wear market had finally embraced the male gender and subsequently exploded with choice for men of all socio-economic statuses, sexual orientations and ages (Aquilina-Ross 2011).

One designer who capitalized on a loosening of social norms in dress for men was Pierre Cardin. Cardin was a new breed of designer, who, similar to his peers Yves Saint Laurent and André Courrèges, embraced style and attitudes that developed from youth culture and the street. One of the original bad boys of fashion, the *Chambre Syndicale de la haute couture* actually withdrew Cardin's membership as a result of him showing a ready-to-wear collection in 1959. Cardin marketed the collarless Nehru jacket, which was seen as revolutionary due to its abandonment of traditional tailoring and classic bespoke silhouette that had been in place since the nineteenth century (Breward 2003). Cardin created suiting for men with silhouettes that were reminiscent of the Edwardian period. Many men adopted these new styles, proving, according to Nora Ephron, 'that dandyism and homosexuality did not necessarily occur

simultaneously in nature' (1970: 87). The male of the mid-1960s enthusiastically flung open Pandora's Box with newfound enthusiasm for expression.

Custin started work on the creation of the Men's Department at Bonwit Teller as soon as she took control of the chain at the beginning of 1965. Renovation and planning took slightly over a year, and by the autumn of 1966 Bonwit's had not only introduced menswear to the assortment but had done so with a launch of Pierre Cardin to the American market. According to Custin, 'the men's shop was quite an innovation at the time, because it was the beginning of the peacock revolution [...] clothing (for men) had been a very conservative sort of business with little or no change in fashion or style for years' (1989: 14). Bonwit's introduction of clothing for men to a physical environment that was synonymous with femininity was a gamble in itself. Other stores that already carried menswear such as Brooks Brothers and Saks Fifth Avenue hesitated to adopt European menswear styles, which were more daring in colour, fabrication and silhouette than American options. In Western Europe men had adopted these fashion-forward clothing options as early as 1960. Indeed, Cardin showed his first menswear collection in Paris in 1960, yet the American market remained unreceptive (Walford 2013). However, Custin thought otherwise, stating, 'we thought this could be a very exciting thing for Bonwit's [...] it was a huge success from day one' (1989: 14). The first manager of the Men's Department at Bonwit's was Jack Daniel Zarem. He was also a customer of the new Pierre Cardin boutique, evidenced by his cotton brown velvet suit purchased from Bonwit's in 1967 (Figure 3).

New choices in silhouette like the Nehru jacket, as well as the use of lush fabrications such as jacquards and velvets like that of Zarem's suit, aided the evolution of the conservative American male to the peacock status of his European counterparts. Male consumers even embraced fur as an outerwear option and manufacturers reported selling out of styles for men (Taylor 1969). By 1968, the American menswear industry had experienced seventeen per cent total sales gains over the previous year (Ephron 1968).

The timing for the opening of the Pierre Cardin Boutique for Men at Bonwit Teller on 6 October 1966 was ideal (Ickeringill 1966). The occasion was celebrated with an in-store cocktail party and fashion show the evening prior, attended by 400 guests. The wife of Hervé Alphand, then French Ambassador to the United States, commented on the new silhouettes: 'all the clothing is close to the body without being tight, it makes men look longer and thinner and the fatter they are the thinner they look' (Ickeringill 1966: 75). According to the *New York Times*, the new Cardin boutique for men at Bonwit Teller introduced 'the French couturier's neo-Edwardian silhouette for men, the double breasted blazer and other notions then deemed radical or effeminate' (Bender 1969: 68). The in-store boutique was modelled after Cardin's Paris flagship store Tout Pour L'Homme that had three floors and was the largest menswear store in Paris at the time (Anon. 1966) (Figure 4).

Customers immediately responded favourably. *Vogue* reported that one shopper left 'Bonwit's Cardin shop after ordering jackets, trousers, raincoat, sweaters, shirts and ties, and the hat to be shipped to him in Virginia [...] on second thought [...] he couldn't wait to wear the hat [...] walked out with it on his head' (Anon. 1966: 107). The Men's Department with Cardin took off and Custin soon added other vendors such as the haberdasher Turnbull and Asner, accessories by the French luxury house Hermes and, in the autumn of 1967, Bill Blass. Bonwit's became the fashionable American destination for *peacocks* as Custin had also negotiated exclusivity with all the vendors represented in the Men's Department



Figure 3: Jack Daniel Zarem's Pierre Cardin Suit from 1967. Jacket labels identified the Bonwit Teller Men's Shop, and Pierre Cardin. The suit was made from lush high-pile chocolate brown cotton velvet. Images © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

(1989). Cardin was initially exclusive to Bonwit's in the United States, and the store added a women's boutique shortly thereafter.

Bill Blass, who was initially only a women's wear designer, expanded his business to fashion for men as well. His first collection of menswear in 1967 featured items such as reversible collarless jackets in bright colours, a lack of formal neckwear, and knickers (Morris 1967). At the time he predicted that ties would eventually disappear altogether (Ephron 1968). The Bill Blass

section of the Men's Department at Bonwit Teller opened on 7 November 1967 (Klemesrud 1967). Colour and variety in fabrication abounded, including, 'a red corduroy blazer worn with black and white checked wool slacks [...] a red Nehru blazer sweater worn with hot pink corduroy slacks' (Klemesrud 1967: 38) (Figure 5).

Like Cardin, Blass' menswear was originally exclusive to Bonwit Teller. Custin's focus on a male customer proved long lasting as the Men's Department at Bonwit's expanded to every store in the chain and was in operation until the company went out of business in 1990.



Figure 4: Bonwit's Men's Department Manager Jack Daniel Zarem and Mrs Hervé Alphanand in the new Pierre Cardin boutique at Bonwit Teller. Green felt walls and black leather accents were modelled after Cardin's Paris men's store Tout Pour L'Homme. Mrs Hervé Alphanand was the director of the Paris store. Image © Vogue (Anon. 1966: 107).



Figure 5: Examples of menswear from the 1967 Bill Blass collection at Bonwit Teller. The exaggerated plaid suit on the left includes trim ankle-length trousers while the double-breasted jacket on the right is executed in shocking red. New approaches to silhouette, print and colour helped define style components of the Peacock Revolution. Images © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

WOMEN'S FASHIONS

Custin's embrace of new styles was not limited to the Men's Department. She established partnerships with both European and American designers who brought innovative and exclusive looks to the store. As she had done with Pierre Cardin, Custin looked to another European style maker, André Courrèges, this time as an opportunity to further expand her female customer base. She sought out exclusivity of representation, and in 1966 one-third of Bonwit's imports for women were exclusive to the retailer (Nemy 1966).

The Parisian-based André Courrèges exploded on the fashion scene in 1965 when he introduced a space travel-inspired look epitomized by short white boots, shiny plastic fabrications, boxy silhouettes and short skirts. The Americans and Russians were locked in a heated race to the moon that culminated with Neil Armstrong's lunar landing on 20 July 1969, and fashion and popular culture of the era reflected this fascination with space travel. Despite his initial success in 1965, Courrèges was not prepared to deal with the massive response to his space travel-inspired fashions and his product manufacturing was troubled. The designer did not complete another major collection until 1968 when Courrèges' partnership began with Bonwit Teller. Despite his early setbacks, Custin recognized that the designer still had the ability to be at the forefront of fashion innovation and on 6 February 1968 the André Courrèges Couture Future boutique opened on the fourth floor of Bonwit's in New York City (Ickeringill 1968) (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Acid orange pantsuit from the Courrèges Couture Future ready-to-wear line offered exclusively at Bonwit Teller in 1968. Pants at the time were still uncommon for women and this ensemble boldly communicated changing gender ideals. Image © The Museum at FIT.

According to the *New York Times*, the clothes were ‘much softer now with a rounded look and lots of scallops on hems or necklines there is even an occasional peter pan collar’ (Ickeringill 1968: 46). This less severe mod style of Courrèges is evident in a dress from his Bonwit Teller collection worn by Custin, then age 62 (Figure 7).

Courrèges commented, ‘when I wanted to impose style, I had to be very brutal about it, now I have changed I can be Courrèges shouting as well as smiling’ (Ickeringill 1968: 46).

Custin not only sought out established European designers but also supported new American designers. Calvin Klein’s career began with a visit to Mildred Custin’s office in 1968 (Calvin Klein 2013). Klein had completed a collection of samples and had arranged a meeting with Custin through one of the buyers at Bonwit’s. She was impressed with the collection. However, she knew that Klein would be unable to maintain the quality he was showing at the wholesale price he was asking. Custin told him, ‘now, young man, if you want to come back here a year from now you will have to increase the price of each of these garments at least ten dollars’ (1989: 15). Klein received his first



Figure 7: André Courrèges dress worn by Mildred Custin, 1968. This cotton dress is an example of the modified approach to futuristic design Courrèges adopted that featured details such as scallops, patch pockets and peter pan collars. This dress was part of his newly launched women's ready-to-wear collection. The label reads, 'Made exclusively in France for Bonwit Teller'. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

major order under Custin's tutelage for 100,000 dollars at retail. His youthful silhouette and clean American take on design was perfect for the Miss Bonwit shop Custin had created to attract a younger clientele. Under her guidance the store advertised Klein's collection and also featured the clothes in all eight of Bonwit's windows, effectively launching the ascension of one of America's most famous designers of the twentieth century (Figure 8).

Custin also created a branded in-store boutique for women called the S'fari Room where she featured exotic looks and new designers from around the globe. Custin stated, 'we did the S'fari Room [...] we were the first ones to give unknown designers a showplace for their lines, that's where Giorgio Sant Angelo first came on the scene, in the S'fari Room' (1989: 14, emphasis added). According to Sharon Zukin, 'Bonwit's S'fari Room featured a smaller changing assortment where women could hunt for the big game of new fashion' (2005: 136). Although there was a focus on offering new and varied designers in the department, it was the concept and marketing of the space that *Women's Wear Daily* referred to as 'the total sell' (Anon. 1968a: 4). The branded



Figure 8: Miss Bonwit ad that promoted Calvin Klein. 'Miss Bonwit Says: Satin Is Scintillating Done The Calvin Klein Way!' By 1968 Klein's representation at Bonwit's had expanded from the flagship New York store to locations including Manhasset, Westchester, Short Hills, Philadelphia, Wynnewood, Jenkintown, Chicago, Oakbrook, Cleveland and Boston (Anon. 1968b: 15).

shop was highly promoted. A March 1969 cover of *Vogue* featured brightly coloured beads by Giorgio San Angelo that were available at Bonwit's S'fari Room (Figure 9).

For Custin, the ability to recognize a new trend or potential product offering was not limited to apparel. As hemlines went higher throughout the 1960s Custin asked of her friend and cosmetics innovator Estee Lauder, 'what are we doing about legs?' (Morris 1966: 62). This led to the creation of a line of skin care and beauty applications specifically for legs and carried exclusively at Bonwit Teller. Like Hortense Odum before her, Custin believed direct contact with her customers showed them that she understood their needs and interests. This personal communication with her predominantly female customers was in Custin's opinion important, as 'after all women buy about 70 per cent of men's wear and most of the home furnishings too' (Barmash 1968: 74). To



Figure 9: Colour and exoticism abounded in this June 1969 cover of Vogue that featured beads by Giorgio Sant Angelo available at Bonwit's S'fari Room.
Image © Vogue.

connect with customers Custin wrote newsletters and personal memos, but also facilitated focus groups, luncheons, and one-on-one meetings where she received valuable feedback.

Custin reluctantly left Bonwit's in 1970 as the company had a mandatory retirement age of 65. However, her career was far from over and she went on to establish Mildred Custin Ltd, a retailing and fashion consulting firm (Anon. 1970). In this new business she was part of the development team that created vertical malls in the United States including Water Tower Place in Chicago and the Renaissance Center in Detroit (Custin 1989). Vertical malls, particularly Water Tower Place in Chicago, contributed to the revitalization of downtowns and attracted shoppers, tourists and new urban residents following the de-urbanization trends of the 1960s (Oser 1987). Custin operated her consulting firm until 1991. She passed away in 1997 at the age of 91 (Schiro 1997).

CONCLUSIONS

Expanded product offerings and representation of fashion that reflected the era under Custin's leadership prompted a hugely successful period for Bonwit's. When Custin took control of the business in 1965 the company produced 58 million dollars a year, and by the time she left in 1970 total volume was over 85 million with the addition of only one new branch store in Troy, Michigan (Bender 1969). Custin's promotion of exclusive and *au courant* fashions created a dynamic, desirable store to which the fashionable women and *men* of the period flocked. Mildred Custin was a leader and innovator who played a significant role in the success of some of the most famous fashion and retailing ventures of the twentieth century and yet her story has remained relatively untold.

Although Custin achieved a great deal in her time at Bonwit's, she approached her job in neither a heavy-handed nor dictatorial way. Her demeanour was demure; as one former employee commented, 'she has such a dainty air she seems so helpless you want to protect her, of course, she is as helpless as a cobra' (Morris 1965: 25). *The New York Times* reported that Custin had a 'reputation for femininity grace and charm bulwarked by superb taste and a capacity not only for working hard herself, but also for inspiring others to work hard' (Morris 1965: 25). Custin led her team to success through this appreciation of hard work, determination and creativity while embracing her demure personality. In 1965, Custin at Bonwit's and Geraldine Stutz at Henri Bendel were the only two female presidents of major retail companies in New York, and yet their histories remain obscure. Researchers must peel away the layers of time to reveal these accomplishments as testament to what women in retail achieved but also to serve as inspiration for disenfranchised potential leaders of tomorrow.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dr. Michael Mamp is an Assistant Professor of Apparel, Merchandising and Design at Central Michigan University, Mt Pleasant, Michigan. Mamp received his Ph.D. from Iowa State University. His primary research areas are the history of dress and the apparel industry of the twentieth century. Mamp is also an accomplished textile designer and his work has been exhibited both nationally and internationally.

Contact: Central Michigan University, Apparel Merchandising & Design, 210 Wightman Hall, Mt. Pleasant, MI 48858, USA.

E-mail: michael.mamp@cmich.edu

Sara B. Marcketti, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management Department and Associate Director of the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa. Her focal research areas are dress history and scholarship of teaching and learning. She joins Phyllis Tortora in revising the sixth edition of *Survey of Historic Costume*.

Contact: Iowa State University, Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, 3024 Morrill Hall, Ames, IA 50011, USA.

E-mail: sbb@iastate.edu

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