

Edited by Nancy Deihl



The Hidden History of American Fashion

DISCOVERING 20TH-CENTURY WOMEN DESIGNERS

THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF AMERICAN FASHION

Rediscovering Twentieth-Century
Women Designers

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6 FIRA BENENSON: THE PEOPLE'S COUNTESS

MICHAEL MAMP

Fira Benenson, whose career spanned more than four decades, was a prolific designer of women's fashion based in New York City. Benenson was first a purveyor of designer garments, then an in-house buyer and designer for Bonwit Teller, and finally the creator of a successful ready-to-wear line sold at retailers such as Bergdorf Goodman, and Lord and Taylor. Clothing designed by Fira Benenson is characterized by impeccable craftsmanship and refined, edited elegance. Benenson, who was "perennially attired in black," possessed a sophisticated sense of style focused on quality fabrications, which were often monochromatically manipulated via shirring, pleating, or tucks (Solomon and Litvinoff 1984: 155). These creations, which were simple but classically elegant in form, fabrication, technique, and color usage, were not only fashionable but also wearable and therefore appealed to a diverse clientele including mature and larger-sized women. Benenson's creations graced the pages of the fashion magazines of the period, including *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. Celebrities, including Grace Kelly, who included a dress by Fira Benenson in her wedding trousseau, favored the designer's work ("Grace Kelly" 1956: 4F).

Despite her many accomplishments in the fashion industry, Fira Benenson's achievements, until now, have been mostly undocumented. Yet from the 1920s through the 1960s, Benenson skillfully adapted her design process and business plan to account for the impact of world events such as the stock market crash of 1929, the Great Depression, and the Second World War. Benenson intuitively determined how to reinvent her business every decade or so in order to remain competitive. She was a successful buyer of luxury goods and designed haute couture in New York City when only a handful of designers such as Charles Kleibacker attempted to do so domestically (Bissonette 2012). Benenson was a



FIGURE 6.1 The Countess Illinski: Fira Benenson c. 1948. Image courtesy of Fashion Institute of Technology|SUNY, Gladys Marcus Library Special Collections.

true couturière, but she also recognized a need to shift her business post-Second World War to focus on ready-to-wear. She was a skilled designer, a strict business owner (her sister would describe her personality at work as that of a despot), and a colorful member of the New York social register (Solomon and Litvinoff 1984). Whatever the outcome, whether it was purchased goods for resale, couture gowns, ready-to-wear, or sew-at-home patterns, the Benenson aesthetic of understated wearable elegance remained consistent.

Imperial Russian roots

Fira Benenson was born in 1899 to Gregori and Sophie Benenson in Baku, on the Caspian Sea (Solomon and Litvinoff 1984). Fira was the third of four children; with two sisters, Flora and Manya, and a brother Jacob. Gregori Benenson settled in Baku where he “interested himself in the development of oil lands ... and in a few years made a fortune” (“Grigori Benenson” 1939: L25). Baku in the early twentieth century suffered from political and social unrest. The Benenson family was Jewish, at a time when many Jewish families in the area were asked to convert to Christianity as a means to avoid possible persecution. However, Gregori Benenson, while not a particularly religious man, remained steadfast and refused to abandon his cultural heritage and sought new business ventures elsewhere (Solomon and Litvinoff 1984).

The family moved to St. Petersburg, where they occupied a palatial apartment on the Moyka River. Grigori’s business success provided his family with the means to live a sophisticated life in the twilight of Imperial Russia. After the abdication of Nicholas II in 1917 and Lenin’s rise to power, the Benenson family, who lived within view of the Winter Palace, survived on a tightrope of anxiety. According to a biographical press release,

for two years after the Bolshevik revolution she [Fira] remained there, with guards almost daily ransacking the house for money and jewels which had already been smuggled out of Russia. The Benenson family finally escaped dramatically, first to Scandinavia and then to England. (Lambert 1951: 1)

At first the family separated to confuse any pursuers. Grigori and Flora settled in London; later Fira and Manya joined them there.¹ Grigori worked feverishly to protect his financial interests. After a few years, the opportunity to seek a new life and fortune called; Fira and her father made their first trip to the United States in 1919 (Solomon and Litvinoff 1984) and two years later decided to make a new permanent home in New York City (Lambert 1951).

New York City

On their first trip to New York City in 1919, Grigori purchased a real estate parcel including 165 Broadway and the “leasehold of the southwest corner of Broadway and Cortlandt Street,” for 7 million dollars (“165 Broadway” 1919: 24). When Grigori and Fira settled in New York City in the early 1920s, America was in an economic upswing. As the decade progressed the Benenson holdings grew to include significant properties in Brooklyn and Manhattan. Several of his new acquisitions included street-front retail development (“Heads” 1927). This allowed Fira to open an exclusive dress shop.

According to Fira's sister Flora, in America, "rich women indulged their love of clothes to the degree of rendering New York the glamorous reality behind the shadows of the cinema screen" (Solomon and Litvinoff 1984: 130–131). Therefore, Fira, along with her business partner Vera Heller, established Verben, a high-end women's boutique in the heart of New York City's luxury fashion district between 5th and 6th Avenues on 57th Street.² From the mid-1920s, Verben focused on classic but cutting-edge fashion for New York City's most fashionable and wealthy women. At Verben, Fira was a buyer and relationship builder with couture houses almost exclusively in Paris. Her selections for Verben demonstrated an appreciation for quality and timeless elegance that would steer her aesthetic for the rest of her career. According to *Women's Wear Daily*,

A certain specially developed gift of selection by Miss Fira Benenson, directrice of Verben, Inc., equips her to sustain the character of unhackneyed imports which are associated with the firm's collections. The Verben clientele is definitely one that is conservative, but at the same time aware of the fundamental changes of smart fashions. Line supersedes all else, in every phase of the mode, whether daytime or evening, and in this connection Miss Benenson leans toward the particular techniques of Vionnet, Augustabernard, Dormoy, Chanel, Molyneux, Paquin, and in daytime styles, Schaparelli. ("Verben Favors" 1933: 6)

According to Eleanor Lambert, "her taste and ability soon became her fame" (Lambert, n.d.). Exclusive women's boutiques in New York City catered to a well-traveled clientele in between their annual pilgrimages abroad. Economic conditions that resulted from the crash of 1929 prompted shop owners such as Benenson to provide even more fashion-forward product for their consumers as some chose to shop domestically rather than make frequent, expensive European excursions. As explained during the period by a self-proclaimed expatriate on her return to the United States from Europe,

the most exciting thing in New York is the shops ... here everything is conceived to save time ... the day before I sailed, I saw Lady Aby at lunch making a sensation with a regular bell-boy's cap sitting high on her semi-grown hair ... from Chanel ... I was telling a friend about these delightful absurdities one day as we were stepping into Verben's on Fifty-Seventh Street. My thunder froze on my lips. There were the tarantella stocking caps in white and black string and also Agnes's angora and jersey turban with tails that you bind about your head yourself! ("Your Thrilling" 1930: 60)

Verben's main competitors included shops such as Franklin Simon, Best, and Stern as well as high-end department stores. Benenson worked with her clients to achieve their desires, even in the case of wedding gowns. According to *Vogue*,

Verben is an Apostle of Modern Chic
In Its Simple Terms



At left, Chanel's version of the ensemble for evening wear, developed in a fancy soft, sheer woolen all the smarter for its choice of stung color.

After Augustabernard is a frock almost naive in its simplicity, but made altogether sophisticated by the use of black broadcloth.

From the Imports of Verben, Inc.

FIGURE 6.2 Verben advertisement with ensembles by Chanel and Augustabernard. Image out of copyright/author's collection.

“the most attractive wedding dress that we have seen in years ... was of white tulle, infinitely simple and infinitely chic, with tiers of knife-pleated ruffles and rows of cording ... the dress came from Verben” (“The Latest Excitement” 1932: 25). Fashions from Verben suited a variety of occasions from daytime to evening. For example, “Augustabernard’s black broadcloth dress, fitted sleekly, with puffed rolls on the shoulders, nice for bridge, for Sunday afternoons, or for dining out in a restaurant” (“The New Conventions” 1933: 36). Verben carried a wide assortment of accessories and dresses for daytime through evening occasions:

with the same quality that is associated with clothes worn by the private clientele of the Paris couturiers ... the quality of exclusiveness is understandable since one model after another confirms the statement made by Miss Benenson ... that handwork of a precious kind is the feature that the customer who patronizes a private dressmaker demands. (“Production” 1932: 3)

Fira’s livelihood was greatly affected by her father’s dwindling fortune. While Verben was well received, Benenson’s father owned the building in which the store was located and she relied on him to help cover her living expenses. Benenson’s sister remarked that Fira’s “difficulty was to manage within her copious dollar allowance ... her stamina, sophistication and extravagance never failed to amaze me” (Solomon and Litvinoff 1984: 130). Fira also had social aspirations and married at age 36 on March 19, 1931 to Count Janusz Illinski, a Polish expatriate and aristocrat who had also served as a general in the Polish military (“Fira Benenson” 1931). After the marriage Fira became known in her personal life as the Countess Illinski, the nomenclature of aristocracy achieved. While her Count was handsome and aristocratic, he came with a title and not much else. Fortunately for the newlyweds, Grigori was incredibly generous, as evidenced by his philanthropic pledge of \$24,000 per year to the Palestine Appeal in March of 1929 (“Aids Palestine” 1929). However, by 1932 his business took a turn for the worse resulting in auctions of properties, foreclosures, and lawsuits (“Finding” 1931). Following the crash of October 1929, real estate value plummeted. “The real estate downturn coincided with the stock market crash ... many businesses and hotels went bankrupt”. The Benenson family lifestyle, which included residence suites at the Plaza hotel, was on the brink of ruin (Nicholas and Scherbina 2013: 300).

Bonwit Teller

In 1934, Hortense Odum became the president of Bonwit Teller, a large-scale women’s specialty store located at 56th Street and 5th Avenue in New York City (Odum 1939). Paul Bonwit started Bonwit Teller in 1895. Until the Great

Depression, it was an exclusive store only for women that offered luxurious, expensive fashion; truly a leader in New York's high-end fashion retailing (Crawford 1941). Bonwit's occupied several different locations before settling at the corner of 56th Street and 5th Avenue in 1930, a short distance from Verben on 57th Street. Although Paul Bonwit had successfully guided his namesake in the past, in this new seven-floor location he found it difficult to maintain adequate inventory levels while also weathering the storm of the Great Depression. Unfortunately, by 1931, business declined at Bonwit's to the point of loan default, and Floyd Odlum, Hortense's husband, acquired the store ("Mrs. Odlum; Bonwit Teller's Chief" 1934).

Odlum's company, Atlas Corporation, liquidated many investments just before the stock market crash of 1929, leaving plenty of capital to acquire holdings post-crash at a fraction of their prior value. In fact, in the early 1930s, Floyd Odlum amassed a fortune placing him among the top ten wealthiest Americans ("Atlas" 1941). Bonwit Teller was one such business acquired by Atlas Corporation in the detritus of the Great Depression. A woman's store was not in the usual purview of Odlum's organization; however, he recognized that prior to the crash the store had achieved respectable profits ("Lady from Atlas" 1934). On a whim, he asked his wife Hortense Odlum what to do with Bonwit Teller (Odlum 1939).

In contrast to Fira, Hortense came from a very modest upbringing in St. George, Utah, where her family was farmers and members of the Mormon church (Mamp 2015). Hortense Odlum stepped on every imaginable rung of the socioeconomic ladder, from scrimping on her husband's 75-dollar monthly salary to her position in the 1930s as the wife of one of America's wealthiest men (Mamp 2014). This put Hortense in a unique position to understand specifically what women, in a variety of economic positions, wanted out of their own store. She was not armed with education or even experience. Instead, she knew intuitively how to meet the diverse economic needs of women shopping for clothing. Hortense Odlum was not a customer of Bonwit's. Upon visiting the store for the first time in 1932 she quickly discovered that assortment was lacking. In her own words, "there isn't a dress ... that a well dressed woman would want to wear, I've never seen so many Christmas tree ornaments on clothes" (Odlum 1939: 72).

Hortense Odlum served first as a consultant and became the president of Bonwit Teller in 1934 ("Mrs. Odlum Heads Bonwit" 1934). Women continued to shop during the Great Depression; they just did so differently by looking for bargains, repurposing, and applying American thriftiness. Retailers and even government responded by providing a greater variety of clothing price points to meet the needs of a stressed economy (Marcketti 2010). Odlum created a variety of new departments at Bonwit's to cater to women of all economic backgrounds, from the extremely wealthy to those on a strict budget.

While she hadn't been a Bonwit's customer, Odlum did shop at Verben, an experience that led to another innovative department. Benenson had the clientele

but no money, Odlum had the money but no clientele; hence the *Salon de Couture* was conceived. Despite its difficulties, Bonwit Teller had one good thing going for it: *location*. Just a block from Verben, next door to Tiffany's and across the street from Bergdorf Goodman—the epicenter of New York City's luxury fashion retail district (Neimark 2006).³ According to the *Jewish News Wire*,

There is news in the very air of Bonwit Teller. The first act in the drama was the arrival of Fira Benenson who, as Verben, has been dressing many of the most sophisticated women you see in New York. She is a bosom friend of the brightest stars in the Paris dress world. She stays in Paris after the other buyers go and shares from these friends of hers very special models, designed for the private clientele. The result is collections of dresses which you don't see elsewhere. A whole floor of Bonwit Teller is given over to her. The collection is divine. ("Shop Talk" 1934: 1)

In 1934, Benenson was paid a salary of 10,000 dollars per year as the director of the *Salon de Couture*, the equivalent of about 180,000 dollars in 2016 (Solomon and Litvinoff 1984; U.S. Inflation).

The *Salon de Couture* occupied an entire floor in the Bonwit Teller building, and it was a success from day one. The Verben clientele followed Benenson, and the Bonwit Teller publicity machine now under the direction of another Odlum new hire, Sara Pennoyer, attracted new customers ("New Bonwit" 1935). The salon was also a means to compete with other in-store couture and made-to-order salons such as the *Salon Moderne* at Saks Fifth Avenue headed by Sophie Gimbel ("Sophie" 1969). At first, the objective was to facilitate orders between New York customers and Paris. Bonwit Teller used the services of Gladys Tilden, who was positioned in Paris on behalf of the company to facilitate orders and to report fashion trends. Telegram correspondence between Benenson and Tilden documented orders from prestigious fashion houses such as Chanel and Mainbocher (Tilden 1934). By mid-1935 Tilden's services were no longer required as Benenson was already better connected to the European fashion scene via her work at Verben. However, as the threat of war loomed in Europe it became clear that the salon needed to do more than just order couture; they needed to produce it.

Odlum "insisted that we have the facilities to create exquisite gowns which would always be remembered by their wearers" (Odlum 1939: 116). Benenson's exposure to the finest couturiers of Europe, not to mention her own privileged upbringing, familiarized her with quality garments. However, she had never actually made one before. Benenson hired workers for her atelier, mostly Russian and Jewish refugees who were less fortunate than her but highly skilled (Lambert 1951). She learned more about garment engineering and construction along the way. Slowly, and quietly, Benenson went about perfecting her skills in garment design and supervised construction until the German occupation of Paris in 1940

effectively shut down the French couture industry. In the fall of 1940, Benenson showed her first small collection of dresses and ensembles in the *Salon de Couture*, and from that point forward did so twice a year until 1948 (Lambert 1951). Her approach to design involved detailed construction and fine handwork and was perfectly suited for wartime. Despite facing regulations imposed on the fashion industry to reserve materials for the war effort, Benenson insisted, "we mustn't



FIGURE 6.3 Fira Benenson (seated middle) at work in the Salon de Couture atelier, August 1, 1940. Image © [Alfred Eisenstaedt]/[The LIFE Picture Collection]/Getty Images.

allow clothes to be dull and stale ... let's make a springboard of our difficulties and let our imaginations put into clothes the liveliness and movement that we require" ("Fira Benenson's Silhouette" 1945: 3). As her collections progressed for Bonwit Teller she further refined her approach of using elegant, simple silhouettes and basic colors (especially black), and painstaking handwork such as "sawtooth edges, narrow Shirred insets, cutouts lined with sheer cordage for more surface interest, faggotting and puffed rows of Shirring" ("Fira Benenson's Silhouette" 1945: 3).

The Benenson collection for the *Salon de Couture* gained notoriety, enhancing Benenson's status as a leading American fashion designer during the 1940s. Benenson also supported the war effort through her design of the uniforms for the American Women's Voluntary Services ("Counter Espionage" 1942: 33).⁴ In 1943 she provided fashion predictions and reflections on wartime in a profile of ten of America's top fashion designers. According to Benenson,

I believe the seriousness of the times has made women softer and more feminine. A woman today wants clothes that are useful, yet becoming to her womanly beauty. By creating a simple silhouette, I have tried to design clothes that may be worn from day to night. I do think that skirts must be manipulated in such a way as to allow ample freedom of movement, during times when women must not only look pretty but must walk and board buses and trains and climb subway stairs. ("Ten Designers" 1943: SM18)

Ready-to-wear

In 1948, after fourteen years, Benenson decided to leave Bonwit Teller. During her time at the store she successfully grew the *Salon de Couture* business first through relationships with Paris fashion houses and later through the development of her made-to-order items. From 1940 she and her team developed a reputation for amazing craftsmanship, clean elegant style, intricate detail, comfortable fit, and versatility. Benenson garments were worked with a very delicate hand. According to Virginia Pope, "Benenson has the faculty of making her trimmings a part of the dress rather than making them seem superimposed. It is rare that she makes use of another material for trimming" (Pope 1948a: 36). Instead, she manipulated the fabrication to create details such as cording, Shirred panels, ruching, and pleats. It seems this focus on surface interest developed during the Second World War when due to rationing she worked primarily with plain wools and crepes (Pope 1944).

Through her years at Bonwit Teller, Benenson retained the building at 37 W. 57th Street where Verben was originally located, so in February 1948 she opened her new Fira Benenson showroom and ateliers in the same spot she had started in twenty years earlier (Pope 1948b). In the new space she not only maintained

a made-to-order business but also worked on the development of her ready-to-wear line. A fashion show in her salon in February 1948 presented made-to-order models. However, in September of the same year she showed her first ready-to-wear collection in a fashion show at Lord & Taylor in New York City.

In September 1948, the new ready-to-wear collection was offered exclusively at Lord & Taylor. This first collection included over forty-six models with “wool dresses and suits, dressy wool crepes, creations for the cocktail hour and for dinner and evening” with price points starting at \$110 (Pope 1948a). The work was extremely well received; Benenson effectively “translated into ready to wear the exquisite detail that made her custom fashions famous” (Pope 1948a). She followed up this success with another collection shown in January 1949 at the Pierre Hotel, as part of a charity benefit for the New York Heart Association. This spring collection featured “widely cut or plunging necklines” and skirts that were full but not cumbersome (Pope 1949: 26). Dorothy Shaver, President of Lord & Taylor, promoted American designers; Benenson was one of many, such as Nettie Rosenstein and Clare Potter, who benefited from Shaver’s American Designer Program (Amerian 2011).

The stylish, finely made Benenson collection sold very well and was picked up by other retailers, including Marshall Field and I. Magnin (“Furred” 1948). The brand was available at retailers from 1948 throughout the 1960s. It also expanded to include a higher-priced bridge line of mostly evening clothes available at retailers such as Bergdorf Goodman, Hattie Carnegie, and Elizabeth Arden (Warren 1964). Consumers outside of New York City were also interested in Benenson designs. In February 1949 her wholesale collection was shown in Atlanta at the opening of a new Franklin Simon store. Dinner dresses were sold for around \$235 (“Fira Benenson” 1949). Benenson offered many items in sizes ranging up to a twenty, and her expert skill at tailoring and surface detail proved flattering on a variety of women (Warren 1964). Only a few extent examples of Benenson’s work from her early years of design at Bonwit Teller exist in collections. Benenson’s garments were distinctly not trendy but rather well made and classically fashionable. Clothes by Benenson were worn over several years. Fortunately, a small collection of her design sketches dating from 1940 until about 1960 was saved.⁵ The sketches reveal designs that were very wearable by women of varying ages and sizes. They are in line with fashion of the period but not overtly trendy (Emerson 1958). Perhaps, the lack of surviving garments is due to the fact that Benenson clothes were *worn*.

A testament to Fira Benenson’s ability to design for a wide range of customers, starting in the 1950s her designs were also offered to the home sewer by the America’s Designer Patterns Company of James and Jean Miller Spaeda.⁶ These “were cut directly from a master pattern which was taken from the original garment,” and the consumer received a Fira Benenson label to sew into their finished work (Bramlett n.d.).



FIGURE 6.4 Fira Benenson cocktail dress c. 1960 with three-quarter sleeves, and full skirt. "Fashion and Costume Sketch Collection. Fira Benenson sketch." Brooklyn Museum Libraries. Fashion and Costume Sketch Collection. Special Collections.

Conclusion

Fira Benenson continued working into her seventies. Her husband Count Janusz Illinski passed away in 1961; the couple had no children. Benenson's accomplishments were remarkable considering her lack of formal training. Benenson built a large and diversified fashion business that weathered the Great Depression and the Second World War. Her passion was her work, and her razor-sharp focus on an edited, elegant, hand-worked aesthetic never faltered. Fira Benenson passed away in 1977 at the age of 78 (Fowle 1977).

Fashion editor Carrie Donovan once said that Benenson created "the illusion of perfect sophisticated chic" (Fowle 1977: 32). Benenson's brand of sophisticated chic appealed to thousands of women over a period of more than forty years. She knew who her customers were, and she never disappointed them. The work of this accomplished woman was lucrative and widely praised, yet her story remained untold. Her brand of wearable sophistication never failed her or her customer.

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Notes

- 1 Flora remained in London and had one son, Peter Benenson, who founded Amnesty International. She worked at Marks & Spencer department store. Her other sister Manya translated Russian literature, most notably *Doctor Zhivago*. Their brother Jacob died in a concentration camp during the Second World War.
- 2 See the London Bureau of *Women's Wear Daily* (April 15, 1932): 10. Vera Heller was a knitwear designer who after working with Fira at Verben established a "handknitted garment" business in Paris. In 1932 Vera Heller and her sister Eva Lutyens opened their own fashion house in London. Lutyens was an accomplished designer who counted Wallis Simpson as one of her clients. Heller and Lutyens were the nieces of Chaim Weizmann, President of the Zionist Organization in America, and in 1949, the first President of Israel.
- 3 Donald Trump demolished the building and built Trump Tower.
- 4 See <http://fashionweekdaily.com/confessions-american-fashion-icon-stan-herman/>. Stan Herman, an early employee of Benenson, went on to design uniforms for Pan Am and McDonald's.
- 5 See Fira Benenson fashion illustrations, Special Collections, Gladys Marcus Library, Fashion Institute of Technology, New York; Designer Files, Brooklyn Museum Library, New York.
- 6 See *Spadea's American Designer Patterns*. Book 2 (n.d.); *Spadea Patterns by World Famous Designers*. Book 14 & 17 (1957, 1960), Iowa State University Textiles & Clothing Museum.

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