

Gerald McCann: The Rediscovery of a Fashion Designer

By KEVIN ALMOND AND CAROLINE RICHES

The research for this article was initiated by the discovery of the archive of international fashion designer, Gerald McCann, hidden in a garage in Fleetwood, Lancashire, UK.

The contents of the archive revealed a treasure trove of press cuttings, photographs, fashion drawings and interviews as well as designs and costings from a once well-known designer, whose significance to the global fashion industry is sparsely documented and largely forgotten. This article reveals the history of the designer, who graduated from the tutelage of Professor Madge Garland at the Royal College of Art in London in the 1950s and forged a career at the heart of 'Swinging London' in the 1960s. He was lured to the USA in the 1970s, returning to the UK in the 1990s as a designer for House of Fraser and Harrods. The research constructs the first significant assessment of McCann's position in global fashion and the value and relevance of his legacy, as well as exploring the rationale for documenting the history of forgotten fashion designers.

Keywords: Gerald McCann, archive collections, fashion industry, 1960s, Swinging London

INTRODUCTION

The British fashion designer Gerald McCann (b. 1931), is largely forgotten today due in part to the scarcity of literature related to his work. He was at the height of his career in

London during the 1960s, throughout the youth-driven social and cultural changes defined by a seminal, *Time* magazine feature called, ‘Swinging London’ in 1966.¹ He was one of the most influential fashion designers of this period alongside names such as Jean Muir (1928-1995), Mary Quant (b. 1934) and Foale and Tuffin (Marion Foale – born 1939 and Sally Tuffin – born 1938). Unlike his contemporaries there is no biography that fully documents his career and there is little mention of him in literature related to fashion history. It is possible to find anecdotal sentences that allude to his work and celebrity status in the 1960s, although there is a longer piece about him in Iain R. Webb’s work, *Foale and Tuffin – The Sixties: A Decade in Fashion* (2009).² An internet search reveals very limited reference to the designer although Wikipedia has a short piece that discusses his work chronologically.³ This research aims to fill the gaps in literature, through an appraisal of Gerald McCann’s career and to suggest why his name is not remembered as well as those of his contemporaries. As the majority of McCann’s archive documents his work in the 1960s and information beyond this decade is scarce, the analysis of his work focuses on this period – his career zenith. It also aims to define his contribution to the international fashion industry as well as considering the global, cultural and educational value for recording the careers of fashion designers.

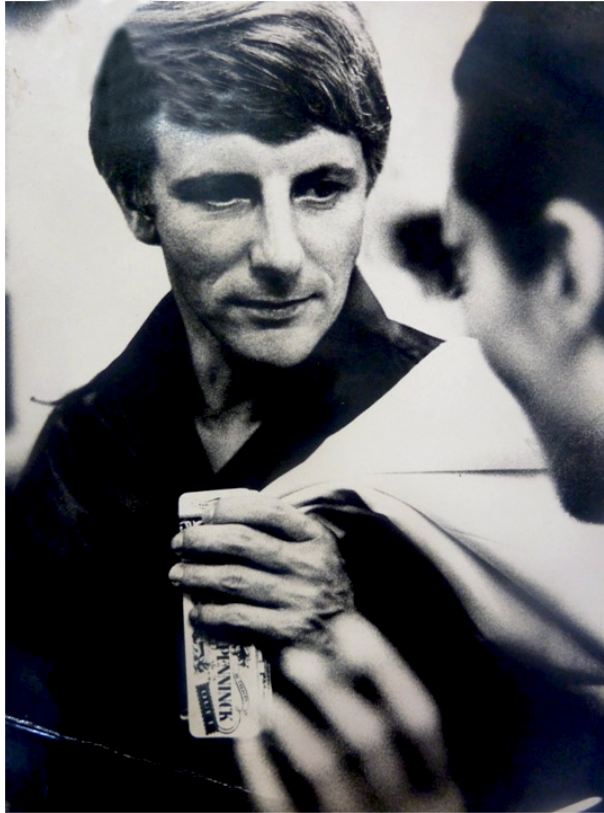


Figure 1. Photograph of Gerald McCann from the mid-1960s: unknown photographer
© Courtesy of Ann Walls, owner of the Gerald McCann archive.

The research was inspired by the chance discovery of Gerald McCann's archive stored in a garage in Fleetwood, Lancashire, UK. (Figure 1) The mother of one of the authors Christine Riches (b. 1951) first met Gerald McCann in 2012, at a recreational art class she had set up at a local community center. His younger cousin, Ann Walls (b. 1948) had contacted Christine asking if she could attend the classes and bring her cousin. Ann also explained that Gerald had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's and she was looking after him at her home in Fleetwood. She thought it would be good for him to take up drawing and painting again as his youthful training had initially begun at Blackpool and The Fylde College, on a course similar to what is known now as a Foundation in Art and Design.

Christine Riches described Gerald as still a handsome man, 'smart/casual in appearance he walked into art class. He had the biggest smile and was very polite and friendly - a kind man'.⁴ It soon became clear that he loved to talk about his career as a fashion designer and the famous people he had known in the 1960s, for example the artist, Francis Bacon (1909 – 1992) and the cafe they frequented - plus many young fashion designers from that time. He talked about how he helped Mary Quant get started with her boutique Bazaar in 1955. Quant's husband, Alexander Plunket Greene (1932-1990) had asked him to help stock the boutique with his clothes, whilst Mary focused on the accessories. He also told Christine Riches that he had stored some of his work at his cousin's house and she asked if she could see it. With the help of his cousin he brought in a multitude of beautifully presented and preserved newspaper articles, cuttings, illustrations and advertisements of his original designs, along with many photocopies of original fashion designs and illustrations from the 1960s to around 2002. Christine Riches commented:

I thought it was such a shame that Gerald was generally little known in this country and particularly in his home town of Fleetwood and that all this important work was sitting in a garage and I wondered what I could do about it. I decided to tell my daughter who is a lecturer in fashion, about my lovely experience listening to and being inspired by Gerald McCann.⁵

This began a research journey, which instigated the internationally peer-reviewed exhibition, documenting McCann's work in the 1960s, *The Radical Decade*, held at

Leeds Arts University (formally, Leeds College of Art) 7 October – 16 December 2016.⁶

It also initiated the reappraisal and documentation of McCann's contribution to global fashion, both through the exhibition reviews and this article.⁷

A qualitative approach was taken in this study. As the writers Corbin and Strauss have emphasized, 'Qualitative research allows researchers to get at the inner experience of participants, to determine how meanings are formed through and in culture, and to discover rather than test variables'.⁸ Close scrutiny, observation and handling of the varied artefacts in Gerald McCann's archive were the principal methods of investigation. This not only provided evidence of McCann's design work but also contextualized his celebrity within the cultural milieu of the 1960s. Further information came from studying surviving McCann garments in the Victoria and Albert Museum (London), the Gallery of Costume (Manchester), the Fashion Museum (Bath), and an analysis of American costume collections and garments from private collectors. The Royal College of Art and Marks and Spencer archives, helped to provide a context for the beginning of McCann's career and oral histories in the form of interviews and email correspondence with McCann's peers and contemporaries from the 1950s to the present, gave insight into different aspects of his life and times. Secondary research was conducted through the literature review and provided the background to support information gleaned from primary sources and this is embedded and discussed throughout the text. Although little written information about McCann exists beyond the designer's archive, it includes some sources that relate to McCann's career and his contribution to the fashion explosion of the 1960s. It proved challenging to document a full trajectory of his career beyond this

decade due to the inadequate literature and Gerald's own memory loss due to illness. This is the rationale for focusing on his 1960s work in order to assess McCann's main contribution to the international fashion industry. The aims of the research were to:

- Document the career of Gerald McCann using his archive as primary source material.
- Appraise the significance and value of Gerald McCann's career to the 1960s, global fashion industry.
- Explore the rationale for documenting the history of fashion designers, such as McCann whose work is largely forgotten.

THE CAREER OF GERALD MCCANN

Gerald McCann was born in Fleetwood, Lancashire in 1931. Ann Walls, his younger cousin confirms his interest in art and design and his attendance at what is now known as, Blackpool and the Fylde College (est. 1892). This nurtured his passion for fashion and his subsequent application to attend the renowned Fashion School at the Royal College of Art (RCA) was accepted in 1951. On arrival, he was enraptured by the surroundings of the school created by Professor Madge Garland (1898-1990), in a house that had been specially decorated in Ennismore Gardens, South Kensington. He described Garland as 'Rather wonderful. She was a former editor of *Vogue*, the first Professor of Fashion, with lots of links to the industry'.⁹ Madge Garland (Figure 2) was a significant early influence on McCann. Her contribution to both the Royal College of Art and the fashion industry had earned her much respect. From her appointment as Professor of Fashion in 1948, she brought in teachers from the actual fashion trade, pattern cutters, designers and sketchers.

As she described, 'I wanted people from the trade – trade was a dreadful word to use in connection with art. So I formed a committee of very high powered people from industry and drew teachers from the trade'.¹⁰ She argued that the British, 'Lack of professional expertise, brought about by our tendency to consider fashion as a frivolous subject, suitable only for female amateurs, totally ignored the knowledge of the designer and the craftsmanship of the worker'.¹¹ Garland fought to use her industrial connections, fashion industry experience and her passion for the fashion industry, to shape a new world of fashion education. This educational approach, produced designers like Gerald McCann and his contemporaries such as, David Sassoon (b. 1932) and Gina Fratini (1931- 2017). A sense of realism was introduced to the school as Garland insisted that students had to have placements at mills, factories or fashion magazines. As Henrietta Goodden, former senior tutor in womenswear at the RCA and author of a forthcoming book about the RCA's Professors of Fashion said:

This was supported by the fact that in addition to annual bursaries and scholarships supplied by the industry, her graduates began to be employed by companies such as Marks and Spencer, Susan Small, Jaeger and Dorville and became so sought after that a waiting list of potential employers would recruit designers well before they graduated.¹²



Figure 2. Madge Garland (second from the left) at a fitting at the Royal College of Art c. 1955 © Photograph courtesy of John Gay, National Portrait Gallery and Royal College of Art Archive.

Gerald McCann's time at the college was marked by the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II (1953) and his risqué designs for English debutantes. Garland's industrial connections secured McCann his first job whilst still a student, as a designer with Marks and Spencer, where his dresses sold over a million copies each. He said, 'My dress had sold a million copies so I had a key to the executive dining room and a cheque from Lord Marks and everyone smiled wherever I went'.¹³ His time at the company is noted in the Marks and Spencer archive at University of Leeds, as being from 17 August 1953 to 28 August 1954, which indicates he was employed there whilst still a student.¹⁴ On graduating from the RCA in 1954, it would be sensible to construe that he worked as a freelance designer as evidenced in his work supplying Mary Quant's first shop Bazaar.¹⁵ He then worked in

wholesale couture for manufacturer and designer, Harry B Popper.¹⁶ His clothes sold to Harrods and private clients such as Princess Marina and members of the aristocracy.¹⁷

McCann began his own business – Gerald McCann Ltd in 1963, with a £600 bank loan and became a key supplier to the fashionable boutique, The 21 Shop at Woollands, in Knightsbridge, London. The buyer, Vanessa Denza (b. 1937), noted that his clothes were always top sellers. Other leading 1960s designers also sold in the shop including Jean Muir, Marion Foale and Sally Tuffin, Rosalind Yehuda (dates unknown) and Roger Nelson (b. 1938). He was the only designer to have a proper manufacturing base, so was able take large orders (he had established four small factories in Poland Street, in London's West End). In an interview with Vanessa Denza, she recalled that the young ideas editor at *Vogue*, Lady Rendlesham (1919-1987) had been asked by Woollands to help with the opening of the 21 Shop and introduce designer models for the first fashion show. As the shop was aimed at the young and Gerald McCann was one of few designers to produce clothes in a size 8, she approached him. Denza said, 'There was an enormous gap, design at last had a young audience. Gerald worked very closely with the 21 Shop and we had many successes with him. He was always enormous fun to work and be with'.¹⁸ McCann recalled his biggest 21Shop seller, was a little dress made from a fine cotton, Liberty print. When first shown the dress, Vanessa Denza said she didn't have the budget to order so he said, 'Well I'll send you three dozen and if they don't sell I'll take them back'.¹⁹ He delivered them the next morning and by the afternoon Denza had ordered another three hundred. He also opened a boutique in Mayfair and one of the first outfits from his own label was an organza and black crepe dress that featured in *The*

Observer just before Christmas 1963.²⁰

McCann quickly became a well-established name and the business supplied coats, suits, dresses and separates to major stores and boutiques throughout the UK, Paris, New York and twenty-five other countries. He was photographed with a group of young British designers (these included Foale and Tuffin, Jean Muir and David Sassoon) for a *Life* magazine article on British fashion, entitled, 'Brash New Breed of British Designers'.²¹ The article described his clothes and those of the other designers featured as epitomizing the 'Chelsea Look', named after the bohemian borough where all the designers lived and worked. Lady Rendlesham began to feature McCann's clothes regularly in *Vogue's* 'Young Ideas' section. Simple but youthful clothes included trapeze dresses, gymslips with men's shirt buttons and denim bra-cut frocks as illustrated in his fashion sketches (Figure 3). He was commissioned by Rayne to design shoes as part of a 'Young Design Quartet', which included Moya Bowler (b. 1940), Jean Muir and Roger Nelson. In 1965 he also dressed the actress, Rita Tushingham (b. 1942) in the film, *The Knack ...and How to Get It*, set amid the mods, rockers and sexual revolution of 1960s.²² In an interview with the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (2006), he described the sixties look:

We had the music didn't we, so that set the stage and then we gave it form. We produced the clothes that epitomized the 'look'. And the funny thing is just before that was the beehive, and the white lipstick, and all so terribly contrived and hideous-looking, I could never understand why people wanted to look like that. But suddenly there was this lighter feel.²³



Figure 3. Simple but youthful clothes - sketches by Gerald McCann. Courtesy of Ann Walls, owner of the Gerald McCann archive. © Photograph courtesy of Kevin Almond.

Significantly McCann also began to supply designs for Topshop, which began as a brand extension of the department store Peter Robinson in 1964 and had shops in London and Sheffield. Topshop was one of the first UK high street chains to supply clothes to the youth market and is today a multinational retailer. McCann's name also became well known as a pattern designer for the burgeoning home sewing market, when he began producing designs for Butterick Patterns as illustrated in Figure 4. He furthermore expanded into the male market, sporadically throughout the 1960s but by 1970 was established with a menswear collection.



Figure 4. Gerald McCann sketches and designs for Butterick Patterns. Image courtesy of Butterick ® B4133 Image courtesy of The McCall Pattern Co., Inc. copyright @2017.
© Photograph courtesy of Caroline Riches (copyright holder of image The McCall Pattern Co., Inc).

In an interview with the authors, Vanessa Denza said that after the first wave of the Swinging Sixties, the Americans wanted to feature certain designers for the Puritan Clothing Group and their retail stores Paraphernalia.²⁴ Gerald was one of the six chosen. An extravagant trip to the USA was paid for by Puritan to show the collections, backed by enormous publicity. This resulted in many orders from the American market. McCann's clothes were bought by a buyer from Bloomingdales in New York, Ida

Sciolino (1920-1993). This led to his recognition in the United States as a contemporary and youthful designer and he was commissioned by several American manufacturers to produce collections that reflected the concept of the 'Chelsea Look' and 'Swinging London'.

McCann commuted between the UK and New York between 1965 and 1973 before settling in New York for twenty years with his own label. His clothes were stocked by stores such as Bergdorf Goodman and Saks Fifth Avenue, amongst others. He continued to be a best-selling designer, adapting quickly to the fast-moving American fashion system, where sales of 140,000 per style were expected. One design for the coat and suit manufacturer, Larry Levine sold so well, it earned him a five-figure royalty. Vanessa Denza commented, 'At the time Gerald's collection was responsible for a 30 million, dollar turnover. Gerald was a genius at working with buyers, a real asset for a company'.²⁵ McCann returned to the UK in the early 1990s continuing to produce designs for House of Fraser and Fenwick. These clothes were not aimed directly at the youth market but were designed to appeal to women who would have worn his 1960s designs in their youth. Speaking to journalist Liz Smith in 1991, he lamented the fashion industry's focus on young designers as stars, he felt what was needed was a good designer to produce young clothes.²⁶ This summarizes his philosophy as a designer, who consistently aimed to produce young, stylish clothes at low and accessible prices, throughout his career.

EXPLORING THE GERALD MCCANN ARCHIVE

An *archive* is defined by Oxford Dictionaries Online as, ‘A collection of historical documents or records providing information about a place, institution, or group of people’.²⁷ Archives are often held in record offices, museums, or private collections where they can be easily accessed. The discovery of Gerald McCann’s archive provided a unique opportunity to study his career as it had previously been inaccessible. In the possession of the designer, it had not been donated to a museum and was stored in a garage at his cousin’s home. As references to McCann and his work in literature are sparse, evidence of his work had to be located in noteworthy [major] museum collections of dress. Since McCann’s career took place on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, important museums in both the UK and USA were identified. In the UK the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London holds two McCann pieces. A wool-barathea skirt suit from 1968, was accompanied by the caption:

Gerald McCann studied at the Royal College of Art in the 1950s. Like several graduates of his generation he played an influential role in the development of the UK fashion, export market. McCann's designs for young women were particularly successful in the USA. His clean lines and modern detailing are exemplified by this very wearable skirt suit, combining an up-to-the-minute, unisex styled jacket, with a very short skirt.²⁸

The second outfit in the V&A was a leather, wool and faux fur coat from 1969, illustrated in Figure 5 (this was borrowed for display in *The Radical Decade* exhibition).²⁹ The Gallery of Costume, Manchester, holds a linen and polyester, sleeveless shift dress from

1965.³⁰ The Fashion Museum at Bath confirmed in email correspondence they hold seven McCann outfits, but that images of these garments are not digitized or accessible online.³¹ They also explained that because the pieces came from unidentified sources there is no provenance to provide information about their wearers or the circumstances of their purchase. All the outfits come from the period 1970–1989 and include a pink and dark red printed cotton day dress and a full-length dress with green synthetic velvet bodice and wool tweed skirt, applied brown lace, long wide kimono style sleeves and central front zip fastening. In the USA, the fashion historian, curator and director of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, Dr Valerie Steele, recommended contacting three significant fashion museums.³² None of the three - The Fashion Institute of Technology and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art – held any Gerald McCann outfits. This search indicates that as a designer located in both the UK and USA, documentation of his clothes in significant collections of dress and fashion was found in the UK, where his importance as a fashion designer appears to be of greater significance. Although successful in the USA as a mass market designer, this could be attributable to McCann's ability to harness the radical, cultural explosion in Britain during the 1960s in order to produce clothing designs which embraced these changes.



Figure 5. Gerald McCann, coat of leather, wool and faux fur coat, 1969. Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. © Photograph courtesy of Kevin Almond

As identified, the McCann archive contained a cornucopia of press cuttings photographs, fashion drawings and interviews as well as designs and costings and a small number of garments, some of which are illustrated in Figure. 6. Most of the contents relate to the years 1960-1969. McCann's cousin, Ann Walls, felt this was due to the 1960s being the apex of Gerald's career and influence as a designer. She also felt that much of his remaining portfolio documenting his American years, would have been discarded after he left the USA. It is also important to note that some of the press cuttings in the archive

were photocopies or tear sheets from newspapers or magazines and some dates and information have been torn away, making them difficult to accurately reference. The information and anecdotal comments however help to build up a picture of his life, times and celebrity as well as some detailed descriptions of his work.



Figure 6. Press cuttings and photographs of Gerald McCann's work from the 1960s displayed in *The Radical Decade* exhibition, Leeds 2016. Images courtesy of Ann Walls owner of the Gerald McCann archive. © Photograph courtesy of Kevin Almond.

MCCANN'S CELEBRITY

The fashion journalist Iain R. Webb, described McCann as 'One of the original 'Swinging London' trendsetters, as photographed for *Life* magazine by Norman Parkinson in 1963. McCann is a renowned raconteur. He is now retired and behaving

himself'.³³ Many of the newspaper clippings in the McCann archive confirm Webb's description. It transpired that he designed one-off clothes for celebrities and members of the aristocracy eager to buy into the youth crazed fashions he produced. These included the singers, Cilla Black (1943 – 2015) and Dusty Springfield (1939 – 1999), the model Jean Shrimpton (b. 1942) and actress, Julie Christie (b. 1940). The newspaper articles represent him as a designer responsible for youth fashion (although it would be more accurate to describe him as one of a group of 1960s designers who pioneered a youthful feel to fashionable clothing). The journalist, Desmond Gorges wrote, 'Gerald McCann is the *enfant terrible* of the Rag Trade. He started the crazy world of teenage fashion as we know it today'³⁴ Many of the press articles within the archive, describe him as the first young Englishman to design clothes for young people. In the 1960s this gave him a similar status to pop stars such as The Beatles, as Desmond Gorges described, 'Wherever he goes he is mobbed by teenage girls, who tear his clothes, pull his hair, write him passionate letters, send him presents and form fan clubs all over the country'.³⁵ On one of his first visits to New York, Cable Fairchild News Service reported:

Now I've established my voice, says Gerald McCann young British fashion designer arriving today in New York. I'm going to do everything in fashion I ever wanted to do. At this stage I can either play it safe or go crazy. I'm going to go crazy.' - How crazy? 'In my spring collection, shorter than short skirts – fancy stockings, mad combinations of fabrics. You can get away with anything, even polka dots plus big checks if you do it all in black and white. Zipped-up coats for the day and crepe pant suits for evening. If you must have an evening wrap, well a

floor length military topcoat in that American mock pony. It's fabulous.³⁶

The article further described how:

McCann is typical of Young London – critical of the Establishment, scornful of tradition and ready to take a swipe at anyone. He's no admirer of London as a fashion center. He says it lacks the Raffine eye of Paris: is minus the marvelous little people who make it easy to find even exciting umbrella heads. He says English buyers are self-satisfied and some of the British glossies mindless.³⁷

The archive contains cuttings that detail how McCann was often invited to the USA by stores who were keen to promote him as a leading young British designer. He was asked, to introduce trunk shows, which are events where the designer's collection is shown to store personnel and customers at a venue such as a hotel, before the products are made available to the general public. For instance, there is an advertisement from an unidentified Brooklyn store. This invites the customer to meet Gerald McCann at a fashion show at which he discussed his work. It says:

He's here!!! With all that's young and great...flown in from London for this special event! Tune-in to the most turned on designer of London town. View his collection of mod...mod...modly wonderful looks, skinnied sleeves, on the rise waist-lines and lots of grannie look crocheted touches...total it, you'll have the kickiest...swingiest clothes you love to wear...ready, waiting in our hop-to Jr. Size

Centre.³⁸

The *Minneapolis Tribune* staff writer, Jacqueline Andre, interviewed him on tour where he declared, 'I try to make a girl's life interesting. I try to make her aware of herself and her youth. I try to imbue her with a certain style. It's the witty look and utterly simple'.³⁹ Throughout, McCann is celebrated for his youth and youthful approach to design and this pitching of his celebrity appears to be the lynch pin of his brand promotion.

THE CLOTHES

The newspaper and journal cuttings revealed insightful information about McCann's fashion collections and vision as a designer. He designed furs for the London store, Peter Robinson. The journalist, Veronica Papworth (d. 1992), wrote an article in 1964 for *The Sunday Express*, which featured his first collection of short, peppy fur coats. One coat was golden and white guanaco, which reversed to a slick and sporty gabardine overcoat, another was a white- rabbit coat banded in silver PVC.⁴⁰ She also reported on a 1970 collection in *The Sunday Express* that described an intensely feminine and sophisticated collection of Indian voile dresses. McCann said 'Voile makes the ladies want to *drift* instead of marching. The thing at the moment is to look terribly tailored and efficient in the daytime. Then towards the evening we go to bits- we all turn gentle and willowy'.⁴¹ The dresses were maxi length and made from a voile that only came in twelve yard lengths, as the weaving and block printing was produced by a small cottage industry.

McCann had turned his hand to menswear in the 1960s, although his first full collection

was not produced until 1970. The painter Ken Moore (b. 1936), wore his clothes in an unidentified magazine piece, photographed in his house at Chesterfield Hill, Mayfair.⁴² In the article, McCann declared that detail and subtlety are the keys to female and male fashion. He used classic lines but fabrics and colours were mixed unusually for interest. Moore wore a double-breasted, beige corduroy reefer jacket with a Prussian collar and ten buttons, teamed with paisley trousers in polished cotton. The menswear collections demonstrate some of McCann's versatility as a designer however these collections were only sporadic as he focused predominantly on womenswear. Further clothing-related artefacts from the archive such as photographs, costing sheets, fabrics, design sketches and fashion drawings were included in the exhibition of his work, *The Radical Decade*. The costing sheets detailed in Figure 7 were particularly useful as some of them still had fabrics attached, which give a feel for the type of cloth McCann selected for designs and his thinking in relation to cloth and three-dimensional form.



Figure 7. Costing sheets with sketches and fabrics and Butterick pattern designs displayed in *The Radical Decade* exhibition, Leeds 2016. Image courtesy of Butterick @ B4133 Image courtesy of The McCall Pattern Co., Inc. copyright @2017 and Ann Walls owner of the Gerald McCann archive. © Photograph courtesy of Kevin Almond.

THE RADICAL DECADE EXHIBITION

Much of Gerald McCann's archive detailed his career as a celebrity designer in London in the 1960s therefore, *The Radical Decade* exhibition focused on his work from this decade. (Figure 8) It adopted the title because it reflected the major shifts in fashion during this period and pitched McCann's work from 1960 - 1969 as emblematic of these changes. The 1960s was an exciting time in the history of fashion. London had transformed itself from a disconsolate, war-damaged city into the dazzling hub of youth

orientated 'Swinging London' and fashion was positioned at the heart of populist culture.⁴³ Following World War II (1939 - 1945), the city was faced with the task of rebuilding itself as well as repositioning itself within a global hierarchy of consumption, which included fashion. The fashion historian, Christopher Breward and the urban and historical geographer, David Gilbert argue that the rise of Swinging London could be paralleled with the fashion industry's gradual shift away from Paris and haute couture in terms of fashion leadership.⁴⁴ Many fashion historians have discussed how the emergence of London as a fashion force in the 1960s was due to the innovation of its designers and a willingness in the consumer to embrace the emerging zeitgeist. Fashion looked to the street and youth orientated markets, providing a socialist kind of fashion for the grand mass.⁴⁵ The fashion designer, Sylvia Ayton (b. 1937) was a contemporary of Gerald McCann's. She formed a business with designer, Zandra Rhodes (b.1940) and together they ran The Fulham Road Clothes Shop, from 1966 - 1969. Reflecting on this time Ayton said:

It was the swinging 60s and I was there. I was there at the beginning and swept on through and out the other side, it was the most exciting and wonderful and magical time, to be a designer then was 'fab'. To go from designing beautiful, elegant, grown up clothes to simple little shift dresses, suitable for us to wear in such a short time span, was not only amazing but a great relief for our minds and certainly our bodies.⁴⁶



Figure 8. *The Radical Decade* exhibition, Leeds 2016, curated by Caroline Riches. (The flower print dress purchased by Caroline Riches on ebay and the brown and cream dress was lent by Rosemary Norris). © Photograph courtesy of Hamish Irvine.

The rationale for mounting the exhibition evolved from the initial discovery of the McCann archive, combined with Leeds Arts University's burgeoning exhibition policy. Former major exhibitions at the university had focused on fine art related subjects but the university recognized they needed to diversify to reflect the increasingly high profile, design related activities within the institution. The location in Leeds, West Yorkshire, the traditional heartland of British textile manufacture also gave the display of fashion an increased gravitas. The exhibition proposal was internationally peer reviewed by an Exhibitions Advisory Board put together by the university. It included specialist reviewers from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and Goldsmiths College in London. One reviewer commented (anonymously), 'The Gerald McCann, exhibition

submission has the potential to realize an important and under-recognized fashion designer'.⁴⁷ They felt it would be useful to recognize the unique aspects of McCann's work particularly the patterns and the more do-it-yourself aspects of fashion in the 1960s. The exhibition demonstrated how a trained designer from the Royal College of Art could forge a viable career working in different levels of the fashion industry, from the mass market to designer ready to wear during the 1960s. The displays exploited the variety and richness of the archive material documenting the designer's life and times. The images mounted on the walls comprised mainly of press photographs and fashion illustrations from McCann's 1960s work. Much of this work had been discovered already window mounted by the designer. This could have been an attempt to record his work in preparation for an exhibition that never actually happened (Figure 9). Further archive material was displayed in glass cases, including fashion sketches, photographs of window displays, costing sheets of designs for factory production and McCann's designs for Butterick Patterns. There was also an edition of the *Radio Times* from the 1960s, featuring a television programme entitled, 'Clothes that Count', where Gerald was a guest presenter.⁴⁸ The press photographs further reveal McCann's celebrity status as a designer. The garments displayed in the exhibition demonstrated much about McCann's approaches to design, pattern cutting and manufacture in the 1960s. Symbolized by the mini skirt, which bared the legs, the fashion ideal of much of the mid- decade was to make women look like little girls, a stark contrast to the smartly groomed, elegant looks of the 1950s and very early 1960s. The cut of McCann's garments evokes this through the tiny, shrunken silhouettes of each style. As discussed his work was frequently included in *Vogue's* 'Young Ideas' section and popular looks such as his Peter Pan

collars and A-line silhouettes in gingham, polka dots and silk crepe, could be observed.



Figure 9. Gerald McCann press photographs from *The Radical Decade* exhibition, Leeds 2016. Images courtesy of Ann Walls owner of the Gerald McCann archive. © Photograph courtesy of Kevin Almond.

An advertisement was placed in *The Textile Society Newsletter* for any owners of McCann's 1960s creations to temporarily lend garments for the exhibition.⁴⁹ Two collectors replied and Barbara Cleveland's *Baby Doll* dress and Rosemary Morris's brown, crepe mini dress (Figure 10) were displayed. Both collectors provided interesting narratives related to their original Gerald McCann purchases. These recollections place

the garments in context and detail how the designer was sold in different boutiques outside London. In a letter, Barbara Cleveland described how she was inspired to buy her dress after looking at a photo-shoot of pretty cotton, 'Little Girl' dresses in *Honey* magazine in summer 1968.⁵⁰ She described how she acquired the dress because she loved the soft material and said, 'I bought it at a boutique in Bolton called Beeta Boutique. It was owned by an art teacher popular with the students. She stocked an interesting range of clothes, different from the run-of-the-mill chains.'⁵¹ Rosemary Morris's letter, describes how she bought her Gerald McCann dress in the summer of 1967 at the age of nineteen, from a boutique in Bold Street in Liverpool, called Lucinda Byre. She said, 'I don't remember what it cost but it was more expensive than my usual clothes budget. I loved the style, the colour and the fabric. It was a particularly favourite dress, which I would wear for parties and has been loved and cherished ever since.'⁵²



Figure 10. Gerald McCann outfits with Rosemary Morris's brown crepe mini dress at the front, displayed in *The Radical Decade* exhibition, Leeds 2016. Images courtesy of Ann Walls owner of the Gerald McCann archive. © Photograph courtesy of Hamish Irvine.

McCann also supplied two outfits from his archive and the curator acquired a purple crepe dress from an antique shop and a flower print dress from eBay. The empire line, leather and wool military-inspired coat was donated by collector, Abigail Hattersley. Originally, Abigail had contacted the Furniture, Textiles & Fashion Department, at the Victoria and Albert Museum, in London for more information about the coat. Being aware of the proposed *Radical Decade* exhibition, the fashion curator, Jenny Lister suggested she contact the exhibition curator. Abigail has since donated the coat to the Victoria and Albert Museum.⁵³ The garments displayed were all extremely wearable and of their time. The radically short skirts, shift dresses and shrunken silhouettes reflected the irreverent, and impudent boldness of 1960s fashion, in clothes that felt liberated from the elegant constraints of the previous decade. They also demonstrated the commerciality of McCann's work and its accessibility to the youth orientated consumer. When questioned about her thoughts on the garments, the curator said:

I was struck by the similarities between these clothes, particularly the short dresses and how my students dressed. Youthful, simple shapes with a modern aesthetic. Personally, I loved the black tailored coat, this would make anyone look fabulous. To me this clearly reflects the longevity of good design.⁵⁴

As the body of work was pitched at the heart of 1960s cultural phenomena, termed by the

curator, *The Radical Decade*, it made clear links between social and cultural changes and their influence on fashion. The visitors were invited to examine the details of the clothing and fabrics and contextualize these observations with the press reports and photographs of the designer. The archive material depicted him as a celebrity at the heart of this cultural milieu and allows the designs to come to life. Graduating from the Madge Garland tradition, McCann had maneuvered his own work to merge with the cultural Explosion of the 1960s.



Figure 11. Caroline Riches, curator of *The Radical Decade* exhibition and Gerald

McCann at the exhibition opening, 07 October 2016. Images courtesy of Ann Walls owner of the Gerald McCann archive. © Photograph courtesy of Hamish Irvine.

THE SIGNIFICANCE AND VALUE OF MCCANN'S WORK

The research has traced Gerald McCann's career path as well as identifying his approach to fashion design and his vision as a designer. A youthful and contemporary stylist, he was also one of the first British fashion designers to be lured from the UK by overseas manufacturers. This has set a trend in recent years, as the global fashion industry has recognized the flair and integrity of UK trained fashion designers and many graduates have been employed by overseas conglomerates.⁵⁵ McCann was one of the first designers to introduce young ideas to fashion, which began with his collaboration with Mary Quant and her boutique, Bazaar in 1955. His enduring reputation has been superseded by British designers who have gained a greater prominence in the documentation of 1960s fashion history, such as Mary Quant, Barbara Hulaniki (b.1936) and Ossie Clark (1942-1996). The journalist Cynthia Bateman of the *Lancashire Evening Post* felt McCann was successful as a young designer, designing for a fledgling Topshop because he produced clothes the young ones wanted and his success derived from the fact that he was young himself. In the same interview, McCann recognized a wider fashion market beyond the UK capital, as Bateman reported: 'He thinks there are two centers to England. Blackpool and London. Nowhere else do you get people spending so much money. Here in Blackpool there are an enormous amount of young people who are looking for clothes and have money to spend.'⁵⁶ McCann's career was central to the emergence of boutique culture and youth orientated shops on the UK high street. He helped to pioneer accessible, youthful fashion as more and more young people had increased incomes to

spend on fashionable clothes throughout the 1960s. McCann's departure from the UK at the beginning of the 1970s could be one of the reasons his name seems to have faded from the collective memory about key 1960s designers. Others, such as Quant, Foale and Tuffin etc, were still very much designers in Britain and as such were more accessible to UK based fashion journalists and historians.

The Victoria and Albert Museum describes McCann as having, 'An influential role in the development of the UK fashion industry.'⁵⁷ This influence could be identified in some of the key words that emerge when describing McCann's work: young; clean lined; modern detailing; stylish; wearable; good design; affordable. These words also encapsulate his overall vision as a fashion designer. In summary his enduring contributions to fashion include; his association with the opening of Topshop, the long-lasting, UK high street chain selling fashionable clothes for the youth market. He was one of the first fashion designers to become well known in the home sewing market, with his designs for Butterick Patterns. He was also one of the first UK designers to make a name for himself internationally, initially lured to New York on the crest of his 1960s celebrity and association with the Swinging Sixties as well as contributing greatly to the international export of British Fashion.

McCann's archive revealed many press cuttings that gloried in his celebrity status during the 1960s and it could be argued that he pioneered the celebrity trend so prevalent in contemporary fashion. Fashion designers such as Coco Chanel (1883-1971) and Christian Dior (1905-1957), became celebrities because they designed clothes that harnessed the needs of social change after World Wars I and II.⁵⁸ McCann became one of the first

modern 'celebrity' fashion designers because he exploited his personality and lifestyle to sell clothes. Today the concept of a celebrity designer is nothing new and there have been several examples of designers who have merged celebrity with fashion and commerce. This includes creators such as the pop star turned fashion designer Victoria Beckham (b. 1974) or designers such as Vivienne Westwood (b. 1941) who played a vital role in the creation of Punk Rock. She has appropriated culture and her status as a fashion designer to promote political causes becoming one of the most unconventional and outspoken 'celebrity' fashion designers in the world.⁵⁹

Articles, catalogues and books have documented how many designers have explored fashion archives for inspiration for designing and cutting contemporary fashion collections.⁶⁰ This can inform choices of fabric, silhouette, shape and the skills and technologies employed in the execution of the collection. The discovery of Gerald McCann's archive and *The Radical Decade* exhibition permitted the gathering, organization, presentation, and interpretation of information about a designer whose work had previously been unrecorded. Its documentation enriches the vocabulary of retrospective sources that can be accessed by contemporary designers.

CONCLUSION

What can ultimately be learnt from Gerald McCann's work? *The Radical Decade* exhibition demonstrated how a fashion designer's output embraced and reflected the spirit of the times, in this case the cultural explosion of the 1960s and how this body of work can continue to have relevance. Examining historical clothes encourages

contemporary fashion designers to think more deeply about the research and design process. Educators involved with current fashion teaching are often disappointed with research by students that relies heavily on Internet search engines and magazines. It is a challenge to develop student's understanding of the value of broader and more profound engagement with research at primary and secondary stages. In order to develop stronger design outcomes it is integral that fashion students develop an understanding of the frameworks in which they will operate as future professionals and that significant retrospective research can both strengthen and inform design practice. For example, the fashion students at Leeds Arts University were set a design project that asked them to create a fashion collection based on Gerald McCann's 1960s output. (Figure 12) The students viewed his work in the archive, studying garments in detail, producing observational drawings, touching and analyzing fabrics and discussing working methods and pattern cutting techniques. They were encouraged not to interpret the design and cut of historical dress literally, but do so in a new and contemporary way. The resulting designs and garments were interesting interpretations and a contemporary embodiment of Gerald McCann's Swinging Sixties aesthetic and the catchy title of an article celebrating his work, 'Nobody can like McCann can'.⁶¹ The project was also an example of how delving into the history of fashion helps the contemporary industry to understand the present, in order to sustain the commercial cycle of selling clothes as well as the continued evolution of the fashion industry itself.



Figure 12. Designers Olivia Palmer and Kate Oakley's dress created as part of the Leeds Arts University design project, 2016 that asked them to create a fashion collection based on the work of Gerald McCann. © Photograph courtesy of Karl Spencer.

Gerald McCann attended the opening of *The Radical Decade* exhibition and the curator remarked, how delighted he was that the university had afforded an opportunity to celebrate his work, which he hoped would inspire and inform budding fashion aficionados and the wider corpus of art students and public who visited the exhibition. Both the research for this article and for the exhibition, were opportunities to rediscover McCann's work and construct the first significant assessment of his position in global fashion. Although his contemporaries, such as Tuffin and Foale, Muir and Quant are better recorded in fashion history, they remained in the UK for the duration of their careers. McCann's relocation to the USA and work as a fashion designer in New York,

from the early 1970s to the 1990s, exploited his 'Swinging London' reputation and his name was established internationally, through global sales. Today his work is less well remembered in the USA than in the UK, as the examples of his work archived in the museum collections demonstrate. The overriding value in rehabilitating McCann's name derives from his 1960s contribution to shaping youth orientated, accessible fashion and that his legacy is equitable to those of all the 1960s fashion names that we do remember today.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the following people and organizations whose help and assistance with this research has been invaluable.

Sharon Bainbridge, Vanessa Denza, Kirsten Doble, Henrietta Goodden, Catriona McAra, Gerald McCann, Christine Riches, Ann Walls, Leeds Arts University and University of Leeds

Orcid Identifier: orcid.org/0000-0002-5194-0428

Dr Kevin Almond

University of Leeds^[1]Leeds LS2 9JT^[2]Tel: 0113 2431751^[3]Email:

K.Almond@leeds.ac.uk

Dr Kevin Almond is a lecturer in The School of Design, University of Leeds. Kevin's research focuses on pattern cutting, suffering in fashion and body shaping and he has published widely. He organized and chaired the first and second international conferences dedicated to pattern cutting. He is a former trustee of the Costume Society.

Caroline Riches

Leeds Arts University^[1] Blenheim Walk^[1] Leeds LS2 9AQ^[1] Tel: 0113 202800^[1] Email:
caroline.riches@leeds-art.ac.uk

Caroline Riches is a Lecturer in Fashion at Leeds Arts University. She is a graduate of the Royal College of Art Fashion School and a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Her specialisms are womenswear design and hand rendered fashion illustration. Research interests center around the use of archives in the teaching of fashion and the relevance of drawing within visual research.

REFERENCES

¹ 'Swinging London', *Time Magazine*, 15 April 1966, Vol. 87 No. 15.

² Iain R. Webb, *Foale and Tuffin: The Sixties. A Decade in Fashion* (London: ACC Editions, 2009), p. 98-99

³ Wikipedia, 'Gerald McCann (fashion designer)' in *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia* <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerald_McCann_\(fashion_designer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerald_McCann_(fashion_designer))> [accessed 10 October 2017].

⁴ Interview with Christine Riches, 08 August 2017.

⁵ Ibid ntervi

⁶ Caroline Riches curated, *The Radical Decade*. 07 October - 16 December 2016: Leeds College of Art, UK.

⁷ Kevin Almond, *The Radical Decade 07 October – 16 December 2016* (exhibition review) Leeds Arts University (formally Leeds College of Art and Design).

⁸ Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss *Basics of Qualitative Research* (London: Sage Publications, Inc, 2008), p. 12.

⁹ Victoria and Albert Museum, 'Interview with Gerald McCann', in *Victoria and Albert Museum* <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/i/gerald-mccann/>> [accessed 08 October 2016] (para. 10 of 10).

¹⁰ Prudence Glynn, '50 Years On', *The Times*, 12 December 1972,

¹¹ Lisa Cohan, *All We Know: Three Lives* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).

¹² Personal email communication with Henrietta Goodden, 08 February 2017.

¹³ Victoria and Albert Museum, 'Interview with Gerald McCann', in *Victoria and Albert Museum* <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/i/gerald-mccann/>> [accessed 08 October 2016] (para. 4 of 10).

¹⁴ Personal email communication with Marks and Spencer Archive, University of Leeds, 08 August 2016.

¹⁵ Personal email communication with Vanessa Denza, 30 August 2017.

¹⁶ Harry B. Popper was a fashion house based in Mayfair, London during the 1950s and

1960s. It was established by Harry Popper who ran it until his death in 1957. The couturiere Leslie Kaye (1925-2007) maintained and developed the business after Popper's, producing wholesale couture for London's smart set and the aristocracy.

¹⁷ Hyfler/Rosner, 'Leslie Kaye; Couturier who brought French-inspired fashion to Britain', in *The Times*, 16 May 2007

<https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.obituaries/SsoudsRBKJE> [accessed 10 October 2017].

¹⁸ Personal email communication with Vanessa Denza, 30 August 2017.

¹⁹ Webb, *Foale and Tuffin*, p. 99.

²⁰ Janey Ironside, 'Dressing for Candlelight' *The Observer*, 15 December 1963.

²¹ US Girls can get the Chelsea look: Brash New Breed of British Designers', *Life Magazine*, 18 October 1963.

https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=XIIEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA79&lpg=PA79&dq=gerald+mccann+%2B+fashion+designer&source=bl&ots=kfYtyXKSEF&sig=53pwTuJdwpEnAJGEJPor6Ai2ILc&hl=en&sa=X&ei=aLdbVLrEH8nsaISkdgK&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=gerald%20mccann%20%2B%20fashion%20designer&f=false [accessed 06

October 2016].

²² Richard Lester's film *The Knack ...and How to Get It* was produced by United Artists Corporation in 1965.

²³ Victoria and Albert Museum, 'Interview with Gerald McCann', in *Victoria and Albert Museum* <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/i/gerald-mccann/>> [accessed 08 October 2016] (para. 4 of 10).

²⁴ Paraphernalia was an American boutique and clothing line that began in 1965 backed by Puritan, a dress manufacturer who sought to cash in on the exploding youth market of the mid-1960s. The store employed some of the most innovative designers of the 1960s and imported designers from the UK including Gerald McCann and Foale and Tuffin.

²⁵ Personal email communication with Vanessa Denza, 30 August 2017.

²⁶ Liz Smith, 'Cutting Cloth to Suit the Pocket', *The Times*, 12 November 1991.

²⁷ English Oxford Living Dictionaries.com, 'Archive',

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/archive> [accessed 22 August 2017].

²⁸ Victoria and Albert Museum, 'V&A Search the Collections', in *Gerald McCann* <<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1386732/coat-mccann-gerald/>> [accessed 22 August 2017].

²⁹ Victoria and Albert Museum, 'V&A Search the Collections', in *Gerald McCann* <

³⁰ Gallery of Costume, Manchester, 'Search the Collections', *Gerald McCann* <

<http://manchesterartgallery.org/collections/search/collection/?id=1978.272>> [accessed 22 August 2017].

³¹ Personal email communication with Fleur Johnson of Fashion Museum, Bath, 22 August 2017.

³² Personal email communication with Valerie Steele of Museum of Fashion Institute of Technology, 22 August 2017.

³³ Webb, *Foale and Tuffin*, p. 215.

³⁴ From a photocopy of an unidentified newspaper; the article was titled, 'Maker of the Mods' by Desmond Gorges.

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ From a photocopy of a Cable Fairchild News Service report (date unidentified). The

article was titled, 'London RTW Designer Hits New York in Crazy Mood'.

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ From a photocopy of an unidentified press release for a Gerald McCann trunk show for the Jr. Size Center of a Brooklyn store, New York, USA in the mid-1960s. The article was titled, 'Meet Gerald McCann at a Fashion Show Commentated by Him!'

³⁹ From a photocopy of a *Minneapolis Tribune* report by Jaqueline Andre (date unidentified). The article was titled, 'Briton Objects to 'Overdoing' Chanel Suit'.

⁴⁰ Veronica Papworth, 'Bang' *The Sunday Express*, 15 October 1966.

⁴¹ Veronica Papworth, 'Turn Gentle and Willow in the Evening' *The Sunday Express*, 31 May 1970.

⁴² From a photocopy of an unidentified magazine; the article was titled, 'The real McCann'.

⁴³ For example, Shawn Levy, *Ready, Steady, Go!: Swinging London and the Invention of Cool* (London: Fourth Estate 2002, New Ed, 2003); D. Richard Truman, *Mods, Minis, and Madmen: A True Tale of Swinging London Culture in the 1960s* (London: Universe, 2010).

⁴⁴ Christopher Breward and David Gilbert, *Fashion's World Cities* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), p. x.

⁴⁵ Valerie Steele, *Paris Fashion* (Oxford: Berg, 1996), p. 282.

⁴⁶ Sylvia Ayton, 'A Love-Hate Relationship with Couture', *Costume*, 39 (2005), 117-127.

⁴⁷ Exhibition Advisory Board Feedback email from Catriona McAra, 2015. The information was anonymous feedback from one of the exhibition reviewers.

⁴⁸ 'Clothes that Count', BBC broadcasting, first broadcast 5 December 1967.

<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/whatwewore/5602.shtml>> [accessed 08 April 2017].

⁴⁹ *The Textile Society Newsletter*. Members of the Textile Society receive a newsletter three times a year, which details news and information about textile related events. The Textiles Society is a UK organization, launched in Manchester in 1982.

⁵⁰ Personal letter communication with Barbara Cleveland, undated 2016.

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Personal letter communication with Rosemary Morris, undated 2016.

⁵³ Jenny Lister is curator of Nineteenth-Century Textiles and Dress at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

⁵⁴ Personal email communication with Caroline Riches, curator of *The Radical Decade*, 08 August 2017.

⁵⁵ For example, Jess Carter-Morley, 'The Great British Fashion Invasion: How UK Designers are Taking on the World', in *The Guardian*

<<https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2014/mar/08/british-fashion-invasion-uk-designers-taking-on-world>> [accessed 28 August 2017]. Michael Page, 'International Demand for Fashion Candidates', in *Michael Page Retail and Fashion* <<https://www.michaelpage.co.uk/our-expertise/fashion/international-fashion>> [accessed 28 August 2017].

⁵⁶ Cynthia Bateman, 'Designing Pacesetter' *Lancashire Evening Post*, 15 October 1964.

⁵⁷ Victoria and Albert Museum, 'Gerald McCann', in *Gerald McCann*

<<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/g/gerald-mccann-1931/>> [accessed 28 August 2017].

⁵⁸ For instance, Lisa Chaney, *Chanel: An Intimate Life*, (London: Penguin, 2012).

Marie France Pochna, *Christian Dior: The Man Who Made the World Look Good*, (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co Ltd, 2008).

⁵⁹ Amanda Lauren, '10 of the Most Successful Celebrity Clothing Designers', in *The Richest* <http://www.therichest.com/expensive-lifestyle/fashion/10-of-the-most-successful-celebrity-clothing-designers/> [accessed 28 August 2017].

⁶⁰ For example, Judith Clark and Amy de la Haye, *Exhibiting Fashion: Before and After 1971*, (New York: Yale University Press, 2014); Marie Melchior Riegels and Birgitta Svensso, *Fashion and Museums: Theory and Practice (Dress, Body, Culture)* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Deirdre Murphy, 'Dialogues between past and present: Historic garments as source material for contemporary fashion design' in *V&A Online Journal* <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/journals/research-journal/issue-03/dialogues-between-past-and-present-historic-garments-as-source-material-for-contemporary-fashion-design/>>. [accessed 16 July 2017].

⁶¹ Miss Peelpants, 'Nobody Can Like McCann Can' in *get some vintage-a-peel* <<https://emmapeelpants.wordpress.com/>>. [accessed 20 September 2017].