



## **The Radical Decade**

**Caroline Riches**

The output is a curated exhibition called 'The Radical Decade', reviewed by Kevin Almond from University of Leeds. It explores the 1960s archive of fashion designer, Gerald McCann's (1931-2019) work. It aimed to rediscover and celebrate the work of the designer.

### **Research process**

Riches discovered McCann's large archive, stored in folders and multiple boxes in a garage. The enquiry involved the collection of this primary data. This included original designs, for example 'Uniform' (1960s). In addition to the archive material, a call was put out for people to donate original garments for exhibition in 'The Radical Decade'. Riches decided that the documentation of McCann's fashion illustrations was a key part of the exhibition.

### **Research insights**

The items of clothing displayed in the exhibition demonstrated McCann's approach to design, pattern cutting and manufacture in the 1960s. It seemed that the fashion ideal of the 1960s was to make women look like little girls. The cut of the clothing had evolved through the tiny silhouettes of each style, for example Peter Pan collars, the A line and 'Baby Doll' silhouettes. The exhibition demonstrated how a designer can manoeuvre their own work to reflect the zeitgeist, in this case the cultural explosion of the 1960s.

### **Dissemination**

The exhibition was disseminated at Blenheim Walk Gallery, Leeds Arts University, 7 October - 16 December 2016. The research was also explored at a one-day symposium, organised by Sharon Bainbridge. Riches was also asked to contribute to McCann's obituary in The Times in 2019.



# THE RADICAL DECADE

CURATED BY CAROLINE RICHES





















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**Contextual Information**



## THE RADICAL DECADE

REVIEWED BY KEVIN ALMOND (UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS)

**THE RADICAL DECADE** (7 October–16 December 2016), marks the first major fashion exhibition at Leeds College of Art. Curated by fashion lecturer, Caroline Riches, it explores the 1960s archive of fashion designer, Gerald McCann's work. The exhibition has also inspired a one-day symposium at the college, organised by Riches' colleague, Sharon Bainbridge. It examines the dynamic social, cultural and political changes in the 1960s and their impact on fashion. This was a radical decade for style, fashion, music, education and culture, which shifted established boundaries between race, class and gender.

Riches' interest in the work of Gerald McCann happened by accident. Her mother, a retired life drawing teacher, now holds recreational private drawing classes and Gerald McCann, who is now in his eighties, had begun to attend them. In conversation with Riches' mother, McCann revealed his glamorous past and Riches arranged to meet him at his home in Fleetwood, Lancashire. Riches discovered McCann's large archive, stored in folders and multiple boxes in a garage,

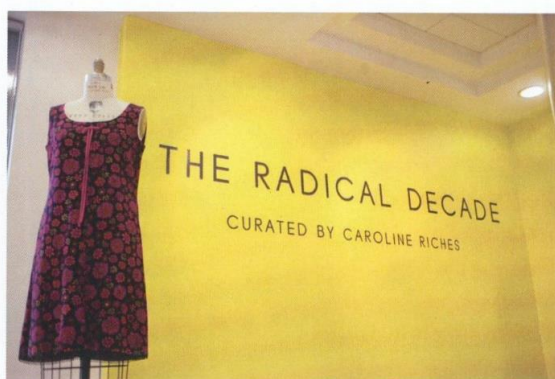


Photo: Hamish Irvine

somewhat decayed and discarded. Fascinated by this treasure trove, she was inspired to rediscover and celebrate the work of the designer and mount the exhibition. Her dual aims being to encourage students to develop their knowledge and interest in the history of fashion and to cultivate awareness of and develop skills in, primary research. This level of enquiry involves the collection of original primary data, which visitors to the exhibition are encouraged to acquire through both observation and handle of the displays.

The exhibition at first appears very clean and somewhat sparse however deeper investigation reveals the richness of the material documenting the designer's life and times. The images mounted on the walls comprise mainly of press photographs and fashion illustrations from McCann's 1960s work. Riches had discovered much of this work already window mounted by the designer. This had been an attempt to record his work in preparation for an exhibition that never actually happened.



Uniform, 1960s. Reproduced with kind permission of Ann and Sandy Walls.





Photo: Hamish Irvine

Further archive material was displayed in glass cases, such as fashion sketches, photographs of window displays, costing sheets of designs for factory production and McCann's designs for Butterick patterns. McCann had become synonymous as a designer for the growing home-sewing market by creating designs for Butterick. 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. The press photographs reveal McCann to be a celebrity designer from the decade and part of a coterie of other designers from 'Swinging London,' including Jean Muir, Foale and Tuffin and Mary Quant. 'Swinging London' was a term invented to describe the youth orientated phenomenon that emerged during the decade which advocated the modern and the new. It represented a period of optimism and the cultural revolution, which surfaced following years of post-war austerity.

The garments displayed reveal much about approaches to design, pattern cutting and manufacture in the 1960s. This was an emancipated time symbolised by the mini skirt, which exposed the legs. The fashion ideal of much of the decade was to make women look like little girls, a stark contrast to the smartly groomed and elegant looks of the 1950s. The cut of the garments displayed



Photo: Hamish Irvine

evokes this through the tiny, shrunken silhouettes of each style. McCann began his own business in 1963 and became a key supplier to the fashionable boutique Woolands'21, where the buyer, Vanessa Denza, noted that his designs were always top sellers. His work was frequently included in *Vogue's* 'Young Ideas' section and popular looks such as his Peter Pan collars and A line and 'Baby Doll' silhouettes in gingham, polka dots and silk crepe can be observed at the exhibition. Riches put out a call in, *The Textile Society Newsletter*, for any owners of McCann's 1960s creations to temporarily loan garments for the exhibition. Two collectors replied and Barbara Cleveland's, 'Baby Doll' dress and Rosemary Morris,' brown, crepe mini dress are displayed. McCann was able to supply two creations from his archive and Riches acquired a purple crepe dress from an antique shop in Matlock and a flower print dress from eBay. The empire line, leather and wool, military inspired coat was donated by Abigail Hattersley. Originally, Hattersley had contacted the Victoria and Albert Museum, in London for more information about the coat and being aware of the proposed exhibition, the fashion curator suggested she contact Riches.

Gerald McCann attended the exhibition opening, over which he presided, resplendently adorned in







Photo: Hamish Irvine

a shocking pink outfit. This served to evoke some of the aura of his days as a celebrity designer. Riches remarked, how impressed McCann was with the work of the fashion students from the College as well as the opportunity to celebrate his own work, which he hoped would both inspire and inform budding fashion aficionados and the wider body of art students and public who would visit the exhibition. This poses the question, 'what can be learned' from this display and indeed other retrospectives of the work of fashion designers. Firstly, the body of work has been pitched at the heart of 1960s cultural phenomena, termed by the curator, 'The Radical Decade.' This makes clear links between social and cultural changes and their influence on fashion. Through object based research, visitors are invited to focus upon examination of the details of clothing and fabric and contextualise these observations with the press reports and photographs of the designer. The archive material depicts him as a celebrity at the heart of this cultural milieu and allows the designs to come to life. I asked Riches if this