

Media History Monographs 16:3
(2013-2014)

ISSN 1940-8862

Fashion as Washington Journalism History:
Eleni Epstein and Her Three Decades
At the *Washington Star*

Kimberly Wilmot Voss
University of Central Florida

Lance Speere
University of Tampa

ABSTRACT

This is the story of Eleni Epstein, a significant fashion editor who reported from a city where clothing was important: Washington, D.C. Her section reflected changes in not only textiles but gender and race roles, society changes and economics. In her 30 years at the *Washington Star*, she grew to become a well regarded expert on fashion – an overlooked part of newspaper history. Information for Epstein came from her personal papers at the National Women and Media Collection, as well as from other archives across the country. Furthermore, her articles were collected for examination. The article concludes with a recommended list of other fashion editors worthy of study.

Fashion as Washington Journalism History: Eleni Epstein and Her Three Decades at the *Washington Star*

From the coat, the dress, and often the hat—a mainstay of media coverage of inauguration of the president of the United States is the question of what the First Lady will be wearing. The color, the design, and the designer of her outfit are used to give the public a hint of what kind of administration lays ahead. From Jacqueline Kennedy's pillbox hats to Nancy Reagan's red suits, Washington has played a role in defining fashion. More recently, as soon as Barack Obama became the official Democratic Party candidate, numerous newspapers devoted articles to Michelle Obama's fashion style.¹ Since he took office, her clothes have been endlessly scrutinized whether it was the cost of her clothes or the introduction of a new designer. In 2011, an entire book was devoted to examining Michelle Obama's fashion style and what it represents for women's roles in society. The book's author wrote: "Michelle Obama's style matters, and one of the reasons she exemplifies the power of style is that she is helping to liberate a generation of women from the false idea that style and substance are mutually exclusive."²

One of the most noticeable Washington, D.C., voices in translating that news in the post-World War II era through 1981 was the *Washington Star's*³ fashion editor Eleni Sakes Epstein. Until the women's liberation movement, one of the few places for women in journalism was the women's page, which typically covered the four Fs: family, fashion, food, and furnishings. It was in these areas that women were granted an authoritative voice. These women educated their communities

from the safety of food on their tables to the fashions worn in the workplace. Epstein's role working in the nation's capital for more than three decades makes her career especially interesting in understanding the social history of fashion journalism in Washington, D.C. She once wrote about the public's fascination with the First Lady's attire and role of women reporters in feeding that interest: "Male reporters give the nod to their female colleagues, and frequently run to them for help in describing 'that thing on her head.'"⁴

Examining Epstein's career offers a new look at women's page journalism in the post-World War II years and at the role a Washington woman played during this time period as a voice in fashion. It also provides an insight to the development of American fashion. Epstein found fashion to have a unique role in Washington society. After all, as she pointed out, it was her city's unique social events that required the high couture clothing that she wrote about. She said, "Washington women have always been interested in fashion. Our city is one of achievers and doers."⁵ It was a world that Epstein circulated within and would share with her readers as someone who could rarely afford many of the fashions she wrote about. Yet, she also wrote about the fashions of working women. She encouraged her readers to shop in Washington and would be insulted when she learned they instead had gone to New York City for their clothes.⁶

The women's pages of newspapers are rarely part of the historical studies of journalism or textiles given that women's magazines

Kimberly Voss is an associate professor and journalism area coordinator in the Nicholson School of Communication at the University of Central Florida. She earned her Ph.D. at the University of Maryland. Her research interests include women and media and food history. She blogs at www.womenspagehistory.com/. Lance Speere is a visiting assistant professor at the University of Tampa. Prior to coming to Tampa, Speere served on the faculty at Southern Illinois University and the University of Central Florida. Voss and Speere are the authors of "Marjorie Paxson: From Women's Editor to Publisher," *Media History Monographs*, 10:1.

have long dominated fashion journalism.⁷ Yet, women's magazines covered fashion differently as they sought to reach a national audience rather than the local audience of a newspaper. For example, when *Milwaukee Journal* fashion editor Aileen Ryan spoke about mini-skirts, it was not the short length she found problematic. She simply did not think they were practical in her city's cold winters.⁸ Newspaper's women's sections spoke to the women of individual communities and reached a broad cross-section of women. Women's page journalists had a significant influence on their community's views about clothing. In Epstein's case, she shared with her Washington readers her views on fashion and the fashion industry. Later, her influence went beyond her news-paper, as she gave numerous speeches and wrote the most complete biographical sketch of Pauline Trigere, a Paris-born designer of American sportswear and a fan of White House visits.⁹ Today, Trigere has a star on the Fashion Walk of Fame on Seventh Avenue in New York City.

This research crafts a biographical sketch of Eleni Epstein—a significant voice in newspaper fashion journalism. It adds to a previously marginalized part of journalism history—one of the four F's of the women's page: fashion. What makes her story significant is her location of Washington, D.C., where fashion played an important role. Her story is revealed through the documents housed in numerous archives, including her personal papers in the National Women and Media Collection. Other archives that included references to Epstein were in the New York Public Library, Brooklyn Museum Archives, and the Smithsonian. This paper concludes with a list of recommended fashion editors whose careers also deserve to be examined. Fashion helps define a time period—whether it was the end of an era of glove wearing or the acceptance of women wearing pants as a symbolic victory about equality.¹⁰

World War II fashion transition

Fashion has long played a part in Washington's social history—especially in the years following World War II when the American fashion industry blossomed. Prior to the war, Europe ruled the fashion world. Most designers were trained in Paris and it is difficult to overestimate the city's influence. Yet, by the summer of 1940, German soldiers occupied the city, and Paris was cut off from the rest of the world. It meant an opening for American designers that led to an erosion of European fashion dominance. In stepped American designers, and newspapers' fashion reporters were reporting on the trends.

During the war years, British rationing led to a restriction on clothing. Instead of fashionable looks, clothing began to reflect the need for utilitarian attire that the many new working women needed. In the United States, the L85 laws imposed limits on the use of silk and wool. The rules affected all kinds of clothing and limited the number of shoes a person could buy. For example, fashion maximums limited skirt lengths to seventy-two inches in circumference and two inches deep.¹¹ A 1940s issue of *Vogue* magazine featured a woman in a pantsuit—a style unheard of before that time and a style that would not reappear until the 1970s. For the first time, newspapers and magazines presented factory-made, ready-to-wear clothing along with couture. It was a significant change for fashion journalism.¹²

The destruction and rationing in Europe following the war allowed American fashion to develop. The American consumer culture grew and that included an emphasis on fashion. According to the Fashion Institute of Technology, "when World War II stemmed the flow of imported fashion news and imported originals, American fashion creativity, from sportswear to grand couture, came into full flower and recognition. American designers championed as their own American girls and the contemporary woman."¹³ While Dior's "New Look" would eventually attract inter-

national attention in 1947, the door had opened for American influence. This was noticed by women journalists who addressed what this change meant in their communities from the perspective of what women were wearing and what local businesses were selling.

While much of the American fashion world has focused on New York City and Los Angeles following World War II, Washington was often the place for fashion to be showcased. The wives of political leaders could set—or reject—trends in the clothing they wore to the various formal functions they attended. This was, of course, before there were many female lawmakers who could set the trends themselves. And these women were listening to what fashion editor Epstein had to say. For example, Epstein recalled getting a phone call from First Lady Betty Ford after Epstein had written about the New York designer Albert Capraro. Ford soon began wearing the designer's clothes,¹⁴ demonstrating Epstein's impact on what a First Lady might potentially wear.

And it is not only high fashion that has its place in Washington's apparel history. As social change occurred, it was reflected in the clothing that working women wore. This can be seen in the sometimes-heated debate about women being allowed to wear pants to work in the early 1970s. It was a symbolic gesture about the changing role of women in American society. Further social change can be traced through the first use of African American models and subjects in newspapers' fashion sections, as well as the coverage of fashions for people with disabilities. A newspaper's coverage can make an issue newsworthy as Epstein showed in her fashion articles.

Women's pages fit the need

Until the 1970s, most women journalists were restricted to women's sections other than those who briefly served as stunt girls, who raced around the world, and sob sisters, who covered heart-wrenching trials in a sensational manner.¹⁵ They were rarely allowed inside

newsrooms at most metropolitan newspapers other than wartime work. In peacetime, they returned to the women's pages with a new definition of news. In the years between World War II and the beginnings of the women's liberation movement, many women's page journalists were also redefining women's roles.

While men dominated the news and sports positions at newspapers, the fashion beat was a place for women to find their niche. The American Press Institute's 1951 industry publication *Fashion in Newspapers* revealed this concept: "No aspect of the news is further from the comprehension of the average male editor than fashion."¹⁶ This position put women in a unique role at most newspapers at the time.

Back at the *Washington Star*, Epstein treated her beat as seriously as those covering news or politics. As Epstein said of the fashion industry, "it is a multibillion-dollar business around the world. Whole economies were and are predicated on the fashion business. The fashion industry is part of social history itself."¹⁷ And, clothing is often the most obvious indication of social status.¹⁸ Fashion critic Teri Agins has echoed this concept:

For all its glamour and frivolity, fashion happens to be a relevant and powerful force in our lives. At every level of society, people care greatly about the way they look, which affects both their self-esteem and the way other people interact with them. And it has been true since the beginning of time that people from all walks of life make the effort to dress in style.¹⁹

A Washington, D.C., native, Epstein spent more than three decades at the *Washington Star*. Most of that time she spent translating fashion news and its intersection with Washington society and politics to her readership. She was a petite 5-foot-2-inches tall with an often-towering mane of black hair and became a celebrity figure in fashion journalism as



In the world of fashion journalism, Eleni Epstein became a celebrity like many of those she covered, including Julie Andrews.

much as she was someone who reported on it. She became a one-word moniker, identified by her byline of “Eleni” and recognized for her laughter and clicking high heels. She was also known for her sensitivity and kindness. For example, she loaned one of her husband’s suits to a young colleague who desperately needed formal clothing for a dressy event.²⁰ The “Eleni” persona was the real deal, as noted by her longtime friend, journalist Helen Thomas, who still remembers Epstein as a special person beloved by many.²¹

Newspaper fashion journalists had no real career path to follow after World War II, and like many other women, Epstein stumbled into her position. Unlike the women’s fashion magazines, there were no specific guidelines for newspapers’ fashion coverage. The American Press Institute noted, “How fashion news is to be played is a problem which must be determined by the individual paper in terms of its competition, the size of the competition, the size of the community, and the kinds of cloth-

ing available in the paper’s marketing area.”²² In Washington, Epstein took a typical journalism approach of focusing on the news closest to her readership and strove to show that top fashions were available in her hometown. She also saw that this beat had the ability to tell the stories of economic systems, gender roles, and social causes.

Under Epstein’s leadership, fashion coverage showcased the social life of Washington, D.C. She was especially sensitive that her hometown not be overshadowed by New York City and spent her career promoting the importance of her hometown and the world of politics to American fashion. According to an editor at the rival newspaper *The Washington Post*, Epstein’s coverage of the European fashion market brought attention to Washington.²³ and she frequently wrote about many of the designers who visited her city because she understood her audience’s needs and desires. As Epstein said of Washington women, “We had the money. We had the people who could wear the clothes. And we had the places to wear the clothes to.”²⁴

Birth of a fashion persona

Eleni Epstein was born Helen Sakes in Washington, D.C., in 1926 to parents proud of their Greek heritage. Her father ran a restaurant in Washington, D.C., on southeast Pennsylvania Avenue. One of her boyfriends was Washington Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson, who used to eat at her father’s restaurant. (*Time* magazine once described Jackson as one of Washington’s most eligible bachelors.²⁵) The society columns—the kinds of columns that would later run in her section—occasionally covered their dates.²⁶ In another column, a society writer described Jackson as Epstein’s date to a fashion show at the National Press Club.²⁷ Much of the early years of newspapers’ fashion journalism grew out of society coverage as women’s page journalists record-

ed who went to parties and what was worn.

She attended George Washington University and Columbia University before joining the *Washington Evening Star* during World War II as a copy assistant. There were already two “Helens” working at the newspaper when she was hired, so Helen Sakes became “Eleni”—a unique name befitting her future as a sophisticated fashion persona. She briefly left to work at a news wire service during the war before returning to the *Star*. By the time she was 21 years old, she rose to the position of fashion editor, her career paralleling the growth also being experienced by the *Star*’s expanding circulation (though unfortunately advertising sales would later decline and lead to the end of the newspaper years later).

While Epstein was an editor, she thought of herself first as a reporter and that fashion was simply her beat. In an interview long after her career was solidly established, she said, “I cover fashions just like another reporter would cover the White House.”²⁸ Epstein, like many women relegated to the women’s pages, was using the same news skills the men used in the newsroom. And at times, this meant pointing out how unchic some of the Washington wives were.²⁹

In a three-part series in 1949, which also ran in newspapers across the country, Epstein gave a behind-the-scenes look at the New York fashion manufacturing industry where nearly 80 percent of American dresses were produced. She spent a week at one of the dress manufacturers, Herbert Sondheim. She felt American women would not want copies of French designs rather than American designs regardless of the “snob appeal” that went along with the label of leading French couture designers.³⁰ In the next article, she described the environment: “It’s not a quiet place. There are traffic jams, trucks unloading dresses and bolts of fabric. Men walk quickly along carrying 15 to 20 fur collars on a hanger. One of these collars could very easily be the fur trim for your winter cloth coat.”³¹ The final

story in the series looked at the coverage of fashion. Epstein wrote, “The news-gathering facilities of the fashion industry are the largest of their kind in the world.”³²

In 1953, Epstein covered a fashion exhibit that included gowns from past Inaugural Balls, including one worn in 1861 at President Abraham Lincoln’s celebration.³³ The following year, she wrote about a Washington, D.C., fashion show called “The Government Girls.” The focus was on budget-conscious clothes for women who worked at the capital. The guest speaker was Ivy Baker Priest, the United States treasurer at the time.³⁴ Also that year, she covered a Turkish fashion show called “Fashion is an Art.” It was a benefit for the costume collection of the Smithsonian Institute. The honorary co-chairs were future First Lady Pat Nixon and the wife of the Turkish ambassador.³⁵

Through the years, she used her own sartorial sense of tailored black suits and jewelry reflecting her Greek heritage as one of many ways to highlight the Greek influence on fashion. In other example, in 1951 she collaborated with the Benaki Museum in Athens, Greece, to show Greek costumes in prints at the Brooklyn Museum. Brooklyn Museum Curator Michelle Murphy wrote to the director of the Benaki Museum that the collection would be helpful in the study of fashion.³⁶ Murphy also wrote that she was deeply indebted to Epstein for her help.³⁷ Epstein saw fashion as important to both art and business. She often worked with museums to use fashion as a resource,³⁸ then covering these exhibits in her section of the *Star*.³⁹

Epstein was becoming well known in Washington in the 1950s. She appeared as a fashion expert on a local program on WRC-TV. By 1953, she was the president of the Washington Fashion Group. Among the speakers she secured was Broadway star Dorothy Sarnoff⁴⁰—one of many celebrities she befriended in her career. The organization often made news by sponsoring speeches and fash-

ion shows that included fashion advice for both wealthy and working women. For example, during a 1954 talk, speakers advised women working in government about their work wardrobe and suggested a limited beauty regimen to save time.⁴¹

Journalist Meg Greenfield noted in her book about Washington that the migration of single woman who came to Washington during World War II quietly became some of the most influential women in the city: "They were secretaries and in time, perhaps, executive assistants or staff aides; but whatever they were titled, many of them were the person to see."⁴² Epstein's fashion coverage showed she was aware of this segment of her readership, too. After all, she worked because she had to in order to make ends meet. She may have been attending fancy balls, but she was dressed on a journalist's paycheck.

Epstein, the fashion editor, met fellow Washington journalist Sidney "Sid" Epstein when he joined the *Star* in 1954. Epstein worked at the *Washington Herald* in 1937 and then served in the war before returning as the *Herald's* city editor. The couple married in 1958, the second marriage for Sid Epstein, who was also the father of a daughter, Diane, from his first marriage. Most newspapers had policies against employees marrying each other and many women thus left their lower-paying positions. The couple went to *Star* Editor Benjamin McKelway with their plans and she offered to quit. He responded that if Eleni Epstein resigned, he would fire Sid Epstein.⁴³ Sid Epstein went on to become the *Star's* editor and associate publisher, following in the footsteps of the legendary editor Jim Bellows. Sid and Eleni became a popular Washington couple who regularly attended local social events⁴⁴ and remained married for 33 years—until her death in 1991.

Eleni's reporting exerts influence

Fashion journalism often lacked newspaper industry esteem and Epstein fought for high

standards for her section. In one letter to management, Epstein complained that she was not able to pay the models as well as other local fashion editors. She wrote a memo to her editor: "We are therefore unable to hire, on a regular basis, the most professional and best qualified local talent."⁴⁵ In a later letter to management, she complained of the lack of consultation for a fashion spread in the newspaper's magazine. She wrote: "It did not do what I feel a section should do: guide a woman in the new highlights of a season."⁴⁶

As a woman in journalism without many role models, Epstein became a member of the Women's National Press Club and the American Newspaper Women's Club, bonding with many other Washington women reporters and editors in the same predicament. For example, Epstein once advised her friend journalist Helen Thomas to make changes in her career. (Thomas, a Hearst Newspapers columnist and member of the White House Press Corps, served for fifty-seven years as a correspondent and White House bureau chief for United Press International.) In 1955, Epstein told Thomas that she had paid enough dues on the dawn patrol, working the hours when news was least likely to happen, and deserved a better position.⁴⁷

Epstein traveled regularly in the United States and Europe to cover fashion shows. Throughout the 1950s, she traveled to the west coast to cover the fashions of National California Press Week. In a *Los Angeles Times* story about the week, she was used as an expert source to describe her view of California's fashion. "Sportswear from California is quickly identified as different, good-looking, new and in heavenly colors," she said.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, the story ran under the dismissive headline describing the fashion writers as "Deadline Dolls."

In 1960, she wrote a lengthy article about the role of the White House in American fashion. The article followed a poll of fashion personalities that the *Star* conducted about the

role of the First Lady and her influence on clothing. The results were that it was a responsibility of the president's wife to promote fashion. Epstein wrote of the potential First Ladies: "The young sophisticate Jackie Kennedy who loves to buy elegant French clothes as well as those 'Made in America.' Neiman-Marcus fashion devotee Mrs. Lyndon Johnson? The quietly chic and always well-groomed Mrs. Richard Nixon."⁴⁹ In another story, she was quoted on her opinion of Lady Bird Johnson: "Mrs. Johnson has always been well dressed but her taste has become surer. She is not a flamboyant dresser, but since her husband became vice president, she has become more interested in clothes."⁵⁰



Epstein did not join other fashion reporters in slamming the introduction of the mini-skirt in the 1960s. Instead, she believed it helped focus women on fitness.

Epstein was invited to the White House for a 1961 gathering of women journalists—the first events of its kind ever held in the State Room. In the days leading up to luncheon, there was a debate over the wearing of hats. In a report of the event, it was noted that sixty percent “turned up with their heads covered.” Of the more than 200 guests invited by First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy, Epstein and her colleague society columnist Betty Beale were described as Washington, D.C., celebrities.⁵¹ (To get an idea of how significant society writing was considered in the city, consider the title of Beale’s memoir: *Power at Play, A Memoir of Parties, Politicians and the Presidents in My Bedroom*.⁵²)

Throughout the 1960s, fashion and its role in a changing society were developing. One of the most obvious symbols was the mini-skirt. According to a poll of newspaper fashion editors, 71 percent disliked the style. Epstein said she accepted the mini-skirt as long as it was worn well—with the right stockings and shoes.⁵³ She later looked back at that time as being about rebellion as well as a time of increased body awareness. In a later interview she said, “The hemline goes up and the hemline goes down. In the mid-1960s we had mini-skirts and that has evolved into the emphasis on fitness.”⁵⁴

Epstein’s views on some of the sparkly Washington fashions were noted in a 1966 *Time* magazine article. She cited a Capitol Hill debate on the nation’s dwindling silver resources and offered the following critique: “They keep wondering what’s happened to the silver supply. Well, I could tell them. It’s all on women’s backs.”⁵⁵ It is evident that after more than two decades in fashion journalism, Epstein had become an expert in her own right, comfortable with her own voice. A review of her raw interview materials shows that her interviews were much like conversations rather than questions-and-answers as she shared her opinions with designers.⁵⁶

It was also in the 1960s that Epstein’s

work earned nationwide newspaper industry respect. She won a Penney-Missouri Award for fashion coverage in 1960—the competition’s first year. The awards program was initiated at the University of Missouri in 1960 and funded by the J.C. Penney Company to raise the standards of women’s page content.⁵⁷ A review of the award-winning sections reflected a mix of hard and soft news. There were overall awards for women’s pages, as well as a specific award for fashion coverage. Epstein’s award for best fashion coverage included an all-expenses paid trip to Paris and the opportunity to attend a journalism workshop at the University of Missouri.⁵⁸

At the workshop, Epstein interacted with other fashion journalism leaders including the previously mentioned *Milwaukee Journal* fashion editor Aileen Ryan, who won three Penney-Missouri Awards during the 1960s and changed the role of newspapers’ fashion coverage in her early career.⁵⁹ Ryan made her first trip to New York’s fashion week in 1931. At that point, only magazine reporters and buyers were allowed into the fashion shows. Ryan would not accept that policy. She knocked on as many as twelve showroom doors a day and got access to about a third of them. She recounts that no one had heard of the *Milwaukee* newspaper, but she eventually prevailed and sent clips of her stories to those New York designers.⁶⁰ Ryan and Epstein shared the same view of their industry. As Ryan said of fashion journalism: “It is a highly practical, not a frivolous field. Fashion, indeed, permeates our lives.”⁶¹

In 1968, the White House hosted its first official fashion show. The designers and their work were chosen by three Washington, D.C., fashion editors, including Epstein. Only American work was shown and it was an all-volunteer project. According to an article about the event, “America’s First Ladies have become steadily more fashion conscious over the past 15 years, and the public, far from objecting, shows every sign of liking them that

way.”⁶²

In the late 1960s and into the 1970s, one fashion debate was whether women should wear pants in business and social situations. Dress reform had been an issue for decades, beginning with Amelia Bloomer and female suffrage. To some people, the wearing of pants symbolized a threat to gender distinctions at a changing time. For others, it was a form of liberation that was covered in the fashion pages.⁶³ In 1957, *The New York Times* noted that physician Mary Walker was awarded the Medal of Honor for being one of the first women to wear pants and “other masculine clothing in public.”⁶⁴ Pants were about more than clothing. Gail Collins’ 2009 book, *When Everything Changed*, used pants as a theme for the complexity of gender roles in America in the 1960s and 1970s.⁶⁵

In a 1969 story, Epstein was quoted as saying that in Washington, D.C., women were comfortable wearing pants on the street but not to the office.⁶⁶ The topic also came up in Epstein’s chapters about Trigere. The designer had been outspoken about women not wearing pants. She noted that her “divided skirts” were meant to be worn at home or to the “country club.”⁶⁷ The designer reversed her views in 1974 and began including pants in her collections.⁶⁸ There were some activities for which women regularly wore pants such as equestrian events or bicycling activities. Women factory workers had also worn pants since World War I. Yet, policies against women wearing pants remained in place for most offices and social occasions until the 1970s.⁶⁹ Another fashion history noted that, “Until the 1970s trousers for women were still widely regarded as informal and inappropriate for any sort of work.”⁷⁰ Also in 1972, the military announced that it was considering pants as part of a woman’s uniform. This policy was considered acceptable as long as the practice was done to attract more women to the service.⁷¹

The following year, the White House announced that women employees would be

allowed to wear pants to work for the first time—but not for social or political reasons. President Richard Nixon announced that the dress code was changed because the energy crisis meant that workplace temperatures would be lowered, but that did not stop him from chiding White House correspondent Helen Thomas for wearing pants during this time period. Her gender became more defining than her occupation.⁷² Ironically, the president's wife, Pat Nixon, was the first First Lady to wear pants publicly.⁷³

As Epstein became well known, she began receiving more recognitions. She was named the recipient of the EMBA Fur Fashion Excellence Award and was honored by the Advertising Club of Metropolitan Washington for her work.⁷⁴ In 1973, she had earned a FRANY (Fashion Reporter Award from New York) awarded by the City of New York and the New York Couture Business Council for best fashion reporting for newspapers with circulations higher than 400,000. A year later, she received one of Italy's highest civilian honors, the decoration of Cavaliere in the order *Al Merito Della Repubblica Italiana*, for outstanding fashion journalism. Fashion editors often made trips to European shows as these shows were predictors of later American designs as fashion typically operated on a trickle-down approach.⁷⁵

Epstein's sources were often well-known fashion designers. Her letters show that she had an open rapport with the fashion elite. One of these interviews was with the designer Bill Blass, whom she included in her article "The Designer Cooks." Blass signed a letter to her "fondly."⁷⁶ By 1975, she was approached to write a chapter in a Scribner's book on fashion designers.⁷⁷ She profiled the work of Trigere, who was known for her reversible coats. Today, Trigere has a star on the Fashion Walk of Fame in New York City and her vintage clothes are worn by actresses such as Wynona Ryder. "Trigere is an intellectual designer, the designer's designer," Epstein wrote. "In es-

sence, Trigere has provided made-to-order couture for the wholesale market—not an easy accomplishment."⁷⁸

In the multi-chapter work, Epstein referenced the designer's admiration for Washington, D.C. After Trigere's first visit to the White House, she said, "I felt the same emotion when I visited the President's house for the first time as I did when I revisited Versailles."⁷⁹ Trigere attended the swearing in of President John F. Kennedy and attended one of his Inaugural Balls.⁸⁰ This was a social world familiar to Epstein. Again, the formal functions that occurred in Washington provided a showcase for the kinds of fashions that Epstein covered.

While women were gaining more rights across the country at the end of the 1960s and 1970s, an executive at her newspaper did not apparently share the same view. While federal legislation had been passed in attempt to ensure equality in the workplace, John H. Kauffmann, president of the Evening Star Newspaper Company, presented a different take on equality. He said in a speech to women reporters: "We, as male employers, are supposed to treat women as equals. That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."⁸¹ The barriers women faced at newspapers were high. It would eventually take settlements from class-action lawsuits for true changes to be made in journalism in terms of gender equity.⁸²

Fashion and Reporting Evolve

The *Washington Star* was often described as "financially distressed" in the 1970s.⁸³ In 1975, the newspaper was sold to Joseph Allbritton for \$28.5 million. The newspaper was dominated by *The Washington Post* and in 1978 the *Star* was sold to the publishers of *Time* magazine, rival to *The Washington Post*-owned magazine *Newsweek*. At the time, the *Star* was losing about a million dollars a month.⁸⁴ There were rumors that the *Post* advertising salespersons were threatening the department stores whose ads helped support

the fashion pages: “The *Star* is going out of business, and if you take any business away from us, wait until we’re the only newspaper in town.”⁸⁵

While the newspaper was in the midst of financial difficulties, Epstein’s work was continuing to keep up with fashion developments. In the 1970s Epstein’s fashion coverage mirrored the new trend in fashion journalism. The Penney-Missouri Award judges who reviewed the 1977 newspaper fashion sections noted, “sociological overtones came through strongly, as in several articles relating career status and upward mobility to women’s clothing selection and utilization.”⁸⁶ There was less of a fashion hierarchy among the social classes and the elite designers as the democracy of clothing was becoming apparent. Epstein wrote about First Lady Betty Ford’s discovery of an unknown American designer: “It was a Frankie Welch dress made by a Japanese born seamstress in which Mrs. Ford had her portrait painted recently. The lime green silk was brought back by the Fords when they visited China recently.”⁸⁷

Epstein gave many talks about fashion during her career and those talks increased throughout the 1970s. A page from her speech list on “Talks Involving the *Star*’s Coverage of Fashion Abroad” showed that she gave at least eight speeches in six months in late 1974. Topics included executives in the field of fashion and the quality of life in Washington.⁸⁸ She later gave about four talks about fashion each year. In 1975, Epstein was runner-up for her coverage of men’s fashion – it was a sign of how fashion reporting was changing shifting from primarily only coverage of women’s clothing. The award was sponsored by the Men’s Fashion Association of America and the Menswear Retailers of America.⁸⁹ She had become as significant as the designers she had first covered and put her hometown on the fashion map.

By 1977, she was invited by the Smithsonian Institution to inaugurate its first “Fash-



Epstein interviewed and reported on all of the major designers working during the 1960s and 1970s, including this interview with Pierre Cardin.

ion as Culture” series.⁹⁰ In putting together the series, she noted, “Clothing styles experienced a dramatic transformation in the direction of a new freedom beginning in the 1960s. The old codes of proper dress for every occasion were radically revised or dropped altogether as the very concept of ‘correct clothing’ receded.”⁹¹ Epstein also contributed to the *Woman to Woman in Washington* publication. She again wrote that fashion was “not a frivolous thing.”⁹² She continued to assert the importance of the fashion industry as social, political, and financial forces. Her interview style was strongly developed and her expertise came through in her questions. For example,

the following question is from a 1977 interview with Bonnie Cashin, one of the foremost American fashion designers in the second half of the twentieth century:

Being American and designing for an American way of life which has become a way of life all over the world, some of your greatest fame is in Europe, some of your devotees and members of the Cashin cult. What has happened over this period of years, this do your own kind of thing, I find people returning to a certain simplicity in the way they want to dress and look which is of course a result of many factors. What do you think some of these factors are?⁹³

Epstein wrote a commentary in the November 1978 issue of the magazine, *Ambiance*. In the column, she wrote about luxury and status symbol clothing. She warned against buying the trendy designer clothing of the moment and argued for classic clothing.⁹⁴ In a series of articles that Epstein wrote in 1979, she addressed disability and fashion. This was two decades before Congress passed the Americans With Disabilities Act. She wrote about clothing for those in wheelchairs or using crutches. She received numerous letters after the series ran. One reader wrote, "The series of articles not only contributed to changing public attitudes toward the handicapped but also provided a very useful service to handicapped people by discussing the design principles."⁹⁵ Another wrote, "I thank you for the great visibility you have given to fashions for the handicapped."⁹⁶ Her attention to people with disabilities may have been due to her own battles throughout her adulthood with scleroderma, a vascular disease that would eventually take her life. The condition kept her in and out of the hospital, and the painful disease led to the amputation of the tips of several fingers. However, she never wrote about her physical struggles in her newspaper coverage.

Epstein's coverage reflected a new direction as fashion more often addressed the clothing of women working outside the home. In April 1980, Epstein's column, "This is . . . FASHION," featured fashions for women who walked to work or took the Metro. The idea came to her when she was walking from Cathedral Avenue to DuPont Circle to come to work. She wrote: "It's a way of focusing fashion attention on a large segment of our population, conserving energy and best of all, getting exercise."⁹⁷ Later that year, she included a fashion profile of an African-American Washington-area doctor, Dr. Peggy O. Brown. She received a letter of thank you from the chairman of the Minority Business Encouragement Commission: "For too long we have been crying out for more positive recognition of successful role models for black youth. Dr. Brown's selection for this article is a perfect way for your newspaper to respond to that request."⁹⁸

Not all of her mail was positive; fashion could be controversial. One letter writer chastised Epstein for a model wearing a bikini on the cover of her section. The reader wrote: "Fashion aside, the picture was indecent and in poor taste to be in such an obvious place."⁹⁹ In another letter, a reader attacked Epstein for a feature about women wearing furs. The reader wrote: "Animal skins belong on animals, not human beings. Aren't you aware of the terrible suffering inflicted on animals to further the fur trade? You should be! Or are you as ignorant as you are cruel?"¹⁰⁰ Epstein's response to the letter writer was typical of her sometimes sarcastic style:

Thank you for your interest and the trouble it took to sit down and write a note. I am always interested in various points of view. My reputation is neither that of being cruel or ignorant. You are entitled to your opinion, however. Thanks again. We like to hear from our readers.¹⁰¹

Her friends were also critical of her work

at times. One such letter was from Dorothy Whitney Frohman, who at that time was married to I. Phillips Frohman, a founder of Southeast Washington Compensation Clinic. She wrote: "Those fashion drawings in SOLAR POWER have got to go! I would take an educated guess these were done by a man," and "God knows I am no prude, but there are those who would say the girl on the dolphin is not just on the edge of—but is pornographic." Despite the critique, the letter is signed "Love."¹⁰²

Epstein was enough of a name in the fashion journalism world that in 1980, when *People* magazine was putting together a "best-dressed issue," it turned to Epstein for her opinion in the political world. Her fashion choice was Millicent Fenwick, the 70-year-old New Jersey congresswoman.¹⁰³ *People* magazine again featured Epstein and her request to designers to create fashions for Miss Piggy in an upcoming Muppets movie. The idea struck the designers' funny bone, according to Epstein. She got Perry Ellis to design an oversized coat, and he noted, "I don't think Miss Piggy gets involved with the serious side of her clothes." Norma Kamali designed a bathing suit with cutouts. Bill Blass created a slinky gown, noting, "I want her to wear something very slim, very soignée. Most blondes know black is becoming, and Miss Piggy can carry it off." Geoffrey Beene suggested trying a new hairstyle and wearing a strapless gown.¹⁰⁴

Epstein was still in the position of fashion editor when the *Washington Star* ceased publication in 1981 and was sold to longtime rival The Washington Post Company. The final newspaper edition of the *Star* featured a front-page letter from President Ronald Reagan beneath the headline "128 Years of Service Ending." There was a final tribute edition and one story featured a photo of a young Eleni Epstein above a current photo of the editor.¹⁰⁵

Epstein did not join *The Washington Post*

staff as several other reporters and editors did. However, she continued to be involved in the fashion industry. And in 1983, the Fashion Group established an annual \$2,500 scholarship to be given in Epstein's name. The scholarship continues today. A photo of Epstein appears in the Fashion Group International's records under "Prominent Individuals."¹⁰⁶ She was occasionally quoted in newspaper articles about fashion in the post-*Star* years.¹⁰⁷ On the speaking circuit, she gave a talk on her personal reminiscences about Christian Dior.¹⁰⁸ In 1990, she was one of the honorees at the anniversary of the Shoreham Hotel whose heyday was in World War II and the 1950s.¹⁰⁹ She and her husband had regularly dined there.

Epstein died in 1991 at the age of 65. Her death was noted in the journalism industry publication *Editor & Publisher*.¹¹⁰ Prior to her death, she donated her papers to the National Women and Media Collection, now located at the Missouri Historical Society. While fashion reporting rarely receives journalism history recognition, Epstein was recognized in her hometown. A year after her death, a black-tie event was held in her honor as part of a fashion festival in Washington, D.C.¹¹¹ A former colleague wrote of her, "She was a flash of color. She was genuine."¹¹² Epstein's story was later featured in the traveling exhibit of the National Women and Media Collection in the second half of 2007.¹¹³ The papers of several Penney-Missouri Award winners are included in this Collection, although Epstein is the only fashion writer included. When the Collection reached its twentieth anniversary, Epstein was one of the seven women featured in articles about significant women journalists.¹¹⁴

Fashion as a reflection of society

Despite the importance of clothing as an industry and in a person's individual life, scholarship on newspaper fashion reporting is lacking. Even the more recent research on

women in journalism has ignored the traditional women's section reporting, focusing more on women whose work reached the front pages of newspapers. Yet, areas like fashion journalism were where women were making their mark for decades. When it came to fashion journalism beginning in those post-World War II years, Epstein held a dominant position. She chronicled the fashions worn in the political world and in doing so served as a social critic. She also promoted the work of American designers at a changing time in the business.

While much of Epstein's work helped to establish the elite in the fashion industry, her work also reflected the styles of everyday working women. Epstein said in an interview, "fashions are reflected in the period we live in. After all, fashions don't just come into existence by accident. If you look back through history, you will see that changes that occurred during the Medieval Period on up through the Renaissance and Elizabethan Periods were not accidental changes."¹¹⁵ During her tenure as fashion editor, she guided her readers through numerous social changes. She addressed the differing fashions of a leisure and working class, she reported on the changing role of women from largely European couture to American sportswear.

Fashion journalism has been easy to dismiss as simply one of the four Fs of the women's pages—food, fashion, family, and furnishings—that reinforced a traditional role for women. Yet, the editors of these sections wielded the power to set trends and as the years went on, encouraged women to take on new roles. The beauty and fashion industries were often places where women could be successful in the years before they were accepted in other industries. An example can be made of Epstein's friend and a common member of the Washington social circle—Estee Lauder. Lauder revolutionized the beauty industry and became a celebrity on the Washington social scene as is documented in her

book, *Estee: A Success Story*.¹¹⁶ And, Epstein went to those events that Lauder described. Epstein's stepdaughter, Diane Morales, recalled the advice that she always dress her best because she might be invited to the White House on any given day.¹¹⁷

Epstein's career demonstrated a power within the fashion industry and among Washington readers that is often overlooked—the voice of a women's page journalist. Her coverage reflected the economic and social impact of an industry that is often not recognized.¹¹⁸ Consider the example of former U.S. Senator Bob Kerry who had described fashion as a frivolous activity. When he became president of New York's New School, which includes the influential Parsons School of Design, he said it made him understand that fashion was "a very serious business."¹¹⁹ That is a view that Eleni Epstein would appreciate, especially in her fashionable hometown of Washington, D.C.

Further fashion research

Little research has been devoted to the fashion sections or the fashion editors of newspapers. This is despite an increased awareness of clothing as part of social history. In August 2010, the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art featured an exhibit that examined how American women—and their clothing—had evolved over the years. The show was called "American Woman: Fashioning a National Identity," and it featured clothes created between 1890 and 1940 that show the gradual emancipation of the American woman, and her rise as an international symbol of style and beauty.¹²⁰ Of course, much of this history could also be found in the women's sections of newspapers, which documented fashion coverage on a local level. While this study of Epstein's career is a beginning, there are several other fashion editors who are worthy of study in the future. Below is a list of fashion editors who made a mark in their communities and documented changes in fashion.

Graydon Heartsill was a longtime fashion editor at the *Dallas Times Herald*, beginning in 1943, although she began writing for the newspaper as a sob sister. She was born in Dallas in 1906 and graduated from Southern Methodist University in 1927. Dallas was a significant fashion city because of the high-end Neiman Marcus department store, which hosted the country's first boutique fashion show.¹²¹ Five years later, she went to Europe to cover the first fashion shows after World War II. Her editor noted that she wrote about hemlines and shoulder padding and "also sent home wonderful stories about post-war France and its people."¹²² By July 1955, she was honored for attending the fashion shows in New York City twenty-five times.¹²³ Heartsill noted that the clothes that were shown at the major fashion shows would later be shown at Neiman Marcus.¹²⁴ She won numerous prizes for her work, including a Penney-Missouri Award for fashion writing. She died in 1989, eleven years after her byline had appeared in the newspaper.

Another significant fashion editor in the 1950s and 1960s was the *New York Herald Tribune* Fashion Editor Eugenia Sheppard. She was known for her way with words. This was how she wrote about the 1957 European fashion shows and the use of buttons and bows: "It's all terribly cute, but like giving a girl candy when she craves steak." Of Lanvin-Castillo's new extra-short skirt length: "Pretty sexy for a tall girl, but it may make a short one disappear altogether." Of Jean Dessès' "dovetail look": "Dresses have always been inspired by birds. I think it's time somebody came right out and told this nice guy to switch to biology or some other ology. Anything but birds."¹²⁵ This is how Sheppard is described in the book about the *New York Herald Tribune*, *The Paper*: "With the introduction in 1956 of her thrice-weekly column, 'Inside Fashion,' Sheppard revolutionized the journalism of style by adjusting its focus from inanimate fabric to the people who designed and wore it. . . . By de-

ciding whom and what to write about she could create a whole new pattern of social commentary."¹²⁶ The Eugenia Sheppard Award for journalism has been given annually since 1987 by the Council of Fashion Designers of America. According to *The New York Times*, she "became known for her breezy writing style, a personalized approach to fashion and her ability to spot trends even before the trend-setters realized they were setting them."¹²⁷ She died in 1984.

Another significant fashion reporter of the 1960s and early 1970s was Marian Christy before she became a celebrity columnist. She started as a fashion reporter at the *Boston Globe* in April 1965 and her work was later picked up by the syndicate U.P.I. Her work then ran in 104 different newspapers. For example, she described the see-through blouse from a late-1960s Saint Laurent fashion show: "Haute couture is a laboratory for new ideas. Saint Laurent was not advocating public near-nudity. It was poetic exaggeration to shock the eyes. Once you see the extreme overstatements, watered-down versions seem reasonable and palatable. This was the late sixties and Saint Laurent seemed to be suggesting that women's bodied should be unharnessed."¹²⁸ She won Penney-Missouri Awards in 1966, 1968 and 1970. Christy took a progressive, sociological approach to fashion.¹²⁹ Her less than flattering report on the Paris fashion show led to a brief revocation of her French press card in 1972. By 1979, two department store buyers pressured editors to have Christy write positive news. She wrote, "The stores argued I should be 'selling' fashion, not talking about its warts."¹³⁰ She left the position of fashion writer rather than violate her ethics.

Barbara Cloud reported about fashion for the Pittsburgh readership for 33 years. Her writing was truly for a local market. She had no typing skills or journalism experience when she arrived in her new city in April 1957—wearing hats and gloves. Yet, she developed her own fashion reporting style and influence.



Epstein regularly covered European fashion shows including this 1972 event in Paris.

As she noted, it was not every reporter who could call and get through to Ralph Lauren.¹³¹ (This was because she first met him selling neckties at Kaufmann's Department Store in Pittsburgh.¹³² After a more than 100-year reign, the store became a Macy's in 2006.) She interviewed Calvin Klein in 1972 who predicted that women would wear pants for the next decade.¹³³ She wrote about Pittsburgh native model Naomi Simms. She was the first African-American model to appear in a

national television commercial and the first to appear on the cover of a major women's magazine, the *Ladies Home Journal*.¹³⁴ She took her readers behind the scenes of a Dior custom shoe salon in Paris.¹³⁵ She attended the first White House fashion show.¹³⁶ In 2010, she was inducted into the Pittsburgh Fashion Hall of Fame.

Judy Lunn took a different path to her position as a fashion editor. While she had a knack for writing, it was fashion that caught her interest so she attended the Rhode Island School of Design to study fashion design. (She liked to draw and design but hated to sew.) She and her family relocated to Houston in 1968 and she took time off to be a stay-at-home mother for her two daughters, Linda and Susan. It was Linda who led her mother to the post of fashion writer. In hopes of earning some change, Linda knocked on a neighbor's door with an offer to recite the Pledge of Allegiance for a quarter. That neighbor was the fashion editor of the *Houston Post*, Lynn Van Deusen. She asked to meet the mother of the precocious child and her fashion journalism began in 1971. Lunn developed the Fashion Today section for the *Post* and won many national fashion prizes with that section, including a Penney-Missouri Award. She was not fazed by the celebrity of fashion although she had met the big names. She traveled to the major fashion markets twice a year, every year. She believed that Tommy Hilfiger was a non-designer, instead just a smart marketer. She believed that when Versace died, the magic died with him.¹³⁷ She died suddenly as the result of a reaction to an insect bite.

These women are worthy of study for the contribution they made to journalism history. They contributed to the social, economic, and textile development of their communities. Because these women covered soft news rather than hard news, they have been largely left out of much of journalism history. They deserve to be included just as food journalism is just now earning respect. In the summer of 2011, the

Bible for journalists, the Associated Press Stylebook, added a special section devoted to food reporting. In a press release, Colleen Newvine, product manager of the AP Stylebook, explained the rationale for the new section: “With all the cooking shows, blogs and magazines focusing on food, as well as growing interest in organic and locally sourced foods, our new food section feels timely and on trend.”¹³⁸ Fashion journalism, likewise, deserves to have its stature raised and its content studied.

Images by permission, the Papers of Eleni Epstein:
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Notes

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