



Black crepe dress with abstracted crinoline print by Jack Liebman, ca. 1940s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2014.07.024. Photographed by Hannah Dobbie.

# STUDY OF A 1940s COCKTAIL DRESS BY JACK LIEBMAN

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This post examines a black cocktail dress from the 1940s by Montreal-based manufacturer Jack Liebman. His design is characterized by its sophisticated colour scheme, flattering shape, and unique pattern. Dresses of the 1940s typically fell below the knee, the shoulders were usually squared, and the natural waist was often belted (note 1). **This Jack Liebman dress shares many features in common with other wartime garments, and yet also blurs the perception of what a dress from the 1940s should look like.**

This dress is made of a fine black crepe. There are bust darts, shoulder darts, two hidden zippers, and large sewn-in shoulder pads. The dress's skirt is attached to the bodice at the natural waistline. The fullness this creates falls delicately to form a soft and flowing garment. One of this dress's most interesting details is the addition of two draped panels that hang over the hips. (note 2). This dress is machine stitched with black thread. The tight even stitches have held up in some places, but are beginning to loosen and break in areas such as the waist and side seams. The garment is unlined, thus making all internal seams visible. The unfinished edges of the seam allowances are significantly frayed. Along the dress's inner neckline is a Jack Liebman label. It reads "Original Fashion Preferred Styled by Jack Liebman".

In addition to the intermittent seam breakage, this garment shows various signs of wear. There are holes in the side bodice and back skirt seams where the thread tore completely. The Jack Liebman label is significantly discoloured. There are several dark spots, implying untreated stains. Attached to each side seam at the waist is a corded thread suggesting that at one time there may have been a belt to accompany the dress.

This dress is stylish and unique, however it lacks fine details such as lining and high quality thread. Because of the absence of refinement in this garment's construction, it can be conjectured that this dress was sold at a mid-level price point. Little is known about Jack Liebman Dresses Ltd., aside from its location at 423 Major Street, Place 3008, Montreal.

The impression this dress makes is one of stylish poise. The name of the original owner is unknown; it was purchased from a Salvation Army store in 1965 by collector Alan Suddon (note 3). **The unique pattern and interesting details combine to conjure an image of an elegant Canadian woman marching through the cobblestone streets of Montreal in this flowing dress.** The fabric would swoosh around her knees as she walked and the hip panels would bounce slightly with each step. **This woman would match the crowd with her broadly padded shoulders and cinched natural waist, but she would stand out in it because of the boldness of the black crepe and the swirling, playful print that adorns it.** The silhouette is very indicative of the 1940s and suggests femininity, poise, and vitality.

**The hip panels on this dress are reminiscent of eighteenth-century panniers.** Panniers began as round hoops that attached to skirts. They gradually became flatter from front to back and wider in the hips. These caged apparatuses grew to be very large by the middle of the century; they could span as long as six feet from hip to hip (note 4). An alternative form of panniers was a bag-like structure that tied around the wearer's waist to enhance the hips. These styles were very popular for most of the eighteenth century, however they began to fade away in the 1780s (note 5). **The swooping panels on Jack Liebman's garment act as a sort of deflated pannier. They draw attention to the hips, just as historic hoops did.**



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**This historic reference is interesting on its own, however, it is enhanced by the choice of textile. The figures depicted on the textile are wearing crinolines; a second nod to the fashions of the past.** The cage crinoline developed in the mid-nineteenth century, replacing petticoats and freeing the wearer's legs beneath her skirt. Jessica Glasscock, a research associate at the Met Museum, describes the expansive silhouette achieved with the cage crinoline; "Made of hoops of whalebone, cane, or steel held together with cloth tapes or encased in fabric, the light, effective support of the cage crinoline allowed dresses to achieve an expanse as great or greater than that provided by the eighteenth-century panniers" (note 6). The crinoline came to replace the pannier, but both were meant to enhance and exaggerate the hips of their wearers.

It is interesting to compare the structure of seventeenth and eighteenth century bodies to the relatively free one of the 1940s. Wartime garments featured natural waists and loose, flowing skirts. Women began wearing pants. The fashions of this period were rooted in utility (note 7). Perhaps this is why Jack Liebman chose to include references to such seemingly whimsical and extravagant periods of fashion history.



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An additional detail that is interesting to note is the dating of the dress. This garment came from the same period as the “New Look”. This was Dior’s first collection and it marked a shift from the days of practicality and fabric shortages to a time of prosperity and femininity. The “New Look” was famous for its cinched waist, full skirt, and extreme elegance (note 8). Jack Liebman’s dress features all of these characteristics, while also including unique hip panels that, while comparable to panniers, also resemble a peplum. Many of Dior’s designs featured peplums, as did various other garments throughout the 1950s (note 9). **This Jack Liebman design is a good example of how the “New Look” echoed through fashion at different price points. Although Dior is credited with introducing the style, many designers all over the world were migrating towards these silhouettes before 1947.**

Jack Liebman was a participant in the growing Canadian garment industry of the twentieth century and his garments contribute to our nation’s rich fashion history (note 10).

## Notes

**Note 1:** "1940s Women's Clothing," University of Vermont Humanities, accessed January 15, 2017, [https://www.uvm.edu/landscape/dating/clothing\\_and\\_hair/1940s\\_clothing\\_women.php](https://www.uvm.edu/landscape/dating/clothing_and_hair/1940s_clothing_women.php).

**Note 2:** The hip panels are made of two roughly rectangular panels. The shortest sides of these rectangles are sewn along centre front to the side seam and from the side seam to centre back, thus allowing the length of the panel to hang over the hip. The fabric from these panels are gathered where attached to the waist seam.

**Note 3:** Alan Suddon was a private collector who amassed the garments in the Suddon-Cleaver Collection. See Will Sloan, "A Stitch from Time," *Ryerson Today*, December 12, 2014. [http://www.ryerson.ca/news/news/General\\_Public/20141212-a-stitch-from-time/](http://www.ryerson.ca/news/news/General_Public/20141212-a-stitch-from-time/)

**Note 4:** Yvette Mahe, "History of Women's Hooped Petticoats". *Fashion In Time*. 2013. [www.fashionintime.org](http://www.fashionintime.org). January 19, 2017. <http://www.fashionintime.org/history-womens-hooped-petticoats/3/>

**Note 5:** To learn more about the history of panniers, visit, "Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History - Panniers," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed January 19, 2017, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1973.65.2/>

**Note 6:** See note 5.

**Note 7:** See note 1.

**Note 8:** To learn more about Dior's "New Look", visit, "Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History - Christian Dior (1905-1957)," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed January 23, 2017, [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/dior/hd\\_dior.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/dior/hd_dior.htm).

**Note 9:** See note 8.

**Note 10:** To learn more about the history of Canada's garment industry, visit, "The Garment Industry and Retailing in Canada", Berg Fashion Library, accessed February 6, 2017, <https://www-bloomsburyfashioncentral-com.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/products/berg-fashion-library/encyclopedia/berg-encyclopedia-of-world-dress-and-fashion-the-united-states-and-canada/the-garment-industry-and-retailing-in-canada>

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