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London Leads the World: The reinvention of London fashion in the aftermath of the Second World War

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Abstract

In the face of widespread damage and disruptive government regulation, London fashion was presented with an opportunity to redefine and reinvent itself in the aftermath of the Second World War. This paper explores how the impacts of the conflict fused with broader changes in manufacturing and promotion to force structural changes in London's fashion industry in the late 1940s that resulted in the city developing a reputation as a centre of design rather than production. Indications of this shift from production to design can be seen particularly clearly in the rising cultural capital of the London 'brand' in mid-market ready-to-wear fashions for women. By focusing on this sector of the industry, this paper adds a new perspective to previous studies of post-war fashion by looking beyond the activities of a narrow band of high-end fashion houses. From the geographies of manufacturing to the symbolic use of London postcodes on garment labels, it compiles a comprehensive impression of the significant role played by London's mid-market fashion manufacturers in managing the fashionable reputation of the city at a time when its industry faced catastrophic decline and reflects on how this shaped London's development as a fashion city in subsequent decades.

Key Words

London, fashion city, regulation, Second World War, manufacture, branding

“Paris makes fashion, London makes clothes”

Guide books to contemporary London often encourage visitors to experience the city through fashion. Suggested itineraries include a wander down Savile Row and a visit to Selfridge’s department store before heading to the Victoria and Albert Museum to gaze at fine silk brocades and the work of Alexander McQueen. Yet London’s history as a centre of fashion mass-manufacture remains conspicuously absent from these celebrations of the city’s fashion heritage. Walking through London today there are few visible markers that, where the steel and glass office blocks of the City now dominate the skyline, once stood garment workrooms, factories and wholesale offices. However, far from indicating that fashion is any less important to London’s identity now than it was when the city was a centre of fashion manufacture, this erasure of London’s industrial past in popular understandings of its status as a fashion city evidences how successful the city’s fashion industry has been in reinventing its symbolic reputation as a centre of creative design, rather than a hub for skilled manufacture.

London is not the first or only fashion city to reinvent itself. These mutations are made possible because there is no single definition of what constitutes a fashion city. In fact, successful fashion cities are varied, multiple, and evolve over time in response to changing conditions (Casadei and Gilbert 2018; Godart 2014; Rocamora 2009; Gilbert 2006). However, the extent to which London’s fashionable reputation changed in the mid twentieth century was particularly dramatic and exemplifies how existing fashion cities respond to changing local, national and international circumstances in order to maintain or elevate their status. In the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, London developed an international reputation as a centre for the manufacture of quality tailored men’s and womenswear garments, in addition to ready-to-wear wholesale goods including blouses and dresses (Breward, Ehrman and Evans 2004). This output was not considered particularly fashion forward and generally closely followed styles set by Paris, the hub of creative fashion design. As *Draper’s Record* put it in 1947, “Paris makes fashion, London makes clothes” (September 27 1947, 21). However, the Second World War and the Nazi occupation of Paris disrupted these established roles, giving London a chance to “Lead the World” in designing new fashion trends (*The Maker-Up*, September 1947, 154-155).

Historians have argued that the combination of Paris's weakened position and the organisation of London's fashion designers under two newly formed industry groups, the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers and the London Model House Group, allowed London to gain increased status as an internationally important fashion city (Ehrman 2015; Tregenza 2014; Walford 2011; Waddell 2001). This article expands upon these arguments by investigating the processes by which London's growing cultural capital as a creative and symbolic fashion city were impacted by the Second World War, and arguing that greater credit for this change should be given to London's mid-market fashion manufacturers. It particularly explores how individual, company-level decisions about how to respond to government policy, technology, and social change played a role in restructuring the city's fashion industry and reinventing its symbolic cultural capital.

Looking at data from the Census, the Board of Trade's *Censuses of Production* as well as the listings of garment industry businesses in *Kelly's Post Office London Directories*, this paper begins by revealing something of the complex relationship between London's economy and its fashionable geographies and explains how the Second World War fused with longer term trends in the fashion industry, resulting in negative consequences for fashion production in London. Together these sources clearly demonstrate that the 1940s witnessed a re-alignment of garment workers and factories, changes in the type of products being made in London, and the overall diminishing national importance of London as a production centre for fashion. The paper then examines how London fashion manufacturers responded to this increase in outsourcing and the growing importance of mass manufacture by rebranding themselves and their connections to the city. Analysis of their advertising and labelling reveals how these mid-market firms succeeded in changing the symbolic meaning of London fashion through their combined activities, resulting in London fashion becoming a symbolic concept more than a tangible geography of material production.

Many of the firms discussed in this article are not well-known today. Often small and flexible, few comprehensive business records survive and frequent name changes, mergers and practices of outsourcing further complicate the process of tracing their histories. This paper has used the trade press to identify firms that were being discussed as innovative or significant in contemporary discourse. These sources, combined with extant garments

representing their output, have further made it possible to trace the trajectory of these businesses over the period and understand the impact of different approaches taken by both new innovators and already established firms attempting to rebrand and restructure to adapt to the post-war economy.

The impact of the Second World War on the geographies of fashionable production in London

The British fashion industry was subject to significant disruption as a result of the Second World War, both in the form of damage caused by aerial bombing to key sites of fashionable production and consumption, and through structural changes necessitated by government regulation and austerity policies that restricted fabric supply and introduced design regulations and price controls. Broadly speaking, wartime legislation and disruption acted as a catalyst for the growth of mass-manufacture ready-to-wear fashions and resulted in deskilling in areas, such as London, where production was traditionally concentrated around tailoring and higher-end goods.

Although there is a long tradition of wars promoting standardisation in fashion manufacture, the type of production encouraged by British government regulation during and after the Second World War marked a particularly dramatic break from the past (Green 1997, 30-31). These changes were primarily the result of two sets of key legislation: the Making of Civilian Clothing (Restrictions) orders, which regulated the designs, cuts and embellishment of commercially produced clothing between 1942 and 1946, and Utility Apparel orders, which regulated the supply of cloth to manufacturers and the price of clothing between 1941 and 1952 (Brown 2014; Howell 2013).

Utility Apparel orders boosted the rise of mass market ready-to-wear fashions because the government's licensing of Utility production encouraged a concentration of the industry, which helped large manufacturers keep overheads low (Sladen 1995). The Utility Scheme specified that production runs of each style should exceed 1,000 items, whereas before the war the industry average was around 100 (Boydell 2012, 28). Utility manufacturers were guaranteed their costs, and competition was minimised as no new firms were allowed to start

up unless guaranteed a coupon float. This scheme benefitted larger-scale manufacturers by ensuring a seller's market, with manufacturers guaranteed custom by retailers "able to sell all they can get" (*Draper's Record*, August 18, 1945, 9). The 1948 *Census of Production* shows that the British industry responded with a dramatic growth in the number of garment making businesses exceeding 100 employees (Board of Trade 1952, Table 4). However, the growing profitability and dominance of large-scale producers elsewhere in the country was damaging to London's wholesale industry, which was overwhelmingly comprised of smaller firms, typically with only 10 to 20 machines and specialising in high-end tailored goods. Post-war membership records of the London branch of the National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers (NUTGW) reveal the make-up of such workforces, a typical example of which can be found in J. Schwarz Mantles Ltd of 20-25 Planet Street, London E1. In 1948, this firm employed 16 people to work in its factory, a workforce comprised of 6 machinists (2 of which were specialists, trained to work the overlocking machines), 4 tailors, 4 pressers and 2 cutters (NUTGW Membership Records. Hackney Archives, D/S/24/3/16). The high ratio of highly-paid pressers and tailors to machinists demonstrates the quantity of skilled and varied work needed to produce tailored outerwear in the factory, and the relative expense involved in its production.

Even where smaller London firms were producing higher-quality goods than their larger, mass-manufacture counterparts, they increasingly struggled to compete due to the system of strict price ceilings that the government incorporated into the Utility scheme in an attempt to control inflation on fashion goods (*Draper's Record*, February 23, 1948, 18). Price ceilings regulated the maximum sale price and percentage profits that could be achieved by manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers based on the types of goods produced. However, price ceilings did not take into account the fact that small-scale, quality workmanship required higher labour costs, and so benefitted larger firms with the resources to set up streamlined production-line processes and invest in time-saving machinery—such as overlockers and hem-levelling machines.¹

¹ Adverts in the trade press during the late 1940s reveal a barrage of new machinery available to factories, including imported "American" machines, capable of leveling hems and hemming and pinking a skirt "in one operation," which was particularly useful as skirts became longer and fuller during this period (*Draper's Record*, March 9, 1946, 21).

The government further curtailed the elaborate pattern cutting and embellishment skills practiced by London's tailors and dressmakers between May 1942 and April 1946 through the implementation of the Making of Civilian Clothing (Restrictions) orders. More commonly known as austerity regulations or restrictions, these severely restricted complex garment construction and surface decoration in order to eliminate unnecessary materials and labour at a time when such things were in short supply (Howell 2013). Although official austerity restrictions were entirely revoked in 1946, embroidery and couture making techniques would remain suppressed in London, as high rates of purchase tax on luxury materials continued to dampen demand for the high-end output of retail bespoke workrooms, causing many to cease recruiting and training new staff.

In addition to government regulation, the Second World War also posed localised problems to London's fashion manufacturers, with aerial bombing disrupting the established locations and networks of the city's fashion industry. According to census returns, over the twenty-year period between 1931 and 1952 the number of people employed in the garment industry in London almost halved from 194,384 to 98,108. The breakdown of these total figures, borough by borough, clearly shows the impact of bombing on certain areas that had traditionally been centres for garment manufacture. Some of the largest falls occurred in boroughs such as Bethnal Green, Islington, Poplar and Shoreditch, which suffered badly during the bombing raids of the blitz, meaning that many garment workers lost their homes and workplaces. Staggeringly, the number of garment workers recorded as living in Stepney fell by 21,147, or 69.8 per cent., during this period

This overall impact of the Second World War on London's fashion industry can be seen starkly in the 1948 *Census of Production*. The figures show that London still dominated the landscape of British fashion with 39.6 per cent. of the nation's garment-making establishments located in the city, producing 34.9 per cent. of national gross output. However, when London's figures are compared to the 1935 and 1931 *Censuses of Production*, a picture emerges of the diminishing importance of London-based making in a national context. The city's share of the total U.K. garment industry fell between 1935 and 1948 by all measures (Table 1), but most notably in terms of output, indicating that while London lost a significant number of jobs and

businesses during the war, it proportionately lost an even larger share of the U.K. garment industry.

London had been left particularly vulnerable to the changes brought about by wartime conditions due to its failure to adapt to the changing realities of the fashion industry in the 1930s. Whilst other British centres of garment manufacturing were embracing the growth of mid-market ready-to-wear that was enabled by new technologies and production processes, London makers remained reliant on high-end tailored production. In 1935, London accounted for 60.3 per cent. of the U.K.'s gross output of retail bespoke tailoring and dressmaking, but only 48.7 per cent. of the nation's gross output in wholesale tailoring and dressmaking (Board of Trade 1938, 406). These figures should have been a warning for the city's fashion industry about the need to adapt to a changing fashion landscape as gross output from wholesale tailoring and dressmaking nationally had increased by 10.6 per cent. from 1930 to 1935, broadly matching a decline of 9.5 per cent. in bespoke output nationwide, a trend that posed a clear threat to the core of London's garment-manufacturing industry. In addition to this, the growth in London's output between 1930 and 1935 was considerably lower than the number of new firms, indicating that many of these were not particularly productive, making them especially vulnerable to the difficulties of wartime conditions.

Between 1935 and 1948 this trend continued and the number of people employed in retail bespoke garment-making across the U.K. fell by 47.8 per cent. (Table 2). Womenswear fashions shifted quickly during the immediate post-war period, with a rapid move towards making more simply constructed garments. This is exemplified by a rise in the importance of dressmaking to wholesalers: in 1948, wholesalers were making 46.4 per cent. more dresses and blouses than more labor- and skill-intensive tailored items.² Yet data from London shows that many manufacturers were failing to adapt quickly enough to these trends. The 1951 Census shows that Greater London was still trying to rely on more traditional and higher skill manufacturing methods, with London businesses specialising in dressmaking and light clothing manufacture employing an unusually high number of pressers (General Register

² 81.8 per cent. of these dresses were made of either silk, Rayon or Nylon (rather than wool or a wool mix), indicating these were likely cheaper, mass-produced items that did not require the capabilities or skillsets of large numbers of expensive employees (Board of Trade 1952).

Office 1956, Table 20). Pressers were some of the most expensive skilled employees in garment-making, suggesting that the city was failing to keep pace with changes and continuing to produce high-end garments in the face of the growing mass-market ready-to-wear industry nationally, losing a significant part of its market share as a result.

These circumstances resulted in job shortages and deskilling throughout London's fashion industry in the mid-late 1940s. A NUTGW check on east London job exchanges in October 1947 revealed that over 2,000 garment workers were jobless (*Draper's Record*, November 15, 1947, 17). The situation further deteriorated throughout 1948, leading to prolonged industrial disputes at the East London factories of the well-established wholesale tailoring firms Harella and Ellis & Goldstein, where managers without garment orders found themselves in a stalemate with workers who couldn't afford to accept reduced hours (NUTGW London Branch Dispute Records. Hackney Archives, D/S/24/3/16). By the autumn of 1948, it was clear that there simply was not enough work making high-end, tailored ready-to-wear garments by the established methods to sustain the former workforces of either factory, resulting in Harella employees accepting reduced wages and Ellis & Goldstein pushing forward with brutal job cuts and restructuring in their Brick Lane factory. For the many companies facing similar pressures as a result of austerity's impact on the London industry, there were only two choices: either cease trading or adapt their processes to the new realities of British fashion manufacture.

Rebranding London fashion

Although London was undoubtedly diminished as a fashion city in the immediate post-war period, its fall in fortunes also created opportunities for innovation and renewal. In order to adapt to the impact of wartime government policies, some of London's existing and newly established fashion businesses began to shift manufacture away from the traditional methods of retail and wholesale bespoke towards a new type of 'fast' fashion in the form of inexpensive ready-to-wear dresses, while others successfully rebranded themselves through creative, imaginary and even misleading associations with London's fashionable geographies. The next section of this paper will explore how these changes helped cement a new reputation for London as a centre of new design rather than quality manufacture.

Kelly's Post Office London Directories from this period give a good indication of how London's fashionable geographies were changing, but also demonstrate how fashion businesses were manipulating the geographies of the city's symbolic capital in order to further their own brand reputations. In order to understand this process, it is necessary to examine why the directories show an increase in the number of businesses listed with multiple locations. For some businesses, this can be simply attributed to the practicalities of running a fashion firm in a time of acute austerity. For example, Evering Manufacturing Ltd, a company based in Whitechapel in the East End, expanded between 1945 and 1948 into multiple locations within walking distance of each other, suggesting a difficulty in finding a single suitable building in the area to house its growing business due to the slow pace of rebuilding bomb-damaged factories. However, more commonly the directories show that manufacturers with factories in the East End, such as Greenberg S. & Sons (Mantles) Ltd, makers of Evandore models, expanded in two directions—opening showrooms in the West End and new factories in suburban areas such as Walthamstow and Clapton, where space was at less of a premium.

The reasons behind this imperative to have a West End address can be understood by looking at the way Harella, a high-end coat and tailored dress brand owned and operated by L. Harris Ltd, promoted themselves through their changing locations during the 1940s. L. Harris Ltd was established in the interwar period and, in the late 1930s, they opened a large factory and headquarters at 90 Goswell Road, on the edge of the City of London to much fanfare in the press. They named the building Harella House, indicating that, at this time, they were happy for their most prestigious brand, Harella, to be closely associated with an address in the E.C.1. postcode, and used this address in their advertising material. However, as L. Harris Ltd expanded production outside of London to a new factory in Halifax during and after the war, the company needed to rethink the geographies they used to promote themselves. L. Harris Ltd opened a showroom at 243 Regent Street in late 1947, and although they retained their headquarters (and design studio and model workroom) in Goswell Road, Harella adverts stopped making reference to their Goswell Road address from the beginning of 1948, and began instead to exclusively use the address of their showroom, describing the fashions they promoted as “Created by L. Harris Ltd, 243 Regent Street, London W1” (*Draper's Record*, 11 January 1947, 77; *Draper's Record*, 10 April 1948, 8). The way L. Harris Ltd shifted the

geographies of their brand from the traditional manufacturing centre of the East to the more reified West End, home to London's couturiers and court dressmakers, demonstrates that they understood that, in the changed post-war garment industry, London had more selling power as an imagined and symbolic creative centre rather than one of technical production excellence. The company's foresight was rewarded in 1948 with an increased demand for their products and 20 per cent. dividend for their shareholders (*Garment Worker*, March 1948, 47). L. Harris Ltd was not alone in this move, and the rush between 1946 and 1950 to open showrooms with addresses in the fashionably prestigious area around Mayfair, Regent Street and Hanover Square in the West End reveals the key importance of selling the symbolism of London as a fashion city to an increasingly brand-aware British consumer.

"Look for the label"

There was a sharp increase in the use of brand names in advertising and on garment labels during the 1940s. The Trade Marks Act of 1938, which had established a register and expanded the rights of trademark holders, had provided more incentive for fashion businesses to use brand names to distinguish their products from others on the market (World Intellectual Property Organization 1997, 23). The effect of this was compounded by government regulation during the war as the 'CC41' labels used to mark products that complied with the Utility scheme had familiarised consumers with the notion that labels were a reassuring mark of quality and value. Mass Observation reports suggest that the general public were increasingly brand conscious as a result of these changes. A report on "Branded Skirts" from December 1948 found that people strongly associated brand names with quality and, even more importantly, consumers were more likely to buy a brand name skirt than an unbranded skirt if it was a name they were familiar with through advertising (Report on Branded Skirts, December 1948. Mass Observation, FR 3070).

Utility Apparel orders further changed the way that consumers encountered branded fashion goods by encouraging a more direct relationship between producers and consumers, at the expense of wholesalers. This had a particular impact on London due to its concentration of small wholesalers. The processes of London's small wholesale firms were rooted in a system developed in the early twentieth century, which relied on a large number of small orders

placed by individual department stores and independent dress shops, with manufacture completed in in-house workrooms or subcontracted to outworkers (Newby 1984, 107-108 and 147-158). This model of manufacture was actively discouraged by government Price Control Orders, which formed an integral part of the Utility scheme and regulated the maximum prices and profit margins that retailers, wholesalers and manufacturers could achieve (Goods and Services (Price Control) Act. Utility Cloth (Maximum Prices Orders, 1942). TNA, BT 64/78). These Price Control Orders encouraged manufacturers to sell directly to a small number of big stores, as only wholesalers “who conduct a regular selling organisation for supplying retail and who carry substantial stocks in relation to their turnover” were able to take advantage of the full profit margin allowed by the orders (*Draper’s Record*, January 14, 1950, 32). Many retail outlets developed their own dedicated manufacturing facilities in response to these regulations. Added to the growing number and size of multiple retailers, this resulted in an increasing use of brand recognition as a tool for selling clothes (*Draper’s Record*, October 13, 1945, 16).

Extant garments and advertising material from this period demonstrate how British fashion firms enthusiastically adopted the idea of the brand name. There was not only an increase in advertisements for branded goods, but a focus on adverts that highlighted the importance of brand names and labelling. This marketing was targeted at both retailers and customers, with trade adverts for women’s outerwear makers Dayella advising retailers to “show your customer this label ... she will recognise it as her guarantee” and Herselle Models encouraging consumers to “look for the label” (*Draper’s Record*, January 18, 1947, 12; *Draper’s Record*, January 10, 1948, 5). As the number of brand names grew during the 1940s, so did the size of the garment labels, until the colours and designs featured on the embroidered labels of some firms were often as eye-catching as the printed fabrics they were made from, suggesting their importance in determining the desirability of a garment to a shopper.

For London-based manufacturers, label designs that specifically celebrated their associations with the city’s long-established reputation as a centre for fashion production provided an opportunity for them to promote their authenticity as a ‘London’ brand. This is particularly apparent in the trend for labels that reminded customers their clothes were “London Tailored,” meaning that they were both designed and made in the capital. Both

Neeta Skirts and Doric models advertised the importance of this promise on their labels, proudly showing the addresses of their East London factories should anyone doubt their authenticity (*Draper's Record*, January 17, 1948, 59). However, labels also provided an important opportunity for other manufacturers to re-define exactly what was meant by the term 'London fashion' in an era of great change and uncertainty. Many manufacturers used the promotional space offered by labels to stretch and redefine the geographies of the fashion city in a way that benefitted their reputations. This was especially useful for London-based brands whose associations with the making culture of the city were becoming increasingly distanced as they moved their production to factories outside of the city, and for companies based in the historically less fashionable areas of the East End to reinvent themselves through associations with more fashionable West End Addresses.

As consumer demand for cheaper, branded goods increased many established London firms moved production out-of-town, and this challenged them to rethink how they sold their fashions—how, for example, should London Pride blouses be marketed now they were produced in a factory in Bridgend, Wales (*Draper's Record*, August 31, 1946, 61)? Because the symbolic fashion city is not bound by the same physical constraints as manufacturing activities, many companies found solutions to this problem by ignoring the physical geographies of their production processes and instead placing the cultural meaning of London fashion at the centre of their brand message.

Companies who were relocating away from London were particularly prone to redesigning their labels in a way that incorporated the symbolism of the city. These labels often drew on nostalgia and heritage by evoking past connection between their own business histories and the city's historic making cultures. For example, when the established fashion wholesalers Cooks of Saint Pauls chose to relocate their business from the wholesale district around St Paul's Churchyard, which had been devastated by bombing during the war, they added an embroidered outline of St Paul's dome to their label, signifying a claimed connection to the city's fashionable history (*Draper's Record*, March 5, 1949, 57). Other, newer, firms chose to use their labels to reconfigure the precise geographies of their businesses by promoting themselves through the activities, such as design, that still occurred within London. This allowed them to create consumer demand for symbolic, as well as material, value in London

goods. This emerging focus on London's symbolic design culture can be seen in the geographical branding of one of British fashion's biggest post-war success stories—Horrockses. Horrockses Fashions were launched in April 1946 by the northern cotton manufacturers Horrockses, Crewdson & Co Ltd in order to capitalise on demand for their high-quality cotton fabrics (Boydell 2012, 29). Although the clothes were made in Manchester and Congleton, and the fabrics were largely designed by a team in Preston, the clothes themselves were sold through and promoted with an address in Hanover Square, a site with strong associations for high-end London fashion, perhaps most notably as the one-time home of the couturier Lucile (Behlen 2014). Horrockses' Hanover Square premises were home to a garment-design studio and model workroom, and although the ready-to-wear clothes themselves were mass manufactured, the operations in Hanover Square were publicised almost as if Horrockses were a couture house rather than a ready-to-wear brand (*Fabrics and Fashions Overseas* 1954). Horrockses ran seasonal fashion shows according to a model borrowed from Mayfair couture houses and invited celebrity customers, including Princess Elizabeth, to the house to view the latest styles under the watchful eyes of the press (Betty Newmarch papers. Archive of Art and Design, AAD/1995/16/4). For Horrockses, London's fashionable associations allowed them to promote their garments as cutting-edge high fashion, providing couture styling at ready-to-wear prices and escape their less glamorous associations with northern England's textile industry.

The creative use of London addresses on some garment labels went so far as to border on outright deception. Marlbeck models, designed and made in Leeds by large manufacturer Thomas Marshall Ltd, used their label to transform themselves into a London brand during the post-war period. Although there had been a London Marlbeck showroom on Regent Street since the 1930s, in the spring of 1947 they relaunched themselves in the press as a London brand with a new address in Hanover Square (Marlbeck annual reports for the years 1932 to 1955, West Yorkshire Archive Service). Their labels no longer read "A genuine Marlbeck reg Tailor Made," but instead promised that this was a "Marlbeck Model 12 Hanover Square W1," in spite of the fact they continued to be a Leeds-based firm and the Hanover Square premises was, in reality, little more than a regional office and showroom (*Harper's Bazaar*, April 1945, 16; Marlbeck Model coat, c.1947-1950. Lasell College fashion collection).

The apparent importance to Marlbeck of a London connection in using the Hanover Square label offers a hint of the power contained within London's rising brand value. London's growth as a symbolic capital gained momentum precisely because it was not bound by the same physical barriers to growth as garment manufacturing. Through creative labelling, London could now lay claim to the fashionable output of other cities, cementing the idea that British fashion was London fashion since the capital drew together the nation's output.

Redefining London's fashionable reputation

Correspondingly, the more garments made outside of the city were labelled as 'London' fashion, the harder it became for many established London manufacturers to distinguish the quality and distinctiveness of their product in an increasingly competitive fashion retail market as government controls were relaxed and consumer choice increased towards the end of the 1940s. Although establishing brand recognition through attractive, illustrated adverts and labels allowed relatively small London firms to compete for consumer loyalty in a marketplace increasingly dominated by multiple retailers such as Marks and Spencer, labels could not help these smaller firms compete with the efficiency of production that large manufacturers had achieved because they did not have access to the latest mass-production technology and did not produce long production runs.

Comparing examples of garments that were mass produced for multiple retailers during this period to items produced by smaller London makers clearly demonstrates the competitive advantage of larger companies, even when looking at seemingly similar garments. At first glance, many of the brightly printed rayon dresses in the large collection of Utility garments at the MFA Boston look virtually identical in their cuts and production. However, looking closely at two different examples from the late 1940s reveals the impact of different production processes on the economies of manufacture (figure 1). Both dresses stem from remarkably similar patterns; in each case, the back bodice is comprised of one piece shaped with darts, the front is formed from two pieces, fastened down the front with buttons, and the skirt—made from two pieces—is given fullness from open pleats falling from the waist. But here the similarities end. The first dress is made by Marks and Spencer and has clearly

been made on a production line, with separate machinists completing different tasks using a range of machines. There is evidence that at least three different machine types have been used—a standard sewing machine for stitching the pieces together, an overlocker to finish the seams and a blind hemming machine. The second dress is made by Springwear Ltd, a small womenswear manufacturer based at 20 High Holborn, London. Unlike the Marks and Spencer dress, this model betrays only signs of one machine type, with a straight stitch used for constructing the pattern pieces and a zig zag stitch used to finish the seams. Although final effect of the Springwear dress is similar to the Marks and Spencer model, it would have taken far longer to make up. To finish seams using a zig zag stitch required a difficult-to-operate attachment that moved the fabric back and forth as you sewed, which was a slow process (Singer 1949, 9). As such, this dress would have needed to retail for a higher price, something that perhaps explains why the Springwear label is used to cover over the CC41 label that betrays it is a Utility garment.

In the face of the impossibility of competing against the economies of scale made possible by the new, large out-of-town factories, a new type of smaller London fashion manufacturer emerged. These firms made branded goods that capitalised on London's growing cultural capital as a symbolic centre for fashion by focusing on selling the novelty and accessibility of their products over the quality of their production. As discussed in the first section of this paper, the Second World War negatively impacted many of London's established fashion businesses and networks. Between 1939 and 1951, the number of tailors and dressmakers listed in *Kelly's Post Office London Directories* fell dramatically, particularly in the West and South West of the City. In their place, a growing number of new garment factories opened in the West End, East End and northern suburbs of Hackney and Stoke Newington. These were categorised in the directories as "Clothiers—Manufacturing" and generally focused on manufacturing inexpensive items such as lightweight dresses, skirts and shirts rather than the tailored outerwear for which London's fashion manufacturers were traditionally known.

These emerging firms understood that the cash-strapped public was hungry for fun and novelty after the relative stasis of wartime fashion and thus promoted their output as fashion-forward but affordable, sacrificing high-quality making for a fast turnaround of the latest trends. This marked a change in the way that London's fashionable reputation was used and

developed, moving away from selling the material quality of tailored goods on which London's fashionable reputation was established, and towards selling London fashion as innovative, current and accessible. Notably, these types of manufacturers had very few designers. Instead, their workforces were dominated by working-class female makers adept at copying, adapting and translating designs into wearable and fashionable pieces.³ This is likely one of the reasons the contributions these firms made to reinventing London's postwar fashion cultures have been overlooked.

Star frocks Ltd was one such new company that forged success at a time of austerity by focusing on style over substance. With its immediately recognisable red star logo, Star frocks positioned itself as a trend setter. The company ran large, full-page colour adverts that promoted the originality of their products alongside information about their low prices and Utility status. In some of these adverts, the company even went so far as to declare themselves as fashion makers, with the tag line "Fashion foretold by Star frocks" (*Draper's Record*, January 18, 1947, 53). This business plan clearly worked, with the company expanding several times in the late 1940s, hiring new staff to work at their Commercial Road factory in East London and opening offices and a new showroom at 316-318 Regent Street in the West End in 1947 (*Draper's Record*, January 3, 1948, 25).

In order to produce a high turnover of new designs for low prices, economical cutting and making up was key, as indicated by the appointment of a new "improver cutter" for the Star frocks factory in August 1945 (*Draper's Record*, August 11, 1945, 46). A rare surviving example of a Star frocks dress from the collections of Lassel College (figure 2) further demonstrates the economy of their making process—both in design, cutting and making up. The construction of the dress itself is extremely basic. The bodice seams are unfinished and the skirt seams, which are more prone to fraying, are cut on the fabric's selvedge edge to eliminate the need to finish them. The omission of shoulder pads is extremely rare for this period, with fullness at the shoulders created from large gathers at the sleeve seams – a feature that gives a striking silhouette, even if conveyed with considerably more fullness in

³ See Lily Silberberg's description of her role working at the Ackerman and Goodman's dress factories. British Library. 'An Oral History of British Fashion, L. Silberberg.', 2003-02-21, C1046/02, 84.

illustrations of the dress that feature in Star frocks adverts than in the finished product (*Draper's Record*, January 31, 1948, 29). The stitching itself is loose and long, showing that the manufacturers even went so far as to economise on labour and materials by using longer, and therefore fewer, stitches; as a result of this low quality, the seam has come down at the back of the dress. But it is the design, rather than the manufacture, of the dress that catches the imagination through its unusual combination of visual references. The ruffled edging of the square neckline evokes an image of the post-war trend towards folk dress, while its full sleeves are reminiscent of the Gibson Girl look made popular by Hollywood films such as *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944). This mixture of borrowed styles is typical of Star frocks's output; the company was known for creating new designs from a collage of cultural references that would have been recognisable to its predominantly young and fashion-conscious consumers, many of whom would have taken more fashion notes from regular cinema trips than from the Paris collections featured in the fashion press.⁴ The key to the dress's appeal is summed up by its use of a velvet-effect trim and Bakelite mother-of-pearl effect belt buckle, which evokes the appearance of the materials and details of high-end fashion but at an accessible, purchase tax-free price.

Although extant objects demonstrate that these brands were producing garments of inferior quality to many of the longer-established firms specialising in tailored goods, the stylish nature of their output was praised within the industry, with *Draper's Record* picking a Utility dirndl skirt made by a similar small/new innovator, Art Skirt Co. Ltd. of Hackney, as one of their "fashion pointers" for January 1946 – a spot usually reserved for garments produced by well known, high-end wholesale couture names (*Draper's Record*, January 26, 1946, 19). Indeed, it was the success of these new, low cost fashions that caused sales of womenswear in Britain to rise by 20 per cent. in 1948, in spite of widespread economic difficulties that year and stagnation at the higher end of the market (*Draper's Record*, April 9, 1949, 65).

Evaluating the significance of the Second World War in London's evolution as a fashion city

⁴ Although 1946 is a year commonly remembered in historical accounts for fuel shortages and the introduction of bread rationing, it also marked the peak of British cinema attendance, with audience numbers reaching 1,635 million (Williams 1998, 194).

In the face of lost fashion cultures and established networks, London's fashion industry was presented with an opportunity to redefine and reinvent itself in the aftermath of the Second World War. This paper adds a new perspective to previous studies of post-war fashion by looking beyond the activities of a narrow band of high-end fashion houses to examine the broader workings of the city's industry. It reveals that adaptation was necessary to suit the new rules and economic realities of post-war Britain, and that established firms who failed to change their manufacturing processes and product types withdrew in the face of newly established firms producing new types of goods that were sold in new ways. In doing so, it reveals the significant contribution that mid-market womenswear manufacturers made to developing London's post-war fashionable reputation and transforming the meaning of London fashion into more of a discursive than material reality.

While London might have been the centre of British fashion, its networks and processes operated in a different way to those elsewhere in the country. The austerity policies that benefitted centres of mass-manufacture, such as Leeds and Manchester, actively harmed London's manufacturers. More significantly, the mixture of sources gathered through this research indicate that London's fashionable geographies were multiple and complex, and the meaning of exactly what constituted 'London fashion' was increasingly broad as a result of the outsourcing of manufacturing and creative labelling. At the same time, this period saw a concerted effort by many fashion businesses to exclude certain parts of the city from their fashionable narratives through careful marketing that concealed unfashionable addresses. More than ever before, fashion brands understood that in order to harness the symbolic power of the city, it was necessary to control the stories told about it.

Unpicking this increasingly broad definition of what constitutes London fashion helps us see the immediate post-war period as one of contrasting fortunes for the city. On the one hand, it was clearly a period of deskilling and decline in London's fashionable making cultures. London would never recover the breadth or depth of its pre-war high-end manufacturing capabilities, and this had ramifications for both the city's fashion industry and the individuals who worked within it. This process of deskilling, however, went hand-in-hand with the city's symbolic ascendance and the acquisition of new skills revolving around branding and

merchandising. This paper provides a reminder of the importance of telling the stories of both the winners and losers in order to understand how fashion cities are shaped. In having lost some of its status as a world-class centre of fashionable making, London's fashion businesses were prompted to consider how they could challenge their counterparts in cities such as Paris using creative design and clever branding, fueling the development of new types of fashion labour that would prove to be significant to the city's future development.

The growing symbolic importance of 'London fashion' had major, long-term implications for the way fashionable creativity was understood and where it was considered to be located in the city. Although the growth of London as a symbolic fashion city was beneficial to a number of British fashion firms, many city businesses lost sight of the creative value of their makers and fashionable making culture as a result. This particularly disenfranchised London's large female garment labour force, whose contribution to London's fashionable reputation was frequently played down in favour of celebrations of a small group of (predominantly male) high-end fashion designers, whom in turn had no qualms about reducing the talented cutters and seamstresses responsible for creating their designs to a cast of mildly comic supporting characters in their biographies (Amies 1954, 147). This tendency had real consequences for these workers in terms of their pay and conditions: in a talk on "the case for equal pay" held at Toynbee Hall in East London on 25 October 1947, Chancellor Hugh Dalton dismissed the case for equal pay for women garment workers as unnecessary, imagining them to be entirely replicable should they choose to pursue other, better paid work (Hackney Archives, D/S/24/3/7). Subsequently, it has also caused fashion historians to overlook the importance of the creative role played by cutters and machinists in innovating fashion production during this period (Bide 2019).

Most significantly, tracing these connections between the decline in manufacturing and the growing importance of symbolism to London's fashion businesses demonstrates that the impacts of the Second World War were not temporary or reversible, and there was no return to 'business as usual' in the aftermath. The rapid changes that occurred in the late 1940s were significant in London's transition from a place that made fashions to a more symbolic fashion city. This paper argues that the shifts that occurred in London, particularly relating to manufacture, in the late 1940s were highly significant for its trajectory as a fashion city. As

such, it suggests that this often overlooked period in London's fashion history deserves greater attention as a time when the foundations were laid for subsequent changes, in particular, the emergence of a new understanding of London as a centre of youth fashions in the 1960s, which led to the city's growing global reputation for creativity in the 1980s. Moreover, although London was certainly not the only Western fashion city to experience a decline in its manufacturing in the latter half of the twentieth century, the body blow that the Second World War dealt to London manufacturing was likely an important contributing factor in the nature of this decline; its role should be considered when examining how the balance between fashion makers, designers and brands in London today differs from other cities such as Paris or New York, and how this influences the way the contemporary fashion city operates.⁵

⁵ For example, New York's fashion industry is shaped by creative clusters of makers and designers, which facilitate the exchange of ideas and practices. This is something that London, with its relative absence of makers, does not enjoy to the same extent (Rantisi 2004).

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Tables

Table 1: London's percentage share of the U.K. garment industry

	1935	1945
Establishments	44.9%	39.6%
People employed	35.5%	28.1%
Gross output.....	43.1%	34.9%

Table 1:

Source: Board of Trade, *Final report on the Fifth Census of Production for 1935*, Table IV and *Final report on the Census of Production for 1948*, Table 5.

Table 2: U.K. garment industry

	Number of establishments			Persons employed		
	1935	1948	1935-48 % change	1935	1948	1935-48 % change
Wholesale tailoring and dressmaking.....	1,521	1,858	22.2%	142,178	172,641	22.1%
Retail bespoke tailoring and dressmaking.....	967	509	-4.7%	28,168	14,701	-7.8%

Table 2:

Source: Board of Trade, *Final Report on the Census of Production for 1948*, Table 8.

List of figures

Figure 1a (left)

Springwear Model Rayon dress, 1940s. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Jean S. and Frederic A. Sharf. 2010.1404.

Photograph ©2020 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Figure 1b (right)

St. Michael Rayon dress, c.1947. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Jean S. and Frederic A. Sharf. 2010.1409.

Photograph ©2020 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Figure 2: Star frocks dress, c.1948. Courtesy of the Lasell Fashion Collection at Lasell University. Newton, MA. USA (2011.1.61-A-B)