

What About a Feed Sack Dress?

In a world of instant gratification, we often take for granted how we got to where we are. We can simply type our questions into Google, send a text message to a friend or walk right into a store to buy our clothes without even considering how we got to this point. A lot of hard work and dedication has led us to where we are now and yet we cannot be bothered to look back and appreciate it. A particularly under appreciated art is that of fashion design, sewing abilities and fabric design. Today we have become obsessed with expensive, high fashion clothing and base all of our trends and desires off of what those designers create. But, in years past, we have actually gained many interesting trends from the lower ranks of the hierarchy. An article from The State, a weekly magazine from North Carolina, outlined a competition of dress making with a particularly ordinary fabric; feed bags. Yes, women from rural backgrounds recycled their husband's feed bags to fashion not only themselves but their homes as well. This article is but one of many that describe this craze and its effect on the fashion, textile and feed industries.

In the 1930's, America was hit with the Great Depression. American's were deprived of 'luxury' items for the sake of the country's mounting expenses. This spawned a "have not, waste not" attitude in many citizens, particularly those living in rural areas. This is how the first feed-sack dress came into being. Out of need for inexpensive fabric, the wives of farmers began using the feed sacks. Originally the sacks were white cotton "emblazoned with brand names and logos" (Jones 93).The women would then have to go through an arduous process in order to rid the fabric of the ink to make it usable for the item they had in mind to create. The process was so

strenuous that it appeared in the Southern folklore of the time. For example, some believed “that a full moon made the inks come out of the sacks more easily” (Jones 94). Women would then have a blank canvas to release any and all creativity they saw fit in the form of dyeing, embroidering, trims, etc.

From their use of the commodity bags, the feed industry took notice. They grabbed at the opportunity to expand business and make a little extra money. The first accommodation they marketed was the “idea of easy-to-remove labels” (Martin 2). This then transformed into the idea of patterned fabric feed bags. “Pretties, feed sacks with colorful and beautiful patterns”, as they were dubbed, were established to entice the female shopper to their feed bag and insist their husband’s purchase that brand (Thompson 1). With the introduction of the print fabric bags, women became even more involved in the role of picking feed. She became the main market for the industry and companies used this to their advantage. Promotions and advertisements were established specifically speaking to women and the market for feed sack dresses. Some companies even hired their own designers to make their bags unique (Martin 2). One example is the Percy Kent Bag Company hiring a prominent fabric designer of the 1940’s, Charles Barton, to create the patterns to be found exclusively on their bags (Jones 98). The once ‘thrifty’ feed bag dress began its shift to ‘fashionable’ when designers were hired to create higher quality pieces. Designers were creating looks that were normally saved for “luxury fashion” for their feed bag companies (Jones 98). With the introduction of designer patterns, women wearing feed sack dresses were able to take pride in what they were creating as it mimicked what they saw in the retail stores. They no longer felt out of the loop because of their status or area of living because they

were able to replicate what they saw on a national level to what they wore on a day-to-day basis (Banning 164).

Now that the feed sack dress was getting national recognition, a whole new revolution took place. The artifact depicts a singular competition in North Carolina, where women designed feed sack dresses that were judged and then the winners received cash awards (“Dresses from Feed Bags”). This was not the only competition by far. Many states and counties were holding their own contests for women to compete in. One county in Alabama held a contest that aimed at promoting self-sufficiency, awarding the winner with the best sewn dress a bag of flour (Jones 93). These competitions really show the enthusiasm women had for what they were creating. Thousands of them would show up to have their pieces judged. Thousands more showed up at the competitions to see what was being created and to gather ideas for what they could possibly make. It wasn’t only the everyday woman who took joy in wearing a recycled commodity bag dress, women of higher status were showing off these designs as well. Miss Carolyn Bailey, Alabama Maid of Cotton, was pictured modeling new products from Frank Teuton who worked with the Department of Agriculture (Vecchio 1). The feed sack dress’ evolution was only fueled further by having prominent, important women wearing them.

“In the early 1940s, The National Cotton Council of America came out with a pattern book for sewing with feed sacks” which only enhanced the booming feed sack market (Thompson 1). Everyone was hooked. Women were searching for the best pattern, trying to one up their prior design in hopes of receiving a compliment or winning a competition. The little rural feed sack dress had spiraled into a full blown fashion

epidemic. The National Cotton Council of America made claims that their pattern book was so popular that it was “in the hands of more than one million women” by 1945 (Jones 101). Women were overcome with the fact that they could be in vogue but not pay the extensive retail prices. There are several pictures of a collection where the feed sack garments that were made are compared to the clothing appearing in a magazine of the era. A woman named Rose Aucoin had an extensive collection of commodity bag dresses that have been donated to the LSU Textile and Costume Museum (Martin 1). In her dissertation on feed sack fashion, Jennifer Banning included the pictures where Aucoin’s garments were compared with high fashion examples (Fig. 1) (Banning 159-161). The skill exhibited to recreate the looks Aucoin did is extraordinary. To an unknowing observer, these looks could be interchangeable. This speaks volumes to the women who crafted the garments out of what is typically unwanted material and made it to the quality of looks featured in magazines. This type of craftsmanship is encouraged heavily in any field, but it is absolutely essential in the fashion industry.





Fig. 1 Left side is magazine example, right is Aucoin's recreation

Although this trend stuck around much longer than the Great Depression did, it ultimately came to an end as luxury made a comeback. The impact it made though is quite notable. It increased a woman's control in choosing feed for the farm, boosted failing industries in a depression and proves as inspiration for designers. Being able to create something from essentially nothing is the exact creativity many designers strive for today. Seeing an ordinary object or fabric and taking inspiration from it to create something new is how the industry thrives. Feed sack dresses are the perfect example of this transformation. These women were able to take stark, blank fabrics and create garments without any formal training. Imagine the impact that creativity combined with modern technology would have on the industry today. Unfortunately, we have become so bogged down with technology that it's almost as if we've lost our creative touch. We keep looking forward when I think we should be looking back. Our economy is in a depression much like that back in the thirties and yet we're still producing the same

luxury fabrics and items that we were in our prime. If we were to take a note from our ancestors and recycle our abundant products it would alleviate the guilt of purchasing these garments and show originality. We could once again take pride in our work and use of unconventional materials, like the women back then did. That's not to say that everyone is ignoring our past. There is an organization today that is making headlines for its use of feed sacks, although it's not exactly in dress form.

There is a company, created by Lauren Bush, that has taken the humble feed sack and created it into a high fashion statement piece. Bush's company, FEED, created pouches with the word FEED stamped on the side which are meant to mimic food ration bags that are shipped around the world (Holmes 1). Not only was this product produced with humble materials, it also strives to give back. With each purchase of a feed bag, one child is fed for an entire year through the United Nations World Food Programme's School Feeding program (FEED 1). Now, we are accomplishing what the women of the thirties did with the feed sack dresses. We are seeing beyond the literal means of the sack and finding ways to benefit others. Celebrities definitely took notice of this new leap. Alex McCord, reality star from the Real Housewives series, was seen sporting a FEED corset, not created by the company (Holmes 1). Although this piece wasn't affiliated with Bush's company, it still had an impact on the community. A revolution is coming in fashion. More and more people are demanding the use of green fabrics and the designers must respond. Not only are we faced with a recession, but the knowledge of global warming and climate change is affecting everyone's decisions. Another reason to look to our past. They made it through

the recession and if we employ some of the techniques we could turn it around for ourselves as well.

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