

A Backward Interest in Design

By Lynda Davis, Dallas and Fort Worth Model A Clubs

In their 1928 winter magazine, the Fifth Avenue luxury department store B. Altman and Company describes evolving fashion trends as the “playful imagination of fashion [that] is constantly conceiving delightfully fanciful things, some of which live while others wither and die. How frivolous one can feel in billows of tulle and chiffon—in a youthful bouffant frock, . . . or, when dining and dancing in crowded spaces, how smart the sophisticate appears in an evening gown of more restraint—one that falls in straighter, softer lines and follows the body rather [definitively].” Altman’s observation aptly reflects the evolution of style during the 1920-30 decade.



McCalls, October 1929. Illustration taken from *The Fashion Files*, p 70.



“Artificial silk bias-cut evening gown by Donguy of Paris, ca. 1930s”

The decade dawned with women’s voting rights and freedoms (leading to shorter dress hems) and ended with the cataclysmic crash of a booming economy (in which hem length dropped along with stocks). B. Altman’s statement marks the fashion-pendulum swing from the frilly garden party and elaborate and beaded flapper dresses (with hem lines reaching their height in 1927 to just below the knee), to the advancing trend towards more conservatively-styled, longer and sleeker gowns “of more restraint,” what Altman called the “straightening out’ feeling.” These dresses were typically made from velvet, heavy silk, silk crepe de Chine, silk pongee, lace, and the new Rayon, and they hug the body in ways that Jean Harlow would later make famous.



The most interesting notation in Altman’s magazine describes a “decided back-ward interest in formal gowns.” These gowns frequently have a front that appears “quite plain”; however, when “backs are turned ethically, bodices and waistlines are found to be attractively elaborated” with “stress—and often *strass* [rhinestone adornments]—on many a low decollete” (*sic*). Just a few years earlier, shorter hemlines exposed women’s legs, increasing hosiery sales and making ladies’ legs an area of interest. As fashion approached the 1930s, hemlines dropped to the mid-calf and longer, shifting emphasis from the legs to the back, and often those backs were bared to the waist.

Above: Backless gowns featured in *McCalls Magazine*, January 1930, and found in *The Fashion Files* Notice the backdrop necklace on the model left of center.
 Right: A dancing couple. Picture from 1930, *Modern Ballroom Dancing*, 1930, by Lillian Ray

The likely reason for displacing the focus to the dress-back may have something to do with dancing. With shorter dress hems, women had free range of movement, enabling them to enjoy dances such as the Charleston. But with longer dress lengths, inhibited movement likely encouraged slower dancing, “cheek to cheek.” Altman’s magazine speculates that it is from behind that the “sophisticate” is better able to show off her formal evening dress when “dancing in crowded spaces.”



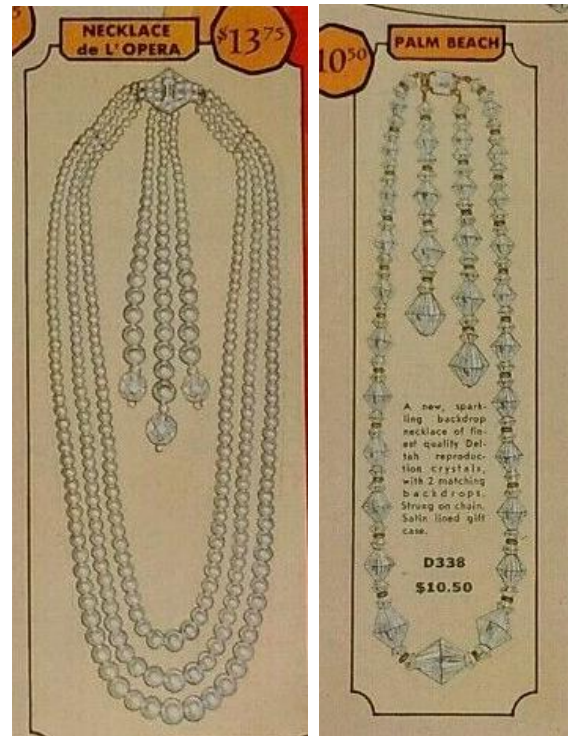


Photo on left shows a model from the 1928 *La Gazette du Bon Ton* which also appears in MAFCA's Fashion Files, p 68. The backdrop necklaces above appear in the annual illustrated catalog of *Leonard Krower & Son's* 1931.

Of course, bobbed hair and bared backs do provide nice landscapes for ladies to show off their jewelry. How often have we heard tales of our grandmothers or great grandmothers wearing their long necklaces backwards down their lovely backs. To illustrate a bit of *strass*, as Altman puts it, look to the 1931 illustration above left and to MAFCA member Tammie Jones below. Here the fashionable models wear rhinestone clips at their back décolleté. Then, too, capitalizing on the desire to accentuate the feminine back, manufacturers produced and sold "backdrop" necklaces especially for that purpose. Backdrop (sometimes spelled "back-drop") necklaces, like traditional necklaces, decorate the neck-front and



fasten in the back; however, the "backdrop feature," as seen in the figures above and the photo of Myrna Loy at the right, typically sport two or three strands that "drop" down below the coiffed hair-bun at the neck's nape and dangle between the shoulder blades. Model A Era fashions prove to be beautiful when women are both coming and going. The women of our era really knew how to make an exit!

Left: MAFCA Member Tammie Jones
Right: Myrna Loy. Photograph taken by Max M. Autrey.

