Florence Eiseman

Designing Childhood for the American Century

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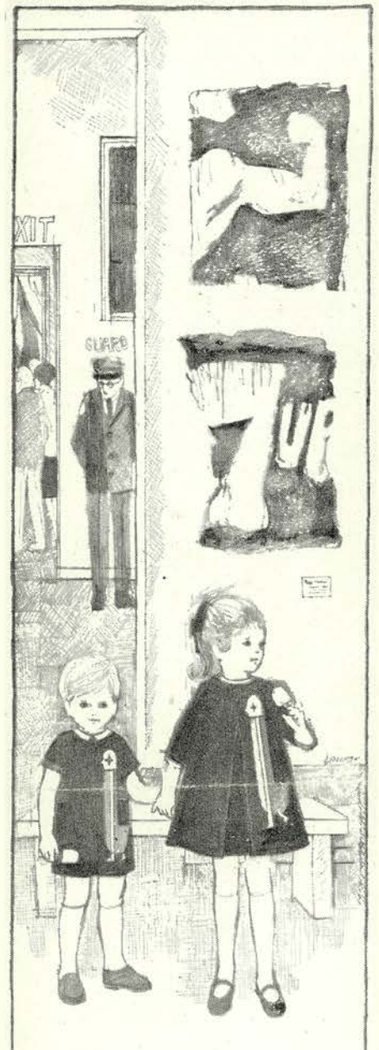
Curated by Sarah Anne Carter
with Jennifer Farley Gordon, Erika Petterson, and Natalie Wright

Published by the Museum of Wisconsin Art

"Mom Art is an even newer
school of painting.
Jody's daddy said so.
It looks very similar to me.
I like my bird dress
in the Miro mood.
And Jody's looks
like a Matisse flower.

My jumper-over-a-polo-shirt comes in green, Jody's dress in red only. Both are imported broadcloth. 1 to 4T, 3 to 6X and 7 to 12 at The Little Bramson in Chicago, and Little Women in Greenwich, Conn., and Rye, N.Y."

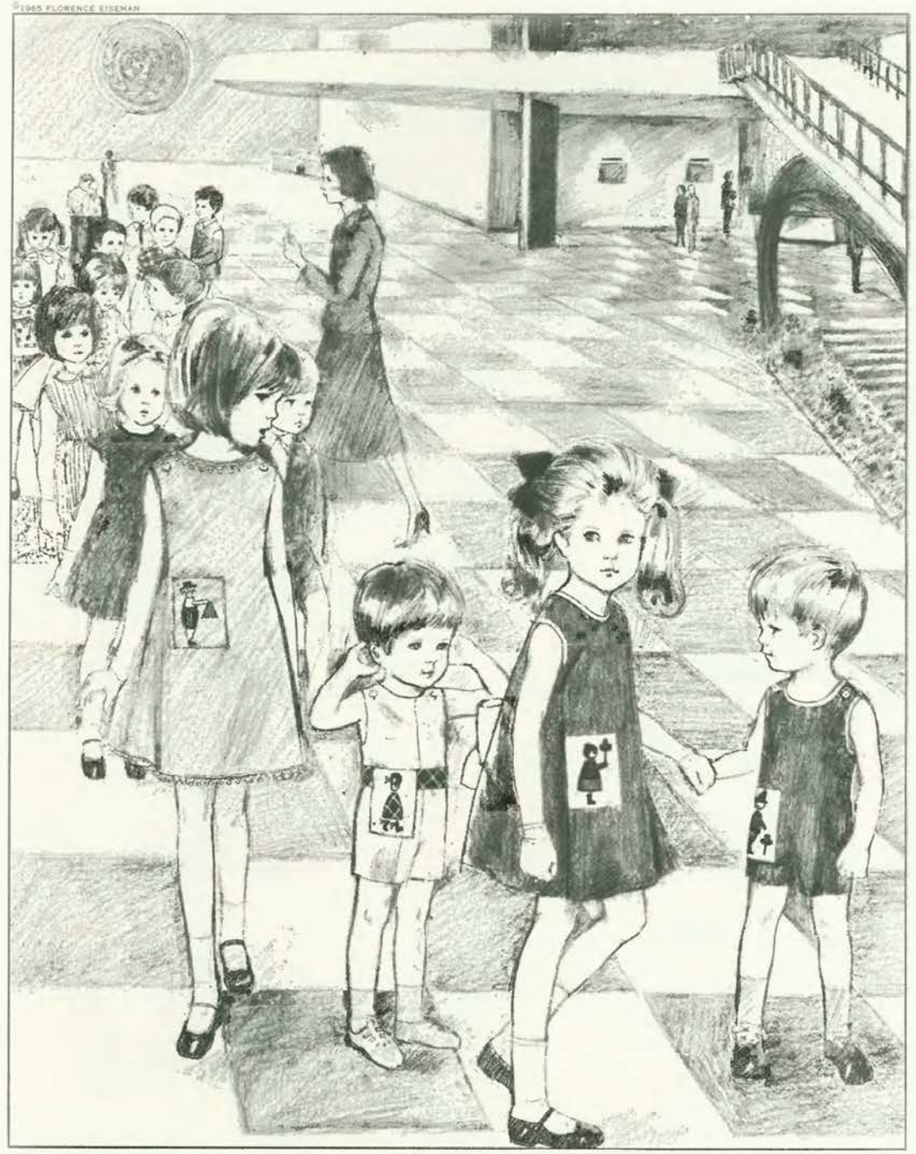
FLORENCE EISEMAN



"Pop Art is our favorite kind.
It's more fun than
painting like Gainsborough.
We like Picasso, too.
My brother and I are going
to draw a Seven-Up bottle
when we get home.

Our gallery-hopping outfits are in pinfeather Dacron and cotton in navy blue. 1 to 4T, 3 to 6X for Sebastian's suit, my dress comes in 7 to 12 sizes as well. At Henri Bendel and Dayton's or write 301 N. Water St., Milwaukee."

FLORENCE EISEMAN

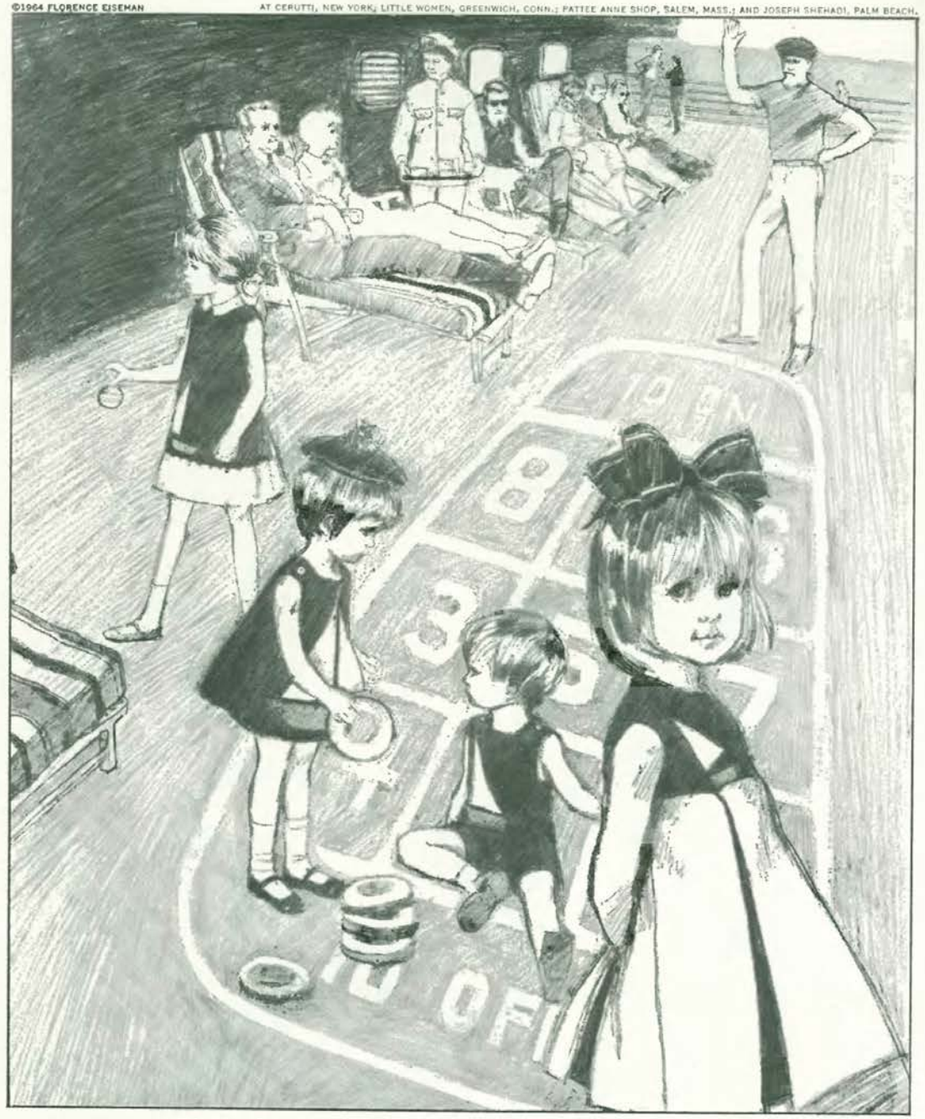


Please do not start a war in the U.N.

IF YOU WANT TO BE KNOWN AS TEACHER'S NICEST CLASS, PLEASE OBSERVE THE FOLLOWING RULES:

1. No giggling at foreign accents. You have one, too, when you're not in the U.S.A.
2. Don't wander off from the group. You may end up looking straight into the eyes of one of the delegates.
3. Be sure to notice the eagle from Denmark. The eyes are Coca Cola caps.
4. Be quiet when the guide speaks. You'll learn a lot.

Our smart, young peace corps members are all wearing "country-of-origin" outfits by Florence Eiseman. Ireland is in green (what else?), all-cotton Swiss denim, Scotland is teasing Ireland in white, all-cotton French bird's-eye pique, and Spain is in regal gold with matador fringe. Girls to 12, Boys 1-6. J. P. Allen, Lord & Taylor. FLORENCE EISEMAN

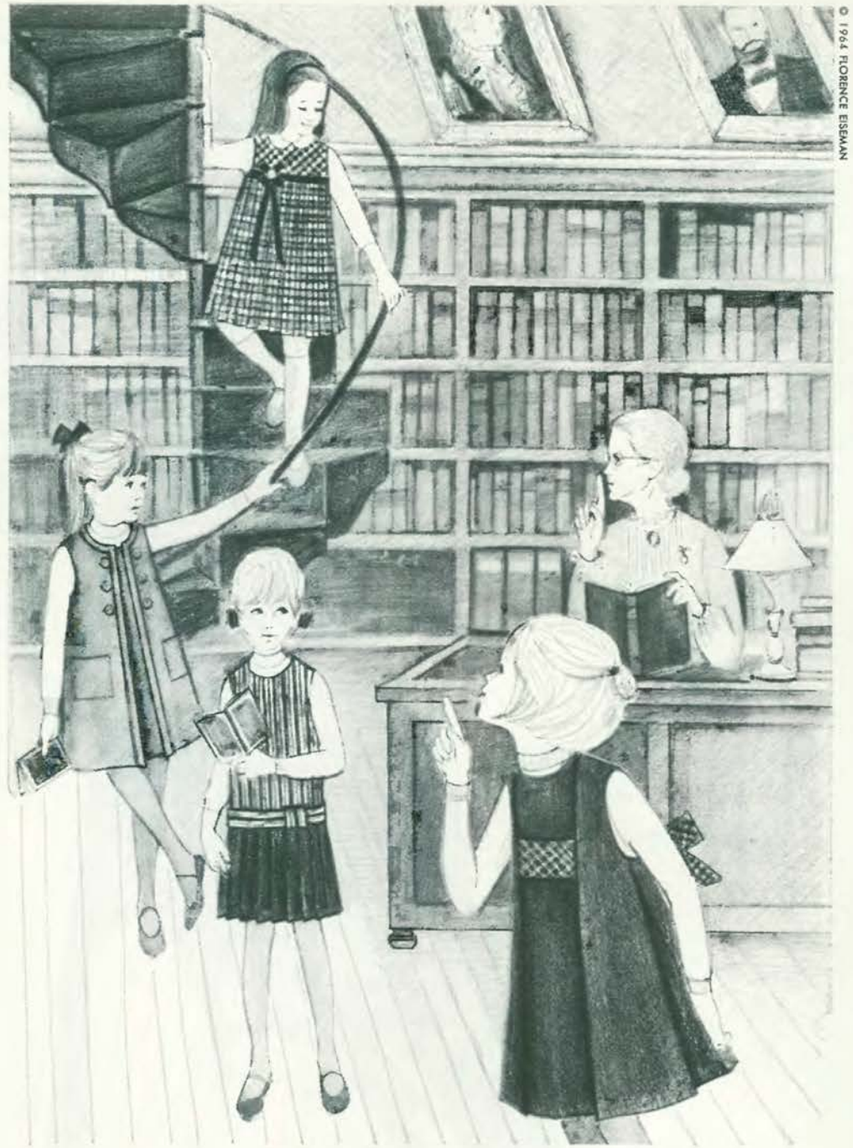


Please don't irritate that gentleman in the deck chair
(he may be daddy's next boss).

IF YOU WANT TO GO ON ANOTHER GLAMOROUS VACATION,
PLEASE OBSERVE THE FOLLOWING SHIPBOARD RULES:

1. When the boat is rocking, please do not bring your gooey chocolate cookies on deck.
2. Don't hang over the railing, remember it takes 10 minutes to stop a boat.
3. Be ever so gentle where adults are concerned, they're re-charging their batteries.
4. Racing up and down the deck will not endear you to anyone.
5. Be ever so nice to the steward, he'll take you on a tour of the ship if you're good.

We personally adore little ones who follow the rules, but who could resist a mutineer if he wears Florence Eiseman cruise clothes. The good twins are wearing "Newport Cup" in fine imported navy blue broadcloth. Bad Bonnie has the "It Floats" dress in white birdseye pique and Terry has the "Pirate" dress in winter blue with sailboat applique. At fine ships everywhere. **FLORENCE EISEMAN**



Don't Go to the Library Unless You Want to Read.

IF YOU WANT TO BE LOVED BY THE READING PUBLIC,
PLEASE OBSERVE THE FOLLOWING MANNERS:

1. Please don't use jelly sandwiches as bookmarks.
2. Please don't use books as coasters for orangeades.
3. Please do not read in the tub.
4. Please don't turn back corners of pages. It hurts.
5. Please don't fill in all the o's.
6. Please learn to love a book. You'll know why when you grow up.

The perfectly behaved little girls sketched here (well, almost perfect) wear Florence Eiseman's imported Swiss flannels from her beautifully behaved collection of school clothes that wash. Collection in plaids, regimental stripes and bright, bright solid shades. All in 3 to 6x—some have little sisters, some big sisters and some have little brothers. At Lord and Taylor, Neiman Marcus and fine stores everywhere. **FLORENCE EISEMAN**

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Foreword

Florence Eiseman: Designing Childhood for the American Century celebrates the fashion legacy of Florence Eiseman (1899–1988), who launched the leading high-end children's clothing line in the United States and helped define the ideal look for the postwar child. Based in Milwaukee, Eiseman created children's clothing rooted in quality, design, and workmanship that was both durable and fashion-forward. Her design aesthetic included simple shapes, high-quality imported fabrics, whimsical appliqués, and bright primary colors.

The Eiseman name swiftly became an iconic, instantly recognizable, international brand. The label was regularly mentioned in connection with children of celebrity and affluence, including the children of Princess Grace of Monaco, Debbie Reynolds, and the young Kennedys—some of the "notables," as Eiseman called them. Former President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama commissioned the company to design two special outfits to use as the official baby gifts from the White House. Today, Florence Eiseman is worn by celebrity children like Suri Cruise and Blue Ivy Carter. This exhibition tells the story of this culturally significant brand through more than one hundred historic garments, photographs, and objects that encapsulate not only consumer trends but also society's philosophy regarding childhood and family in the American Century.

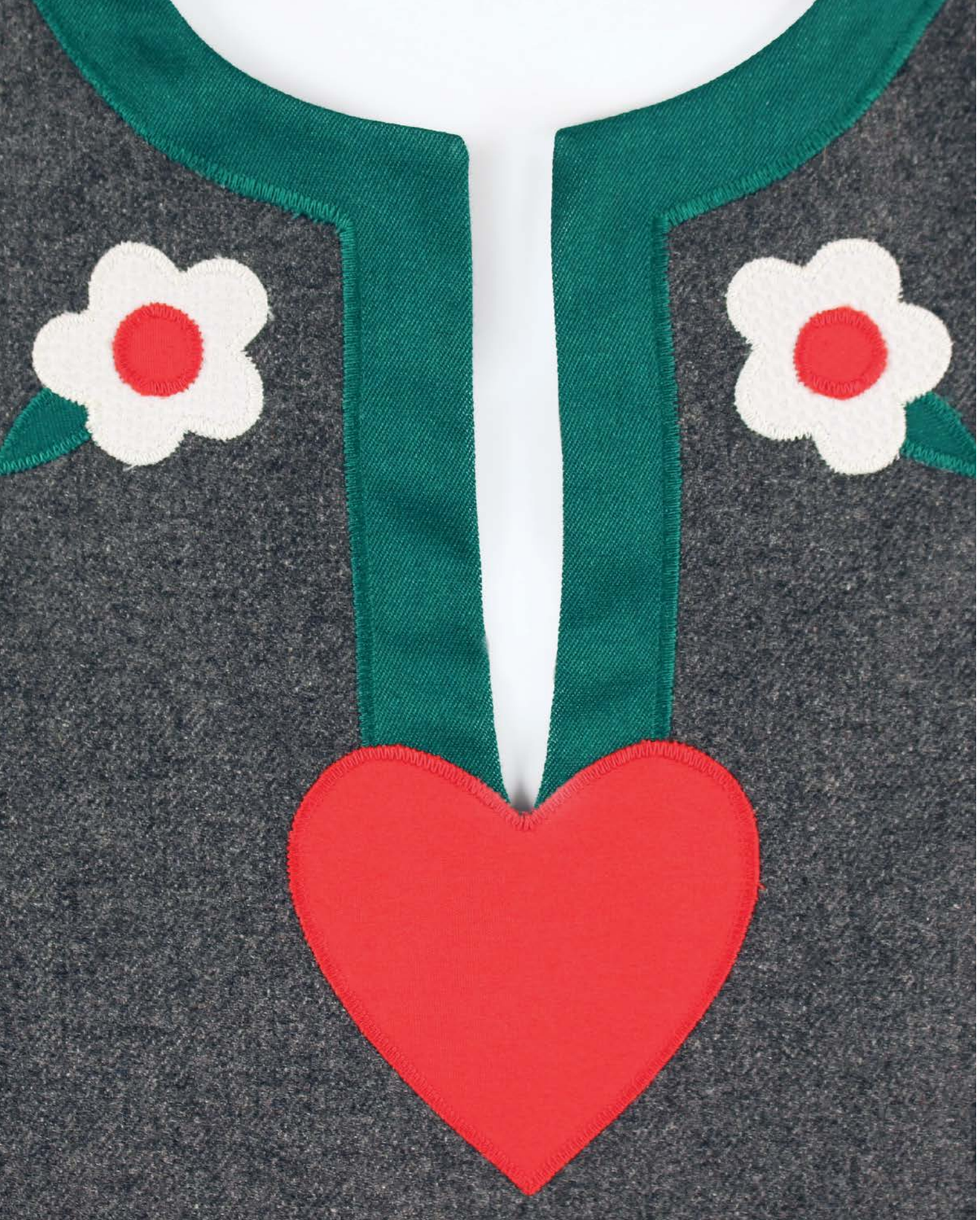
Florence Eiseman: Designing Childhood for the American Century is the second in a series of collaborations between the Museum of Wisconsin Art (MOWA) and The Chipstone Foundation. Our institutions' shared interest in material culture, design, and fashion has produced an exhibition of significant contribution to the field of fashion history. A project of this magnitude would not have been possible without the help and assistance of many people.

We offer significant thanks to the Eiseman Company LLC, which from the outset embraced the concept of the exhibition. CEO Frank Botto and Vice President and Head of Design Teri Shapiro were especially generous with their time and enthusiasm. We are also deeply grateful to Mount Mary University Historic Costume Collection and a number of private collectors for lending treasured garments in their holdings. For their generous financial support of this exhibition, we sincerely thank the Wisconsin Humanities Council.

We owe special thanks to the curators and authors who shaped the project and articulated the vision of Florence Eiseman. Sarah Anne Carter, The Chipstone Foundation curator and director of research, deserves special mention for her outstanding effort as the lead curator for the exhibition. Jennifer Farley Gordon, independent curator, Erika Petterson, associate curator at MOWA, and Natalie Wright, Chipstone's Charles Hummel curatorial fellow, also made indispensable contributions to the exhibition. A special note of thanks goes to our talented book designer Amy Hafemann, book editor Terry Ann R. Neff, and exhibition designer Brent Budsberg, who worked tirelessly to showcase the historic garments and engage the visitor. For their help in countless ways, it is a pleasure to thank everyone in our two institutions who made the project possible.

Jonathan Prown, The Chipstone Foundation
Executive Director

Laurie Winters, MOWA Executive Director | CEO



The Florence Eiseman Fashion Legacy

Jennifer Farley Gordon

Florence Eiseman's entry into the children's wear field is the stuff of fashion legend. She had no formal fashion training and, as a middle-aged housewife turned children's wear doyenne, she did not follow the typical trajectory of her fellow designers. She is most often portrayed as a kindly and diminutive grandmother, which indeed she was, but she also became a towering figure in the history of modern children's wear.

The beginning of the Eiseman empire is usually dated to 1945, the year that her husband, Laurence—a key player in what was from the beginning a family affair—accepted a large order for his wife's handmade pinafores from Chicago's famed Marshall Field & Company department store.[1] Together the Eisemans built an enduring business with products characterized by extraordinary quality and a singular style of bright and simple designs. The Florence Eiseman label earned a dual reputation: her clothes were solid and sturdy enough to hand down, but also the gold standard in children's dress-up clothing.[2] Eiseman created fashions that have, as a *New York Times* profile noted, "frequently been copied, but never quite matched."[3] Moreover, she did it all outside of the nation's fashion centers, favoring the Midwestern city of Milwaukee, where she raised her family, as the place to also run her company.

This modest background may seem antithetical to the creation of one of the leading children's wear status labels, yet the line was often compared with the prestige of the custom women's clothing of fashion designer Norman Norell.[4] Trade publication *Women's Wear Daily* argued that Florence Eiseman was one of the few labels that mothers knew by heart.[5] Eiseman dresses and suits were *the* clothing that every upper- and middle-class mother wanted to own. From Milwaukee, her fashions spread to "every posh birthday party in every borough throughout the land."[6]

Eiseman redefined classic children's wear, eschewing trends, fussy fashions, and too-grown-up looks.[7] As she recalled late in her life: "When we started the business, there was so much ruffling, with big skirts and petticoats. They made designs that made girls look like little women."[8] For the rest of her career, she responded with basic, flattering shapes—often without waistlines—decorated in vivid shades. Eiseman's palette of primary colors shone like a children's paint set, and the pastels and neutrals they replaced literally paled in comparison. "Really distinctive fashions for youngsters, the uncommon sort of dresses for little sister and equally smart outfits for little brother have never been overabundant," journalist Rea Seeger wrote of Eiseman's early competitors.[9]

Her fashions were indeed distinctive, and they seemed to celebrate the liveliness of childhood. Whimsical appliqués—of birds, boats, and balloons—were often the finishing touches on garments that hung loosely, in

A-line shapes, floating away from the body: clothing in which children could run and jump and play. Both boys and girls could find their wardrobe needs met by Eiseman for whom coordinating brother-sister ensembles were a particular favorite (pp. 58–65).

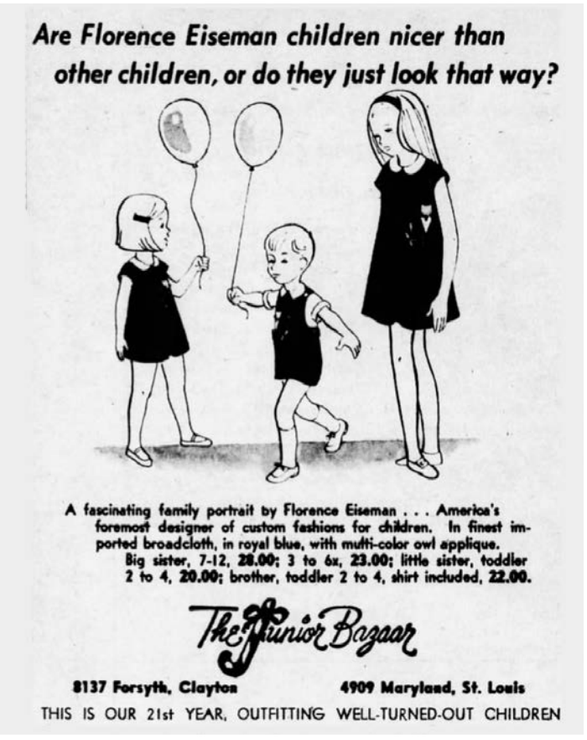
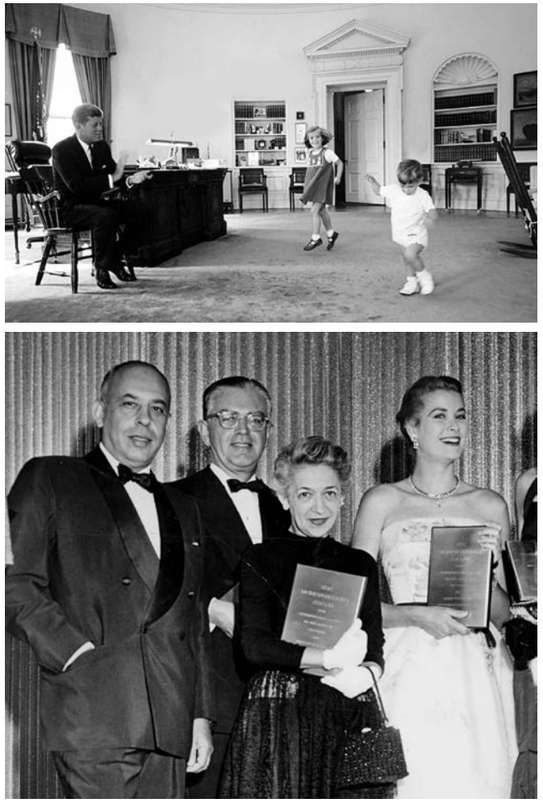


Fig. 1. Advertisement featuring Florence Eiseman designs, 1967

Renowned Bergdorf Goodman personal shopper Betty Halbreich recalled she simply "couldn't resist" these matching creations for her son and daughter, who became "early Eiseman children."[10] The Eiseman aesthetic conveyed a certain sentimentality, a rosy ideal of childhood, which was attractive to the bias inherent in every mother's view of her own child: "Are Florence Eiseman children nicer than other children, or do they just look that way?" inquired one representative advertisement (fig. 1).[11]

While some of Eiseman's contemporaries shared her philosophies on simplicity, suitability, and ease in children's fashions, it was her brand that emerged as the most recognizable and the most coveted: "The label of Florence Eiseman in children's clothes has a luster competitive manufacturers envy," noted one reporter.[12] Other designers of children's wear flitted between companies, and credit for their work was often shared with or even subsumed by a manufacturer's label. In contrast, Florence Eiseman built a strong and consistent brand name for the fashions her family manufactured. Stanley Marcus, of luxury retailer Neiman Marcus, told the *Chicago Tribune:* "She had a very strong conviction that there were people who wore good clothes themselves and wanted their children to wear good clothes. She defined that market."[13]

Mothers acknowledged that Florence Eiseman garments had a certain connotation of privilege.[14] The label was regularly bandied about in connection with children of status, celebrity, and affluence—the "notables," as Eiseman called them (figs. 2–6).[15] Eiseman's attractive and straightforward styles were worn by some of the most famous children of the mid-twentieth century, including Carrie Fisher, daughter of Hollywood star Debbie Reynolds, the young Kennedys, and the daughters of Princess Grace of Monaco. Actress Wendy Lawless recalled that her mother's social ascension to New York's tony Upper East Side brought with it a fashion sea change for Lawless and her younger sister. Florence Eiseman dresses were chosen to match the family's prestigious new address.[16] Eiseman garments may



Figs. 2–6. Clockwise: Debbie Reynolds with daughter Carrie Fisher in Florence Eiseman; Beyoncé and Shawn "Jay Z" Carter with daughter Blue Ivy Carter in Florence Eiseman; President John F. Kennedy with his children dressed in Florence Eiseman visiting the Oval Office; Stanley Marcus presenting the Neiman Marcus Award with Henry Dreyfus, Florence Eiseman, and Grace Kelly in 1955; Christmas card from Princess Grace of Monaco (Grace Kelly) with children wearing Florence Eiseman

have served as social signifiers, but they followed considerable precedent in demonstrating a family's status through a mother's consumption and a child's appearance.[17] When fashion journalists drew parallels between Florence Eiseman children's wear and some of the finest, most desirable, and likewise most expensive American women's wear by Norman Norell, it was a comparison that mothers readily understood.

Florence DeSantis, fashion editor for *Bell Syndicate,* classified Eiseman garb as "the kind of children's wear…regarded as solely for the upper classes, never to cross the barrier to mass."[18] Whether durable play clothes or a best Sunday dress, Eiseman clothing was among the most expensive—a detail about which Eiseman remained unapologetic: "They are not inexpensive," she told *Time* magazine, "but we will not compromise. We don't know how."[19] Eiseman was associated with the notion of "trading up," defined by the midcentury industry in practice as manufacturing and subsequently retailing better quality merchandise at correspondingly higher prices.[20] There is some evidence that "trading up" was not a novel idea within the children's wear industry, but Eiseman perhaps embodied the concept at its best.

Mothers, too, could "trade up" in purchasing an Eiseman, its very acquisition representative of social and economic aspiration. A child may have enjoyed the comfort and color of her Eiseman dress, but it was her mother who was "aware of the instant status of an Eiseman label."[21] Although Eiseman counted many an affluent toddler among her clients, her clothing was not merely the domain of the elite. The dresses and suits were pricey, but they were not beyond the reach of a rising middle-class family: wives of stockbrokers or dentists, for example, told *Women's Wear Daily* of their willingness to spend more for an Eiseman.[22] According to her daughter-in-law Judy Eiseman, this sartorial display of status and upward-mobility continued well into the 1980s, as the company found a new crop of consumers in the "yuppie mother."[23]

Part of Eiseman's success was in offering both status and value. Eiseman clothing was branded as the best—a claim that many companies make—but her product's quality measured up to the marketing. In the children's wear industry of Eiseman's mid-twentieth-century heyday, the excellence of the imported cloth she loved and the exacting workmanship she demanded were unparalleled. Still more impressive, this commitment to quality held fast even when such details as hand-finishing (a staple in her early years) became economically unsustainable during the latter part of the twentieth century.[24] So consistent is the Eiseman association with style and excellence that it remains a popular choice among prominent families. The new generation of Eiseman children includes Suri Cruise, daughter of actors Katie Holmes and Tom Cruise, and Blue Ivy Carter, daughter of entertainers Beyoncé and Shawn "Jay Z" Carter (figs. 2–6). Custom-made clothing from the company was even chosen by President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama to be used as official baby gifts from the White House during his administration (fig. 7).[25] A Florence Eiseman was, and is, an investment, with a label that puts a child on par with Rockefellers and royals,but it is also an impeccably made, long-lasting, and special ensemble with simple lines and charming details that evokes the sweetness of a fleeting childhood.[26]

(opposite) Fig. 7. Detail of Presidential Seal Dress

Designing the Postwar Child

Sarah Anne Carter

A world in which children and their needs create the shape of daily life, a filiarchy, may be the best way to understand American culture in the years after World War II.[1] From the nineteenth into the twentieth centuries, a range of social and cultural forces transformed ideal children from beings who financially contributed to their families into emotionally priceless individuals at the center of their parents' worlds.[2] The postwar baby boom further elevated the role of children in the American household. It was the perfect moment for Florence Eiseman to introduce her children's clothes to the eager parents of this new and rapidly expanding demographic. From the 1940s to the present, Eiseman's iconic dresses, rompers, and suits, especially her A-line shapes and graphic appliqués, have projected an image of childhood that feels simple, visually distinct from adulthood, and somehow timeless. She endeavored to, "make a child look like a child." This directive was at the core of her philosophy and helped define what a child looked like in the postwar era, offering a new design perspective on the history of the baby boom and a new vision of the family-centered prosperity that followed World War II. Eiseman developed an aesthetic that turned children into objects to be admired, whether wrapping them up in bows like gifts, echoing styles that look back to children's fashion of America's first Gilded Age, or using clothing to define family memories that are both full of wonder and project a sense of childhood innocence and creative possibility. As the first line of luxury fashion for children, Eiseman goods were out of reach for the majority of families, but they projected an image of childhood that was both reflective of key patterns in American culture and broadly aspirational.

Florence and Laurence Eiseman's decision to introduce her handmade organdy pinafores to Marshall Field's in Chicago in 1945 was perfectly timed (p. 36). After decades of privation and delayed family life caused by the Great Depression and the stress of wartime production and sacrifice, an unprecedented baby boom—at its peak, the birthrate was almost double what it had been in the 1930s—completely reoriented American life.[3] The birthrate was highest for women over the age of thirty-five who had waited until after the war to have children. New homes in the suburbs, mass culture marketed to children, and new anxieties about the stakes of proper parenting all contributed to a world in which children were at its center. While more expensive than anything else they were selling for children, Marshall Field's recognized an opportunity to create a new market for children's clothes. The handmade clothing sold quickly, and Eiseman expanded her business outside of her home.

The appeal of Eiseman's clothing was rooted in the quality of its design and workmanship: deep hems, hand-applied appliqués, and fine, often imported, carefully matched fabrics. Consumers viewed Eiseman designs as potential heirlooms from the start. Parents could invest not only in a garment for one child, but for their growing families and planned future, stable generations, central to postwar life. The distinctive contour of the garments also contributed to their appeal. A-line dresses flattered the round bodies of little girls and

Fig. 1. *Package Dress,* Advertisement, November 8, 1956

turned them into geometric shapes. Garments like the rompers or all-in-ones further shaped children's bodies into recognizable geometric forms, often in primary colors. Rather than mini-adults, the classically styled garments had their own look that was separate from adult fashions. The company took this approach even further with garments that turned children's bodies into specific objects. For example, the iconic package dress and romper, advertised from the early 1950s, allowed children to be dressed as if they were white presents tied up with a red ribbon (fig. 1, p. 82). These garments were labeled with Eiseman's signature embroidered handwriting, personalizing them as, "A present for…(child's name)," "Happy birthday…" or "Your Christmas package…." Other garments employed the handwritten script to suggest qualities of the child wearing them, whether "Big as a minute," comparing a small child to a dainty watch pin, or giving the child a voice claiming, "I am an Angel" or simply "Hello" (fig. 1–2, pp. 42–43). A decade after the company's founding, creative garments like these, that fed into the national desire to project a precious and protected image of childhood, earned Eiseman one of the highest awards in the fashion industry. In 1955, she won the Neiman Marcus Fashion award—which she shared with several fashion icons including Grace Kelly, whose children, of course, wore Eiseman clothes.

Florence Eiseman's broad appeal was compounded by another cultural pattern that intersected with the postwar baby boom: the desire to provide children with a sense of "wondrous innocence." Since the late nineteenth century, the desire to inspire feelings of wonder and surprise in children, and for their parents who lived vicariously through this joy, has been a key part of both children's culture and the marketing of that culture. For historian Gary Cross, this term is a way to explain the pleasure parents may find in providing their children with family vacations, special holidays, timeless toys, and clothing designs that seem to extend the period of childhood.[4] In the postwar period, growing family sizes and rising incomes allowed for the broad cultural expansion of these long-term trends.

With a savvy understanding of the consumer, Eiseman created clothes that capitalized on these patterns: sailor suits for the entire family, formal holiday dresses, and fad-resistant classical designs. From at least the early 1950s, the summer and later the cruise collections provided families with a way to dress their children for family vacations that did not revolve around the station-wagon road trips that historians and popular culture represent as key to postwar family life. Rather, these outfits, often nautically themed, seemed destined for fancier beach vacations, cruises, and country clubs. The sailor suits, which have been reprised year after year since the 1960s, offered kids of all ages the opportunity to look like members of a late-nineteenth-century crew intending to pilot their own small boat (pp. 112–116). Dresses for girls, rompers for babies, shortalls for young boys and two-piece sets for older sisters allowed everyone to match and were perfect for family photographs. Parents could capture and preserve idealized images of the special experiences they created for their children. The formal "Holiday" line worked in the same way. Intended to make Christmas festive and formal, it fed into the creation of appealing and wonder-producing family memories (fig. 3, pp. 82–89). For all of these garments, the focus on historic or timeless clothing and quality designed to create heirlooms allowed the clothes to be passed down to subsequent generations. With innovations such as the 1961 patented "add-a-hem" design, parents could not only prolong the life of expensive garments, they could also extend and elevate the notion of a timeless childhood, as opposed to fads and mass consumer culture. Traditional sailor suits and Victorian-inspired lace dresses deliberately reframed imagery from the Gilded Age when modern conceptions of childhood were invented (p. 117).[5]

Despite the stability suggested by the clothing, Eiseman-clad kids were also living through the Cold War and it shaped several key aspects of

Fig. 2. *I am an Angel,* Advertisement, c. 1955

their worlds. While World War II was eventually won by the United States and its allies, the subsequent political and philosophical clash of American democracy and Russian communism had to be waged culturally. The child-centered nuclear family was perceived to be the foundation of America's strength. Creative play, knowledge of

the world, and clearly defined gender roles were part of this ideological democratic framework; they were also central to Eiseman designs. Appliqués—carefully applied imagery from the five-petal flower to scenes from children's stories or images of balloons, animals, or trains—are signature elements. As described in a statement of company values, Eiseman designs "should not be too literal; whimsical or stylized representations are more appealing than realistic depictions."[6] These recognizable, but slightly abstract decorations connected to the postwar desire to encourage creative play. "The idealized imaginative child" as art historian Amy Ogata explains, was key to the war on communism, because creativity was viewed as a "transcendent force of personal liberation" that parents could develop in their children as opposed to an innate ability.[7] Eiseman's innovative "Party-Pin-Ons" or "Dress-Ups" offer another example. These decorative button-on aprons typically in the shape of an assortment of dolls could extend the life of dresses by allowing them to be worn for multiple occasions. "Angel," "Little Sweetheart," "Happy Birthday," "Gingham Girl," "Little Traveler," "April Showers," "Little Red Riding Hood" dolls and even a doll representing the back of a Native American mother wearing a baby carrier could be buttoned onto the front of dresses as aprons, making a clear connection between the little girls wearing the dresses and the stylized doll figures. These connections all scripted opportunities for imaginative play (fig 4, pp. 36–37).

Fig. 3. Florence Eiseman with children celebrating the holidays, 1982

Clothing that encouraged or represented a creative or imaginative spirit was viewed as an ideal way to train future citizens in American values. International themes, like dresses and shortalls with European flags, conjured up the idea of an informed, jet-setting consumer, who was educated to understand the international landscape in a playful, creative, uniquely American way (pp. 70–71).

Postwar society valued clearly defined gender roles. This emphasis was part of the postwar drive for orderly suburban family life and was also considered a bulwark against communism: boys had to be trained to engage in violent play in preparation for potential military battles with the Soviet Union.[8] By the mid-1950s, the company's distinctive appliqués were gendered in what were called "Brother-Sister Go-Togethers." These featured "the matching of colours and fabric in clothes for boys and girls to achieve essentially feminine lines for girls and masculine lines for boys without, as she [Eiseman] says, making small boys look like grown men."[9] Similar imagery was altered for boys and girls, with the fletching on an arrow for a brother inverted into flower petals for his sister, a mouse into a cat, a house into a car. These themed pairings allowed brothers and sisters to wear complementary but not identical clothing, linking them as siblings while underscoring the gender differences perceived as important in the Cold War United States

Fig. 4. *"Dress-ups,"* Advertisement, c. 1957

Fig. 5. *The Gingham Dog and the Calico Cat,* Eiseman “Bother-Sister Go-Togethers,” 1959

(fig. 5, pp. 58–65). For most of the company’s history, sizes for girls have run through size 12 (preteens), while they ended around size 4 for boys. The distinction reflected sales patterns: mothers bought the classic and cute Eiseman clothing for their daughters long after their sons were wearing more rugged play clothes or dressing like their father for formal events.

Eiseman expressed a desire to design for all children, an aspiration that reflected the ideals of a democratic America (if not the realities of American life). Not only did she design high-end garments for children with disabilities in the 1960s, she thought about her fabric color choices in relation to the ethnically diverse clientele for her fine children’s clothes. She explained in a 1971 interview that, “We use only ‘honest’ and unmuddled colors for our things. It’s a mistake to picture all little children as blond and angelic.”[10] She believed that the deep blues, reds, and whites she used would flatter children with a range of skin tones and hair colors, rather than just selecting colors for the archetypical blond and blue-eyed child. Her attention to the needs of a range of children likely connected to her Jewish identity and personal experiences with friends, family, and employees. It probably made good business sense, but it also reflected a progressive, forward-looking view of the way America should treat all of its children.

In the filiarchy of the postwar period, Florence Eiseman understood the appeal of creating garments for children who were not miniature adults. Eiseman clothing defined childhood as a distinct period of life that was simultaneously fleeting and enduring and worth the investment of both time and money. Whatever might lie ahead, treasured Eiseman garments documented in beloved photographs implied that children were at the center of their families. Investment in this image of childhood—particularly in a gendered, creative, and international child—was also perceived to be in the best interest of a free nation (fig. 6). Florence Eiseman designs are often repeated year after year, reconfirming what both the company and customers proudly refer to as a “timeless” look. This design aesthetic, grounded in the child-centered world of the postwar period, continues to convey the comforting vision of an innocent childhood more than seventy years later.

(opposite) Fig 6. *Globe Dress,* 1981

Functional Fashions for Every Child

Natalie Wright

In 1963 award-winning designer Florence Eiseman did something unexpected by creating the first commercially available, ready-to-wear high-end fashions for children with disabilities. At the invitation of leading designer and advocate for the disabled Helen Cookman, Eiseman created pieces that incorporated special features to accommodate a variety of abilities. Their project, which resulted in at least three years of Eiseman designs with Cookman's Functional Fashions label, constitutes a fascinating case study in histories of disability, design, and childhood and their intersections in the early 1960s. Eiseman and Cookman sought to create clothing geared toward physical accommodation and psychological empowerment. This was meaningful work for Eiseman, whose design ethos presented an inclusive and progressive vision of childhood centered on the idea that "all children are beautiful."[1]

In 1955 Cookman created a line of "Functional Fashions" clothing for people with disabilities at the Institute of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at New York University, one of the many rehabilitation centers set up after World War II (fig. 1). This institute paired designers with medical specialists to create self-help devices to assist physically handicapped persons with everyday tasks and one of their areas of interest was in functional clothing. Cookman believed that "every child, man and woman with a disability can be functionally and beautifully dressed at all price ranges."[2] After receiving a staggering number of inquiries from 35,000 individuals and 700 organizations, Cookman saw a need and an opportunity to expand the Functional Fashions line.[3] She set up her own organization, the Clothing Research and Development Foundation (CRDF), and invited leading designers such as Vera Maxwell, Brooks Brothers, Davidow, Alexander Shields, and Florence Eiseman, among others, to include Functional Fashions adaptive features in their own lines. Eiseman was the principal designer of children's clothing for the CRDF for several years.

Prior to this collaborative initiative, clothes for the disabled were typically plain, ill-fitting, and usually made of inexpensive fabrics. Apart from the custom clothes available to the wealthiest members of society, there was little attention to style or to the way clothing made a disabled person feel. This was especially true at institutions where children were sometimes minimally clothed, if at all.[4] Even for those cared for at home, convenient options did not exist. In order for a child with challenges to be accommodated, let alone to be well dressed, parents needed to alter the clothing themselves.[5] A young woman with disabilities was encouraged to learn to sew, if possible, because, as noted in a 1963 government publication on vocational rehabilitation, she would be "obliged to create or remodel her clothing for the rest of her life."[6] Cookman believed the entire situation was damaging to a disabled person's self-confidence and mental health. The ready-to-wear fashions offered by her and her designer partners addressed these challenges through a thoughtful combination of physical accommodation for, and aesthetic adornment of, the disabled body.

Fig. 1. Helen Cookman presents her Functional Fashions line, 1955

Eiseman's design approach made her an ideal collaborator in this project. She had already distinguished her brand with design and construction features that occupational therapists later defined as "adaptive." In 1963 Oregon State graduate student in Clothing, Textiles, and Related Arts Lynda Frescura analyzed the effectiveness of clothing adaptations for children with disabilities and recommended dresses without waistlines, strong construction and durable fabric, and features that allow the garment to grow with the child.[7] The "Self-Help Clothing for Handicapped Children" parents' pamphlet echoed these suggestions, adding that simple designs without extra frills were preferred.[8] Eiseman's designs privileged all of these features, rejecting puffy sleeves and waistlines, championing expert construction and exceptional fabrics, and patenting the add-a-hem growth feature that allowed parents to easily let down a dress.[9] In this way, Eiseman was already demonstrating Cookman's conviction that disability, fashion, and commercial success were not contradictory.

With the help of Cookman's research on design solutions for children with disabilities, Eiseman set out to create styles that would accommodate a spectrum of physical abilities.[10] For the first time, designs for the disabled were marketed as attractive and useful for everyone.[11] As a line designed for varying abilities, Eiseman's Functional Fashions prefigured the 1970s universal design movement that aimed to design for people of *all* abilities.[12] Fashion shows for the Functional Fashions line featured only able-bodied models, but newspaper articles often pictured a Florence Eiseman design on an able-bodied child next to the same outfit on a disabled child (fig. 2).[13] Available at the same retailers as other Eiseman pieces, the only indication of an outfit's additional purpose was the "Functional Fashions" label sewn into the garment. Accommodating designs were discreet, such as wider trouser legs for braces, reinforced underarm seams for crutches, matching shoulder strap purses for girls who also had to maneuver crutches, and trousers or longer dresses to preserve the modesty of a child in a wheelchair. The Eiseman aesthetic of bright colors and playful appliqués did not waver, and in fact, many of these clothes would wear better and be more convenient for able-bodied children. If parents were buying Functional Fashions clothing for a disabled child, the styles would be suitable for siblings and even for future generations.[14]

In creating adaptive clothing that resembled the firm's other pieces, Eiseman believed she was fighting discrimination that was based in children with disabilities dressing differently from their peers. If children wore larger sizes to accommodate equipment such as braces or wore less expensive clothes in case they were soiled, as had been the norm, Eiseman believed that they would not have the opportunity to fit into society appropriately.[15] As clothing specialist Opal Robertson said of Florence Eiseman's Functional Fashions on a 1965 television special, "These clothes are not any different because they were designed for the handicapped. They are adapted, so the children who wear them will not be set apart from their playmates or from any group that they want to go into …. They must belong to a group and clothes help children [do that]."[16] At a time that has been characterized as an era of postwar conformity, fitting in was extremely important for children, especially for those with disabilities.[17] Denying a child's disability by hiding devices such as braces was not the strategy. Instead, children were to be given clothing that would boost their self-esteem, which was in turn believed to diminish any "irregularities."[18] The Functional Fashions initiative took seriously the psychological role of clothing and its capacity to be a therapeutic treatment.

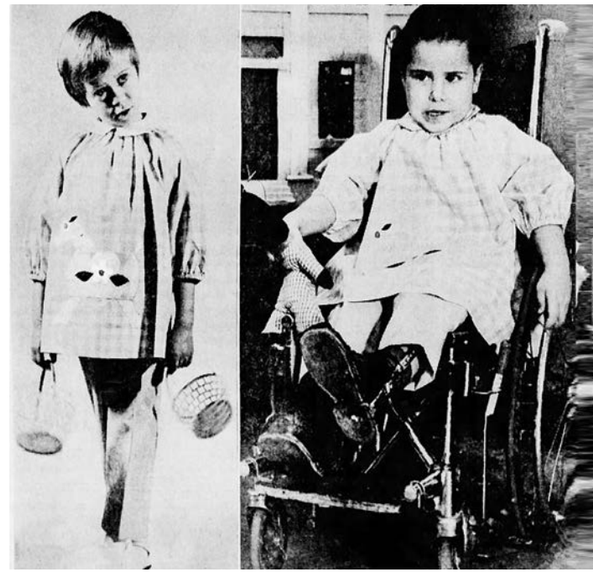


Fig. 2. Children wearing Florence Eiseman Functional Fashions, *San Bernardino Sun-Telegram,* April 19, 1964

As self-help devices, these clothes were also meant to teach independence. Parenting publications suggested that mothers, occupational therapists, and doctors collaborate on a training plan for mothers to practice teaching their disabled children to dress themselves.[19] Mothers were instructed to devote hours to teach their children to dress and

undress themselves, using the adaptive features in the clothing.[20] On Florence Eiseman pieces, such features included side zippers on trousers to facilitate bathroom activities, over-the-head dresses with no fasteners, and large shoulder or side buttons

Fig. 3. Film still of child modeling Eiseman dress on the television special, *Today's Homemaker,* "Clothes for the Handicapped: Part 2," April 13, 1965

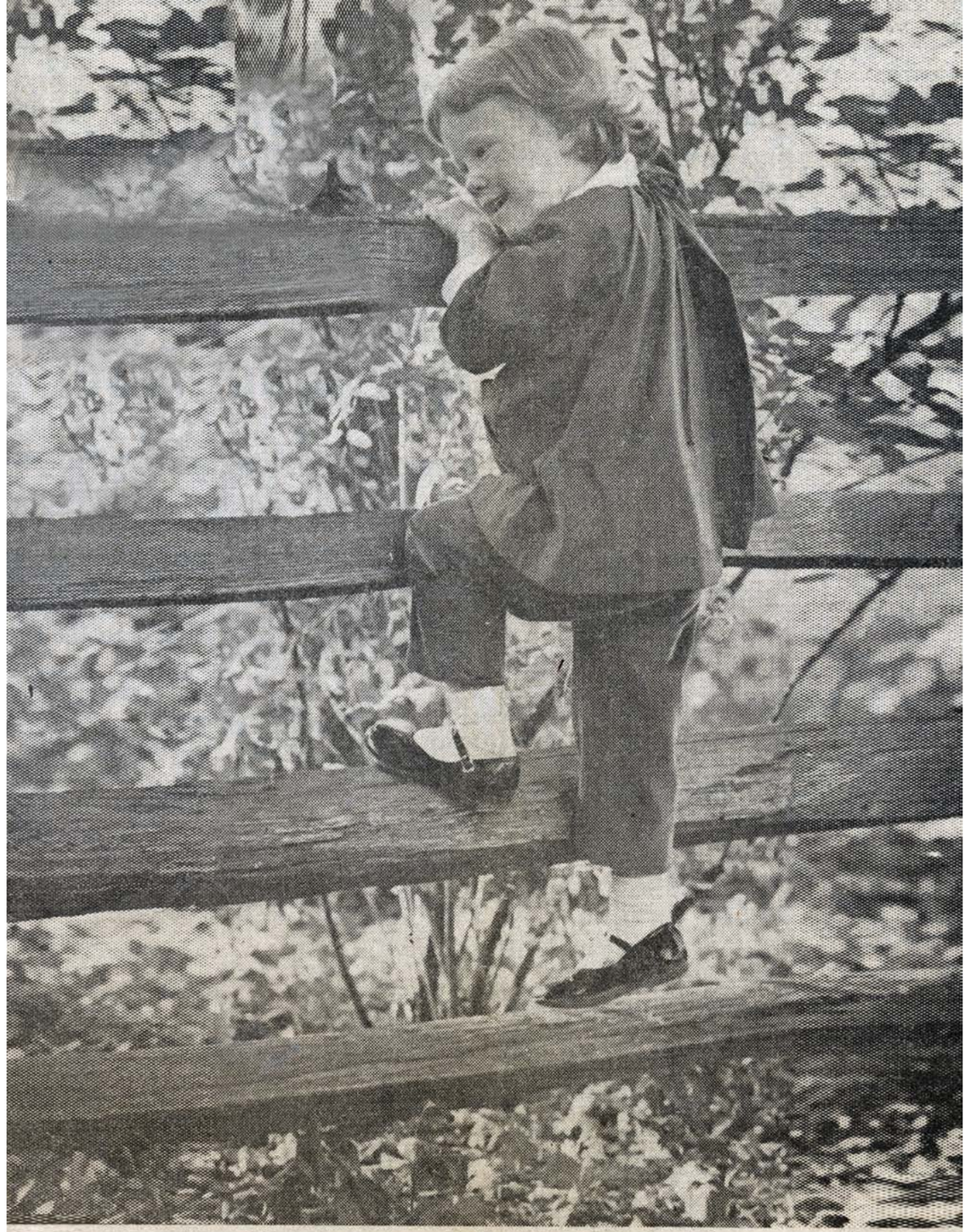
on petticoats (fig. 3, pp. 100–101).[21] With regard to parenting books and even clothing charts that used the ability to dress oneself as a marker in child development, the self-help devices might have aided children with disabilities to meet these milestones.[22] The ultimate goal of these garments was not only to get children adept at dressing and undressing themselves, but also to instill in them feelings of independence, confidence, and happiness.

The intent here was to fight institutionalization with rehabilitation, to help children lead a life of physical and financial independence outside of institutional or family care.[23] A good life meant not being a burden on society or their families. Florence Eiseman advanced these therapeutic goals through the use of playful, adaptive designs and high quality, physically pleasing fabrics that made learning to dress a fun activity.[24]

Disabilities cut across all strata of society, but like Eiseman's other designs, Functional Fashions may have been primarily purchased by elite families who could afford the brand. Even so, the line fit within Eiseman's overall concept of designing an aspirational vision of childhood, not limited by physical ability. Dressed in Florence Eiseman clothes, disabled children gained confidence and a broader access to the world (fig. 4).

At Florence Eiseman's funeral, her son Laurence emphasized her strong sense of right and wrong, her clear moral compass, which in turn guided her aesthetic and business decisions.[25] Eiseman's Jewish faith and identity, as well as her position as a female business owner, played key roles in the creation of her value system. Throughout her career, Eiseman strategically leveraged her design skills and her status as a community and industry leader to push for a world in which all children, including those with disabilities, were seen as beautiful and worthy of the highest level of design and dignity.

(opposite) Fig. 4. A child plays in Florence Eiseman's Functional Fashions, *Milwaukee Sentinel,* October 14, 1963



ALL THE CHILDREN'S CLOTHES she designs are functional, Florence Eiseman caims, but this is one costume which unquestionably deserves the "Functional Fashion" label. Three year old Patricia Lawrie, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. James Lawrie, 4440 N. Prospect av., tests the wearability of the coveralls which feature a drop seat, zipped at either side, and a smock top fastening with a single tie in back.

Notes

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10 Betty Halbreich with Rebecca Paley, *I’ll Drink to That: A Life in Style, With a Twist* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2014), 70.
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21 Klemesrud.
22 “Convenience is Called the Major Shopping Factor by Mothers,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, October 6, 1969, 24.
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Plates

Florence Eiseman designed garments for the distinctive shape of a child's body. For that reason, we felt that it was important to show children wearing the garments whenever possible. We offer a special note of thanks to The Eiseman Company LLC for granting this permission and to photographer Lois Bielefeld for her exceptional photos that capture the spirit of both the Eiseman line and of childhood.

All of the works in the exhibition have been lent by the Eiseman Company LLC, Mount Mary University Historic Costume Collection, and by additional private collectors.

Starting Out in Pinafores

Tyrolean Pinafore, Cotton, cotton piqué, hand-sewn appliqué, 1945/50
Dress with Pinafore of Native American Woman and Baby Carrier, Cotton, cotton piqué, hand embroidery, 1956

Clockwise:
“April Showers” Pinafore, “Gingham Girl” Pinafore, “Happy Birthday” Pinafore, “Happy Birthday” Pinafore
All: Cotton piqué, hand-sewn appliqué, hand embroidery, c. 1955

Tabard, Cotton piqué, hand-sewn appliqué, c. 1955

Dress with Tabard, Cotton, cotton piqué, hand embroidery, 1956

Hello Baby

Hello-Goodbye Dress and Bloomers, Cotton, hand embroidery, 1954

Big-as-a-Minute Jumper, Linen, hand embroidery, 1953
Shirt, Cotton poplin, hand embroidery, 1950

Button-on Short, Cotton, 1960s

Rocking Horse Carriage Cover, Cotton corduroy, hand-sewn appliqué, 1964

Dress and Bloomers, Cotton, hand-sewn appliqué, late 1950s

Strawberry Dress, Egyptian cotton broadcloth, hand embroidery, c. 1950

Button-on Short, Cotton poplin, hand-sewn appliqué, c. 1960

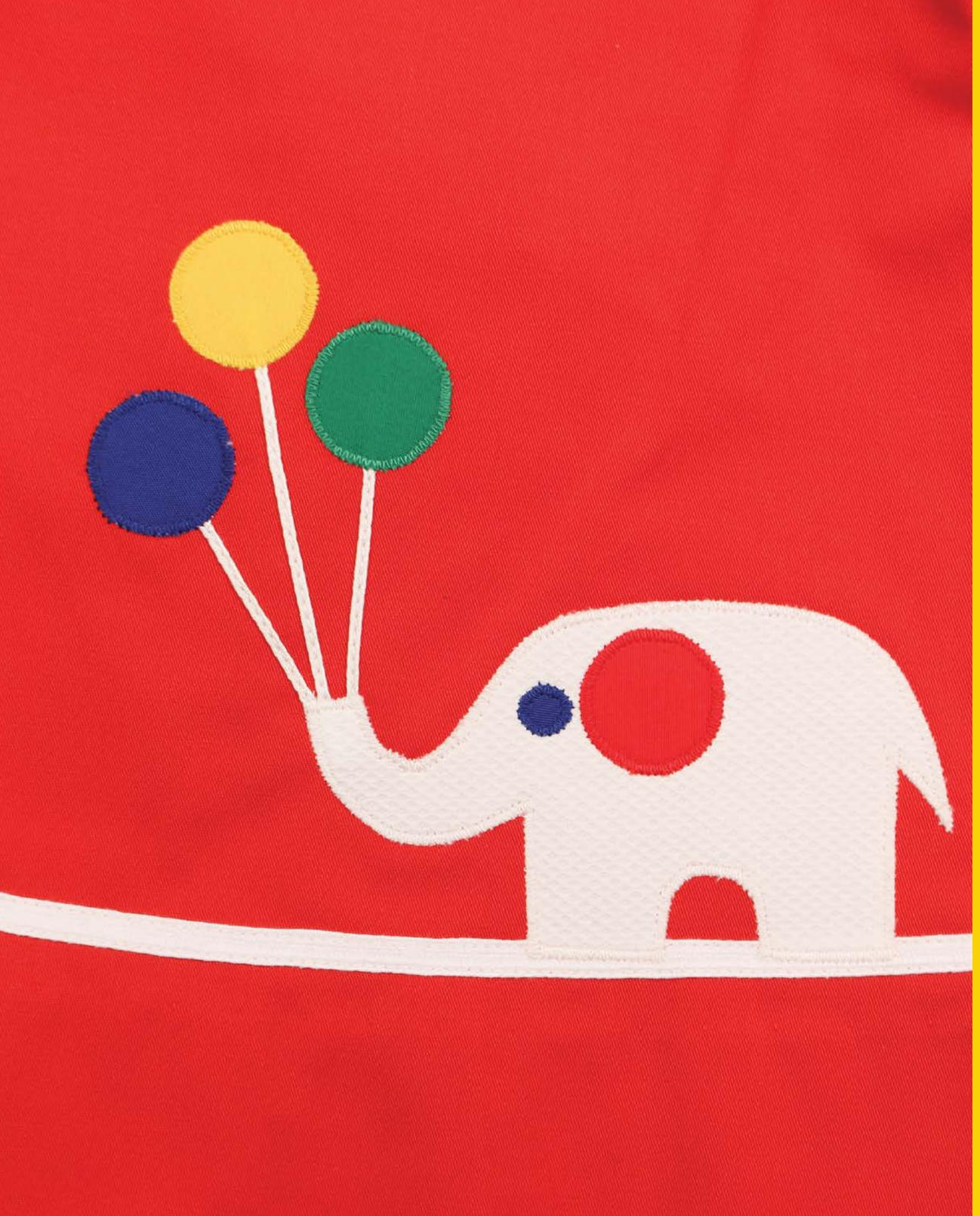
Danish Sailor Shortall, Cotton, hand-sewn appliqué, c. 1960

Romper, Cotton, buttons, 1947/54

Ribbon Dress, Egyptian cotton broadcloth, fine wale piqué, 1957

Dress and Bloomers, Cotton/polyester blend ottoman, embroidery, loose appliqué, 2008/17

Shortall and Shirt, Cotton/polyester blend ottoman, embroidery, appliqué, 2008/17



Brother-Sister Go-Togethers

Balloon Dress, Cotton, hand embroidery, 1950s

Balloon Button-on Short, Cotton, hand embroidery, 1950s

Mouse and Cheese Shortall, Cotton blend, appliqué, 1973

Cat and Yarn Ball Dress, Cotton blend, appliqué, 1973

Elephant Dress, Cotton/polyester blend, appliqué, 1986
Elephant Shortall, Cotton/polyester blend, appliqué, 1986

Shortall, Cotton/polyester blend, appliqué, 1986
Dress, Cotton/polyester blend, appliqué, 1986

Dress, Linen/rayon blend, appliqué, 1980

Shortall, Linen/rayon blend, appliqué, 1980

The Worldly Child

Dress, Cotton, loose appliqué, 1950s

League of Nations Dress, Cotton/polyester blend, 1964

Arithmetic Dress, Cotton/polyester blend, appliqué, 1964
Dodo Bird Dress, Cotton, appliqué, 1963

Renoir Dress with Pinafore, Swiss cotton poplin, cotton batiste eyelet, hand-sewn ornament, 1965

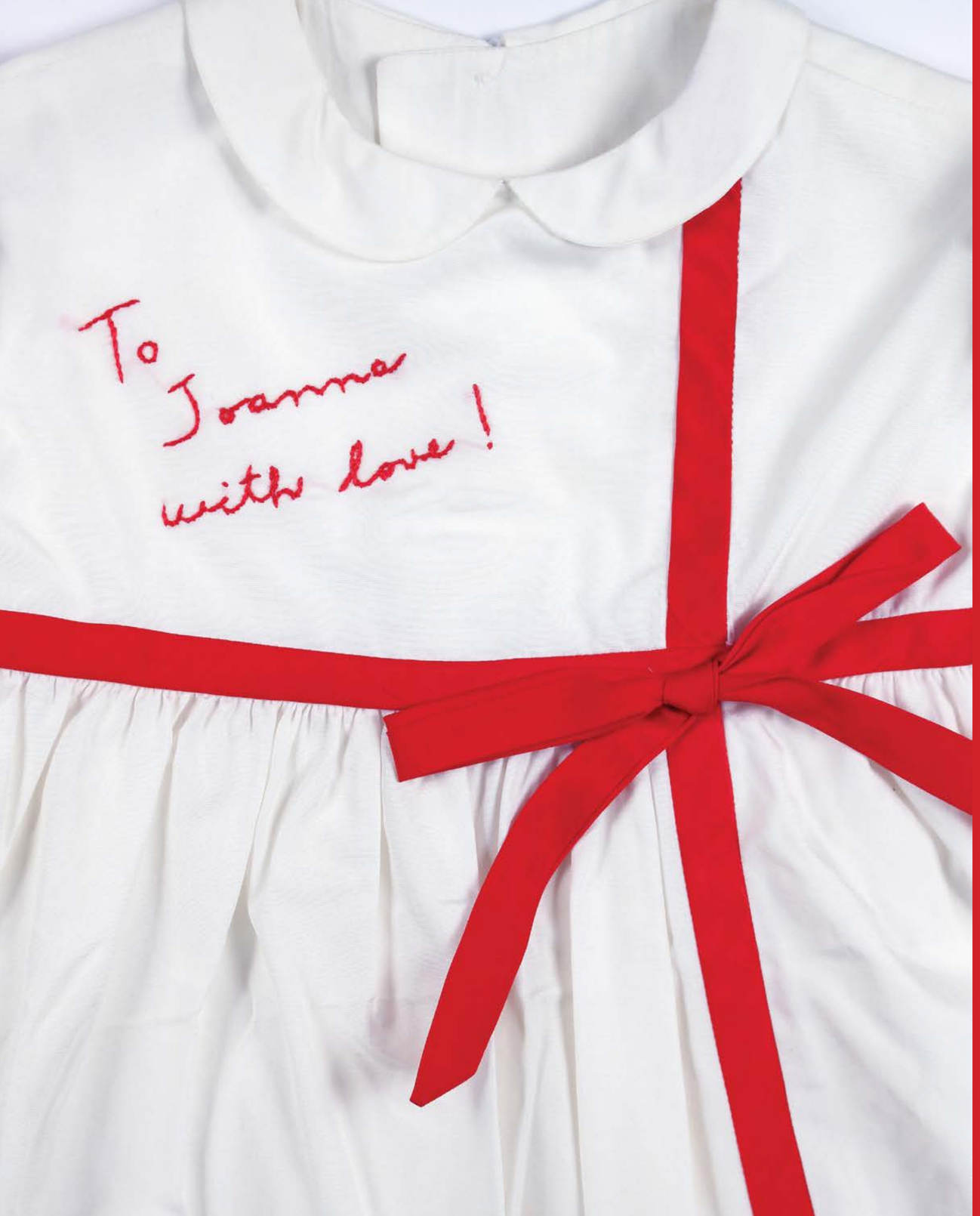
A Tyrolean Tradition

Tyrolean Jumper and Turtleneck, Wool/polyester/acrylic blend, cotton knit, appliqué, 1975
Tyrolean Jumper and Turtleneck, Wool/polyester blend, cotton knit, appliqué, 1984
Tyrolean Jumper and Blouse, Wool/acrylic blend, cotton, appliqué, 1986

Tyrolean Jumper and Blouse, Wool/polyester/acrylic blend, cotton knit, appliqué, 1975
Tyrolean Jumper and Blouse, Wool/polyester blend, cotton, appliqué, 1979

Tyrolean Jumper and Blouse, Wool/polyester blend, cotton/polyester knit, appliqué, late 1980s
Coat Dress, Wool/polyester blend, 1968

Tyrolean Shortall and Turtleneck, Wool/polyester blend, cotton knit, appliqué, 1984



Celebrating the Holidays

Package Dress, Egyptian cotton broadcloth, hand embroidery, 1956

Jumper, Cotton velveteen, hand-sewn ornament, 1962

Dress, Cotton velveteen, cotton embroidery, 1972
Dress, Cotton velvet, cotton batiste, 1962
Dress, Wool/acrylic blend, early 1980s

Tuxedo Shortall, Wool crepe, cotton, taffeta, 1982
Tuxedo Dress, Wool crepe, cotton, taffeta, 1982

Dress, Cotton velveteen, Swiss cotton eyelet, embroidered cotton batiste, 1968

Coat, Cotton velveteen, 1962

Shortall, Cotton velveteen, 1987

Jumper and Blouse, Cotton velveteen, cotton, 1961

The MOD Child

Mondrian Coverup, Cotton/polyester blend, 1985
Mondrian Swimsuit, Nylon/lycra blend, 1985

Dress, Cotton, appliqué, late 1960s
Circle Pocket Dress, Cotton, cotton piqué, 1969
Dress, Cotton/polyester blend, appliqué, c. 1975

Circle Dress, Cotton, silk, appliqué, late 1960s

Dress, Nylon Helenca, 1964

Dress, Cotton/polyester blend, silk, late 1960s

Dress, Cotton/polyester blend, appliqué, late 1970s

Bull Dress, Cotton/polyester blend, appliqué designed by Lois Ehlert, 1973

Dalmatian Dress, Swiss cotton poplin, appliqué, 1964

Functional Fashion Dress, Cotton, appliqué, 1960s
Functional Fashion Dress, Cotton poplin, appliqué, 1960s

Functional Fashion Dress, Cotton poplin, appliqué, 1960s

Digital Age Design

Robot Shortall and Turtleneck, Cotton/polyester blend, appliqué, 1985

Dress, Cotton/polyester blend, appliqué, 1985

Dress, Cotton/polyester blend, appliqué, early 1980s
Turtleneck Dress, Cotton/polyester blend, appliqué, late 1970s

Dress, Cotton/polyester blend, appliqué, late 1970s
Carrot Dress, Cotton/polyester blend, appliqué designed by Lois Ehlert, 1970s

Shirt and Pants, Cotton/polyester blend, appliqué, 1990

The Family on Vacation

Sailor Romper, Linen/cotton blend, 1986
Sailor Dress, Linen/cotton blend, 1986

Sailor Shortall, Linen/cotton blend, 1986

Dress, Cotton/polyester blend, appliqué, 1980

Shortall, Cotton/polyester blend, appliqué, 1980

Sailboat Sundress, Cotton/polyester poplin, appliqué, 1985
Sailboat Sunsuit, Cotton/polyester poplin, appliqué, 1985

"Peter Thompson" Middy and Skirt, Cotton/wool flannel, 1963

Swimsuit Coverup, Cotton terry cloth, appliqué, 1964/74

Swimsuit, Nylon Helenca, appliqué, c. 1965

Swimsuit and Coverup, Cotton terry cloth, nylon/lycra blend, appliqué, 1983

Dressing the Lollipop Set

Belted Dress, Swiss cotton eyelet batiste, 1962

Dress, Swiss cotton eyelet lace, 1966

Dress, Swiss cotton fine wale piqué eyelet, 1966

Ivy Dress and Coat, Swiss cotton eyelet lace, 1965

Dress, Swiss cotton lace, hand-sewn ornament, 1967

Hooded Coat, Cotton velveteen, taffeta, c. 1965

Dress, Swiss cotton eyelet, cotton, 1977

Polka Dot Dress, Swiss cotton batiste, embroidery, 1976

Dress, Linen, appliqué, late 1960s

Profile

Profile

Florence Eiseman was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1899. As a young woman she trained as a stenographer and moved to Chicago to work with her brother. It was there she met and married Laurence Eiseman. They moved together to Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1927. The next year she gave birth to their son Laurence Jr. and a second son, Robert, followed in 1931. After the birth of Robert, Eiseman's doctor suggested she develop a hobby to "calm her nerves." Eiseman's new hobby—sewing baby blankets and original clothing for the children of friends—became the foundation of her design aesthetic and an international business.

In 1945 Laurence Eiseman, who had been a partner in a Milwaukee toy company, took three of his wife's handmade pinafores as samples to Marshall Field's in Chicago. He returned home with a $3,000 order. The family shifted focus from children's toys to fine clothes for kids. After first working out of her Shorewood, Wisconsin home, she and her husband, true partners in this endeavor, established a factory on North Water Street in Milwaukee. After her husband's death in 1967, Florence Eiseman and her sons Laurence Jr. and Robert continued to build the company.

Eiseman's designs focused on bright colors, playful appliqués, geometric shapes, fine, imported fabrics that moved with children, and design innovation, creating what may be the first A-line dresses. Eiseman was also a collector of modern art and her approach to color and bold design likely related to her love of Braque, Calder, Matisse, Moore, Kandinsky, and others. She created garments specifically inspired by artists like Mondrian and Renoir (pp. 72–73, 92).

Eiseman's creative approach—and the company's unwavering focus on good design and high quality materials—earned her many honors including the Neimen Marcus Fashion Award in 1955, the Gimbel's Fashion Award in 1971, the I. Magnin's Great American Award in 1974 and an exhibition of her designs at the Milwaukee Art Museum in 1985. Her work has been a favorite of celebrities for seven decades, most recently as the official presidential gift for babies from former President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama.

Eiseman died in 1988 from emphysema. The Eiseman Company LLC continues to create high quality children's clothes designed in Milwaukee and inspired by Florence Eiseman's unique aesthetic and style dictate that "a child should look like a child."

Lender Credits

All of the works in the exhibition were lent by The Eiseman Company LLC, except for a significant group of objects from Mount Mary University Historic Costume Collection on pages 36, 37, 38, 52, 58, 82, 83, 106, 107 (left), 118, and 119. Two private collectors lent garments featured on pages 39, 42, 46, and 107 (right).

Photography Credits

Front Matter

p. 2, “Pop Art is our favorite kind,” *The New Yorker,* August 10, 1963; “Mom Art is an even newer school of painting,” The New Yorker, August 10, 1963 (Ad owned by The Eiseman Company LLC)
p. 3, “Please do not start a war in the U.N.,” *The New Yorker,* February 6, 1965 (Ad owned by The Eiseman Company LLC)
p. 4, “Please don’t irritate that gentleman in the deck chair,” *The New Yorker,* December 12, 1964 (Ad owned by The Eiseman Company LLC)
p. 5, “Don’t Go to the Library Unless You Want to Read,” *The New Yorker,* July 25, 1964 (Ad owned by The Eiseman Company LLC)
p. 6, ©1955 Currys, Photograph from The Eiseman Company LLC Archives

The Florence Eiseman Fashion Legacy

p. 12, fig. 1: Advertisement for The Junior Bazaar, *St. Louis Post Dispatch,* September 17, 1967, p. 248.
p. 13, figs. 2 – 6: “Debbie: ‘I wish Eddie and Liz Happiness,’” *Photoplay Magazine,* August, 1959, Florence Eiseman Company LLC Archives; Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, Shawn “Jay Z” Carter, Blue Ivy Carter, http://www.elle.com/culture/celebrities/news/a42642/beyonce-posts-never-before-seen-photos-jay-z/; President Kennedy, Caroline Kennedy, John F. Kennedy, Jr., White House, Oval Office, October 10, 1962, Cecil Stoughton White House Photographs; *Dallas Morning News,* September 1955, Photograph by Doris Jacoby; Grace Kelly Christmas Card, http://photobucket.com/gallery/user/2goddesses/media/bWVkaWFJZDo4OTc0MDk1/?ref=
p. 15, fig. 3: Lois Bielefeld for the Museum of Wisconsin Art

Designing the Postwar Child

p. 18, fig. 1: Eiseman Company LLC Archives
p. 19, fig. 2: Eiseman Company LLC Archives
p. 20, fig. 3: ©1982 Kevin Horan, kevinhoran.com
p. 21, fig. 4: Eiseman “Dress-ups,” October 27, 1957, Eiseman Company LLC Archives
p. 22, fig. 5: *The Detroit News,* Sunday, March 29, 1959, Eiseman Company LLC Archives
p. 23, fig. 6: Globe Dress, Fall, Holiday 1981 Collection, Eiseman Company LLC Archives

Functional Fashions for Every Child

p. 26, fig. 1: Rusk Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine Photo Collection, The Lillian and Clarence de la Chapelle Medical Archives, NYU Health Sciences Library
p. 27, fig. 2: Photograph by Marian Stephenson
p. 28, fig. 3: Special Collections and University Archives, Iowa State University Library
p. 29, fig. 4: Photograph by Sherman A. Gessert

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The following photographs in the plate section are by Lois Bielefeld: 60, 61, 64, 65, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 76,77, 78, 79, 84, 85, 86, 87, 89, 92, 93, 98, 99, 104, 105, 112, 113, 114, 115, 117, 125, 131, 134. All other photography is thanks to Andrea Waala.

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Model Recognition

The Museum of Wisconsin Art would like to thank the following models for posing in historic Florence Eiseman clothing:

Ashlyn D., Axel L., Brooke K., Calla B., Ella H., Elsie S., Fletcher F., Genevieve B., Gladys M., Greta O., Isa L., John F., Kathryn S., Louis K., Loveday S., Lucy L., Lucy S., Maria S., Mitchell W., Parker A., Paul D., Rachel S., Stel la O., Summer S., Tau P., Winifred M., Zora P.

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