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PAGE ONE

Gasp! Polyester Is the New Name In Paris Fashion

Silky Synthetics Pass
The Test for Armani;
Marcia Brady's Nightmare

By **RACHEL DODES** and **CHRISTINA PASSARIELLO**

March 1, 2008; Page A1

It has been more than three decades since "The Brady Bunch" went off the air. But the memory of the yellow polyester dance outfit she wore on the long-running sitcom still haunts Maureen McCormick, who played the eldest Brady daughter, Marcia.

"I never wanted to see polyester again," says the 51-year-old Ms. McCormick, recalling how the material clung to her body and made her sweat.

But brace yourself. Polyester is back.



Associated Press

Just as the "Summer of Love" swept America, men began wearing flamboyant polyester styles.

imaginary piece of cloth between his fingers.

To Mr. Theyskens, who also used polyester fabric for the first time last season, polyester is "an interesting subject." He likes it. But the fabric does have its limitations. Because it's so thin and stretchy, the new polyester is very difficult to sew, and can't be ironed. Mr. Theyskens struggled with it last season, while trying to create a diaphanous pleated gown with a metallic sheen. "You must handle polyester with care," he says.

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- **Photos:** [The Plight of Polyester⁴](#)

As Paris fashion week wraps up, several designers are lauding polyester as high fashion's next big thing. Lanvin's Alber Elbaz, Nina Ricci's Olivier Theyskens and the American designer Narciso Rodriguez all have elaborate thousand-dollar polyester creations that women are starting to see in expensive stores.

Designers say recent improvements in the synthetic fiber have made polyester lighter, thinner and more delicate. Mr. Elbaz, who got a standing ovation for a series of \$5,800 polyester evening gowns at his runway show last fall, said the texture of the new polyester was like cream. "It was so light," he said, as he rubbed an

The gauzy, light polyester that designers are using today is a far cry from the stiff cardboard-like Dacron suits mass-marketed in 1954. The thick DuPont yarn made from petrochemicals was pushed as a godsend for postwar Americans because it didn't stain, didn't require ironing, dried quickly and was cheap to produce. Its unique ability to absorb and retain dye prompted a fashion craze that came and went quickly in the funky 1960s and 1970s, when people who should have known better snapped up clothing in loud, psychedelic colors. The sculpted doubleknit polyester leisure suit followed and was just as ridiculous.

Just as John Travolta was dominating the dance floor in a white three-piece polyester suit in the 1977 movie "Saturday Night Fever," polyester hit its high-water mark. The U.S. apparel industry used more than a billion pounds of polyester filament yarn that year, according to the Fiber Economics Bureau. By 1987, following a back-to-the-earth uprising against synthetics, the industry was using less than half as much.

For many who lived through polyester's groovy heyday, the fabric still conjures up horror stories. Randy Jones, the original cowboy from the singing group The Village People, recalls partying one night in 1977 at Studio 54, the New York nightclub, when a woman got too close to a candle and set fire to her polyester wrap dress. "Someone threw a fur coat on her and put it out, and the music never stopped," says Mr. Jones.

Polyester "was gross. It was horrible. It was just so cheesy," recalls singer Gloria Gaynor, 58, who remains famous for her 1978 disco anthem, "I Will Survive." She recalls having to leave a polyester jacket open on stage to let in some air while she performed.

Neil Sedaka, 68, the chart topper of the 1950s and 1960s, says he was wearing a polyester jumpsuit while performing for a sold-out crowd during his comeback in the 1970s when it split up the back. "To that extent, we can say that polyester breathes well," he says.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, polyester went undercover and got a sexier name: "microfiber." The thinner, lighter polyester fabric found new purpose in undergarments and athletic wear, where it wicks away moisture and protects against cold and wind.

Intrepid designers like Calvin Klein and Giorgio Armani then began blending microfiber with cottons and wools in trench coats and suits to endow them with water- and wrinkle-resistant properties. Avant-garde Japanese designers such as Rei Kawakubo at Comme des Garçons also experimented with the fiber throughout the 1990s.

But polyester's appearance in super-luxe European designer apparel is another matter. Its emerging popularity among prominent designers has been driven by both technological innovation and clever marketing.

Recently, Japanese producers of fabrics, facing competition from Chinese and Indian manufacturers, began developing new types of synthetics, such as super-fine satin, twill and crêpe, with light finishes that can't be achieved using natural fibers. Some are oil-resistant; others have what's called fabric memory stability. That is, the fabric can be molded to hold a particular shape. One new type of Japanese polyester fiber is 1/40th the thickness of a human hair.

In 2006, **Toray Industries**, Japan's biggest maker of high-tech fibers, began to go after fashion designers throughout Europe and exhibited at the prestigious fashion-textile show *Première Vision* in Paris. The company called its fabrics the "Pride of Gousen." Gousen is the Japanese word for

synthetic textiles. Labels including Lanvin, Balenciaga and Louis Vuitton placed orders. While still a small part of the company's business, Toray's "high value-added materials" aimed at designer brands have quadrupled in sales over two years, to about \$18 million in 2007, the company says.

When he first encountered some of the new polyesters in the late 1990s, Mr. Rodriguez, the designer, says he loved the fabric. And so did retailers, until they found out it was polyester. Over the past several years, however, Mr. Rodriguez says, most retailers have calmed down because they now realize how appealing the new fibers are. This season, he showed polyester-silk blended garments on the runway.

Consumers who once thumbed their noses at polyester now deem the fabric *très chic*. "If Lanvin uses it, then it's cool," says Tracey Overbeck, an interior designer in Austin, Texas, who has bought several polyester-blended ensembles by designer Diane von Furstenberg.

Giorgio Armani, an early adopter of the new synthetics, says he now prefers polyesters to natural fabrics such as linen, which wrinkles. The Italian designer, who himself enjoys wearing cashmere-and-polyester blend jackets, urges men to wear blends for better fit and elasticity.

These days polyester, is anything but cheap, in part because of the soaring cost of the fossil fuels from which it is derived. A pair of pure polyester women's pants from Armani Collezioni sells for \$615. The highest-quality polyester fabrics top out at about \$37 per meter. That's more expensive than some silks.

But although it has gone upmarket, polyester hasn't lost its disco groove. In the yet-to-be released 2008 French comedy "Disco," actor Franck Dubosc plays a middle-aged deadbeat named Didier Travolta, who boogies to '70s hits in an electric-blue synthetic fabric pantsuit. "The jacket was tight and it made it difficult to move," in his dance scenes, the actor says. "But it gave me wings."

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