

Gilbert, Irene

by Robert O'Byrne

Gilbert, Irene (c.1910–1985), fashion designer, was born in Thurles, Co. Tipperary. Both in private conversation and public interview she was always secretive and little is therefore known of her parentage or early life, although on one occasion she did explain that while her father was Irish, her mother came from Yorkshire. She attended Alexandra College, Dublin, followed by a brief period at a Belgian finishing school before returning to Ireland to run a women's clothes shop in Dublin, called Femina.

From childhood onwards, Gilbert had shown a keen interest in fashion design but in post-independence Ireland there was nowhere for her to receive training in this field. She therefore moved to London, working at a court dressmaking establishment. This experience was of vital importance in her later career, since she often referred to the meticulous workmanship required from all members of staff. The clothes produced by the couture house she eventually opened in Dublin would also be distinguished by their flawless finish and attention to the finest detail. Gilbert once declared that her work was so thorough that it could be worn inside out.

While living in London, Gilbert married for the first time, but even the name of both this and her subsequent husband are no longer remembered, so reticent was she about divulging such information. It is believed that during the second world war she remained in England, working for British intelligence. After the war she returned to Ireland and opened a shop on Dublin's South Frederick St., stocking hats created by herself and some clothes by British and French designers.

During this period, Irish fashion was dependent on direction from London and Paris, and while the country was replete with competent dressmakers, there were no designers of sufficient skill or stature to inspire the establishment of an indigenous industry. Gilbert was the first such designer to emerge, following a fashion show she held in Jammet's restaurant, Dublin, in May 1950. Here she presented a dozen coats and dresses manufactured to her own designs, and so successful did these prove with the Irish clientele that Gilbert's career as Ireland's first couturier was established.

Haute couture – in which each garment is made for a specific woman – was always Irene Gilbert's field of expertise, and she worked during a time when there was still a large enough number of customers prepared to pay for such work. Her list of loyal clients included many members of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy such as the Countess Fitzwilliam, the marchionesses of Headfort and Sligo, and the Viscountess de Vesci. However, her greatest supporter among this group was Anne, countess of Rosse, who ordered large numbers of garments from Gilbert each season and

worked closely with the designer on their creation. Lady Rosse's collection of Irene Gilbert clothing remains at her former home, Birr Castle, Co. Offaly. Another stalwart fan was Lady Ursula Vernon, who provided financial backing in 1960 when Gilbert moved from South Frederick St. to larger premises at 117 St Stephen's Green. Here at the height of her success, she employed a staff of more than thirty women in her workrooms.

Not only did Irene Gilbert help to create the concept of an Irish fashion industry, she also gave considerable support to the country's fabric manufacturers. She was a keen advocate of Irish tweed, much of what she used in her clothing being specially produced for this purpose by the likes of Avoca Handweavers in Co. Wicklow and Magee & Co., Ltd, in Co. Donegal. But she was not averse to sourcing material from French and Italian mills, especially for her eveningwear.

Gilbert's particular skill as a designer lay in her handling of fabric, which she preferred to drape and pin on a model rather than follow any preconceived form. Her perfectionism meant she would often rework a design repeatedly in an effort to ensure it met with her satisfaction, and former staff would testify to the dauntingly high standards she demanded from them. Her technical abilities were also exceptionally strong and she revelled in opportunities to produce clothes that, despite their apparent simplicity, had actually cost considerable effort.

Less than twenty years after first opening her own couture business, Irene Gilbert was faced with the twin problems of escalating costs and diminishing demand. In February 1969 she therefore announced her retirement. She then left Ireland, moving first to Malta and subsequently to Cheltenham, where she died in August 1985. Her archives have not survived, but the National Museum of Ireland possesses some of her letters, drawings, and a small number of clothes.

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Robert O'Byrne, 'Couture for a countess: Lady Rosse's wardrobe', *Irish Arts Review*, xii (1996), 156–63; Elizabeth McCrum, *Fabric & form: Irish fashion since 1950* (1996), 18–20; Robert O'Byrne, *After a fashion: a history of the Irish fashion industry* (2000), 22–6