

Sculptor takes stock, turns to fashion design



Boston-based designer
Susan Playfair

By JULIE HATFIELD
Fashion Editor

Talk about checkered careers! How about someone who's a sculpture major in college, who then goes to New York to get her stockbroker's license, and finally returns to Boston and successfully designs and markets women's clothes.

Perhaps Susan Playfair, of Mount Vernon Street, has come full circle because her training as a sculptor has had an obvious effect on the unusual hand-blocked French cottons that she molds into dresses and sportswear.

A deep appreciation of all art forms has influenced her designing to the point that she has studied the clothing of ancient Egypt and developed a modern version of the "kalisiris," the dress which is actually built on to, and is part of, a gold or silver necklace.

Playfair is a rare entity — a Boston-based designer. She also is a

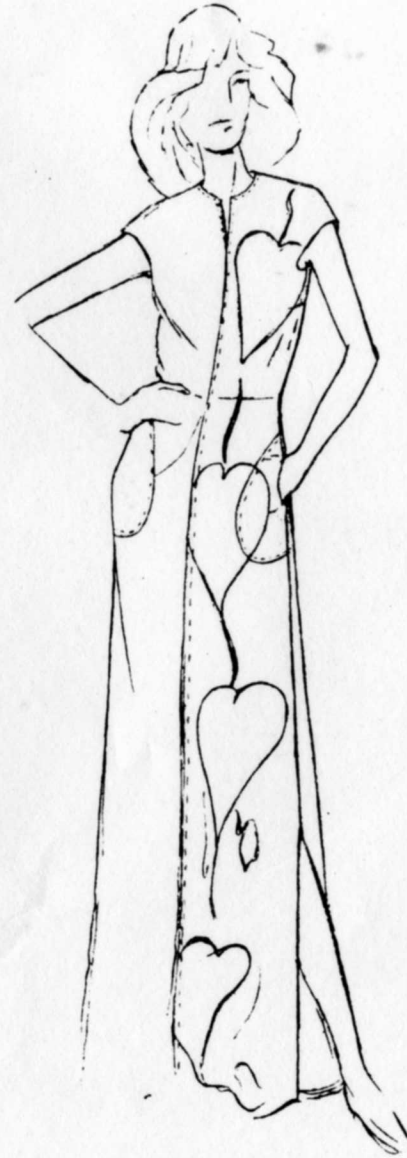
delight to the media, with her descriptive words as fresh and unused as "pareu" (the piece of fabric with a u-shaped border, used by missionaries at one time to clothe the naked Samoan islanders). Perhaps the combination of her training at Bard College, in upstate New York, and later courses at the Parsons School of Design in New York City (which, incidentally, she disliked intensely), helped her ability to shape such banalities as jeans with the sculptor's attention to a minimal curve in front and the designer's eye for cut that creates the illusion of a flat tummy on the wearer.

The public had a chance to see a good chunk of Playfair's spring, summer and resort designs last Tuesday when she was featured at a luncheon show to benefit the Tufts-New England Medical Center, given at Anthony's Pier 4.

The show included clothes from other designers also who sell to La Biarritz, a shop in the Quincy Market area, but it was primarily Playfair, with the mood following the prints — hot colors, big tropical floral prints and forget-the-winter sun clothes.

Whether it's because she grew up in Duxbury and likes strong contrasts in her life is not certain, but Playfair's penchant for color is as far away from New England as you can get: saffron yellows, burnt oranges, deep fuschias. And in her prints, she leans toward the tropics even more: profusions of hibiscus, giant Calla lilies and eucalyptus leaves grow all over her French cottons and voiles.

About eight years ago, Playfair was given the use of a sailboat by a generous friend, and she cruised into the little island of St. Barthelemy, or St. Bart's, 12 miles from St. Maarten ("It's lovely . . . please don't play it up too much").



In French cotton voile and slit to the knee the "dieffenbacchia" dress, which takes its name from the plant, comes in true green or hot pink - \$125.

There she met another sailor, Jean Yves Froment, and she became intrigued with the hand-blocked prints he was selling. A partnership of sorts was formed, and, at this point, Playfair still has the former Frenchman's prints exclusively in this country, although he sells them to a number of the other islands.

Froment hand carves wooden blocks in the manner of a woodcut, according to Playfair's color specifications, and then hand-blocks them onto the fabric. One signed print is used to make one garment, so that each garment is, in effect, a one-of-a-kind.

The prints are large, and by themselves make a strong statement. Playfair finds it a challenge to create something within the limitations imposed by the material . . . Anyone can make a geometric pattern and cut it from a bolt of fabric, but the excitement comes from working with the fabric, letting it suggest what form the finished design should take. Then you approach beauty."

Playfair also uses the hand-screened cottons of Carol Odell, who sells her fabrics by the yard on the Cape, and in addition she uses some handwoven silks in her collections. Whatever the fabrics used, though, it's a guarantee that there won't be duplicates in New England towns and on New England beaches this season.

Her dresses, shorts and tops have sold in 25 stores throughout New England and upstate New York. In New York City, she sells to Bergdorf Goodman, and in Boston, to La Biarritz, Charles Sumner and Tat Saunders.

That's an impressive list of retailers for a Parsons alumna whose dean once told her "at 23, Susan, you're much too old to be a designer."