



“I BELIEVE THE BODYSTOCKING OR A FORM OF IT WILL BE THE MAIN ELEMENT OF FASHIONS OF THE FUTURE.” (JACQUES FONTERAY, ONE OF THE COSTUME DESIGNERS FOR BARBARELLA, 1968)

SECOND SKINS

The typical contemporary street scene, teeming with people of all ages dressed in post- or pre-sport variations of bodysuits, bike shorts, and jog bras, owes much to the pioneering work of a handful of prescient designers: Claire McCardell, Rudi Gernreich, and Giorgio di Sant' Angelo (1936–89). In careers that spanned seven decades and were influenced by the clothes worn for active wear—the dancer's and trapeze artist's leotard, the swimmer's maillot, and the wool knit one-piece suits first worn by skiers—these designers devised new ways to clothe the body.

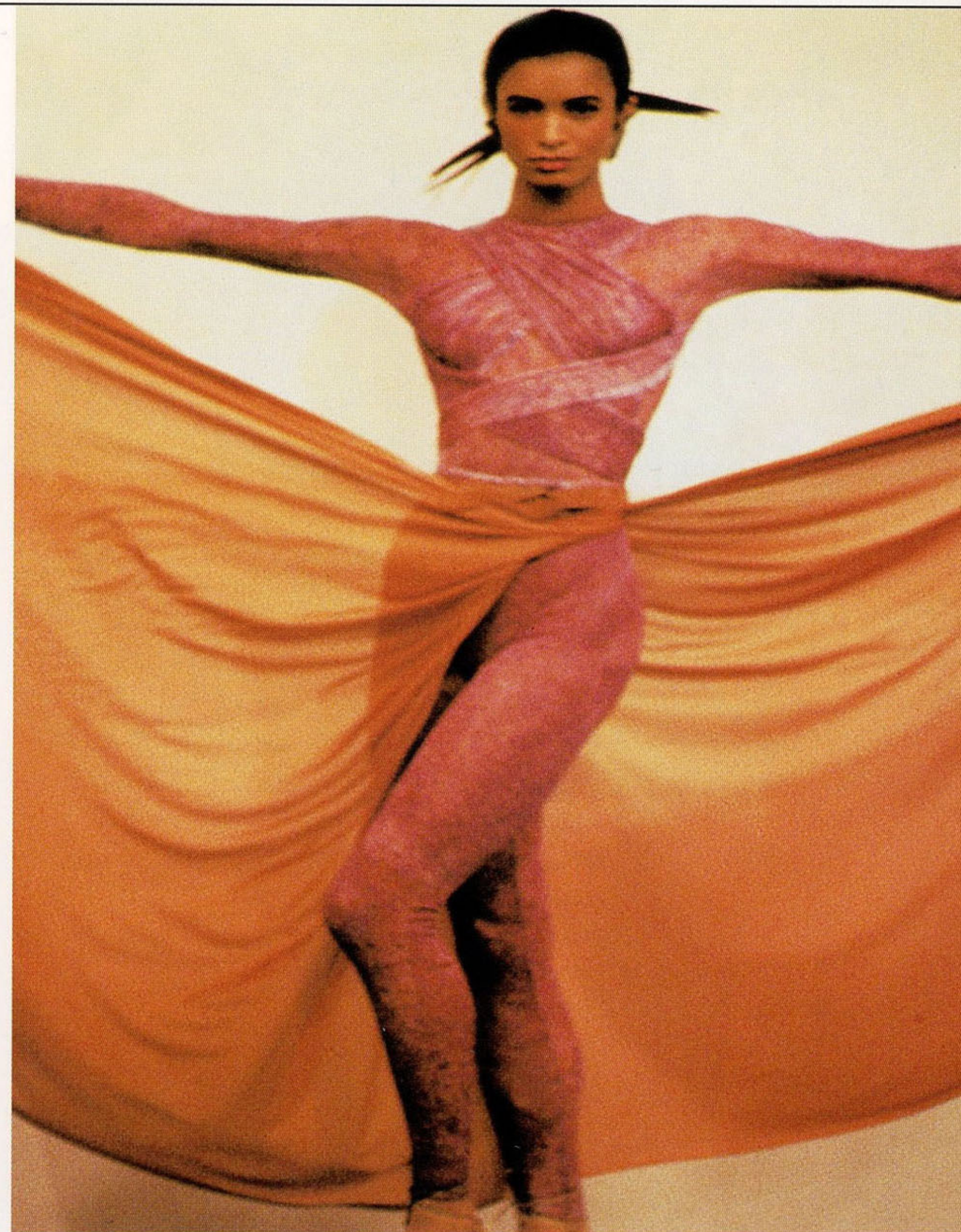
Efforts to reduce the body's coverings to their barest essentials have typically involved stretch fabrics. Although Charles Frederick Worth (1825–95) had worked with jersey, and Coco Chanel had served to popularize it, McCardell was the first to design, in 1934, a modern system of dress that could, in various combinations of the “basics,” serve as an entire wardrobe. Made of black wool knit, the five easy pieces included bare and covered-up tops, along with several choices of bottoms, that could be used in various ways to go from bicycling on the beach to dancing at dinner. Five and six decades later, designers would continue to experiment with similar ideas.

During the early 1940s, McCardell turned to the leotard as the basis for a new look; there was something indelibly modern about basing an ensemble on a black turtleneck and tights. Gernreich, whose background included modern dance, expanded this concept even further. Although he is most remembered for his 1963 topless bathing suit, his greatest impact came from such lively turnouts as minidresses, tunics, shorts, and one-piece jumpsuits shown with patterned or brightly colored tights that were an integral part of the look—all made in springy knits.

The next major development came from the test tube. The designer most often associated with experimental new fibers is Sant' Angelo. While McCardell and Gernreich were instrumental in introducing such concepts as the leotard, Sant' Angelo worked together with the company Dupont to devise not only suitable replacements for wool or acrylic knit, but fantastic ones: silk that could stretch in any direction and new fabrics that were transparent, took color beautifully, and could be painted, tie-dyed, or embroidered. From the 1960s to the 1990s, he worked with Lycra-enhanced materials of all kinds to devise ensembles based on such versatile elements as bodysuits that could double as bathing suits or evening tops, and tubes that could be worn as tops, skirts, cummerbunds, or shrugs.

These were not just successful designs that launched a thousand copies; they were concepts that infiltrated every aspect of how we dress—from Olympic sports to glamorous awards ceremonies. Stretch fabrics provide freedom and comfort. Obsolete are the many layers of the past, the need for separate underclothes, and the idea that any garment serves a single purpose. Perhaps most importantly, these second skins showcase bodies that are now far more designed—by athletic trainers and surgeons—than the clothes.

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