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GEOFFREY BEENE

02



“MY CLOTHES EMBRACE THE BODY.” (GEOFFREY BEENE, c. 1985)

What is a dress but cloth, seams, closure, and, once on, the body? Geoffrey Beene continuously investigates these basic elements that comprise the very essence of fashion. He starts with intriguing fabrics that may be as Old World as chine taffetas paired with brushed lace or as new as the airiest of weightless jerseys tied with a filament of plastic tubing. Next, but hardly secondary, he experiments with the seams. Beene makes them do his bidding by turning them this way and that, or by disciplining them to stand up straight. Hardly incidental to the whole of the dress, they might be three-dimensional, padded to emphasize the curve of a ribcage or the jut of a hipbone, or march across the ridge of the shoulder, drawing the eye beyond the silhouette and its boundaries. Finally, Beene adds the closure. Something most designs aim to conceal, it can be glorified in Beene’s dresses, entwined by fourteen-foot-long industrial zippers in eye-popping colors.

Although any single dress by Beene stands as a microcosm of his artistry, one must look at his work as a whole to discover just how strong the threads are that wind their way from design to design. Going back decades, one finds consistent leitmotifs in his work: a bib panel gently evoking the starched front of an old-fashioned men’s dress shirt; a curved band encircling the waist, suggestive of a fencer’s jacket, a corselet, or a waistcoat; a trompe l’oeil shirt collar, sometimes complete with necktie. There are some fabrics which Beene can practically call his own: men’s shirting, matte jerseys, *point d’esprit*, lace, and horsehair—all used with modern legerdemain. In lieu of traditional couture embroidery, Beene repeatedly chooses to work with trapunto, lines of channel stitching, and forms of appliqué. When used together, these elements of stitchery comprise a sophisticated patchwork whose homey American origins are rendered unrecognizable through superb contemporary craftsmanship.

Described as the most inventive designer working in America today, Beene’s clothes are a marvel of contrasts: as beautifully and intricately constructed as any couture garments can be, yet designed to be revolutionarily light and free. Some dresses or jumpsuits are almost monastically covered up; others make use of slivers of sheer fabrics curving from one erogenous zone to the next. Like Madeleine Vionnet, to whom he is often compared, Beene tames, reveals, and highlights the curves of the female body by means of triangles; these can take the form of shard-like cutouts, inserts, or panels in varying degrees of transparency. Lest we take fashion too seriously, Beene often adds an element of humor to his work: the amusing translation of a football jersey into a floor-length evening dress or the surprising taffeta and lace underskirt—only seen while kicking up one’s heels—under an otherwise sober black dress.

Caroline Rennolds Milbank

GEOFFREY BEENE

- 1927 Born on August 30 in Haynesville, Louisiana, United States
- 1946 Briefly studies medicine and works as a window dresser for a department store in Los Angeles
- 1947 Studies at the Traphagen School of Fashion, New York
- 1948 Studies at the Ecole de Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne
- 1954 Works as a freelance designer for various New York fashion houses
- 1963 Becomes self-employed and presents collection under his own name
- 1964 Designs small “Empire” style dresses for clients such as Jackie Kennedy and Pat Nixon; receives the Coty Award for the first time
- 1965 Designs flannel and wool jersey evening dresses and lace, satin, and chiffon day dresses
- 1968 Designs sequined evening gowns inspired by American football jerseys
- 1969 Introduces a menswear line, the sporty Beenebag line, and the Bridge line of accessories and interior décor
- 1972–73 Has a stylistic turning point and abandons classic pattern construction in favor of a softer, more modern structure; designs jersey dresses that are spontaneously draped around the body
- 1986 Receives the CFDA Designer of the Year Award for the first time
- 1993 Becomes the first designer to use female dancers instead of supermodels to present his creations
- 1994 *Geoffrey Beene Unbound*, retrospective, Fashion Institute of Technology, New York
- 1999 Presents the first curved zipper in his Spring/Summer collection
- PERFUMES Grey Flannel (1970), Bowling Green (1987)

