



IT'S ALL ACADEMIC

A study of America's
two most influential
schools of fashion design.

by Jon Carroll/photos: Shalmon Bernstein

Gray water. Look down at it and watch yourself looking up. Iron reeds poking through the inverted buildings. A hole in the ground. On Seventh Avenue, they fill holes with buildings. Look up.

Look up. Nine stories of glass and cement—an infant by Manhattan standards, but surrounded by holes it looks like the Great Pyramid. That's the Fashion Institute of Technology. The name sounds like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the California Institute of Technology, which was intentional, but the resemblance ends there. It's the anagram that's important, F.I.T. FIT. If our graduates do it, it FITs. The theoretical baseline of professionalism. Clothes that fit.

FIT is something between a state-supported junior college and a private, industry-sponsored technical college. In fact, it's both. It was started by the industry—or, specifically, by a foundation supported by the industry



—in 1944 as a permanent Winter Instructional League for the rookies in the garment game. A talent pool, so the industry could be sure that the talents it needed were the talents that were being trained.

But (did you know?) the garment industry is the biggest business in New York state. Clout in Albany. It wasn't long before FIT was affiliated with the State University of New York. That nine story number, plus the 10 story dorm across the street, was built in 1958 for \$15 million—a sum borne by the grateful citizens of New York. And those holes in the ground mean more FIT—\$80 million more worth of buildings, two city blocks (27th to 29th between 7th and 8th Avenue) dedicated to Fashion's Future. The house that rags built.

Inside the monolith. Students cluster in the lobby, looking like students. We're going to the top, all the way to the ninth floor. We could use the elevator (the sign says, "No Students On The Elevator," but we're not students), but let's rough it. Let's use the escalators.

2nd Floor, 3rd Floor, 4th Floor. They all look the same. They may be heavily into the decorative and textile arts at FIT, but it doesn't show in the institutional environment. The halls are drab and blank except for small, impersonal notices—"No Smoking Areas: Auditorium, Classrooms, Elevators, Escalators, Gymnasium, Hallways." The bulletin boards feature fuzzy photographs of nondescript buildings with 3x5 cards affixed near-

by: "A Management Graduate of January 1957 Is Now Assistant Production Manager In The Plant Pictured Below." Are there really 18-year-olds who dream of being assistant production managers?

The escalators, alas, stop at the eighth floor. To reach the ninth floor corridors of power at FIT, we'll have to use the elevator, the one the students can't ride. Does that mean that students never get to see the ninth floor, where the administrators administer? Probably not. But they're discouraged from hanging out. They're transients. The administrators have watched the world go crazy from the ninth floor.

The doors close. The elevator rises silently through its 20 foot journey. It stops, the doors glide open. We're in another world. Up here it's indirect lighting, wall-to-wall carpeting, color-coded furniture, lowered voices and prosperous smiles. The posh parlor of institutional gentility. Standing there in our normal person clothes, we feel somehow as though we're staining the rug.

The acting president of the Fashion Institute of Technology is Shirley Goodman. Her full-time job is Executive Vice President, but FIT is between presidents and she's filling in. Miss Goodman (that's a professional "Miss"—she's also Mrs. Himan

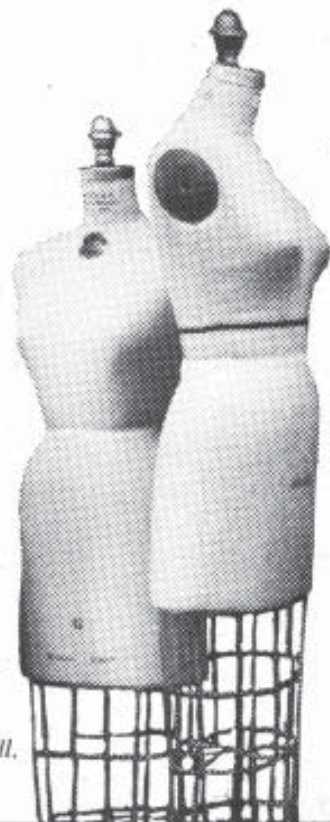
Brown and has two kids) is tough, wary and polite. She talks like a press release.

"Our job here is to attract talented young people to the fashion industry. We're constantly expanding our programs, because the more students we get, the more we're able to serve the industry. Our curriculum includes all facets of fashion design, industrial management, business skills, advertising, even fashion reporting. No other institution is completely devoted to these areas. But that's the way we serve the industry best."

Any changes contemplated?

"Our program is constantly expanding and changing. We're beginning to become more involved in the menswear industry. We've been considering theater arts—costume design, scenic design—fine arts, many areas of textile technology. We try to keep broadening the base of service, in consultation with carefully selected advisory committees from the industry. It is our responsibility to place our graduates in that industry; we must know what skills will be required. Of course, we never release our prerogatives as educators. Students are our product."

Has there been any, uh, student unrest? Shirley Goodman is going to be frank with us: "Last year, there was some student involvement. At the time of Kent State, many of our students became involved in the pro-



Top left there is Shirley Goodman, the acting head of everything at FIT. Across the page is Eva Bernard Lambeth, who teaches them, as far as she can. The figure just to the right is not a real person at all.

tests that were, I believe, sweeping the nation. Those protests concerned national politics and the war. They were not directed against the institution. Students are, of course, involved in matters which concern policy decisions here. They are informed, and we do consult them. Among the committees interviewing candidates for the president's job is a committee of students."

Would she, herself, like to be the permanent president? She laughs. "Goodness, no. I'm quite happy where I am."

There is another side to the protest story, as you might expect. Jumping briefly into our consciousness is Carmine Langone, an FIT student who dropped out, became a successful designer for Truth and Soul and now stares out at you from their ads, hard-eyed and intense. He talks about the way he remembers it at FIT:

"Some of us were involved in protesting the war. A lot of the big supporters of FIT—Burlington, Celanese, I can't remember who else—also did things for the Army. And we got together and asked them to stop doing it, to stop supporting the war. Well, some guys came and they heard us out and you could see that they didn't care. And at the end they said they didn't like our political attitudes, and that the reason tuitions were so low at FIT was because of the money



they gave, and that if we kept up they'd take the money away. And everything kind of stopped after that. The average student didn't give a damn."

Well, so FIT is the handmaiden of the garment industry. No surprises. FIT is not seeking truth and beauty in a flower-wrapt cloister, but perhaps the university conceit has outlived its usefulness anyway. Somebody has to provide the bodies for industry while intellectuals decide whether It's All Worth It or not.

For the moment, we move into the presence of Eva Bernard Lambeth. Mrs. Lambeth is a floor lower and a generation younger than Miss Goodman, and she teaches fashion design. Her voice and her thoughts are sharp, witty and sensible. She's been at FIT for five years, and she's gotten happier every year.

"I think we're getting into it more lately. We're getting new kinds of students—we're getting motion and movement. I'm glad to have them. I like to challenge them, like to find

out what they don't know and what they want to know, and teach them, as far as I can. It's exciting."

Even better than Mrs. Lambeth was Peter DiGeorge. He saw the reporter wander into his room, and he knew who he was, but who wants to talk to a reporter when there are students around? This is education. Public relations is somewhere else.

Gray water. Look down at it and watch the sluggish river grope reluctantly toward the Atlantic. The East River. Turn around and look up. Up 54th, on the other side of York Avenue. The nondescript converted warehouse on the left. Yes. The Parsons School of Design.

Walk up the street, step inside. A small, cold, unoccupied lobby. The elevator's broken, so we'll take the stairs. A little warmer. The stairwell is painted a felonious orange and decorated with graffiti, many of them quick, accurate sketches of common objects. Just practicing. On the second landing, at eye level, someone has announced: "There Is No Gravity—The Earth Sucks."

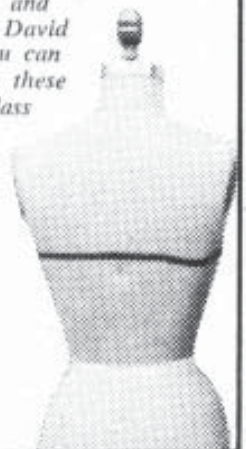
Third floor door. It feels like a college inside. Walk down the hall. A student manning the reception desk on your right, but she's not there to keep you out, she's there to help you



if you ask. There's something like a gallery on your left, a collection of paintings and the like. Nothing arresting, but comfortable. Down a bit further, on your right, a class in fashion illustration. A model poses; the students draw. Some leave or move



Directly above us is Joan Eby, who has incredible taste, and just to the right is David Levy, who is, as you can see, Dean. Also on these pages are a girl, a class and a drawing. Ten points if you can find the Star of David.



around the room. A few talk. Everybody seems to want to be there.

Teaching the class is Joan Eby. She says she's just teaching people how to see, how things relate to each other visually. "They're exploring, really," she says. "They're finding out how far they can go with their imaginations." She stands at the back of the room, silently, letting them do it.

Next door to Joan Eby is another illustration class, this one taught by Albert Elia. Elia is a graduate of Parsons, and calls Joan Eby one of the best instructors he ever had. "She taught me how to react to a model, and how to be a lot more selective about what I put down on paper. She has such incredible taste." Elia liked Parsons so much he came back to teach. He was offered a job at FIT once, for much more money, but he turned it down.

Besides illustration, Parsons offers courses in fashion design, art history, graphic design (which includes things like silk-screening, etching, photogra-

phy and film techniques) and environmental design. With the exception of fashion design (more later, more later), Parsons seems like a relaxed and productive way for a student to spend three years and come out with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at the other end.

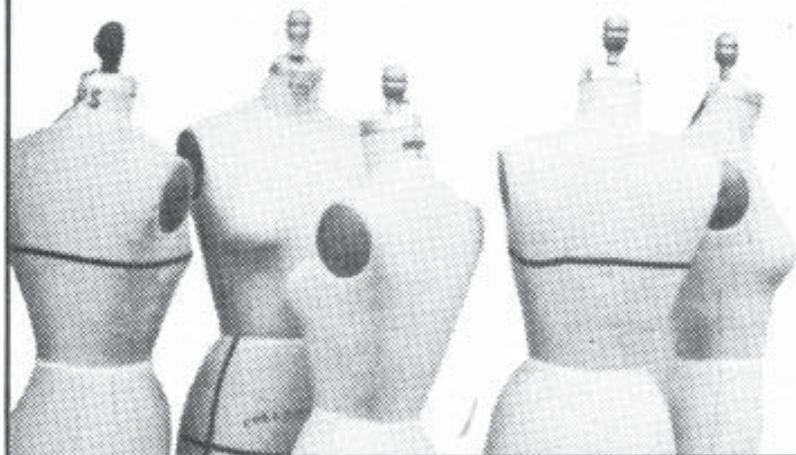
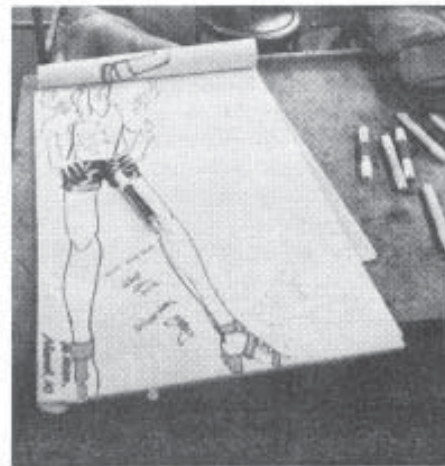
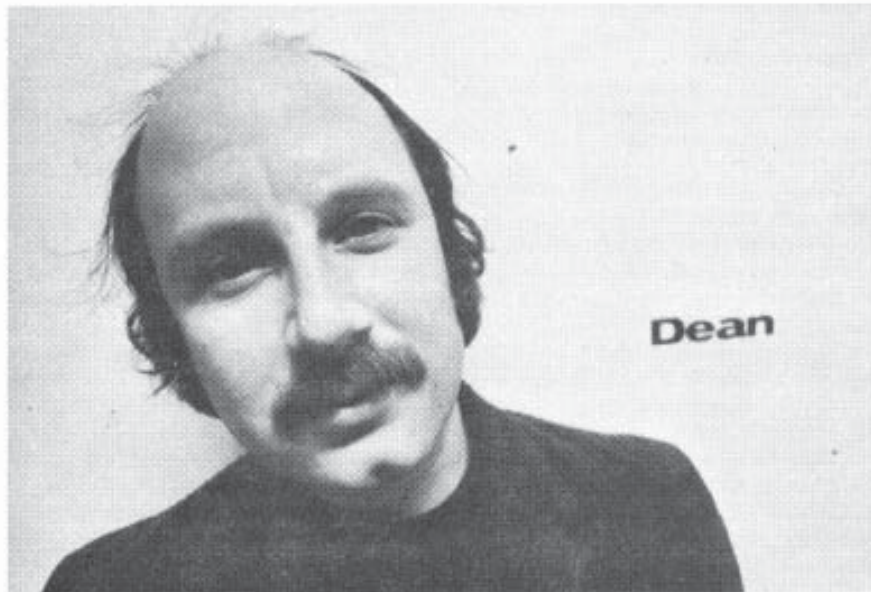
Parsons was founded in 1896 by a painter and teacher named William Merritt Chase. With a fine simplicity, he called it The Chase School. But in 1904, a dynamic fellow named Frank Alvah Parsons joined the faculty, and by 1910 he was president of the college. Parsons was heavily involved in the relation between industry and the visual arts. Courses were initiated in interior decoration, fashion design and advertising art. The college became acquainted with the steamy world of commerce. It was never just an art school again.

Last year, Parsons took another turn—it affiliated itself with the prestigious and eccentric New School for Social Research. The New School,

which had been making love gestures in the direction of the fine arts for years, now had its very own art school, and Parsons had an instant liberal arts faculty and a good deal of money. The honeymoon is still going on.

Still on the third floor. Back through a rabbit warren of halls and intersections, in an office (alas) just a bit smaller than he might expect (being the head of things and all), is Dean David C. Levy. Dean Levy is 32, just starting his second year as boss, and he has not yet learned how to mask his intelligence or how to take himself seriously. Perhaps he never will.

We start talking about the recent educational revolts and experimental programs initiated and directed by students. "A lot of this is a very valid reaction to the fact that there is something seriously wrong with the traditional educational system. I accept it as a symptom. It means that we should modify what we're doing. But . . . just because the patient tells you



a symptom doesn't mean you should accept his advice on what to do. Students tend to be very idealistic, absorbed with the good, true and beautiful—which changes very quickly when they graduate, unfortunately. They are intolerant of human foibles, and tend to see human error in terms of willfully repressive acts.

"And, of course, the student wants to do things that he likes. But, when he starts determining the curriculum, he's only dealing with the pieces he knows. There's all kinds of things that he doesn't know, things that hurt while you learn them. I've observed these experimental situations. There's always a great deal of excitement initially. But the students become frustrated when they realize they're not progressing, and they start making de-

mands — demands, essentially, for guidance. It becomes a ritual exercise. In some ways it's beneficial, but we just can't do it every four years. We can't prove it to every entering class. We just have to go ahead and teach them the disciplines they came here to learn. We're a school."

All departments are equal at Parsons, but some are more equal than others. Three floors above Dean Levy's head, the department of fashion design has carved out its own semi-autonomous fiefdom under the regal and suspicious gaze of Ann Keagy, the department chairman. Though there are no dress codes for Parsons generally, fashion design students are told very definitely what they may or may not wear. Sixth floor students are not encouraged to mix much with the rest of the student body, nor are they given much of a chance—the work load is murderous, and lots of design students spend their years at Parsons on ups. But, though hardly any of them retain any affection for the department or Ann Keagy, they stick it out if they can—graduation from that department is the nearest thing to a certain guarantee of lucrative employment that exists in the fashion industry.



When you mention the fashion design department to Dean Levy, he rubs his hand through his thinning hair and takes a deep breath, like a young king asked to discuss the wily, jealous barons with whom he must share his power.

"Of course the program is difficult. The fashion industry is difficult. It would be unfair to kid a student along—if he can't take the pressure here, he certainly can't take it on the outside. I don't think the pace is unjustified if it brings the student up to that level."

But . . . fashion design is a creative discipline, and surely people create at different speeds, in different atmospheres.

"That may be true. I don't know. The department obviously feels that this is the way to fulfill the needs of industry. It's a very rough couple of



years, but graduates are in great demand. Great demand. The industry is changing now, and I suspect the department will change too, as it always has."

So you get the idea. Students want jobs, and the only way to insure that they get them is to train them to industry standards. This presupposes that (a) the training works, according to industry standards, and even more vitally, (b) the industry knows what it needs. Neither of these things turn out to be wholly true.

Carmine Langone discusses (a): "Well, I don't know what the figures are. All I know is that I quit FIT and got this job, which is really a very good job. And I've got friends who quit, and they've got good jobs. And a lot of the kids who graduate can't

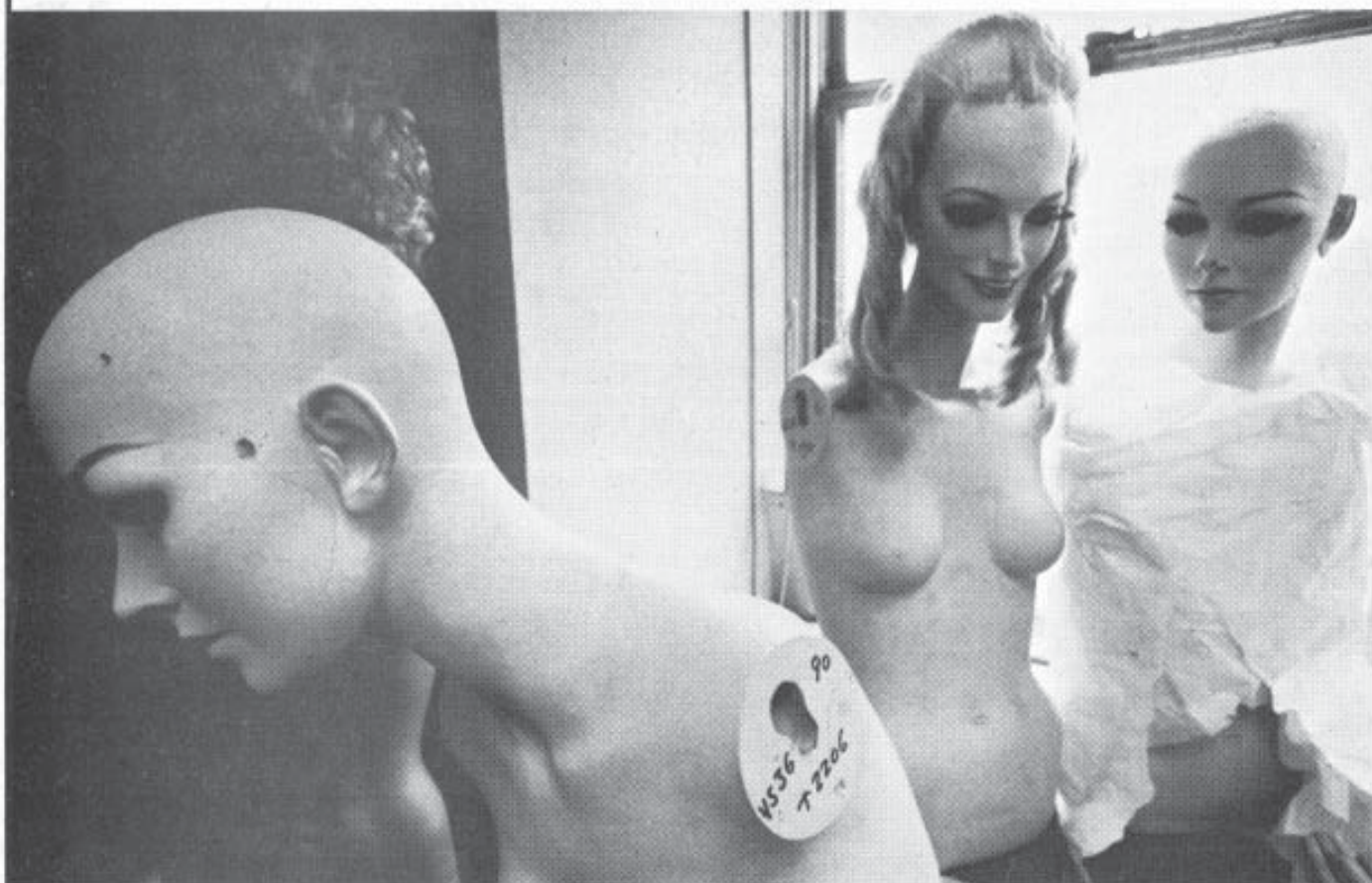
find jobs anywhere, especially good jobs, the kind they thought they were going to get."

Sally Kresap is a designer for the Akron Garment Corporation, which makes clothes for upper middle America. She's been inside the industry for some time, and she has seen what's happened to it: "Nobody knows what the fuck is happening. Everybody's having meetings, and they sit around guessing. Nobody knows where it's headed. A lot of businesses are going under every day. There just aren't many jobs."

Then the industry doesn't know what it needs? "Right now, the industry doesn't know anything."

If she were starting out as a young designer—again, what would she do: "If I were really good, I'd go to Parsons, which is very well thought of.





If not . . . well, I'd just start knocking on doors. The best way to learn how to do something is to get a job doing it. I've had two FIT graduates here, and they were terrible. I had to retrain them. I'm not saying that's true of everybody from FIT—I'm sure it isn't—but it's probably better to get a job. How much can you learn in a school? You can learn how to sound knowledgeable, how to bullshit.

"This is a very bizarre industry. Lots of pressure, lots of screaming, lots of fanny pinching. The companies have no loyalty to the designers, the designers have no loyalty to the companies. The place where I'm working now is very nice to me, very nice people, but it's mostly a cut-throat business. You never know whether you're still working for someone when you come in in the morning. If you're go-

ing to work in this industry, you should start learning what it's really like early."

One person's opinion, of course. But it may be that the industry, like many people and institutions newly arrived at respectability, is promoting the training of well-behaved mediocrities, round pegs for circular but irrelevant holes. Maybe fashion needs some new street-fighters and wild men—people who would rethink the assumptions of the industry rather than fitting smoothly into its decaying in-nards.

We could end here. It all ties together, easy bundles of contradictions, seven points for their side, nine for ours. We win by two. Yea team. It's all academic, anyway.

But we should take this one last

step together. We're back at Parsons now, up in the sixth floor wonder world of the fashion design department. We're talking to a young lady who is just two months short of graduating. The conversation moves in friendly currents. Suddenly, she puts down her needle and picks up a book.

"You want to know what I'm doing here? I underlined this last night. This is what I'm doing. I think this is what a lot of us are doing. You know?"

The book is *Dune*, the science fiction classic by Frank Herbert. This is the underlined passage: "You've heard of animals chewing off a leg to escape a trap? There's an animal kind of trick. A human would remain in the trap, endure the pain, feigning death that he might kill the trapper and remove a threat to his kind." 🐾

