THE TINA LESER COLLECTION
sketches, press clippings, photographs, personal papers
10.75 linear feet

Fashion Institute of Technology Library, Special Collections, X-80
processed by Whitney Blausen

PROVENANCE: Purchase, 1988

ACCESS: Open to qualified researchers by appointment

BIOGRAPHY/HISTORY
Tina Leser (nee Christine Wetherill Shillard-Smith, 1910-1986,) is remembered primarily for her play clothes, leisure wear and beach ensembles. Her best designs gave an American twist to silhouettes adapted from non-Western European sources, often rendered in batik, wild silk, or other fabrics imported from the East.

She trained at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, The School of Industrial Arts, Philadelphia, and at the Sorbonne.

Her career began in Hawaii, where, in 1935, she opened a shop selling high quality ready-to-wear and her own custom clothing. The early Leser designs featured hand painted motifs on such unusual fabrics as sail cloth and "Paluke", a kind of shirting material worn by Filipino workmen.

On a buying trip to New York in 1940 Tina Leser was able to show her clothing to the editors of Vogue and Harper's Bazaar. Their enthusiasm for Leser's work resulted in a large order from Saks Fifth Avenue. This was the beginning of Leser's career as a designer of mass market ready-to-wear.

With the on-set of WWII, the Lesers moved to New York. From 1941 to 1943 she had her own workroom. Lacking experience with wholesale production methods, pricing and union regulations, Tina Leser gave up her business in 1943 to design for the Edwin H. Foreman Sportswear Company. The association lasted ten years.

From 1953 until 1982 (with a brief two year retirement in the mid-60's) Tina Leser maintained her own firm, concentrating on play clothes and day wear with designs often inspired by her travels throughout the world.

Among Leser's many awards are the Fashion Critics Award (1944), the Neiman Marcus Award (1945), the Coty American Fashion Critics Award (1945) and the Sports Illustrated Sportswear Design Award (1956 and 1957). In 1964 she received an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts from the Moore Institute of Arts.
SCOPE AND CONTENT:
The Tina Leser Collection, housed in 45 boxes, 3 unboxed oversize sketchbooks and one 3-ring binder, (saved in this form to represent how Ms. Leser preserved her drawings, how they came into Special Collections and to illustrate the fact that these were working drawings, not necessarily intended for posterity), comprises 4,051 sketches, most of them in acrylic, on water color paper, tissue, or pellon. It also includes press clips, photographs, research material, personal papers primarily relating to the Japanese National Design Contest which Ms. Leser sponsored and which gave one of several awards in her name, as well as a hand-painted bodice from Tina Leser's earliest days as a designer.

BOX AND FOLDER LIST

Series I: Scrapbooks
28 scrapbooks with newspaper ads, press clips and magazine pages illustrating or commenting on Leser's career; personal papers

Box A1: Scrapbooks, 1944-45
Box A2: Scrapbooks, 1945, 1947
Box A3: Scrapbooks, 1946-47, 1949
Box A4: Scrapbooks, Spring & Fall, 1950, Summer swatch book, 1950, Good Housekeeping, 1951
Box A5: Scrapbooks, Resort, 1949-50, Fall, 1951, Fall, 1960
Box A7: Miscellaneous clippings, 1942-67
Box A8: Scrapbooks, Tina Leser home; Leser tie designs, Prize book, (contestant's designs for the Japanese National Design Contest.)
Box A9: Miscellaneous press clips and correspondence about Japanese National Design Contest.

Folder 1: Press clips, 1940-42
Folder 2: Press clips, 1946
Folder 3: Press clips, 1947
Folder 4: Press clips, 1950-Jan., 1951
Folder 5: Press clips, Feb.-Aug., 1951
Folder 7: Press clips, undated
Folder 8: folio of photographs, correspondence and papers relating to Japanese National Design Contest
Series II: Sketches
Dates in brackets are estimated dates

Box 1: Fall, 1948; Holiday, 1950, Nofade collection
Box 2: Resort, 1953, Fall/Winter [mid-1950's]
Box 3: Holiday, 1953-54; Fall/Winter & Spring/Summer 1954
Box 4: Resort, 1954, Fall, 1954
Box 5: Summer, 1954, Summer, 1955
Box 6: Fall/Winter, 1955, Beachwear, 1955
Box 7: Resort, 1955
Box 8: Beachwear, [mid-50's], Resort, 1955
Box 9: Summer, 1955
Box 10: Summer, 1955, Holiday, 1956
Box 11: Summer, 1956, Fall/Winter, [1956], Holiday, 1956
Better Skirts and Blouses, 1956
Box 12: Miscellaneous sketches, 1950's
Box 13: Resort, 1958, sketches [late '50's-early '60's]
Box 14: Spring, 1959, sketches [early '60's]
Box 15: Sketches, [late '50's-early 60's]
Box 16: Resort, 1961, Summer, 1961
Box 17: Summer and Fall, 1962
Box 18: Fall/Winter [1961 or 1962]
Box 19: Sketches [early to mid-60's]
Box 20: Fall, [mid-60's], Beach [1965-66]
Box 21: Sketches, [late 60's]
Box 22: Sketches, [late '60's, early 70's]
Box 23: Summer, 1973
Box 24: Resort, 1974, 1975
Box 25: Holiday and Resort, 1975
Box 26: Fall, 1977, sketches, [1970's]
Box 27: Resort, 1978
Box 28: Sketches, [1970's]
Box 29: Sketches, [1970's]
Box 30: Sketches, [1970's]
Box 31: Sketches, [1970's or early '80's]
Box 32: Miscellaneous sketches, 1950's-1970's

Oversized Sketchbooks:
Resort, Summer, Fall, 1960

3-ring binder: [1970's]

Series III: Photographs

Box 33: Tina Leser designs, 1940's-1970's
Box 34: Tina Leser designs, 1940's-'50's & Holiday, 1978
Box 35: Research photos (folder 1); photos of Tina Leser (folder 2); programs for Neiman-Marcus award ceremony and for "Tea with Tina" fashion show (folder 3)

Series IV:

Box 36: Bodice hand-painted by Tina Leser