Adventures in a Sub-Culture: Collecting mid 20th Century Clothing within the Rockabilly Scene

Abstract

Within the world wide rockabilly scene an obsession with mid 20th century North American music, design and popular culture also extends to clothing. The music is the catalyst for this whole scene. It is rhythm and blues, jump blues, western swing, doowop, hillbilly, and rockabilly. There exists a search for authenticity, a passion for vintage textiles and garment construction, and a love of dressing up and a sense of performance. Currently the most collectible womenswear genres are:

- *Hawaiian clothing*
- *Western wear*
- *Mexican tourist skirts*

These garments all have origins in traditional ethnic costume – and indulge vacation nostalgia and fantasies of the American heartland. The golden days of country music performers and costume and the "dude ranch" holidays of the immediate post-war period manifested in western wear entering the mainstream. Holidays to Mexico and Hawaii created industries that revolved around making clothing specifically for the tourist trade.

This paper proposes a framework for the meaning behind the collection of vintage clothing then explores these highly collectable garments in a brief historical context, before illustrating pieces through individual profiles of collectors.

Introduction

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These garments all have origins in traditional ethnic costume – and indulge vacation nostalgia and fantasies of the American heartland. The golden days of country music performers and costume and the "dude ranch" holidays of the immediate post-war period manifested in western wear entering the mainstream. Holidays to Mexico and Hawaii created industries that revolved around making clothing specifically for the tourist trade.

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It is important to define "traditional" in relation to ethnic costume and textiles. I believe the tradition remains wholly within control of its practitioners – it is theirs to remember, change or forget.

What is the test for authenticity in this context? The object, in this case a garment, will belong to a set that can be arranged into a series to demonstrate a pattern of continuity and assimilation and will illustrate a particular culture's style. The garments hold meaning that both maker and buyer identify with tradition. The culture of the artisan is packaged along with the product. There is a re-shaping of heritage that allows tradition to continue, making it relevant and accessible, comprehensible and most importantly in this case - wearable. (Glassie, 1989)

Exploring vintage clothing collection involves analysis of the complex mechanisms of accumulation and display. There are a number of primary issues involved in the collection and wearing of vintage clothing. These issues relate to notions of nostalgia, memory and meaning creation; authenticity and the souvenir, and collection, curation and performance.

Nostalgia is considered part of the post modern condition, and this nostalgia is rooted in secondary sources - that is, the artefact or souvenir. In the rockabilly scene there is a strong sense of identification with a very specific time period based on an informed understanding of a particular history and the notion of authenticity. Music, clothing and cars are primarily the way in which this obsession manifests itself. As dress is the decisive means "with which we write or draw a representation of the body into our cultural context" (E. Wilson cited in Jenks 2005, p. 182), it makes sense that specialist historical fashion knowledge is utilised to construct a personalised way of dressing which emphasises difference, individuality and knowingness. (Gregson & Crewe 2003). Collecting and wearing vintage clothing relies on detailed and researched knowledges about particular historical styles, and hinges on

questions of authenticity and cultural capital (Gregson & Crewe 2003, p.147). As curators, the vintage clothing collector makes decisions regarding which objects to collect; conducts research based on the collection, shares that research with others, and in time becomes a specialist. There are patterns that emerge amongst serious collectors of mid-twentieth century womenswear, and these patterns form the basis for the designation of collection as a genre of material narrative (Tidmore 2003).

Gigs and rockabilly weekenders such as Viva Las Vegas (USA), Hemsby (UK), Screamin' Festival (Spain) are the prime stage for displaying vintage clothing collections. This collective performance is determined by iconic looks from the late 1940s and 1950s. However, this performance is more original and perfect than the original itself. The past is exaggerated and subverted through the search for perfection and authenticity. The rockabilly weekender can be considered a living museum – a space to perform in. This performance is continually recorded by participants and observers, through video and photographs. The rockabilly lifestyle is defined through the material culture of commodities; it is about differential display and rarefied elite knowledges ((Gregson & Crewe 2003, p.150).

Nostalgia, Meaning Creation and Continuity

Gregson identifies a mode of meaning creation around the recovery of meaning and centres on the imaginative potential of commodities. This mode of meaning creation "revolves around profound association with, and attachment to, particular historical eras"; this is referred to as "meaning creation through historical reconstruction". (Gregson & Crewe 2003, p.146). Davis suggests that "nostalgia is one of the means - or better, one of the more readily accessible psychological lenses - we employ in the never ending work of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities". Nostalgia facilitates the continuity of identity, and this nostalgia is rooted in secondary sources – the artefacts. The attraction and value of a second-hand good lies in the imaginative potential of its former life (Gregson & Crewe 2003, p.145), and the clothing that I am looking at has origins in exotic locations. As a result the narrative constructed around these garments is exciting and engaging.

Goulding (2001 p. 575-576) identifies a consumer labelled as "aesthetic". This term is used to describe the idealization of, and association with, previous eras, a desire for authenticity, and the quest for imaginative nostalgic escapism. This nostalgia is based on an interest in history, admiration for the arts and architecture, romantic identification, and a sense of loss of these in contemporary society. Those labelled as aesthetic provide a case for secondary or vicarious nostalgia (Goulding 2001, p.584). These people exhibit a strong sense of

identification with figures and movements from previous eras, and an affiliation with the past, or more specifically with periods that were felt to have been aesthetically or intellectually superior to the present. People identify with the late 1940s and 1950s because of aesthetic preference. Davis (1979) argues that nostalgia provides us with a sense of continuity, especially in times of great or rapid change. By returning to lost pasts, we feel a sense of continuity over a sense of separation and disengagement from community, tradition and shared meaning.

This is particularly important in relation to vintage clothing, as the textiles, design and garment construction are considered by collectors to be vastly superior to the garments available today. The shopping and searching out is an important component in the practice of the "authentic" style as a means to perform identity and construct difference, in contrast to consumers of mass fashion. (Gregson 2001 cited in Jenks 2005) The material object, the garment, has its own history that becomes a quality or attribute of the garment. It is unique, and a highly valued artefact of the past. The consumption and appreciation of the authentic and unique guarantees a feeling of individuality and distinction from others; the authenticity of the item is transferred to the self and to the performance of a unique and authentic identity (Gregson & Crewe 2003, p.147). The wearers' sense of the garments' value is that it defines the wearer and marks them as singular (Jenks 2005).

We use clothing as a means of making both ourselves and our world knowable (Cummings, 2000 p.16)

Authenticity

Within the development of culture under an exchange economy, the search for authentic experience and the search for the authentic object have become critical. In a seemingly homogenised mass of consumables – we seek something with a verifiable "essence' or legitimate history. The values attributed to objects are not properties of the things themselves, but judgements made through encounters people have with them at specific times and in specific places (Stewart 1993, Cummings 2000). This is the juxtaposition of history with a personalised present.

The collector of vintage clothing creates a narrative of origin and belonging; locates points of origin, and traces lines of inheritance in order to authenticate experience. (Cummings 2000). There is a re-awakening of the garment, and thereby a reawakening of narrative. (Stewart 1993) The garment as souvenir displaces the point of authenticity as it itself becomes the point of origin for narrative. Through narrative the souvenir substitutes a

context of perpetual consumption for its context of origin. It represents not the lived experience of its maker but the "second-hand" experience of its owner. The souvenir is removed from its natural location, but it is only by means of its material relation to that location that it acquires its value (Stewart 1993).

The Artefact as Souvenir

The souvenir (in this case a garment), articulates the drives that underlie the desire to construct a material image of oneself – to order thought and feeling by finding their equivalence in material things. It anchors us in an intensely commodified present (Cummings 2000, p.40). Although all objects exist in the present, first and foremost, they refer to a past. The souvenir gives memory a form (Cummings 2000, p.41) Integral to a sense of who we are is a sense of our past, and possessions are a convenient means of storing the memories and feelings that attach us to our sense of past (Belk 1988). A souvenir may make tangible some otherwise intangible experience – especially for the vicarious nostalgic, who was not even born at the time of the souvenirs' creation.

The vintage garment is viewed as a cultural artefact. These garments are invested with meaning through the knowledges and discourses of fashion and aesthetics. (Gregson & Crewe 2003, p.148) An artefact is a text and thereby displays form and is a vehicle for meaning (Glassie 1989). Placing oneself within a constructed form (the garment), with the possibility of modifying that form, or being modified by it, is the ultimate three dimensional experience. We feel the fabric on our body, see the form, and respond to the texture and colour – where it touches our skin, conforms to or constrains our body. This means that by wearing particular clothing, the human body can be acted upon by the garment which has become subject. This is transformative. The garment can be seen as an active subject in a web of relationships between persons and things. This can be either an individual or collective experience where the garment acts upon both wearer and viewer.

Collecting

Collecting helps us make sense out of the material world – it is a way of establishing trails of similarity through fields of otherwise undifferentiated material. (Cummings 2000). As Belk (1988 p.154) notes, humans and animals once primarily assembled collections of necessities for future security, but today humans more often assemble collections of non necessities for distinction and self definition. Today however, contemporary collections are more often specialized to allow the collector an ability to gain control and uniqueness within self-prescribed boundaries (Treas and Brannen 1976, cited in Belk 1988). Demonstrable

provenance, age and “authorship” (through a manufacturers’ label) is important, especially as it relates to the most well-known and collectable labels within each genre.

Within the rockabilly scene, there is an emphasis on celebration and display. This in turn creates value in the use of the object, in this instance a garment. There is a continuous exchange of information through a collectors’ interaction with the broader rockabilly community; this may be through myspace, blogs, eBay, or gigs and festivals. This is a demonstration of consumption, creativity, and communication as related to the actual process of collecting (Tidmore 2003).

Extension of Self

Belk (1988) believes that the functions that possessions and other historically significant artefacts play in the extended self contribute toward the creation, enhancement, and preservation of a sense of identity. Possessions can symbolically extend self. People collect to remember themselves despite social transformations and they collect to form identities through the creative use of objects. A collection may be used as a canvas onto which the individual can refigure the self (Tidmore 2003).

Possessions help us know who we are. Just as clothing, accent, grooming, and jewellery can distinguish an individual from others and express an individual sense of being; they can also indicate group identity and express belonging to a group. Formal uniforms are an obvious example, but informal "uniforms" also exist for social groups (Belk 1988, p.153). Vintage clothing collectors define themselves and others through their collections in terms of authenticity, which in turn demonstrates dedication to an era of choice. Theirs is a self-constructed elite based around authenticated, researched and intellectualized historical re-creation.

Performance

Performance can be defined as “the creation of presence…” (Schieflin 1998 p.194 cited in Mitchell 2006 p.384). It is a creative and transformative engagement with the self. Performance theory from an anthropological perspective has a focus on social identity as performative (Mitchell 2006). Through performance, objects of material culture become subjects. This is particularly important when the object of material culture is placed on the body. It is a ritualized encounter with the past through things. (Cummings 2000, p. 57) Subject and object merge and exchange places.

The rockabilly weekender is a spectacle. It is an ongoing display of the most highly valued clothing in participants' collections. There is a continual parading of garments; some people change into multiple outfits each day over a period of three or four days. Performers present selective narratives and the performance is recorded visually, with a context of celebration underlying the "discourse' – if we view the garments as texts with a secret and shared language.

Westernwear, Hawaiian clothing and Mexican skirts all have origins that lie with traditional ethnic costume. As a result, this clothing has connotations of Otherness, in terms of ethnic, national, or cultural Other. It is not clothing of the everyday; it is not the ordinary, the mundane. It is exotic and can be considered clothing of the Other in its context of origin as well as the way in which it is worn now – in a subcultural context. The ongoing practices of wearing, displaying and using these transformed artifactual commodities further adds value (Gregson & Crewe 2003 167), especially as we move further and further away from their points of origin.

The next section of the paper discusses these points of origin through traceable lineage.

Western Wear

In 1769 Franciscan missionaries brought longhorn cattle up from Mexico to Spanish California and what was to become Texas. On the rancheros, these men became the earliest incarnation of the cowboy. These were the *vaqueros*. Their tall-crowned sombrero was the model for the cowboy hat. Their leather *chaparreras* became chaps. The sash they wore to hold up their trousers was part of western attire until the end of the 1920s (Beard 1993; George- Warren 2001).

The mountain men, hunters, trappers and frontiersmen wore garments drawn from those of the Native American. Animal skins decorated with fringing – became the simple buckskin shirt (Beard 1993; Weil and DeWeese 2004; George-Warren 2001) Later the buckskin became a jacket and was elaborately embroidered in traditional styles drawn from Native American and Eastern European embroidery and Dutch folk art.

By the end of the 1890s the Wild West stars such as Buffalo Bill Cody and Wild Bill Hickok toured in huge spectacles (George-Warren 2001). These shows were instrumental in the romanticisation of the American West after the official closing of the United States frontier in the late 19th century. The west symbolised freedom – both social and personal. The cowboy came to be an archetypal symbol of American individualism and freedom.

Cowgirls

In the 1890s women in the west wore standard Victorian costume. They wore divided skirts in some areas as a practical solution to riding and ranch work. Out of necessity ranch women started to wear clothes similar in style to those worn by their fathers, brothers and husbands.

With the advent of the Wild West shows cowgirls came into their own. Their riding, expert marksmanship, and trick roping. By 1900 skirts split for riding freed women to compete with men in many events. By 1910 Calamity Jane, Annie Oakley and other Wild West performers paved the way for future cowgirls. They were performers and wore fancy show costumes such as buckskin. Western cowgirl and rodeo performer Vera McGinnis was the first woman to wear long pants instead of the split riding skirt in 1924 (Beard 1993).

The Wild West Shows were later followed by dime novels and pulp fiction, as well as newspaper serials that conjured up romantic notions of the life of a cowboy and the western frontier. These concepts were later translated to the screen, where screen cowboys had a huge effect on what we think of as western wear today. Film idols and singing cowboys were the first to wear the heavily embroidered shirts, ornate boots, decorative belts and buckles, and neckerchiefs. What had originated as practical and utilitarian clothing for cowboys and ranchers gradually became embellished with details of Western costuming made popular by entertainers and rodeo stars. Then Nashville discovered the Hollywood cowboy and musicians clothing became more and more elaborate. These excessive garments are intensely personal expressions of the individualism of those who designed and wore them (Weil and DeWeese 2004).

The growing tourist industry also stimulated western wear's popularity from the 30s through the 50s. The dude ranch was created for visitors and tourists. Affluent and imaginative Easterners and Europeans headed west for vacations by car and rail. Also, many people from Texas and Oklahoma migrated to California during the war years to work in shipyards and manufacturing plants. So their culture moved with them – they took western music to the west coast.

Holidays at dude ranches necessitated wearing the right kind of clothing, and people wanted the clothes they saw on screen, in rodeos and on country and western singers. Part of the fun was in dressing up, playing the part. As a result, the manufacture of western wear became an industry.

Styling and Fabrics

- The western shirt's double breasted or bib front (like a cavalry shirt), cuffs with plackets, flap pocket and piping all had origins in military uniform.
- The earlier western styled garments were made from suiting – worsted woollens, wool gabardine, and rayon.
- Later satin shirts were popular, and shirts were made in lighter fabrics.
- Fancy yokes emerged in the late 30s and were huge in the 40s.
- Pearl snaps were used so if the garment was caught on a fence it would just pop open. During WWII buttons were used instead.

Rose Maddox and the Maddox Brothers were described as "The Most Colourful Hillbilly Band in America". They wore spectacular suits of gabardine wool, satin shirts, with Slavic embroidery in amazing colours. Rose Maddox said "We started dressing in those wild clothes by Nathan Turk in 1948 after the boys came back from the war." These garments were custom made by Turk, and merged European embroidery and tailoring traditions with North American cowboy style including a strong Mexican influence in the silhouette, to create a new style of decorative garment. Turk referenced a book entitled "National Costumes of Austria, Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia" (George-Warren 2001). It is easy to see the origins of the elaborate heart and flower embroidery in Polish folk dress, translated across into the Maddox family's outfits.

There is a deeply rooted appreciation of western clothing as part of true Americana. It is a living history, a living language. Western wear sits at the outer edge of what is perceived as taste and style, but is highly original and innovative clothing.

Mexican skirts

The history of indigenous costume and textiles in Mexico has been comprehensively documented, but very little exists about the historical influence of European fashion and Asian textiles. The beauty of Mexican artistic expression lies in the convergence of cultures, which has created an astonishing mix of traditions – combining indigenous, Asian, and European influences.

Randall (2005, p. 109) believes the colonial and independence periods of Mexico have presented an exciting opportunity to explore aspects of dress in a society where the population was undergoing rapid miscegenation (interbreeding of races) and "creolization".

The Creoles and mestizos who grew up in Mexico felt comfortable in adopting elements of both indigenous and European dress that reflected their experiences and personal history.

While the upper classes copied European fashion; most foreign visitors found the costumes of the working classes with their blending of Spanish and indigenous elements much more interesting and representative of the Mexican people. The origins of the mid 20th century tourist skirt begin in colonial Mexico and the costume of the *China Poblana*.

A distinctive women's costume evolved in the early 19th century – inspired by Spanish peasant styles from Andalucia and Lagartera in the province of Toledo (Sayer 1985, p. 109). Considered the female dandies of their day - the *China Poblana* (Poblana being a derivation of pueblo – village) wore a fusion of styles – both Spanish and Indian. Written about in detail by foreign travel writers in the 19th century the China Poblana had a costume of European skirts and petticoats, colourful embroidered Spanish style blouses and *rebozo* (shawl). The skirts were embroidered and embellished with lace and, most importantly, sequins. These women were working class, mixed race. It was the costume of the *Mestiza*. (Randall 2005)

Spanish colonial expansion soon extended to the Philippines, and before long, inhabitants of Mexico were clothed in fabric from China. All classes in colonial Mexico were dressed in fabric from Asia, including cottons from India, silks from China (Randall 2005, p. 47). The Chinese embroideries brought to Mexico by the Spanish served as inspiration for floral patterns, and in copying the designs using coarser materials, Mestiza and Indian women imbued these floral patterns with a distinctly Mexican style.

There is a tradition within some indigenous Mexican populations of tracing patterns onto fabric in *huizache/guizache* (an acacia plant) dye and these patterns were subsequently outlined in sequins (Sayer 1985). These traditions were not only carried forward into the skirts created for the tourist market, but into contemporary folk dance costume.

The trigger for mass production was that visitors to Mexico loved the colourful, exciting and exotic skirts worn by the women they saw and wanted to buy them.
As a result, a market arose specifically around tourism after WWII, and garments were made expressly to sell to individuals outside of their ethnic communities. The Mexican tourist skirt contains both cultural elements from the past and interpretations of them in the present – that is the post war period up until the late 1950s.

These skirts are handmade and incorporate a “traditional” motif or design – often referencing everyday village life. Tourist skirts are heavy cotton, full circle skirts with ties at the waist. They are hand painted, then hand sequined. Featuring large scale designs in bright colours; often figurative – showing scenes of village life (men harvesting cactus, women carrying fruit baskets, churches); flowers; bull fighting; and ancient Mexican designs.

Tourist art and craft is often condemned by purists who view tradition as unresponsive to change. However, the artefact created for the tourist is made as well as those for use within the community.

Hawaiian Aloha Wear

A reflection of the state of Hawaii’s cultural diversity, Hawaiian clothing has become a visual testament to both ethnic integration and ethnic diversity. As new immigrants entered Hawaii in the 19th century, they brought with them their traditional dress and design concepts. Over time, many of these design features have been incorporated into Hawaiian costume (Arthur 1995).

Prior to the arrival of Christian missionaries in 1820, the indigenous Hawaiians wore layers of bark cloth, called kapa or tapa, passed several times around the waist and extending below the knee (Arthur 1997). This fabric was worn for protection against weather, and also used in a ceremonial context for birth, death, marriage, war, worship and tribute (Steele 1984). Motifs were hand-painted or stencilled on the tapa – and these traditional geometric designs later became part of aloha wear.

The missionaries wanted the native Hawaiians to cover their nakedness so western garments were re-interpreted to fit the larger figures of Hawaiians. The high waistline of the humble, simple missionaries’ dress was replaced with an above the bust yoke, the rest of the dress a full, straight skirt with a high neck and tight sleeves. This style was referred to as a *holoku* otherwise known as a Mother Hubbard. The holoku was adopted as daily dress by 1822, and became the standard dress of all Hawaiian women as early as 1838. By 1873, the holoku was considered native dress and worn by nearly all Hawaiian women (Arthur 1997). The holoku continues to be worn as a symbol of the wearer’s commitment to Hawaiian culture. The *holoku* was originally worn with a chemise – an undergarment called a *mu’umu’u*. This later evolved to be worn on its own, initially as a house dress, later as a fashion garment.

The earliest foreign settlers in Hawaii were the Chinese and Japanese in the 1850s (Steele 1984, Hope 2000). Women's dresses were based on Asian garment designs and made from printed fabrics from China and Japan – these were the direct ancestors of modern aloha wear. The main influence from the Japanese was in textile prints. The Chinese influence can be seen in major design elements including diagonal front openings; the mandarin collar; side slits in dresses and knot closures, also known as frogs.

In the late 1920s tourism came to Hawaii via cruise ships. Tourists sought exotic souvenirs of their visit to a tropical paradise and small local shops began to make custom tailored versions of Hawaiian work shirts for visitors and American servicemen (Steele 1984). In the mid 30s the tourist trade grew and then the bombing of Pearl Harbour in 1941 drew attention to the Hawaiian Islands. Aloha wear was worn by the local population during the war, due to the scarcity of imported fabric and clothing. Locally produced fabrics in Hawaiian prints were made into women's wear as well men's shirts. The *mu'umu'u* was no longer seen as a housedress once it was made of Hawaiian prints. It was still loose and worn long for casual day wear.

The holoku was also produced in Hawaiian prints during the war and post-war years. Formal, and more fitted, the holoku was worn for special events – now in Hawaiian prints and with long trains.

Post war Hawaii became Vacationland for people from the United States, and Aloha wear boomed. In womenswear leisurewear became a new category. Tea timers, Chinese influenced pant sets, Hawaiian swimsuits; and - for evening, cocktail dresses made in Hawaiian fabrics but with mainland styles – which grew to develop a style of their own. The distinctive strapless sarong dress, was often worn with an over the shoulder, detachable sash.

The *pake mu'u* emerged during the 1940s – it was a closer fitting mu'umu'u with a mandarin collar. With origins lying in Chinese costume the pake mu'u has a wing sleeve, is full length with a Chinese collar, frog front fastening, and was worn as a hostess gown for informal entertaining.

The *holomu'u* was invented in 1949 as a combination of the *holoku* and the *mu'umu'u*. It is semi-fitted with a ruffle on both the shoulder and hem, with no train and a much closer fit to the body. The *holomu'u* became very popular in the 1950s.

Hawaiian Textiles

The fabrics used for womenswear were more floral than figurative and featured flowers such as hibiscus, ginger blossoms, plumeria, and birds of paradise.

The dominant fibres used for womenswear fabrics between 1945-1958 were cotton or silk. Dupont introduced rayon in 1924 and rayon fabric became commonly used after WWII because it was durable, inexpensive and held colour well. This early rayon, often referred to as “silky rayon” is cool to the touch and highly valued by the collector. Unfortunately a fire at the Dupont factory in the early fifties means this rayon was lost.

Tourism created a ready market for more adventurous aloha attire after the war. Designs incorporated unique Pacific patterns such as palm trees, pineapples and hula girls; Honolulu landmarks like Diamond Head and the Aloha tower, , as well as traditional culture and marine life.

Alfred Shaheen was one of the most creative and prolific of all the Hawaiian manufacturers in the 1950s. His textile designs are legendary and were inspired by Hawaii, the South Pacific and Asia. Alfred Shaheen’s design team referenced traditional kapa and Hawaiian artefacts that they studied at the Bishop Museum, to create textile design with meaning. One of the most beautiful aspects of his textiles was the use of metallics. He used metallics and colours together, and developed the inks so the metallics were washable and stood up to ultra-violet light, salt water and chlorine. His Surf’n Sand label as well as Shaheen are some of the most collectible today. Other highly valued labels are Kamehameha; Surfriders Sportswear; Hale Hawaii; Malahini and Stan Hicks Hawaiian Casuals.

Collecting is creative activity. It is aesthetically pleasing and a source of nourishment and inspiration. It preserves the past for use in the future. The collection is a narrative within which the collector is an actor. If the collection is presented to the public it becomes artistic communication – arranged for the pleasure and enlightenment of others. If the collection is worn it becomes public performance. The preservation, renovation and revival of mid 20th century clothing is a shared language among an international community.

Profiles of Collectors

1. Michele Wright

2. Dawn Collier

3. Leah Gionis

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Photo archive courtesy of Camille Shaheen-Tunberg

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