GO BACK

Frances and Kathryn McLaughlin wear matching sundresses by Claire McCardell in Montauk, circa 1944.

ISSUE № 242 CONTENTS

Sister Act

How the McLaughlin twins broke the glass ceiling of the male-dominated photography industry during the golden age of magazines

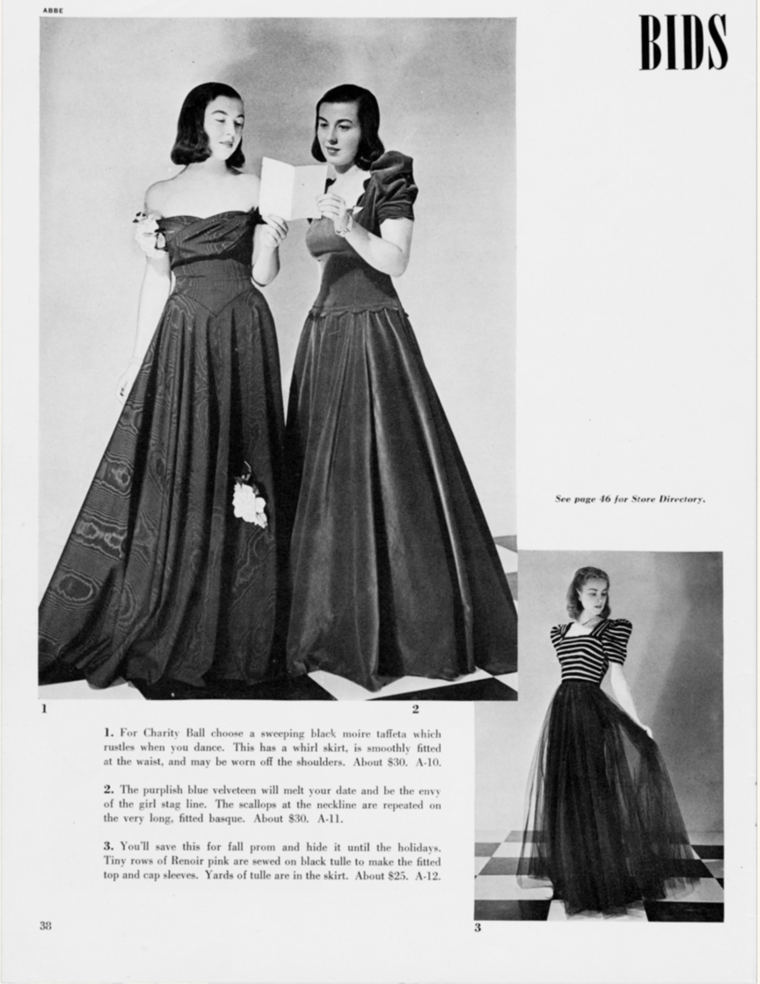
BY CAROL KINO

MARCH 2, 2024
READING TIME: 4 MINUTES

When I began reporting *Double Click,* my book about the McLaughlin twins, who set out to become photographers in New York just before America entered the Second World War, I already knew they were incredible characters. One twin, Frances McLaughlin-Gill, swiftly became a staff photographer in the Condé Nast photo studio, the only woman in a group that included Irving Penn and Horst P. Horst. The other, Kathryn Abbe, was a successful freelancer for such 1940s career-girl magazines as *Charm* and *Mademoiselle.*

They started out in a time when publishers were especially interested in young women and creating smart, savvy publications that catered to their tastes. They also had extremely long careers—unusual for women of their era. Sometimes they ascribed this to the luck of twins. Other times they said it was due to hard work.

But what really surprised me was the twins' uncanny ability to be in the right place at exactly the right historical moment, especially early on.



ABBE

BIDS

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1. For Charity Ball choose a sweeping black moire taffeta which rustles when you dance. This has a whirl skirt, is smoothly fitted at the waist, and may be worn off the shoulders. About $30. A-10.

2. The purplish blue velveteen will melt your date and be the envy of the girl stag line. The scallops at the neckline are repeated on the very long, fitted basque. About $30. A-11.

3. You'll save this for fall prom and hide it until the holidays. Tiny rows of Renoir pink are sewed on black tulle to make the fitted top and cap sleeves. Yards of tulle are in the skirt. About $25. A-12.

See page 46 for Store Directory.

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The McLaughlin twins, photographed by James Abbe Jr. for the August 1940 issue of *College Bazaar*.

Seventeen-year-old Frances and Kathryn arrived from Wallingford, Connecticut, to take art-education degrees at Brooklyn's Pratt Institute in 1937, just as photography was infiltrating American magazines; *Life* had launched the previous year. The school was setting up its first photography department, a rarity at the time, and the sculptor Beverly Pepper, a classmate, told me that all the cool kids wanted to study the subject. "It was the experimental thing being taught so we were all very attracted to it," Pepper wrote in an e-mail before her death, in 2020. "Everyone took photography class."

The identical twins, who were gorgeous, had been photographed constantly since they were small, but now they decided they wanted to control the camera. Together, they talked the head of the photo department into including them in the tiny group who received lab privileges. "They knew how to get what they wanted," Walter Civardi marveled many years later to a reporter at *Popular Photography* magazine, adding that they'd been undeterred by the fact that most professional photographers at the time were men.

The model Pat Donovan, photographed by Frances McLaughlin in 1948.

Pratt also taught industrial design—the hot new trade of the 1930s—and many media people sent their children to the school. The twins' group included the stepdaughter of Betsy Talbot Blackwell, the editor of *Mademoiselle,* the smart, snappy publication that was setting the pace for women's magazines by performing makeovers and discussing subjects like pre-marital sex in a *been there, done that* fashion.

Another classmate was Lewis Teague, the youngest son of the great industrial designer Walter Dorwin Teague, who had made Kodak cameras into must-have accessories during the Depression. Kathryn and Lewis dated, apparently continuing even after he left Pratt to study painting at the Art Students League, in Manhattan. (After Kathryn, he met and briefly married another League student, the debutante and model Mary Lee Abbott, now better known as an Abstract Expressionist and the longtime friend and mistress of Willem de Kooning.)

The twins were soon discovered by *College Bazaar* (*CB*),an early teen magazine published by *Harper's Bazaar* that was distributed in department stores. In their junior year at Pratt, *CB* briefly, and providentially, recruited college girls as models and photographers. It published the twins' accessory shots and hired them to pose in evening gowns for James Abbe Jr., a fabulously handsome Hearst photographer. After the twins graduated and were working in Manhattan—at jobs found by *CB*'s editor—they encountered him again, and he began dating them both, together.

Left, a photo taken by Frances in Manhattan for *Vogue* in 1944; *right,* Abbe Jr. and Kathryn on their wedding day, May 15, 1946.

While they swanned around the city and the Hamptons *à trois,* often wearing matching clothes—the story was that this handsome photographer was trying to choose between the twins—he introduced them to other photographers, people like Fernand Fonssagrives, a refugee from Paris, whose wife, Lisa, was already a *Vogue* cover model, and the foulmouthed German experimentalist Erwin Blumenfeld, who had just escaped a Nazi concentration camp. Suddenly the twins were on equal footing with idols whose work they had clipped from magazines.

Yet their lives weren't entirely glamorous, because the twins and their peers were desperate to work. Despite America's improving economic prospects, 1930s kids had come through a depression that had ruined many of their parents. The twins' mother, widowed during the Spanish-flu pandemic, had lost her money, too, and "We *had* to work" was their constant refrain. After Pearl Harbor, the boys they'd known in school began disappearing into the war that was spreading overseas.

The painter and designer Leonor Fini, photographed by Kathryn McLaughlin in her Paris studio, circa 1947–48.

So why not *carpe diem* with an attractive, fascinating man who could give them entrée into the world of professional photography? There weren't too many men left.

Not long after, another refugee, Alexander Liberman, desperate for work himself, nabbed the top art-directing job at Condé Nast in a corporate coup, and chose Frances, who'd been recommended to him by Kathryn's boss, Toni Frissell—*Vogue*'s top woman photographer of the time—to represent the junior generation in his studio. (Frances was his second hire after another young unknown, Irving Penn.) Kathryn, stricken with envy, quit her assistant job and hurled herself into freelancing, eventually becoming a major contributor to *Charm*, a *Glamour* competitor.

Luck or hard work—or both? Either way, the twins' careers as photographers were off and running.

Frances continued working in the Condé Nast photo studio—the lone woman on staff until it disbanded in the early 1950s—and then went on contract with the company for 20 more years, becoming the first photographer to shoot Dior for the cover of the magazine, and the first woman to cover the Paris collections for American Vogue. *(Along the way, she married the* Harper's Bazaar *photographer Leslie Gill.) Kathryn, who had married Jimmy Abbe Jr., became a successful children's photographer. Frances and Kathryn died a few months apart, in 2014.*

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CAROL KINO

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Carol Kino's arts writing has appeared in The New Yorker, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, *and elsewhere. Her book,* Double Click: Twin Photographers in the Golden Age of Magazines, *will be published on March 5*

Photos: James Abbe Jr. (Frances and Kathryn McLaughlin, both); Frances McLaughlin-Gill/© Condé Nast (Donovan, model and skyline); James Abbe Jr. and Kathryn McLaughlin (Abbe Jr. and Kathryn); Kathryn Abbe (Fini)

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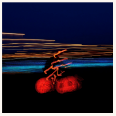
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