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Arthur Cinader, founder of preppy fashion powerhouse J. Crew, dies at 90

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Arthur Cinader, who built a pastel-colored, turtlenecked fashion empire as the founder of J. Crew, popularizing a preppy aesthetic in the 1980s and '90s through meticulously produced catalogues and sleek, wood-paneled stores, died Oct. 11 at his home in Santa Fe, N.M. He was 90.

The cause was complications from a fall, his family said.

Mr. Cinader (pronounced SIN-uh-der) created a company whose identity is neatly encapsulated in its name — inspired not by any ancestral James or Julia Crew but by the sport of rowing, in which Mr. Cinader never engaged but favored for its Ivy League associations. He added a J. to the Crew because he thought the letter looked nice on the page.

Established in 1983 as a slightly downscale version of Ralph Lauren, the family-run business soon sold jeans, hats, sweaters, jackets and suits through glossy mail-order catalogues, delivered to several million doorsteps some 14 times each year.

Mr. Cinader's daughter Emily, then in her 20s, oversaw the clothing's design, expanding the company's early lineup of moderately priced sportswear to garments such as rollneck sweaters and "barn jacket" outerwear. Mr. Cinader, who had previously succeeded his father as head of a successful catalogue clothing business, was chairman and ran the business operations of what became known as the J. Crew Group.

Mr. Cinader and his wife, Johanna, in 1989. They are wearing two of J. Crew's signature pieces from that time, a rollneck sweater and barn jacket. (Maud Bryt)

He could be obsessive about details, reportedly sending one employee's reports back because the staples were crooked. On another occasion, he ended a meeting because an employee used the wrong abbreviation for the season "spring." (Mr. Cinader preferred his spring reports to be titled SPR, rather than SP.)

He demanded a similar level of precision in the production of the company's catalogues, which advertised the promise of a casually elegant lifestyle as well as stonewashed oxford shirts and "petal"-colored dresses. Thousands of rolls of film were shot each year for the glossies, and Mr. Cinader personally penned much of the copy, extolling a J. Crew sensibility from "Campobello to Cape May."

It was, he admitted, a look that would not fit every closet or pocketbook, though he sought to win over potential customers each time he hit the slopes of Vail or Davos, where he performed what he called “my ski-lift research.”

He estimated that fewer than 10 percent of Americans could be convinced to buy and wear J. Crew apparel, and, indeed, the company became a powerful brand but never a financial juggernaut. In 1997, when Mr. Cinader sold 88 percent of the business to a private investment firm for about \$500 million, its \$600 million in annual sales were dwarfed by those of Eddie Bauer (\$2 billion) and Lands’ End (\$1.2 billion).

But under Mr. Cinader’s watch J. Crew became an inescapable part of American fashion, successfully expanding from catalogues to brick-and-mortar stores in 1989, at a time when few brands offered high-end in-store experiences. A decade later, it was among the first major brands to offer online sales.

In shaping J. Crew and the fashion industry as a whole, “Mr. Cinader never got the credit he deserved,” said Sid Mashburn, a designer who worked at J. Crew from 1985 to 1991 and now runs his own chain of men’s stores.

“He saw there was an opportunity to have an intimate relationship with a customer without the go-between of department stores,” he said. “L.L. Bean and Lands’ End had pioneered that, but never to the audience he was going after — not just young, but knowledgeable and interested in high quality.”

Arthur Cinader was born in New York City on Sept. 8, 1927. His father started the Popular Club Plan, a catalogue company for moderate-income families, in 1947.

Mr. Cinader studied at the University of Arizona and Yale School of Medicine but dropped out of school to join his father’s business. He soon took the reins, expanding the company enough to acquire the First National Bank of Albuquerque in 1969.

He married Johanna van Riel in 1958. In addition to his wife, survivors include five children, all of whom worked at J. Crew, including as models and photographers for the catalogue, and 13 grandchildren.

Mr. Cinader retired after selling J. Crew to the Texas Pacific Group in 1997, though he stayed on for a time as a consultant. Outside his business activities, he was involved with conservative and libertarian groups such as the American Enterprise Institute and the Cato Institute.

His daughter Emily, now known as Emily Scott, told Fortune magazine in 1998 that her father was not particularly careful about his clothes — nearly all his shirt necks were fringed — but that the clothes he owned were carefully chosen, and inspired items such as J. Crew’s “bicolor anorak,” the type of jacket that Mr. Cinader wore when he met Riel while skiing in Davos.

“J. Crew is a design spirit,” he told the New York Times in 1990, trying to sum up the company’s aesthetic. “It’s hard to put into words. If you could put it into words, you wouldn’t need designers.”