New, established designers sought

Forgotten Fashion

Black Fashion Museum to open in D.C.

Former model, Lady Sara Lou Carter, wife of Guianan Ambassador Sir John Carter

By Greg King
AFRO Intern

It began as one woman dream — a dream to make public the history of black people by uncovering a world of treasures found in old and new fashion designs created by black Americans.

"For years blacks had been contributing to the world of fashion, yet, they never received any credit," said Joyce Bailey, chairman of the soon-to-be opened Black Fashion Museum in DC.

"Many of the fashionable clothes made on plantations during slavery were either designed or made by African-Americans," she said.

The idea, though new to the District, is old to Harlem, NY., home of the country's first black fashion museum.

Bailey tells the story of founder and the Director of the Fashion Museum in Harlem — Lois Alexander — who established the NY museum because she wanted people to know the contributions that blacks had made to the history of fashion.

She discovered information dating back to early Egypt.

Yet Alexander had been told while doing research on her masters degree on the role of blacks in the retail industry, that there was simply no information available on black fashion designers.

"Like many other things about African-Americans it had been overlooked, discarded, ignored and/or suppressed," said Joyce Bailey.

In her research she decided she wanted to make a statement about the many unknown black designers that had contributed to the fashion field.. And what better way to do so than to start The Black Fashion Museum.

Before Alexander opened the Black Fashion Museum she started the Harlem Institute of Fashion. "If you give a girl a dress she has one dress, if you teach her to sew she has many."

The original goal of the Harlem Institute of Fashion was to teach young people of Harlem how to sew and design their own clothing, the Black Fashion Museum was an out-growth of that.

The DC Black Fashion Museum will tell the public stories that have never been told through presenting information about each designer. For instance, did you know Jacqueline Bouvier-Kennedy's entire bridal party was outfitted by black designer Ann Lowe in 1953?

Or, that Mary Todd Lincoln, the wife of President Abraham Lincoln wore a ball-gown designed by former slave Elizabeth Keckley? Presently, the gown is in the First Ladies Hall of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C.

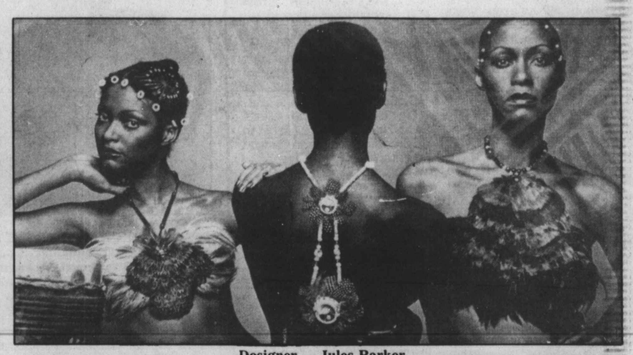
The DC Museum will highlight new designers such as Jeffrey Banks, Geoffrey Holder, Willie Smith (Williwear), Jon Haggins, and Patrick Kelly, as well as local designers like Ann Lowe, Sister Maria Theresa and Etta D. Arnold.

The fashions to be presented at the DC Black Fashion Museum are from many black designers including those who have never sold or presented their work to the public. These designs have come out of the closets of many black Americans who for years made their own clothing. And as noted designs tell the story of African-Americans, so do these.

The museum will not only record history but also serve as an educational tool.

"In a time when black children don't have a whole lot of role models, we feel its important that they know contributions were made in many fields other than sports and entertainment," said Mrs. Bailey.

The museum will open in December. AFRO readers who have any designs that they feel are of Museum quality — designed by either them or their relatives — can write to Mrs. Bailey at the Black Fashion Museum, 2007 Vermont Avenue. N.W., Washington, D.C., 20009.



Designer — Jules Parker

Full Dashiki by D. C. Designer Lepenski

Model Dorothea Towles in dress and hat designed by Hazel Shumate

Designs by Jon Haggins

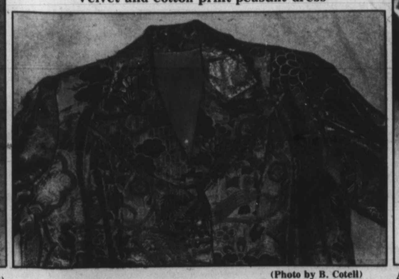
(Photo by B. Cotell)

Velvet and cotton print peasant dress

Actress Ruby Dee in gown designed by Danielle Simpkins

(Photo by B. Cotell)

Norman Bailey, Joyce Bailey and Chandra Bailey



(Photo by B. Cotell)

Multi - colored brocade jacket

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