Black Fashion Designers
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Organized by Ariele Elia and Elizabeth Way

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Cover: Eric Gaskins, dress, 2014, USA.
There have been past exhibitions about individual black fashion designers, such as Stephen Burrows and Patrick Kelly, but this exhibition explores the experiences of several generations of African and African American fashion designers from the 1950s to the present. The curators acknowledge the problem of using race as a lens through which to view fashion design. Fashion journalist Robin Givhan addressed the implications of such categorization when she described the Pyer Moss spring 2016 collection by designer Kerby Jean-Raymond: “It was a startling and emotional reflection of Jean-Raymond’s fatigue over being described as a ‘black’ designer. Not because he isn’t proud of his heritage and African influences.

Yet because black designers have too often gone unrecognized and underrepresented, there is much to be learned from such an exhibition, about the challenges faced by black designers and how their experiences have changed over time. Even today, they make up only about one percent of the designers covered by the fashion press.

The curators take inspiration from many traditions that encompassed countless, unnamed black dressmakers, to the modern conception of a fashion designer. Designers such as Arthur McGee, Wesley Tann, and Jon Weston worked for New York manufacturers before establishing their own businesses. For example, Weston, an FIT alumnus, started his ready-to-wear company in the mid-1960s, stating, “I’d gone as far as I could go on Seventh Avenue; it wasn’t growing with me.”

By the 1970s, however, as Willi Smith later recalled, “There was this tremendous exposure given to designers based on their blackness.” Indeed, the fashion press made a point of reporting on black designers of that era, such as Stephen Burrows and Scott Barrie, who became well-known for their body-conscious styles. As wary of the label “black designer” then as Kerby Jean-Raymond is today, Smith added, “When the hype was over, people thought there were no more black designers. In a way it’s a blessing. Now we can get on with being what we are: designers.”

Visibility also increased for black models. Events such as the annual Ebony Fashion Fair gave them a national platform, while energetic performances such as the annual Ebony Fashion Fair gave them a national platform, while energetic performances such as the annual Ebony Fashion Fair gave them a national platform, while energetic performances such as the annual Ebony Fashion Fair gave them a national platform, while energetic performances such as the annual Ebony Fashion Fair gave them a national platform, while energetic performances such as the annual Ebony Fashion Fair gave them a national platform, while energetic performances such as the annual Ebony Fashion Fair gave them a national platform, while energetic performances such as the annual Ebony Fashion Fair gave them a national platform, while energetic performances such as the annual Ebony Fashion Fair gave them a national platform, while energetic performances such as the annual Ebony Fashion Fair gave them a national platform, while energetic performances such as the 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