

Patrick Kelly, dress, fall/winter 2014, France.



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Black Fashion Designers

December 6, 2016–May 16, 2017

Organized by Ariele Elia and Elizabeth Way

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#BlackFashionDesigners

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Cover: Eric Gaskins, dress, 2014, USA.

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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 not because he doesn’t bring his full self to his work, but because the nomenclature is limiting.”



Ann Lowe, wedding dress, 1968, USA.

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 VogueRunway.com, the most comprehensive online site for viewing collections from fashion weeks around the world.

The designers featured in *Black Fashion Designers* work in a diverse range of individual styles; they do not all speak in one voice. The exhibition draws exclusively from the permanent

collection of The Museum at FIT and is organized according to categories and themes, such as eveningwear, menswear, street style, experimental fashion, and African influences.

Black fashion designers began to gain recognition during the late 1940s, even while still segregated within the fashion industry. A section of the exhibition devoted to black designers breaking into the industry features work by New York-based Zelda Wynn Valdes and Ann Lowe, who created custom-made gowns for society women and celebrities. They represent the transition from nineteenth-century dressmaking 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



Stephen Burrows, two-piece evening dress, 1973, USA.

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.”

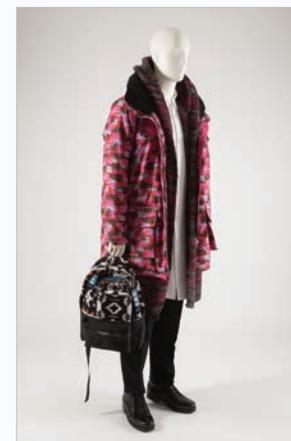
By the 1970s, however, as Willi Smith later recalled, “There was this tremendous exposure given to designers based on their blackness.” Indeed, the fashion press made a point of reporting on black designers of that era, such as Stephen Burrows and Scott Barrie, who became well-known for their body-conscious 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.”



Willi Smith, suit, circa 1984, USA.

Visibility also increased for black models. Events such as the annual Ebony Fashion Fair gave them a national platform, while energetic performances by African American models at the 1973 “Battle of Versailles” fashion show in France captured international attention.

Black designers take inspiration from many sources, but may not necessarily address race in their work. Eric Gaskins, who trained under



Casely-Hayford, ensemble, fall 2015, England.

couturier Hubert de Givenchy, creates eveningwear in the tradition of the French haute couture. His white gown is intricately beaded to mimic the brush strokes seen in Franz Klein’s paintings. The father-son duo at Casely-Hayford incorporate elements of anarchy into traditional British fine tailoring to create a modern menswear aesthetic.

The black experience does prominently figure in the work of other designers featured in the exhibition. Paris-based Patrick Kelly, for instance, drew inspiration from his American Southern roots. The colorful buttons on his knit dress reference the mismatched buttons his grandmother used to mend his family’s clothing. Duro Olowu, a Nigerian-Jamaican, London-based designer draws on multiple cultural perspectives and emphasizes Africa’s historic role in cultural production and international trade.



Duro Olowu, ensemble, fall 2012, England.

A section of the exhibition devoted to activism comprises fashions that send political and social messages. For example, a cover image of the anti-apartheid magazine *Drum* adorns an ensemble by South African designer Nkhensani Nkosi of Stoned Cherrie, and a Kerby Jean-Raymond ensemble inspired by Ota Benga, a nineteenth-century African who was caged at the Monkey House in the Bronx Zoo, expresses Jean-Raymond’s frustration at being labeled and pigeon-holed, as not only a black designer, but also a black person.

Despite progress over the past half century, the fashion industry is not as welcoming as we might expect. However, the value of diversity is increasingly being recognized. Black designers contribute alternative perspectives to fashion that make it more creative, more inclusive, and more varied as both an art form and an industry.



Pyer Moss, ensemble, spring 2016, USA.

Ariele Elia and Elizabeth Way, curators