

A Stitch In Time

African Americans' Impact on Fashion Design



The fashion industry has been profoundly and enduringly influenced by the Black community.

1600s



Enslaved people left an indelible mark on the fashion world, showcasing their expertise in weaving vibrant fabrics, quilting cultural designs, and mastering dyeing processes. This influence is evident in the use of vivid colors and bold patterns, mirroring the lively African landscape. Headwraps, dashikis, and kaftans have become iconic symbols of cultural pride.

Below are notable individuals who have inspired the fashion industry:



Elizabeth Keckley was a prominent designer of the 19th century. Born enslaved, she purchased her and her son's freedom from their abusive owners in 1855. She moved to Washington, D.C., in 1860. In 1861, when President Abraham Lincoln moved into the White House, one of Keckley's clients suggested to Mary Todd Lincoln that she ask the designer to fashion her inauguration gown in simple yet sophisticated Victorian fashion.

The Harlem Renaissance significantly impacted fashion during the 1920s. Some of the 20's most notable and influential clothing styles, including the zoot suit, originated in the Black community. Performers Cab Calloway and Count Basie were often seen wearing the zoot suit, and entertainer Josephine Baker popularized the flapper dress.



Vanilla Beane, born in 1919, was a legendary milliner in Washington D.C. well-known for her collection of hats. Beane, who died at 103, worked at her shop, Bené Millinery & Bridal Supplies, six days a week until she was over 100. Beane frequently displayed her creations at exhibits around Washington D.C., and her work was showcased at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. But she is best known for the colorful hats she created for civil rights activist Dorothy Height.

The Ebony Fashion Fair was Ebony Magazine's annual traveling fashion show. It ran from 1958 to 2009 and played a significant role in introducing luxury fashion to the Black community. The magazine also popularized certain cultural styles, turning them into iconic fashion statements.



Willi Smith, an American fashion designer, revolutionized the fashion industry by bringing urban culture to the catwalk. He combined elements of workwear, military, African, and Indian prints, often integrating tweed, denim, or corduroy. At the time of his death in 1987, Smith was considered one of the most successful African American fashion designers. WilliWear Limited launched in 1976, providing affordable, stylish clothing for modern women and men made from natural fabrics.

Hip Hop has also had a far-reaching impact on fashion. Its emphasis on dance popularized athletic wear and baggy clothing. These larger sizes made it easy to dance or pop and lock.



Dapper Dan is credited with creating the distinctive fashion style associated with rap music. Dapper Dan's pieces gained significant attention after being worn by clients like LL Cool J and Salt-N-Pepa. Dapper Dan employed "logomania" in his work, which is when a brand's logo is all over the work. Dapper Dan's work has been featured in the Museum of Modern Art, and he has launched a luxury fashion house with Gucci in Harlem.

Black fashion designers continue to break barriers by redefining beauty and creating new standards in fashion.



Law Roach is a retired American fashion stylist best known for his work with Zendaya and Céline Dion. His career began with his New York City boutique, where he caught the eye of industry insiders. He was one of the main judges on seasons 23 and 24 of America's Next Top Model. For the 2021 Met Gala, Roach styled ten celebrities, showcasing his exceptional talent.

2024

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