Black Designers in American Fashion

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At one point during the late 1840s or early 1850s, she was supporting the entire seventeen-person household of Anne Burwell Garland and her husband Hugh A. Garland in St. Louis with money that she made from dressmaking. Keckly developed such a loyal clientele that these elite St. Louis women willingly lent her $1,200 to buy her and her son's freedom in 1855. Newly freed, Keckly moved to Washington, DC and quickly became the dressmaker of choice for the Washingtonian elite, working first with Varina Howell, wife of Jefferson Davis. Keckly, however, is best known for serving as Mary Todd Lincoln's dressmaker during her time as First Lady and directly afterward. Keckly penned *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*, in 1868, a memoir of her years in the White House, in which she reveals intimate details about the Lincoln household during the Civil War.[21] Beyond her experience

Figure 2.3 Elizabeth Keckly designed this purple silk velvet and satin dress for Mary Todd Lincoln who wore it during the 1861–1862 winter social season. Division of Political and Military History, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

as a dressmaker for the crème de la crème of Washington's elite, and alongside her involvement in the inner circles of the White House, Keckly was an activist who fought fiercely for the end of slavery. Although she maintained a cordial relationship with her former enslavers, Keckly was a staunch abolitionist. She founded the Contraband Relief Association in August 1862, receiving donations from both President and Mrs. Lincoln, as well as other white patrons and well-to-do free Black people in Washington, DC. The organization provided food, shelter, clothing, and emotional support to recently freed slaves and sick and wounded soldiers.[22]

Thankfully, later generations of scholars and others have been able to learn of both Jacobs's and Keckly's sewing skills and activist work because both were literate and had the power to tell their own stories through their published memoirs. Although Keckly is remembered as an expert "mantua-maker," while Jacobs is better known as an abolitionist, both women simultaneously utilized their needlework and advocacy skills throughout their lives.

Laying the Groundwork: Ann Lowe

The task of studying other early Black fashion designers' histories and material culture is often difficult because during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most enslaved and even free seamstresses of color worked in relative obscurity for little or no pay. This is despite the fact that prior to the mechanization of the fashion system, with the widespread use of sewing machines and industrial systems emerging by the end of the nineteenth century, all clothing was made by hand, and the constructing of garments required skill and precision. These early dressmakers' work informed the careers of more widely recognized twentieth-century designers, such as Ann Lowe. Unfortunately, only a small number of handmade garments positively identified as having been made by a free or enslaved maker of color survive in museums and cultural institutions. There are three reasons why it is still difficult—two centuries later—to match surviving garments to the craftsmanship of enslaved people. First, most of these women were not credited for their work at the time. Second, records describing enslaved peoples and their occupations are not a reliable guide in differentiating those who worked as dressmakers and seamstresses—designing, sewing, and mending clothes—from those who performed other household duties, such as cooking or childcare. In other words, most women who worked as seamstresses would have also performed these other domestic duties. Third, the garments themselves are

often "silent" as to their origin, as the enslaved seamstresses had to ply their craft under duress within slave societies. For these reasons, many African American dressmakers have been under-acknowledged in studies of Black fashion history.

Although the majority of women in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America possessed basic sewing abilities, dressmaking, especially on a professional level, was a specialized skill. Women such as Margaret Mahammitt Hagan and Eliza Ann Gardner possessed such skills and could rely on them to support themselves and their families. They were also able to engage in other professional pursuits and activist work at different points in their lives. Hagan worked as an entrepreneur and dressmaker throughout her life, but she is most remembered as a reformer and groundbreaking business owner. Born in 1826, she lived in Maryland during the mid-1800s. In 1861, she moved to Philadelphia, where she owned a laundry. By the late 1800s, Hagan had moved to Washington, DC and had established a dressmaking business at 1109 F Street North West. While in Washington, DC, she also studied medical electricity—what is today more often called electrotherapy—and became a certified practitioner. After obtaining her certification, Hagan set up business in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. By the age of eighty, Hagan had owned and operated three medical electricity businesses, including two in Pennsylvania and one in New Jersey.[23] Although she does not appear to have been directly involved in abolitionist efforts, Hagan, as a wealthy Black female landowner and entrepreneur during slavery, disrupted white male supremacy and served as a living example of the potential of enterprising African Americans. Her progeny would go on to become prominent African American educators, athletes, religious leaders, and even an astronaut.[24]

Eliza Ann Gardner also worked as an entrepreneur and dressmaker throughout her life, but this work is eclipsed by her abolitionist efforts and her position in Boston's elite African American artisanal class. She also used her home as a stop on the Underground Railroad. Gardner was born in 1831 in New York City to free parents who made a living making sails for ocean vessels. The family moved to Boston in 1854, where they opened a sailmaking business on Grove Street in the West End. Gardner became active in her church and in the anti-slavery movement while making her living as a dressmaker, and was later employed as a keeper of a boarding house. She founded the missionary society of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and was a strong advocate for women's equality within the church. As an activist, she knew and worked with many abolitionist leaders including Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Wendell Phillips. She was also a cousin of W. E. B. Du Bois.[25]

The early Black fashion designers described above laid the groundwork upon which a later generation of Black designers made their names. For example,

designer Ann Lowe's maternal grandmother was an enslaved seamstress named Georgia, whose freedom was bought by her grandfather "General" Cole, a free Black carpenter. The two married soon thereafter. Their daughter Janey followed the métier of her mother, and later gave birth to her own daughter, Ann.[26] Lowe was thus a third-generation clothier. Trailblazing fashion makers, such as Lowe's mother and grandmother, can be understood as the literal and metaphorical forebears to early twentieth-century Black designers. The talents of these enslaved seamstresses were not directly molded by the formal fashion apprenticeship system that was active in the great metropolises of the time. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was rare for free and enslaved seamstresses to be formally trained in fashion design; the same was true for the generation just out of slavery. They learned in the home, as many people have historically learned to create and care for clothing. However, Georgia Cole possessed professional-level skills that stood out among those of the typical home-sewers, and she passed these, along with a successful dressmaking business, down to her family; her granddaughter thus emerged as an African American designer who learned how to sew at home, but who would also go on to train at a design school.

Lowe was born in Alabama, where she worked for her family's business in Montgomery. In 1916, at the approximate age of eighteen, she moved to Tampa, Florida, where she opened a successful dress shop.[27] She then participated in the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to major metropolises in the North in pursuit of greater employment opportunities and less racial discrimination. In an *Ebony* profile, Lowe described her early years in New York City as lonely and difficult. She was the only Black student at a design school in the city and was segregated from the other students in a separate classroom.[28] Although she spent most of her life living in Harlem like other early Black New York-based designers Ruby Bailey (see Chapter 5 by Joy Davis) and Zelda Wynn Valdes, Lowe designed for New Yorkers who lived in a different part of the city—the old-moneyed Upper East Side, where her studios were also located. Lowe is documented as saying that she only designed for elite families, such as the Du Ponts, Roosevelts, Astors, and Auchinclosses. "I love my clothes and I'm particular about who wears them. I'm not interested in sewing for café society or social climbers. I do not cater to Mary and Sue. I sew for the families of the Social Register," she told *Ebony* in her 1966 feature.[29] Although Lowe decided to work primarily with New York's upper crust, her very presence in these elite circles was an intervention into what was still a bastion of whiteness. She opened two shops of her own on the Upper East Side and even had a short-lived made-to-order salon in a Saks Fifth Avenue department store.

Figure 2.4 This ivory dress decorated with handmade roses is representative of Ann Lowe's precision and attention to detail. Silk dress, 1966–1967. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. Gift of the Black Fashion Museum founded by Lois K. Alexander-Lane.

Figure 2.5 Ann Lowe was known for her careful embroidery and handmade details. Silk dress, back detail, 1966–1967. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. Gift of the Black Fashion Museum founded by Lois K. Alexander-Lane.

Lowe's biggest claim to fame was designing Jacqueline Kennedy's wedding dress, which was worn at her 1953 wedding to future president, John Kennedy. Inauspiciously, a few weeks before the wedding, a flood in Lowe's New York studio destroyed the wedding dress and the gowns of most of the wedding party. Lowe had just two weeks to remake all the dresses and ended up losing money on the order. Regardless of her hard work and the loss of any potential profit, Lowe was not widely or publicly credited for designing the extensively photographed Kennedy wedding dress.[30] Despite the lack of acknowledgment of her work, it is through Lowe—who died in 1981—that scholars can draw a direct through line from enslaved fashion makers to the current generation of Black fashion designers.

Conclusion

Ann Lowe is one of the last Black American designers whose design acumen can be directly and positively traced back to the era of slavery. However, the legacy of enslaved seamstresses lived and lives on in the subsequent generations of Black seamstresses and designers. Many of these designers have drawn inspiration from their progenitors. Today, Black designers are less obligated to juggle fashion design with greater freedom struggles, though a number of twentieth- and twenty-first century designers have drawn inspiration from Black history and have made commitments to address social justice in their work. Patrick Kelly, for example, was born and raised in Vicksburg, Mississippi, but made his name as the creative director of his eponymous Parisian label (as Eric Darnell Pritchard discusses in Chapter 12). In 1988, Kelly became both the first American and the first person of color to be admitted as a member of the *Chambre syndicale du prêt-à-porter des couturiers et des créateurs de mode*, the organizing body of Parisian ready-to-wear designers. Rather than eschewing his Southern roots, Kelly liberally drew inspiration from African American culture; he appropriated and reframed the racist imagery popularized in American popular culture after slavery, such as the golliwog, which he prominently featured on his shopping bags. Ever the provocateur, Kelly reclaimed a controversial symbol of racism and transformed it into the logo for his chic Parisian design house.[31]

Likewise, Kerby Jean-Raymond, the creative director of Pyer Moss, designed "American, Also," a three-part series of fashion collections beginning in the fall of 2018 to address the erasure of African American narratives in United States

history. With each successive collection, Jean-Raymond has pushed forward the concept of the brand's ethos of broadening the definition of Blackness. His immersive shows are staged at important places for American Africans, such as the Weeksville Heritage Center, the site of a community founded by free African Americans in the early nineteenth century. Jean-Raymond's work is grounded in the reality of Black genius rising out of a collective history of enslavement. Twentieth- and twenty-first century African American designers such as Jean-Raymond have taken inspiration from the United States' legacy of slavery and, in the process, have helped change the meaning of African American and American identity.[32]

Rosa Parks's work as a seamstress provided her with the livelihood with which she could launch a seminal moment in the Civil Rights Movement. The same is true for Harriet Jacobs, Elizabeth Keckly, Margaret Mahammitt Hagan, Eliza Ann Gardner, Ann Lowe, and numerous other less prominent early Black fashion designers and their progeny. Sewing was part of the broader social activism in which these designers were engaged. They mobilized needlework in the fight for the enfranchisement and elevation of African Americans, weaving slavery's warp into liberty's weft.

Notes

1 Joyce A. Hanson, *Rosa Parks: A Biography* (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, 2011), 17.

2 Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 260–1.

3 Nancy Prince, *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince* (Boston: Self-Published, 1853).

4 Tanisha C. Ford, *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

5 Monica Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

6 Tiffany M. Gill, "How a Black Female Fashion Designer Laid the Groundwork for Ghana's 'Year of Return,'" *The Washington Post*, January 10, 2020, accessed April 13, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/01/10/how-black-woman-fashion-designer-laid-groundwork-ghanas-year-return/.

7 "Virginia Gazette (Purdie), Williamsburg, August 8, 1777," *The Geography of Slavery: Virginia Runaways*, accessed April 8, 2020, http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/search/relatedAd.php?adFile=vg1777.xml&adId=v1777082448.