

Overview:

What is fashionable is a subjective subject; ask five different people what makes something fashionable, and the answers will likely be five different ideas. Mainstream, dominant American fashion is dominated by names like Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein, Ann Taylor, Michael Kors, Donna Karan, Tommy Hilfiger, and Betsey Johnson. These powerhouses of fashion design all have one common denominator—they are all white. The question of how and where black fashion designers find their fit in America's capitalist, entrepreneurial society is compelling to anyone interested in fashion, but it is also one that is engaging and relevant to high school students.

A historical perspective must start with the first African-American "fashion designers"—black women of the 19th and 20th centuries who made their living as seamstresses and dressmakers. A particularly interesting account is found at the National Humanities Center Website (2007). In their first hand account of her story: "'The Making of African American Identity: Vol. I, 1500-1865", readers learn about Elizabeth Keckly, dressmaker to Mary Todd Lincoln. Keckly was born into slavery in Virginia in 1818, and remained a slave until she was granted manumission, freed from slavery by her owner, in St. Louis in 1855.

Keckly had a reputation for being an excellent dressmaker, and upon her arrival in Washington DC in 1860 she quickly found work with the wife of then Senator Jefferson Davis. Through her reputation as a skilled and efficient dress-maker, Keckly was employed by multiple wives of military officials to make dresses for them. Eventually she was introduced to First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln, and spent four years with her as her personal dressmaker and stylist. Keckly later published a book about her time with the First Lady,

and in 1963, she founded the National Home for Destitute Colored Women and Children in Washington DC (National Humanities Center, 2007).

A significant decade for the American fashion industry was the 1980s. According to Pauline Weston Thompson, writing for fashion-era.com, the Reagan-era economic success experienced by the America created a mainstream market of economically secure, financially stable consumers. The high fashion Reagans and the influences from England—Margaret Thatcher and Princess Diana—inspired the consumers of the west to spend money on clothes and use their credit cards to flaunt their economic status. This is the time period when designers like Calvin Klein, Ralph Lauren, and Donna Karan rose to the peak of the fashion markets. Two prominent black designers during this time were Willi Smith and Patrick Kelly.

Willi Smith (1948-1987) died at the age of 39 from complications from AIDS and a parasitic infection he acquired during a trip to India to purchase fabric for his clothing line. Smith was the creator of the WilliWear Ltd. brand that was popular as a casual, sportswear designer. By 1986, Smith's fashion company had grossed \$25 million. He had stores in Paris, London, and the United States, and was known for his clothing that was trendy, stylish, and affordable. He produced sought after suits that could be purchased for less than \$200. After his death, his business floundered and eventually filed bankruptcy in 1990 (Campbell, 1990).

Patrick Kelly was a second prominent black designer in the 1980s. Kelly (1954-1990) was the first black designer inducted into the elite French fashion organization: Chambre Syndicale. Kelly died at the age of 35 from complications from AIDS, so his designs never became household names. He was, however, well known for his use of

fashion to explore his identity, and his success incorporating color, creativity, and fun into his fashions. Kelly was also known as an activist against racial prejudices. He sought to “embody stereotypes to deflate them” (Givhan, 2004). Kelly was known to collect black memorabilia, and routinely passed out mini black baby dolls to attendees of his fashion shows. (Givhan, 2004).

During the 1990s, Daymond John and three of his friends founded a fashion company targeted to young black consumers. The brand-FUBU (For Us By Us) was launched when John secured a mortgage on his house for 100,000 and quit his job at Red Lobster to dedicate his time and efforts to the success of his fashion line. The line sprung to popularity when John and his team persuaded rapper LL Cool J to wear FUBU gear in his music videos and even in a Gap commercial. FUBU is now a popular, multi-million dollar business whose designs are worn by people of multiple ethnicities—not just blacks (Ferriss, 2011).

As the fashion landscape evolves, the opportunities for under-represented populations become greater. The possibilities for currently unknown designers to rise to the top of the fashion world and make their names known have been primed by the risk takers and entrepreneurs that came before them. Entrepreneurs such as Elizabeth Keckly, Willi Smith, Patrick Kelly, and the founders of FUBU.

Activities

Day One

- The teacher should gather pictures of men and women in various clothing outfits. The teacher should make sure that students cannot discern the race of the people in the pictures. The teacher should show the students the pictures and have them guess the race of the people and the designer based on what the clothes look like.
- The teacher should pair the students up and have them compare answers and reasons for why they chose the races that they did for the people who were wearing the clothes, and for the designers of the clothes.
- The teacher should facilitate whole class discussion about the students' answers.
- The teacher should instruct students to conduct a "fashion audit"; they should inventory the clothing, shoes, and accessories that they have at home and come back to school the next day prepared to list the manufacturers of their clothing,

Day Two

- The students should list their clothing makers on Post-it-Notes—one note per manufacturer. Then students should get into groups and organize their post-it notes into categories.
- Students should research the manufacturers of their clothing, and report out to the class what they find.

Day Three

- The teacher should summarize the results of their class "fashion audit", and determine how students in the class have, or wear clothes that are designed by black fashion designers.
- The teacher should show students the following poem
(from <http://www.blackfashiondesigners.org>)

Sewing Support

There was no easy entry into the market of fashion for the race that were called
Blacks,
until designs by Willi Smith and Patrick Kelly broke the shackles that held them back.

Insurmountable barriers and obstacles these designers had to face,
whether it be because of lack of finances, advertising, marketing or maybe even
their race.

Yes, the door of opportunity was slightly opened even though they had no ends,
its not easy for a black fashion designer who has no connects or a friend with the
last name
Lauren.

The game was revolutionalized when P. Diddy, Russell Simmons, and Jay-Z retraced
the
footsteps of those who led the way,
reinventing a whole new genre that influences the entire hip-hop culture of today.

Phat Farm, Karl Kani, Sean John and Rocawear these fashions are a must,
cause if it weren't for these black people we wouldn't have anything For Us By Us.

Don't limit your buying power by only purchasing what is black owned,
give much love to Calvin Klein, Christian Dior, and Donna Karan's clothes.

Always remain cognitive that struggles and hurdles of yesterday are still the same
struggles of
tomorrow, so we must continue to support our own so from banks we don't always
have to
borrow.

There are many foot soldiers that are waiting in the wings for their turn to shine,
they are ready, willing, and able to take the game to the next level and blow the
industries mind.

Names like Earle Bannister, Manale Dagnew, L'Amour Ameer, Cedric Wallace,
Cassandra
Bromfield, Ean Williams, Diane Parsons, Shadrick Lee and Michael 'Monee' Toney,
all of

which you've probably never heard,
but soon you will hear of these people and many more and not just through this
spoken word.

Never give up hope for dreams do come true, and don't ever let anyone tell you that
success is
only for the chosen few.

Author:

Terence N. Simms, Sr.

- Each student should journal about his or her response to the poem, and then share the responses in small groups.
- Each person in the class should choose a name of a designer from the poem to research.
- Each student should write a biography of the designer, and find images of the designer's clothes.

Day Four

- Students should pair up with another student who had their designer and they can compare information and create a joint presentation to show to the class.

Day Five

- Students should present to the class while the audience members take notes about the presentations. Students should look for common themes, and should take notes in preparation for answering the question "Black Fashion Designers in America: Who, How, and What"

Day Six

- Students come to class and compose a written response to the prompt: Black Fashion Designers in America: Who, How, and What"

Web resources

<http://www.blackfashiondesigners.org/>

A list of contemporary black fashion designers, historical profiles of a few designers, the poem “Sewing Solutions”, and a networking site for contacts in the make-up, stylist, and designer industries.

<http://collections.si.edu/search/results.jsp?q=African+American+fashion+designers>

A Smithsonian Institution website; 15 books, pieces of artwork, and articles that provide perspectives about the history of black fashion designers, and the rise of black fashion.

Ferris, T. (2011) “The Making of FUBU—an Interview with Daymond John”

<http://www.fourhourworkweek.com/blog/2011/04/07/fubu-daymond-john/>

An interview with FUBU founder Daymond John

http://www.fashion-era.com/1980s_lifestyle_and_fashion.htm

By Pauline Weston-Thomas; an account of the economic influence on the fashion industry of the 1980s.

<http://www.geoclan.com/style/articles/05/TheLifeofPatrickKellyFashionDesigner.html>

A short, easy to read summary of Patrick Kelly’s life and accomplishments.

<http://www.nytimes.com/1987/04/19/obituaries/willi-smith-clothes-designer-creator-of-vivid-sportswear.html>

Willi Smith’s obituary.

<http://www.rontrent.com/tribute-to-a-fashion-icon-williwear-willi-smith/>

A lengthy biography of Willi Smith—one of the first black designers. Popular in the 1980s, this site includes a youtube video of a tribute to Willie Smith and his designs.

<http://styletvshow.com/home/2011/02/influential-african-american-fashion-icons/>

A Style•TV site with full color photos of black fashion icons throughout history.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZaR_WxCkvXA

A video chronicling the history of FUBU—includes interviews with founding partners.

Print resources available on the Web

“50 years of style: Dressing through the decades” *Ebony* November 1995 (p132-134).

http://books.google.com/books?id=o9If_HeJUjUC&pg=PA168&lpg=PA168&dq=Ebony++August,+1995&source=bl&ots=PJg1qAE4zj&sig=QmqREvOzwSmyhskIH00btzEbYQ4&hl=en&ei=MZLiTdC0K87PgAes0bW7Bg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=8&ved=0CEUQ6AEwBw#v=onepage&q=Ebony%20%20August%2C%201995&f=false

A brief historical overview of black fashion from 1944-1995 with several pictures—would be a quick, engaging read for high school students.

Campbell, R. (1990). “Chapter 11 papers filed by williwear” *The Inquirer*. 25, June 1990. http://articles.philly.com/1990-06-25/news/25913623_1_natural-fabrics-fashion-industry-collection

Givhan, R. (2004, May 31) PC01 “Patrick kelley’s radical cheek” *The Washington Post*. <http://www.webcitation.org/5qB2bz5mb>

A summary of the life, trends, and influence of Patrick Kelly

National Humanities Center Resource Toolbox: “The Making of African American Identity: Vol. I, 1500-1865” [www.quiltersworld.com/webbonuses/.../elizabeth keckley mary.pdf](http://www.quiltersworld.com/webbonuses/.../elizabeth_keckley_mary.pdf)

A prolife of Elizabeth Keckly, former slave and eventual dress maker to Mary Todd Lincoln. A first person account; including pictures.

Royal, L.E. 2000, July. “Hip-hop on top: Urban fashion designers rule” *Black Enterprise*. <http://www.blackenterprise.com/2000/07/01/hip-hop-on-top/>

A historical look at the rise of black fashion designers and the success of black fashion designers in the year 2000. A four page article that high school students will find engaging and accessible.

Books

Reed Miller, R. (2007). *Threads of Time, The Fabric of History: Profiles of African-American dressmakers and designers from 1850 to the present*. Toast and Strawberries Press, Washington DC.