

HAWAII'S ALFRED SHAHEEN: FABRIC TO FASHION  
(AN EXHIBITION REVIEW)

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**Abstract**

This article is a review of the retrospective exhibition “Hawai’i’s Alfred Shaheen: Fabric to Fashion” held at the San Jose Museum of Quilts and Textiles (SJQMT) in San Jose, California, May 18-August 8, 2010; and that subsequently traveled to three additional venues. The review discusses both the content, including the historical and aesthetic development of Alfred Shaheen’s pioneering textile and fashion designs, and the visual presentation of selected examples representing the 40-year history of his career in the business between 1948-1988. The exhibition was curated by Linda Boynton Arthur, whose original research and documentation of Shaheen’s output formed the basis of the content of the exhibition, and Deborah Corsini, Curator of the SJQMT. This information and the installation were augmented with personal recollections and examples from the collection of his daughter, Camille Shaheen and son-in-law William Tunberg.

**Key words:** Hawai’ian fashion and textile design; multi-cultural fashion; sarong, pareau

The purpose of an exhibition is to present a visual narrative – to tell a story using objects, artifacts, and visual media – rather than just words. The objects must be able to communicate on a non-verbal level and the exhibition installation plays an important role in furthering that communication and enhancing the story. In addition, the exhibition format allows the viewer to experience a story spatially, through time, and through all the senses. This major retrospective exhibition was at the San Jose Museum of Quilts and Textiles (SJQMT) in San Jose, California

from May 18-August 8, 2010. Curated by Deborah Corsini, from the SJMQT and Dr. Linda Boynton Arthur, from Washington State University, this exhibit surveyed the unique textile and clothing designs produced by Alfred Shaheen of Hawai`i for four decades from 1948 – 1988. *Hawaii's Alfred Shaheen: Fabric to Fashion* told the story of his pioneering innovations and entrepreneurial spirit; of peaceful cultural interaction and blending; of multi-cultural mutual respect and admiration; and of his commercial success in a visual paradise. The textile designs, as carriers of collective history, demonstrated one man's inspiration to try and capture the unique spirit of a place and share it with the world.

If you have ever visited Hawai`i, it takes awhile for your eyes to adjust to the vivid color palette combined with the luxuriant forms and exotic shapes of the native flora and fauna that surround you; the brilliant blues of the water; the ever-changing shades of the sky. The challenge is to see beyond the now familiar cliches that have developed over the past and realize that this is the *reality* of Hawai`i. Those postcard images and "Hawaiian Prints" were not exaggerations, but true depictions of the heightened visual drama that exists on these tiny volcanic islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. This exhibition effectively immersed you in this reality through the use of highly saturated wall color to set off the array of patterns and designs representing Shaheen's output. Three spacious galleries at the San Jose Museum of Quilts and Textiles showcased 130 objects and examples that set Shaheen's work apart from other designers and manufacturers and documented the chronological evolution of his design *oeuvre*. Furthermore, this retrospective documented the pivotal role Shaheen played in establishing the garment industry in Hawai`i which has been brought to light through the pioneering research conducted by Dr. Linda Boynton Arthur over the past 15 years.

Background context is necessary to understand Shaheen and his work. Alfred Shaheen's grandfather originally came from Lebanon to the East Coast of the United States in the nineteenth century. Alfred's father, George, came from Lebanon to join his father and started his own factories for silk, apparel production, embroidery, and seven retail stores. Alfred Shaheen was born in New Jersey in 1922. The family moved its business to California in 1930 and then to Honolulu in 1938, and started a successful business making custom-made special occasion and

wedding dresses. Simultaneously, there was increasing public interest in the mystique of Hawai`i and Polynesia inspired by fantasy-escapist movies featuring tropical settings, such as those starring Dorothy Lamour. These included her first film *The Jungle Princess*, 1936, and *Hurricane*, released in 1937, followed by nine more films in a ten-year span in which she wore her “iconic” sarong interpretations of the Tahitian *pareau*. Known as the “sarong girl” from then on, these films culminated for Lamour with the popular “The Road to...” series with Bob Hope and Bing Crosby. Further interest in Hawai`i developed as a result of the Pacific theatre during World War II (1941-1945) during which American military personnel were stationed in the Islands. Feeding on this fascination with exotic locales and in response to demand, post-war tourism increased with the introduction of trans-Pacific passenger air travel from the mainland which supplemented ship travel and continued to expand throughout the 1940s and 1950s. These developments laid the groundwork for the growing consumer demand for Hawaiian apparel.



**Portrait of Alfred Shaheen  
by William Tunberg, 2002**

Shaheen’s son-in-law, William Tunberg, completed this pencil portrait of Alfred Shaheen at age 80, wearing the adjacent shirt displayed with “Tiki Pareau” print on cotton broadcloth from the 1950s.

From: “Hawaii’s Alfred Shaheen: Fabric to Fashion” Exhibition, May 18-August 8, 2010. Photo courtesy of Camille Shaheen and William Tunberg, 2010



This vivid red wall of the second main gallery entitled 'Black & White & Red Allover' captures the heat of the volcanic geology that created the Hawaiian Islands and provides a dramatic backdrop for the related color palette of Shaheen textiles displayed before it.

From: "Hawaii's Alfred Shaheen: Fabric to Fashion" Exhibition, May 18-August 8, 2010. Photo courtesy of Camille Shaheen and William Tunberg, 2010

After serving in the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II as a fighter pilot, Alfred Shaheen returned to Hawai'i (1945) and worked in the family's custom clothing business. George transferred his business, Shaheen's of Honolulu, to his son Alfred Shaheen, who later started production of his own line, Surf 'n Sand (1948), with four seamstresses trained by his mother. Beyond being familiar with this trade, Shaheen was an aeronautical engineer who had earned a degree in engineering and whose inventive mind could see the potential for creating his own textiles for garments rather than ordering fabric from the mainland manufacturers located on the East Coast. When he realized he that making his own textiles would be critical to the success of his company, Shaheen learned about silk screen printing on his own, and designed his own equipment by 1949. He moved away from using the customary roller-printed textiles with 15 inch repeats to the production of exclusive large-scale designs for aloha shirts and women's wear. His signature silk-screened prints were large, with 24 inch repeats. The garments, inspired by archetypal Hawaiian and Polynesian styles, were updated by incorporating the latest contemporary American and European fashion styles and silhouettes. Their vivid colors and large-scale imagery demonstrate why Alfred Shaheen became a leader in Hawaiian fashion industry.

High quality cotton, silk and rayon fabrics were chosen for Shaheen's prints. This 'vertical integration' ensured the opportunity to establish a unique look and control the output based on in-coming orders. While other manufacturers produced small, allover prints that were referred to as 'hash' prints, Shaheen developed large-scale imagery. These designs focused on beautifully rendered Hawaiian scenes, tropical florals, and designs inspired by traditional Hawaiian kapa cloth and other ethnic artifacts (Arthur, 2008). Shaheen had the appreciation of a skilled craftsman who embraced the machine.

Over the years, Shaheen hired and trained artists to research traditional textiles and native artifacts as sources of inspiration for the new fabric prints they constantly designed. Some of the artists' original gouache print designs were shown in this exhibit and gave insight into the conceptual development of Shaheen's famous textiles. Gouache, an opaque water-based paint,

was the standard industry medium used for designing textiles on paper as the first step before being translated into a silk-screened print on cloth.

Shaheen developed a library of rare books containing the history of original native prints to be adapted to Shaheen textiles. In addition, he often sent his artists traveling to Tahiti, Polynesia, and throughout Asia to find fresh inspiration that could be adapted for textile designs. In *Hawaii's Alfred Shaheen: Fabric to Fashion*, some examples of the preliminary working drawings and sketches were included in this exhibition. These rare documents and artwork effectively illuminated the design process of conceptual development that lead to the finalized textile prints. "Cultural authenticity was paramount," according to Shaheen's daughter, Camille Shaheen-Tunberg, whose collection of Shaheen originals formed the basis of this exhibition. When Shaheen closed his business in 1988, that closure was total. There was no company archive. Camille and her artist husband Bill Tunberg began collecting Shaheen garments and textiles in the 1990s and the collection has steadily grown. Mr. Shaheen was involved in documenting the artifacts as they were collected, up until his death in 2008.

Polynesian style was interpreted by Shaheen and his artists, who studied art of and from the Islands and other cultures as they created textile design. While not included in this exhibition, extant photographs and engravings from the late-19<sup>th</sup> century (1890s) taken in the Marquesa Islands, as well as several paintings executed by French artist Paul Gauguin while living in Tahiti (1891-4), attest to natives wearing wrapped *pareaus* (Tahitian word for wrapped cloths) or sarongs made from textiles with bold motifs created by one color printed on white cloth. These distinctive designs use one color for the background – or "negative" space – while the plain white cloth is left unprinted to depict the positive image of flower forms, particularly the hibiscus, or angular patterning through a process of "resisting" the dye from penetrating into those areas. Perhaps originally based on tattoos or tapa patterns or other native imagery printed on barkcloth, these 19th century textiles are believed to have been imported from China or Europe as there was no indigenous source for cotton fiber. Including some reprints of historic images of these early native textiles in this exhibit would have enriched the sense of history and tradition that Shaheen was continuing. Examples of Shaheen's bold scale one-color silk-screen

prints with white motifs are seen in the vertical panels dramatically hanging from floor to ceiling in several of the gallery installation photographs.



Two dramatic one-color fabric panels flank a Shaheen halter-neckline sundress composed from the early 1950s cotton print entitled “Joss Sticks” which creates a geometric, almost plaid effect. The boy’s cotton shirt is from “Pau Lani Pareau” fabric from the same time period.

All of Shaheen’s textile designs carried names that referred to the source of their imagery or cultural heritage.

From: “Hawaii’s Alfred Shaheen: Fabric to Fashion” Exhibition, May 18 to August 8, 2010. Photo courtesy of Camille Shaheen and William Tunberg, 2010



Note the uniform black color of the dress forms that produced a consistent armature for the three-dimensional garments. This was an excellent installation strategy to reduce visual competition with the textile prints and to create continuity.

From: "Hawaii's Alfred Shaheen: Fabric to Fashion" Exhibition, May 18 to August 8, 2010. Photo courtesy of Camille Shaheen and William Tunberg, 2010

Beautifully cut and fitted sundresses also became a hallmark of the Shaheen label in the 1950s. These styles followed the fashionable silhouette that had evolved from French Haute Couture designer Christian Dior's 1947 "New Look". This style employed the classic "hour glass" fitted bodice with cinched waistline and bust line emphasis contrasted with a full skirt, much more figure-defining than the wrapped sarong styles. The vast experience Shaheen's family had accumulated with specialty and custom evening dresses had honed the superb



tailoring skills and craftsmanship required to create these shapely versions. Shaheen's signature "halter neckline" may have evolved from a traditional variation of wearing the *pareau*, in which a single rectangle of cloth is wrapped around the body from the center back with the top two corners brought to the front and crossed, then brought upwards, and then tied at the back of the neck to form a loose "short dress". However, the fitted Shaheen interpretation was engineered to enhance the bust line, which led to its widespread success. The exhibition featured several examples of this style in a variety of prints.



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There were many other print styles that Shaheen developed as well. When he began the company in 1948, his initial emphasis was on men's Aloha shirts. An entire wall of the first main gallery which was entitled "Tropical Paradise" dramatically presented 40 examples of prints on cotton or rayon shirts from the 1940s and 1950s, each one with a specific name. This 'flat' presentation allowed for immediate visual comparison between the variety of early textile design motifs produced by Shaheen and enabled the viewer to assimilate the imaginative creativity involved in this array.



From: "Hawaii's Alfred Shaheen: Fabric to Fashion" Exhibition, May 18 to August 8, 2010. Photo courtesy of Camille Shaheen and William Tunberg, 2010.

Shaheen was also known for being one of the first to create "fusion fashion" in which Western clothing styles were combined with traditional ethnic elements, such as Chinese style 'frog' buttons or a traditional Hawaiian *mu'u mu'u* made up using an East Indian-inspired textile print: (for more on this topic, see the article by Bradley in this volume). As the decades wore on, he incorporated more of the Far Eastern styles, including tunics and pants inspired by the native dress of Indonesia, Thailand and Viet Nam. Middle Eastern and East Indian designs also inspired

some textile prints in the 1960s and 1970s, harking back to his family roots. Wherever he saw beauty and recognized its potential, he developed those ideas into desirable products.

Technical innovation was merged with contemporary interpretations by Shaheen's company. He and textile chemist Dr. Lutz, whom he hired to perfect his dyes, developed over 100 metallic printing inks that did not stiffen or rub off the cloth, as was typical of other metallic textile prints of that time. "They were lightfast, chlorine- and saltwater-resistant, and could withstand the rigors of the tropics" (Arthur, 2010). Many examples of these were featured on the Asian-inspired garments shown in the third gallery entitled "East Meets West", especially the tunic-with-pants sets from the 1950s and 1960s. He was renowned for his use of border prints and "engineered designs" that could be used in multiple orientations for garments.



From: "Hawaii's Alfred Shaheen: Fabric to Fashion" Exhibition, May 18 to August 8, 2010. Photo courtesy of Camille Shaheen and William Tunberg, 2010

This overview of the “East Meets West” gallery displayed a range of Shaheen textiles and fashion garments that reflect his increasingly multi-cultural influences. The man’s Aloha shirt on the left, entitled “Japanese Postcards”, is from the early 1950s when Japan was a major source of textiles and also strongly influenced Hawaiian-produced textiles; the long Angel mu’u mu’u next to it is entitled “Geisha 02”; the silk dress with belt from the early 1960s is entitled “Indian Paisley” and features a draped-sari effect; next to that piece is the “Indian Border” design printed on polyester for an early 1970s pants outfit with long overdress and “Indian 01” belted acrylic crepe dress; the long dress with jacket is entitled “Thai Ensemble” (early 1970s) while to its left is “Asian Blossoms”, a long dress with black obi belt from the early 1980s, clearly inspired by Japanese traditions.

Each gallery in the Museum documented another step in this evolution, in terms of both design and business developments. By 1958 Shaheen’s fabrics were carried by major department stores across the country and he began to open his own chain of retail stores in Hawai’i, eventually numbering twelve. The final gallery included some props to suggest a mock-up of his “East Meets West” boutiques that were located within major department stores (140 shops by 1969) and his “Ports O’ Call” boutiques for specialty stores. “By the late 1950s, Alfred Shaheen was the largest Hawaiian clothing manufacturer, employed more than 400 people in his factory in Hawai’i, sold Shaheen fabrics and clothing worldwide and in his own chain of retail stores in Hawai’i, and the Hawaiian garment industry’s sales had grown from \$1 million in 1947 to \$15 million annually” (Arthur, 2008). His business genius continued to expand by incorporating lines of “findings” including buttons and fastenings, and accessories such as belts (produced in his Hong Kong factory beginning in 1960), costume jewelry (1970), and perfume and cologne (1975). He was a “brand” before “branding” became the business catch-word of today.



Four tunic-with-pants ensembles reflect Shaheen's multi-cultural direction in the 1960s. As globalization and cultural exchange accelerated, his textile and garment designs were increasingly inspired by East Asian dress traditions, including China, Thailand, and Viet Nam among others. His exclusive color-fast, permanent metallic pigments were perfected by this time and used lavishly on these cotton blend prints to capture the exotic elegance of Far- and Middle-Eastern brocades.

From: "Hawaii's Alfred Shaheen: Fabric to Fashion" Exhibition, May 18 to August 8, 2010. Photo courtesy of Camille Shaheen and William Tunberg, 2010

In the photo below, taken at the exhibition, Several ‘props’ in this section of the third gallery were utilized to suggest the Alfred Shaheen “East Meets West” boutiques – literally ‘stores within a store’ – that he conceptualized. These boutiques were used to sell his fashions in major department stores and they proliferated throughout the United States during the mid- to late-1960s. This pioneering marketing strategy provided him with name recognition within larger department and specialty stores on the mainland as well as throughout Hawai`i. The range of garments seen here depict inspiration from Thailand, Japan, Arabia, and India.



From: “Hawaii’s Alfred Shaheen: Fabric to Fashion” Exhibition, May 18 to August 8, 2010. Photo courtesy of Camille Shaheen and William Tunberg, 2010

*Hawaii's Alfred Shaheen: Fabric to Fashion* was an exhibition that clearly marked the important intersection of art/design/industry/culture based on one man's respect for cultural heritage and appreciation of world-wide aesthetics. For his contributions to the culture and economy of Hawai'i, Alfred Shaheen was awarded Hawai'i's *Ka 'Ahu No'eau Lifetime Achievement Award* in 2001; and in 2006 was recognized as one of the 150 most important influences on the state of Hawai'i from 1856 through 2006 by the *Honolulu Advertiser* newspaper. At the entrance to *Hawaii's Alfred Shaheen: Fabric to Fashion* stood a large portrait of Alfred Shaheen done when he was 80. This beautifully rendered portrait was done in fine pencil work, by his son-in-law artist William Tunberg in 2002; the portrait graced the entrance to the museum galleries and acknowledged Alfred Shaheen as the force behind this phenomenal business.

*Hawaii's Alfred Shaheen: Fabric to Fashion* at the San Jose Museum of Quilts and Textiles reflects the role of textiles in visually documenting and communicating the essence of *place* and its evolution, through the unique combination of natural phenomenon and multi-cultural influences. The cross-fertilization seen in Shaheen's designs predicted the global world in which we now live where cultural fusion continually re-invents and creates new forms of visual expression.

A traditional ceremonial blessing and Hawaiian dance presentation was incorporated into the Opening Reception event for this exhibition, further enhancing the Aloha spirit that pervaded the Museum. The joy of living in this paradise of vibrant color, lush images and warm human exchange was effectively captured and communicated in this stunning exhibition honoring Alfred Shaheen's legacy. Following its<sup>2</sup> opening at the San Jose Museum of Quilts and Textiles, the exhibit traveled to other venues. It was at the Arab American National Museum, Dearborn, Michigan,—and was on exhibit from September 30, 2010-March 13, 2011, then travelled to Washington State University, Pullman, Washington where it opened April 7, 2011—and closed July 10, 2011. *Hawaii's Alfred Shaheen: Fabric to Fashion* ends its run at the Maui Arts & Cultural Center, Maui, Hawai'i from September 3-October 22, 2011.

**Related Publications:**

Arthur, L. (2000). *Aloha Attire: Hawaiian Dress in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, Atglen, PA: Schiffer.

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**About the author:** Jo Ann C. Stabb is a designer, author and lecturer specializing in 20th century fashion and wearable art. She received her Master of Arts in costume/fashion design from the University of California Los Angeles and served as a Sr. Lecturer in Design at the University of California Davis from 1968-2002. She has published numerous articles, exhibited her designs in and also curated exhibitions, lectured at national and international venues for the past 40 years. She was Executive Producer of the video series "Wearable Art from California" (1985-86) which was distributed through the American Craft Council and the United States Information Agency.