



A sampling of vintage Shaheen's of Honolulu women's aloha wear to be displayed at a Bishop Museum exhibit honoring the designer. OPPOSITE PAGE: Alfred Shaheen

FASHION FORWARD

Pioneering Hawai'i garment manufacturer Alfred Shaheen took aloha wear into the realm of global high fashion while growing its international every-person appeal. A new Bishop Museum exhibit honors his legacy.

BY CHERYL CHEE TSUTSUMI

WHEN CAMILLE SHAHEEN-Tunberg started working in her father's garment factory at age 10, one of her first tasks was dusting spools of thread.

"I remember going into a big room where there was thread everywhere, on shelves and in bins," recalls Shaheen-Tunberg, of her trailblazing Hawai'i textile industrialist father, Alfred Shaheen. "They were arranged by color. All kinds of colors. It was like walking into a rainbow."

The late Alfred Shaheen has been called the father of the modern Hawai'i garment industry as well as a pioneer of the aloha shirt. Prior to the 1948 opening of his clothing manufacturing business, Shaheen's of Honolulu, Island ready-to-wear was largely a hodgepodge of unimaginative styles and designs sold at mom-and-pop shops.

Shaheen's influence on the industry from the moment he opened shop was pure game changer, employing quality fabrics of the era (silk, cotton, rayon), professional graphic artists and modern design to raise aloha wear to the realm of high fashion—first in Hawai'i, then globally. Against all business advice of the

era, he based the entirety of his garment-making business in Hawai'i, employing hundreds of residents in his factory and retail stores. Radical decisions all, which would influence Hawai'i fashion for decades to come.

"HI Fashion: The Legacy of Alfred Shaheen," a three-month Bishop Museum exhibition opening on Nov. 10, aims to honor Shaheen, his legacy and his extraordinary body of work. Anchoring the exhibition will be more than 200 pieces from the personal collection of Camille Shaheen-Tunberg and her husband, William Tunberg, including aloha shirts, sarongs, sundresses, fabrics and original textile art. The exhibit will also feature vintage photographs and Shaheen's of Honolulu advertisements, hangtags, buttons, jewelry, shoes and more.

Many of the items in her collection are purchased after finding them on online auction websites or the collections of private dealers. Occasionally, someone will donate a piece to the collection.

"My father was never a collector, and he didn't understand the significance of his work until his later years," Shaheen-

Tunberg says. "He was so prolific! Every time I turn around, I see another print, a different style."

At the start of its manufacturing operations in the late 1940s, Shaheen's of Honolulu imported its fabrics from the U.S. mainland. However, with unreliable shipments and the necessity of bulk purchasing prints that might not sell, Shaheen quickly realized success would hinge on producing his own textiles.

Shaheen opened his first silk-screen printing plant, Surf 'n Sand Hand Prints, in 1952, in a Quonset hut near Honolulu International Airport. Having studied math, physics and aeronautical engineering in college, he designed and built the plant's equipment with parts personally scavenged from junkyards. By the time Hawai'i became a state in 1959, Shaheen was the biggest garment manufacturer in the Islands.

At the peak of its operations in the mid-1960s, Shaheen's of Honolulu employed more than 400 people at its factory, showroom, office complex and seven shops on O'ahu, Maui and the Big Island. Shaheen's aloha wear was also available at upscale

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looked as though they'd been plucked from a garden. His use of dyes that did not discolor when exposed to light, and implementation of chlorine- and saltwater-resistant metallic colors were innovative at the time.

"My father and his close friend and head dye chemist, Dr. Edmund Lutz, created more than 100 metallic colors, including gold, silver, sapphire, ruby and emerald," Shaheen-Tunberg says. "Today we take metallic dyes for granted, but in the early 1950s they were major achievements."

A vocal member of his design team and expert marketer, Shaheen was also influential in globalizing the popularity of the humble aloha shirt. The company's innovative aloha-shirt designs were worn by celebrities ranging from President Harry Truman to John Wayne. Elvis Presley, a frequent visitor to the Islands, sported a bright red-and-white floral Shaheen aloha shirt on the cover of the soundtrack album of his 1961 film, *Blue Hawaii*.

Shaheen kept his manufacturing operation Honolulu-based for more than 40 years, until 1988, when he shuttered the company and retired. He passed away in December 2008 at age 86.

The second-eldest of Alfred Shaheen's six children, Camille Shaheen-Tunberg, holds the rights to her father's textile designs and, in recent years, has licensed some of them to Hawai'i-based aloha-wear manufacturer Reyn Spooner. The company has, in turn, reinterpreted three to six Shaheen designs annually for its contemporary aloha-shirt collection.

"At first, the patterns they produced were very true to the originals," Shaheen-Tunberg says. "Recently, they've been focusing on specific elements from Shaheen prints for new shirt designs. Each Shaheen print can inspire countless new prints, because they're made up of so many intriguing vignettes."

Shaheen-Tunberg, who is helping curate the Bishop Museum tribute exhibit, is understandably proud of her father's contributions to modern aloha wear and continued influence almost a quarter century after ending his own business.

"I believe my father's work still influences designers," she says. "He started the movement of using cultural imagery in textiles and apparel. And that continues to grow in importance as an expressive form of wearable art." 🌺



Original Shaheen's of Honolulu men's aloha shirts. Alfred Shaheen's aloha wear employed iconographic design elements from around the world, not just Hawai'i.