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## "Fashion is Freedom": Milwaukee Art Museum's '50 Years of Ebony Fashion'

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## Milwaukee Art Museum's '50 Years of Ebony Fashion'

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"Inspiring Beauty: 50 Years of Ebony Fashion Fair," opening at the Milwaukee Art Museum (MAM) on Thursday, Feb. 5, offers a spectacular viewing of *haute couture* ensembles from the 1960s through the present while inviting critical reflection on the struggles of African Americans for access to the world of fashion design. On display will be nearly 100 original objects, including accessories and ensembles, from leading European and American designers. Photographs and videos accompany. The ensembles include creations by prominent European designers Laura Biagiotti, Christian Dior and Pierre Cardin; the Dominican Republic's Oscar de la Renta; Japan's Issey Miyake; Turkey's Balizza; and Americans Bill Blass, Halston, Fabrice Simon and Bob Mackie.

The elegant ensembles chosen for this exhibition were selected from a collection of originals that appeared in the Ebony Fashion Fairs over five decades. Ebony Fashion Fair began in 1958 as a project of the John H. and Eunice W. Johnson family, publishers of America's flagship black magazines, *Ebony* and *Jet*. The aim of the Ebony Fair, last seen in 2009, exemplified the Johnsons' commitment to visually show and celebrate the best of black life. At its peak, the Fair enabled African Americans in 187 cities across the U.S., Canada and the Caribbean to celebrate their identity while enjoying first-hand access to international fashion. It gave black women and men access to the same fashion creations as others enjoyed. This was especially important at a time when even department stores were not necessarily free of discrimination. Eunice is said to have spent more than \$1 million for each year's purchases. She was known in the industry for her shrewd bargaining skills.

The Fair served as a model of African American success in business. At the same time, it helped to advance civil rights. Aspiring young black models competed to present the *haute couture* fashion at the Fair. For them, and young black designers, the Fair offered inspiration and opportunities to advance their careers. Every Fair supported local charity events. Collectively, the Fairs provided millions to support black charitable interests including the United Negro College Fund.

Sande Robinson, MAM board member and former head of the Marquette Educational Opportunities Program, recalls attending these events both in Cleveland and in Milwaukee. "The Ebony Fair was a special social event for middle- and upper-middle-class black people to dress up in their finest, have fun and feel good about themselves," she says. "Recalling the Ebony Fair in the exhibition is important for the new generation of young blacks today as it inspires hope in the possibilities for success and resistance to racial discrimination."

James Hall, past president of NAACP Milwaukee Chapter, also remembers warmly his own visits to the Fashion Fairs. "For black people who, in the half century preceding the start of the Fashion Fair, had embraced civil rights and social uplift, the Fashion Fair had a similar effect regarding style and beauty as did the James Brown song, 'Say It Loud—I'm black and I'm Proud,'" he says.

Guest curator Camille Morgan finds "Inspiring Beauty" a "truly American story told through the democratizing power of fashion. Through the incredible costumes in the exhibition, you experience the liberation that style and beauty brings as opposed to the anxiety that often permeates the [fashion] industry. For 50 years, the Ebony Fashion Fair empowered women of all colors, shapes, sizes and sensibilities to explore their own ideas of what it means to be valued even if that wasn't the message they were getting from their culture or society. Here, fashion is freedom."

The Johnson family's efforts are part of a move worldwide to recognize the contributions of black women to social change. As late as 1946, Vogue School of Modeling turned away a black model. By 1974, black supermodel Beverly Johnson was featured on the cover of American *Vogue*. And in 1979, a Black Fashion Museum opened at the Smithsonian in Washington, D. C.

Like MAM's 2013 exhibit, "30 Americans," "Inspiring Beauty" draws attention to significant black participation in our shared culture. Both show that the appreciation of beauty and artistic creativity transcends ethnic or racial differences. As positive steps toward recognition of African American contributions to our culture, such exhibitions celebrate the importance of African American presence in our city. Perhaps MAM's efforts might also encourage other Milwaukee social and cultural institutions to explore positive ways to reduce the racial tensions that emerge in a city that holds the unholy distinction of being the most segregated in the nation.

"Inspiring Beauty: 50 Years of Ebony Fashion Fair" represents the joint efforts of the Chicago History Museum, Mount Mary University and MAM. It runs through May 3. For more information, visit [mam.org/inspiringbeauty/](http://mam.org/inspiringbeauty/) (<http://mam.org/inspiring-beauty/>).