

OBITUARIES

ALFRED SHAHEEN, 1922-2008

Designer of aloha shirts transformed Hawaiian industry

CLAIRE NOLAND

Alfred Shaheen, a textile manufacturer who revolutionized the garment industry in postwar Hawaii by designing, printing and producing aloha shirts and other ready-to-wear items under one roof, has died. He was 86.

Shaheen died Dec. 22 of complications from diabetes in Torrance, where he had lived for the last five years, his daughter Camille Shaheen-Tunberg said.

After World War II, many servicemen and servicewomen returned to the United States from Asia and the Pacific islands with aloha shirts that had been made in Hawaii since the 1930s. Tourists began flocking to Hawaii in the 1950s as faster airplanes allowed for easier travel and the former U.S. territory became a state in 1959.

The tropical-print shirts for men and sundresses for women became standard and sometimes tacky souvenirs for travelers, but Shaheen raised the garments to the level of high fashion with artistic prints, high-grade materials and quality construction.

Even Elvis Presley wore a Shaheen-designed red aloha shirt featured on the album cover for the "Blue Hawaii" soundtrack in 1961.

Born into a family established in the textile business, Shaheen maintained high standards by controlling the process from start to finish at the factory he built in Honolulu.

He hired professional artists and silk-screened their designs on silk, rayon and cotton fabrics he imported to Hawaii. Then his seamstresses cut and pieced together garments that were sold at his own shops and other retail outlets in Hawaii or exported to the mainland and around the world.

"He was a genius," Dale Hope, art director for the Honolulu-based Kahala shirt maker and author of "The Aloha Shirt: Spirit of the Islands," told The Times. "He knew more

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Alfred Shaheen's designs

More photos of Alfred Shaheen's prints and vintage images from his Honolulu factory can be found online.

about the inner workings of all of the elements of printing, the garment business and wholesaling and retailing and distribution. He was really a bright, sharp and smart man."

Linda Arthur, a professor of textiles and clothing at Washington State University who has written extensively about the Hawaiian fashion industry, said that "before Shaheen came along, there was no Hawaii garment industry. There were mom and pop stores but no real modern industry."

Shaheen was born Jan. 31, 1922, in New Jersey, where his father and grandfather owned textile mills and clothing stores. He moved to Compton with his family when his father decided to relocate. The elder Shaheen would travel to Guam to buy silk for the family's custom women's wear line, and after falling in love with Hawaii on stopovers, he moved the family again, this time to Honolulu in 1938.

Shaheen returned to California the next year to attend Whittier College, where he studied math and engineering and starred on the football team. After graduating in 1943, he joined the U.S. Army Air Forces and became a fighter pilot in Europe during World War II.

His cousin, another soldier, had been engaged to a woman named Amelia Ash in Olean, N.Y., but he died in the war. After the war, Shaheen wanted to meet the woman his cousin had told him about, so he went to meet her and wound up marrying her and bringing her back to Honolulu.

His parents operated a custom dress shop there, making bridal gowns and prom dresses from formal fabrics such as silks, chiffons and lace. But

Shaheen wanted to branch out into ready-to-wear fashion.

He struck out on his own in 1948, opening Shaheen's of Honolulu with four seamstresses his mother had trained. In those days of relative isolation, clothing manufacturers in Hawaii had to store a year's worth of fabric to guard against the vagaries of shipping delays, strikes and other unforeseen factors. And they had to settle for whatever fabric the textile mill sent them.

Using equipment he built himself, Shaheen started a silk-screen printing plant in a rented Quonset hut in 1952. He put artists on salary to design patterns inspired by Polynesian and Asian cultures. Soon the company was printing more than 60,000 yards of fabric per month. Some of that fabric was used to make garments, and some was distributed in bolts to other businesses.

In 1956, to meet increasing demand, Shaheen expanded to a new, state-of-the-art factory that sprawled over 23,000 square feet. The company's focus remained on good design.

"I wanted a certain look that was different from everyone else's," Shaheen said in an interview for Hope's book. "I would not do hash prints or chop suey prints. I avoided bright or garish colors."

Most of the patterns featured three to five colors that laborers applied to silk screens by hand, saturating the fabric. Artists in the Shaheen studio had more than 1,000 dye colors to choose from, including innovative metallic shades, and they consulted rare books, libraries and museum collections. Sometimes Shaheen sent the designers on field trips to Tahiti and other exotic locales to soak up the culture for future work.

By 1959, according to company history, Shaheen employed 400 workers and grossed more than \$4 million annually, dominating the local industry. The Hawaii garment industry overall had grown to roughly \$15 million in sales from less than \$1 million in 1947, according to the Honolulu Advertiser.

Shaheen sold men's shirts



www.alfredshaheen.com

TEXTILE PIONEER

Alfred Shaheen, shown in a Samoan Tapa, sold Polynesian and Asian-inspired men's shirts and shorts and women's dresses and sarongs in his seven-store chain, as well as to other retailers in Hawaii, on the mainland and around the world.



Beyond Words Publishing Inc.

Elvis Presley helped popularize the aloha shirt when he posed for the album cover of the 1961 "Blue Hawaii" soundtrack in this Shaheen print.

and shorts and women's dresses and sarongs in his own seven-store chain as well as to other retailers in the islands, on the mainland and across the

world. Bullock's and the Broadway (both since closed) and other upscale department stores on the mainland carried the clothing, and some stores

had special "East Meets West" boutiques dedicated to Shaheen's fashions.

Shaheen retired in 1988 and shut down the factory. He maintained homes in Honolulu and Los Angeles before relocating permanently to Torrance.

In addition to his daughter Camille, of Venice, he is survived by three other daughters, Susan Mulkern of Oahu, Cynthia Rose of Maui and Marianne Kishiyama of Culver City; a son, Alfred Shaheen II of La Cañada Flintridge; five grandchildren; two great-grandchildren; and a sister, Joyce Bowman. His first marriage ended in divorce, as did a second.

Although the company is defunct, vintage Shaheen shirts can sell for \$1,000 or more, said David Bailey of Bailey's Antiques and Aloha Shirts in Honolulu, a well-known emporium that stocks about 15,000 aloha shirts.

As Arthur, the textile professor explained, a Shaheen garment "is like a piece of moving art."

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