



The Ebony Fashion Fair made headlines when it went on the road to as many as 200 cities, carrying style and earning money for charities.

# The Ebony Fashion Fair

For 50 years, this show brought high style to new audiences **BY CLAIRE SHAEFFER**

A fashion extravaganza for 50 years, the Ebony Fashion Fair (EFF) was in a class by itself. Called the world's largest traveling fashion show, it began in 1958 with four models, shows in 10 cities, and audiences of a few hundred.

The show, an immediate success, showed Black America the latest in high fashion, showcasing black models and designers. It grew to include as many as 200 cities with 12 models, including two men, 200 outfits, and thousands in attendance. It set many records—nearly 5,000 individual shows, 180 nonprofit sponsors, and it raised more than \$55 million in scholarships.

EFF reflected publishing cofounder Eunice Johnson's focus on fashion and education. EFF was completely underwritten by Johnson Publishing Company. The tickets included a subscription to the publisher's *Ebony* or *Jet* magazines, and a 50 percent donation to the event's sponsoring nonprofit group. When the shows ended in 2009, many of the sponsoring organizations were devastated because it had been the major fund-raiser for them.

It introduced audiences to the latest fashion trends from the finest European couture houses, such as Yves Saint Laurent, Givenchy, Valentino, Christian Dior, and Emanuel Ungaro, as well as to the work of such African-American designers as Stephen Burrows, B. Michael, Henry Jackson, Patrick Kelly, and

Willi Smith. It launched modeling and television careers for Pat Cleveland, Terri Springer, Shayla Simpson, Richard Roundtree, and Janet Langhart Cohen.

In the early years, no aspect of producing the shows was easy for the African-American staff. The landmark Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, but the South was still segregated. Securing housing and meals for the traveling show and its staff was difficult, at best.

Attending EFF was an unforgettable experience. Eunice Johnson had an eye for timeless fashions. According to her daughter, Linda Johnson Rice, Eunice wanted African-American women to feel beautiful. EFF included showstopping looks that celebrated the body. Rudi Gernreich's thong of 1975 and Paco Rabanne's hot pants were avant-garde masterpieces that remain iconic.

An extraordinary fashion exhibition of these clothes, put together by the Chicago History Museum, runs through January 5, 2014. The catalog, *Inspiring Beauty: 50 Years of Ebony Fashion Fair*, can be purchased for \$29.95 from ShopChicagoHistory.com.

*Claire Shaeffer travels the world to study fine clothing, its history, and its construction. Special thanks to the Chicago History Museum and curator Joy Bivins.*



## Emanuel Ungaro (France)

**Bridal gown, haute couture, fall/winter 1996-97**

The bodice on this beautiful wedding gown is simply beaded with pearls and small beads to outline and enhance the lace design and the embroidered floral pattern. The arrangement of the floral motifs on the skirt front is particularly attractive.

## B. Michael (United States)

**Woman's evening dress, custom design, spring/summer 2007**

B. Michael worked for Oscar de la Renta and Louis Feraud before launching his first couture collection in 1999. Fabricated in silk faille, this stunning custom design features 14 different colors, a variety of unusual seamlines, and a bright yellow lining.



Photos: (p. 50, p. 52, bottom; p. 53, left) Jessica Harvey, Chicago History Museum; all others, John Alderson, Chicago History Museum



**Patrick Kelly**  
(United States)

**"I Love Fashion Scandal"**  
evening dress, special order,  
fall/winter 1986

The slim, black wool dress by Patrick Kelly is embellished with hundreds of colorful buttons. They form a whimsical face and a sassy message designed to express the theme of the Ebony Fashion Fair.



**Oscar de la Renta**  
(United States)

**Evening gown and coat, ready-to-wear,**  
fall/winter 2002–03

This evening ensemble features embroidery and many small beads sewn with a variety of stitches and thread colors to create an interesting pattern. Some beads have four-thread stitches, some two, and some have a small bead at the center (above left).



**Bill Blass** (United States)

**Day suit and stole, ready-to-wear,**  
fall/winter 1997–98

Bill Blass mixed scale and pattern in this day suit and topped it with a houndstooth wool check on a fur-trimmed stole.

**Tilmann Grawe** (France)

**Cocktail dress, haute couture,**  
fall/winter 2003–04

Tilmann Grawe worked for Louis Féraud and Paco Rabanne, then blended prêt-à-porter with haute couture for his own collection. His unique designs are for a sophisticated clientele. This silk taffeta dress's skirt encases very lightweight millinery horsehair tubes, and the midriff is made of flattened woven tubing for a cummerbund effect. Each tube is finished with a large amber-colored bead.



## Jean Patou by Christian Lacroix (France)

**Cocktail ensemble, haute  
couture, fall/winter 1986–87**

This delightful draped design from Jean Patou features a large muff. Embroidered at the edges, the ruffles were gathered then shaped into roses to add the volume.



## EUNICE WALKER JOHNSON

*Inspiring Beauty: 50 Years of Ebony Fashion Fair* is the story of the vision and innovation of Eunice Johnson, a founder, with her husband, of Johnson Publishing Company and publisher of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines.

Eunice Walker Johnson was one of the 20th century's most important fashionistas. This fashion pioneer changed the lives of thousands of African Americans. Some were models, make-up artists, and designers. A few were actors, but most were ordinary Americans inspired by her vision of fashion.

Eunice Johnson was the daughter of a prominent physician in Selma, Alabama. She grew up in the segregated South, where black women could not shop at most stores in the white community; if they could, they were not permitted try on garments before buying them, and all their purchases were final.

Eunice's mother taught education and art at Selma University, a school for African-Americans, founded by Eunice's grandfather.

After graduating from Talladega College with a degree in sociology and a minor in art, Eunice moved to Chicago and earned a master's degree at Loyola University where she met her future husband, John H. Johnson. He had moved to Chicago as a teenager because his community had no schools for African-American children after the eighth grade. The two were married in 1940.

Eunice left her job as a social worker in 1945 to join her husband in launching *Ebony*, a magazine similar to *Life*. It focused on African-American lifestyle, culture, and successes. In 1958, a friend in New Orleans asked the Johnsons to produce a charity fashion show for a local hospital. And so began what would become known as the world's largest traveling fashion show.

The creative force behind the *Ebony* Fashion Fair, Eunice Johnson had the style, elegance, and sophistication to make it successful.