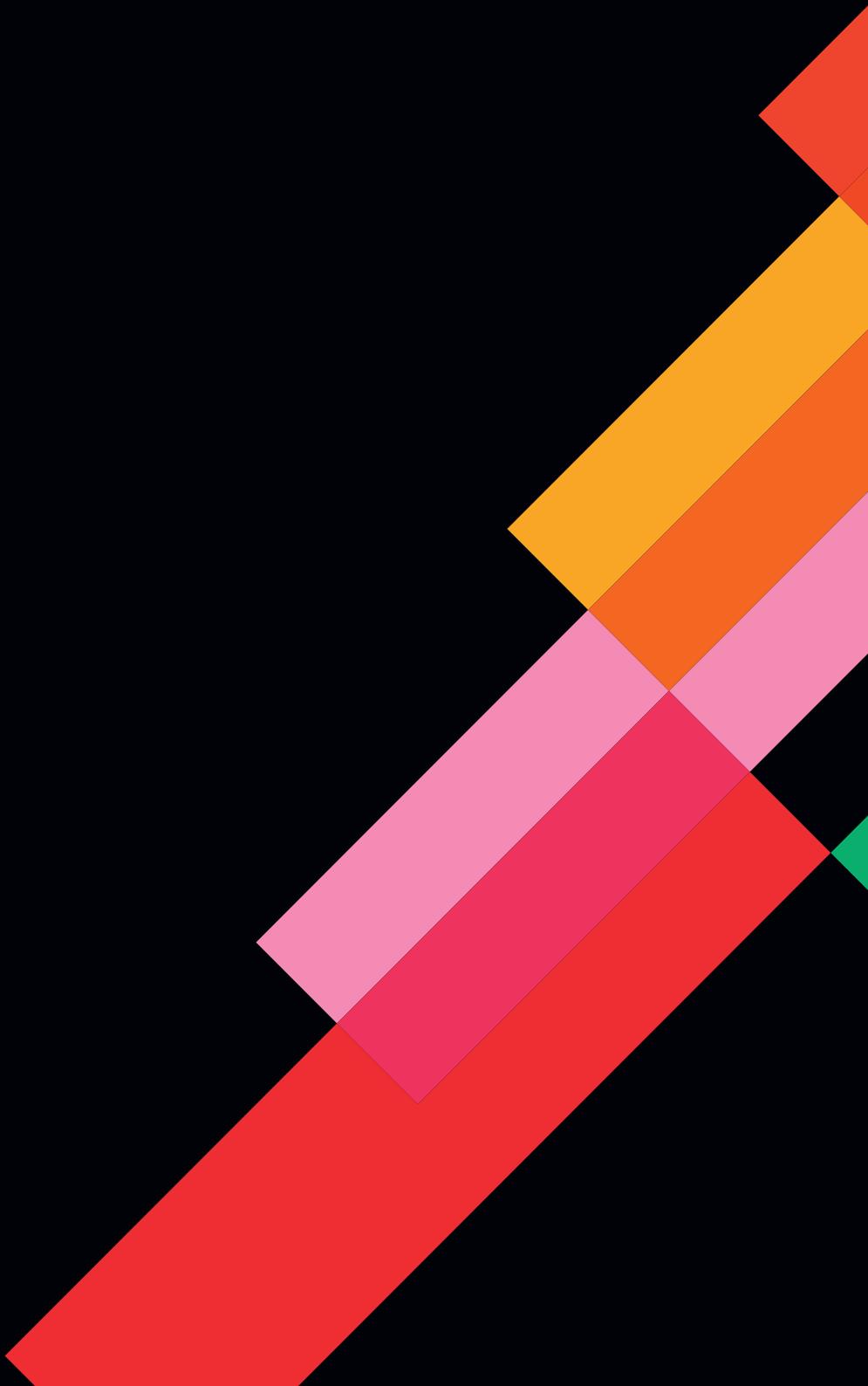
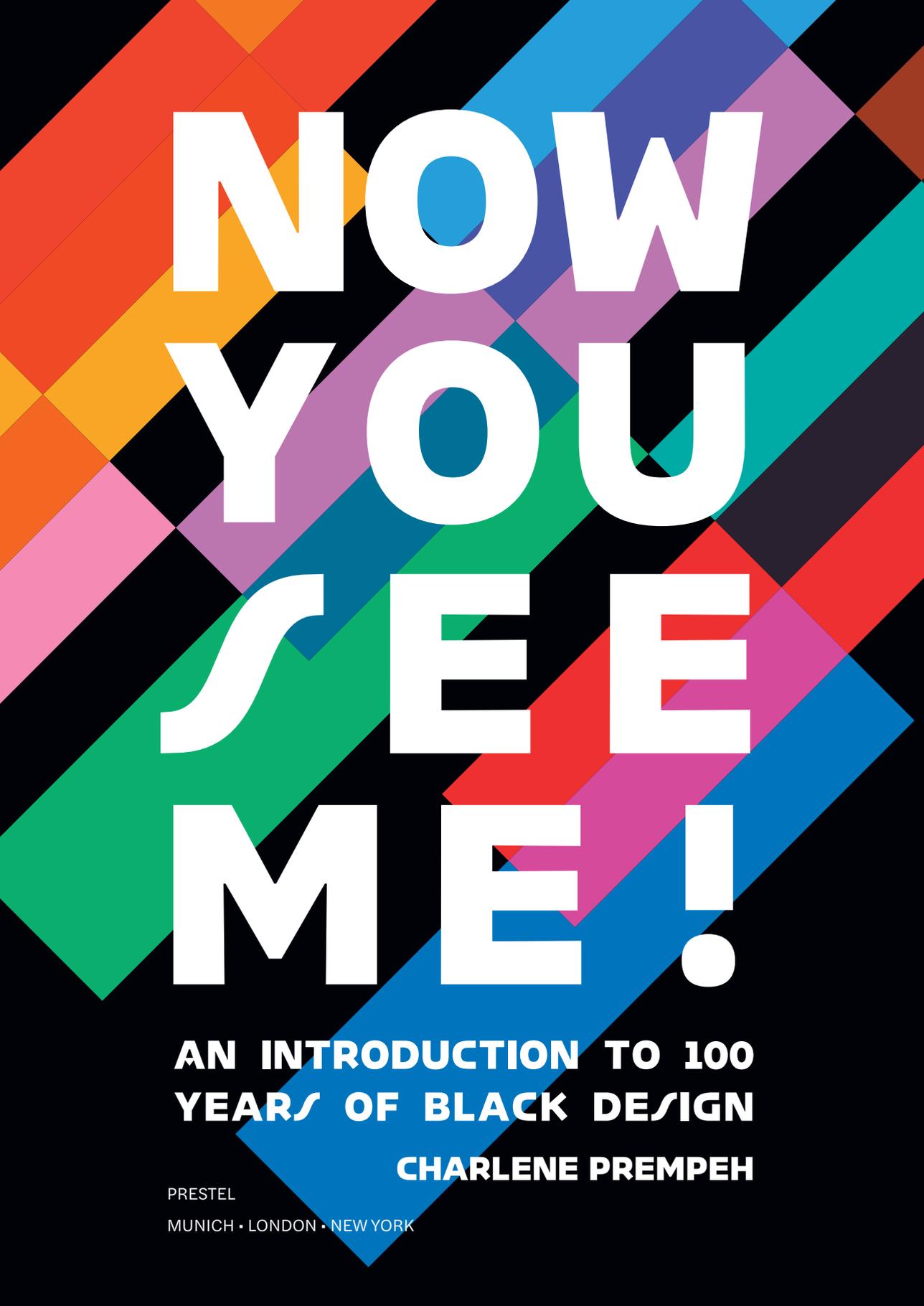




**NOW  
YOU  
SEE  
ME!**





**NOW  
YOU  
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ME!**

**AN INTRODUCTION TO 100  
YEARS OF BLACK DESIGN**

**CHARLENE PREMPEH**

PRESTEL

MUNICH • LONDON • NEW YORK

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# NOW YOU SEE ME

## INTRODUCTION

WORDS BY  
CHARLENE PREMPEH

I founded the agency arm of A Vibe Called Tech in the summer of 2020 amidst the collective chaos of a pandemic and a reckoning on the treatment of Black Lives sparked by the death of George Floyd that May. The original intent of the agency was to celebrate Black creativity. It has since evolved to include all marginalized communities under a collaborative ethos that necessitates brainstorming sessions with partners and friends across media, art, and design. It was in one such meeting that I was first introduced to Ann Lowe. We were working on a brief for the North Face X Gucci collection and wanted to connect the explorer aesthetic to stories of past Black pioneers. Chrystal Genesis, founder of culture podcast Stance, and Lewis Gilbert, creative director at A Vibe Called Tech, were exuberantly flinging names around on a Zoom call when Genesis asked, “What about Ann Lowe? The woman who designed Jackie Kennedy’s wedding dress?” I am not a Jackie Kennedy obsessive but given the level of attention that has been paid to her every outfit, I felt like I should know the name. “How come I’ve never heard of her?” spilled from my mouth before I had time to scoop it back in. A pause, then ironic laughter followed by a response delivered in chorus: “Why do you think?”

For decades, Black designers have been sheathed in an invisible cloak. The absence of prestige and recognition afforded to Black figures in this space has shapeshifted as the formality of segregation and colonial rule has given way to more subtle forms of gatekeeping and erasure. With unprecedented levels of attention being paid to diversity in creative fields, debates on the need for representation have expanded—and finally burst—to unveil a new, more vibrant discussion about economic sustainability for Black designers, access to design industries, and support for emerging talent.

This appetite for evolution is noticeably strong in the fields of fashion, architecture, and graphic design. All three boast a rich history of Black makers, and there is mounting urgency for that legacy to be honored, as well as for today's Black designers to be given the attention and respect they deserve. Transforming the lens through which Black designers of past and present are viewed involves asking crucial questions about creative freedom, the power dynamics of the design world, and what it means to create in a field where Black is perceived as an aesthetic positioning.

Though what I am alluding to is a certain proclivity for the Black designer to be boxed in, I am also intrigued by the creative dexterity that comes from a lineage of making that has existed either literally and/or culturally on the fringes of mainstream white society. It raises larger, more philosophical debates about the distinction between self-expression and circumstance, about creative autonomy and societal structure, and ultimately an inquiry of what it means to create when your Blackness is inescapable.

During the past century there have been symbolic developments for Black people globally. With the signing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, African Americans could no longer be legally segregated. Across the Atlantic, Ghana became the first sub-Saharan country to gain independence from the British Empire in 1957, sparking a tsunami of independence movements across the continent. More recently, the global Black Lives Matter protests forced industry and the wider public to consider the ways in which our society remains racist. While none of these events immediately resolved the layered prejudices that have been systematically inflicted upon the Black community for generations, overall, they signify a moving tide toward equality. The changes have also shone a light on the complexities of navigating a career as a Black person in white-dominated industries: Do you work within the establishment to create change, or should you prioritize success in your own community? Who are the gatekeepers influencing the trajectories of Black people and what power do they wield? How does a Black person escape the shackles of tokenism and monolithic ideas of the Black experience? The business of design, an industry synonymous with liberalism and progression, is the ideal space to observe the dilemmas raised by these changes and the real-world impact on Black lives.

The question posed by Gilbert and Genesis on that fateful Zoom call led me down a rabbit hole which has thrown up as much delight as it has stunned outrage. This book is the first stage of unpacking that experience. My aim is to give an introduction to Black design from the past hundred years in an attempt to identify some of the ways the space

has evolved in relation to Blackness. What you will not find in these pages is a comprehensive survey. There are many Black designers who have worked and are working across fashion, architecture, and graphic design that I wasn't able to include in this book. My hope is that the themes and designers examined serve as a starting point for readers to begin their own investigations into this part of the creative sector in order to foster more knowledge, develop some healthy scepticism, and ultimately help the ongoing move toward change.

### **A CHANGE IN FASHION**

The implicit tension born out of the demand for Black creativity and the reality of white society's refusal to treat Black designers as equal to their white counterparts is an issue that persists today but was particularly acute in the years preceding the Civil Rights Act. For Ann Lowe, this meant being given the opportunity to design Jackie Kennedy's wedding dress in 1953 while being denied recognition for it when Kennedy referred to Lowe only as her "colored woman dressmaker" in an interview. In a similar way, American fashion and costume designer Zelda Wynn Valdes is often wrongly cited for designing the Playboy Bunny outfit. Her more interesting (and factually correct) claim to fame lies in the designer-and-muse relationship she formed with singer and actress Joyce Bryant. As costume designer for the famously all-black ballet company, Dance Theatre of Harlem, Valdes also played an important role in artistic resistance during the Civil Rights Movement.

A disregard for the work of Black designers leads to a complex issue of legacy. Daniel Day, known as Dapper Dan, ran into difficulty at the beginning of his career when he used the logos of luxury designers without their consent. However, in 2017, Gucci created a mink bomber jacket for their Resort 2018 show which resembled one designed by Dapper Dan in the early 1990s, which caused a social media furor resulting in what is now an ongoing collaboration between Dapper Dan and Gucci. This arc creates an uncomfortable question about why it took Gucci's endorsement of Dapper Dan to legitimize his designs when he had already been selling to prominent African Americans from the start.

One fashion designer who excelled with an ironic nod to Blackness was Patrick Kelly. In 1985, he sent a model down the runway with a golliwog cartoon printed on the front of a dress. He later adopted the golliwog logo with his name in bold letters around the blackface. He honed his aesthetic of bold colors and racial references when he moved to Paris. Once there, he dressed celebrities such as Grace Jones, Isabella Rossellini, and Madonna. What could be read as a success story starts to fall apart when you compare the fame and adulation bestowed upon Kelly's contemporaries and the care taken to preserve their legacies.

# “A DISREGARD FOR THE WORK OF BLACK DESIGNERS LEADS TO A COMPLEX ISSUE OF LEGACY.”

For example, Yves Saint Laurent has a museum in Paris and an ongoing business worth billions, while the innumerable books and documentaries on Coco Chanel are only matched by the endless homages paid to Christian Dior. And yet many people who would consider themselves interested in fashion have never heard of Patrick Kelly or examined the impact of his designs that reclaimed Black tropes as luxury items.

Where Kelly and Dapper Dan chaffed against the dominant conventions of their field, Willi Smith, hailed as the most commercially successful Black American designer of the twentieth century, enjoyed a warm reception from the white fashion world and the Black community alike. As he was embraced by the mainstream, he found he did not need to reference his Blackness in his work but instead sought to design clothes for “people on the streets” of every color.

In current times, Black designers are often faced with the challenge of navigating a fashion world that tends toward restrictive views of Black design. LaQuan Smith, New York–based creator of his flirtatious namesake womenswear line, has noted the tendency for the industry to box Black designers into a corner rife with stereotypes, while he pushes against the “urban” badge he never asked for. One response to sidestepping casual industry discrimination has been to ideate and produce on African soil. Kenneth Ize, a 2019 finalist of the LVMH Prize for Young Fashion Designers, creates hand-woven textiles for his label in a small factory that he owns and operates in Nigeria. Where many designers would have seen making the exclusive shortlist of the prize as a sign to move to the commercial fashion centers of London, Paris, or Milan, Ize has taken his acclaim and invested it in Lagos where he continues to create collections with brands like Karl Lagerfeld. Similarly,

Sindiso Khumalo, a South African native and recipient of the LVMH Prize in 2020, designs her own textiles and produces with local NGOs in South Africa and Burkina Faso.

Telfar Clemens, the queer, Liberian designer, has had incredible success by setting his label up in direct opposition to the exclusivity cultivated by luxury brands. With the mantra, “not for you, for everyone,” Telfar has positioned high-end design as accessible with vocal commentary on the closed nature of the fashion industry. Clemens’s work with the Liberian Olympic team—he designed and sponsored the kits for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic games—also reflects a wider trend where Black designers are encouraging a reassessment and education of the West’s relationship with Africa by spotlighting their country of origin. Similarly, Bianca Saunders has created an aesthetic that is rooted in her experiences as a second-generation Jamaican in London.

### **REDEFINING ARCHITECTURE**

In architecture, as in fashion, Black designers have been pushing against the confines of a Western society that refuses to look past the color of their skin. Paul Revere Williams, an architectural juggernaut who began his career in 1921, created luxury homes for Hollywood icons and yet, had to develop elaborate tactics in order to avoid uncomfortable situations with his patrons. The work of Norma Sklarek, who was the first African American woman member of the American Institute of Architects, is another case of “lost” identity. We are in a time where celebrating the historical and current achievements of women is a focus. My son is obsessed with the children’s book series *Little People, Big Dreams*, where Amelia Earhart and Greta Thunberg feature alongside Black figures like Harriet Tubman, Josephine Baker, and Rosa Parks. But where there is acknowledgment for Zaha Hadid, Sklarek, who had a less visible career but did great things for Black people in architecture and designed buildings of note, is nearly forgotten.

Chicago-born architect Hilyard Robinson is an example of a Black designer whose practice is of huge significance and yet undervalued. Working as codesigners in the mid 1930s, Robinson and Paul Revere Williams were the lead architects of Langston Terrace Dwellings, the first federally funded housing project in Washington, DC, and one of the first four in the United States. The fact that Robinson’s work is barely celebrated says something devastating about the ethos of “for us, by us”: the first housing project designed by African American architects, constructed by African American laborers, and open to African American families is not an event of note.

Meanwhile, in Africa, architects were choosing to reject the Western tradition of architecture in favor of indigenous techniques and solu-

tions for African buildings. The work of John Owusu Addo and Oluwole Olumuyiwa spoke to a more formal sense of freedom—both designers began working in Ghana and Nigeria respectively once the countries had become independent from colonial rule. The political regimes in the late 1990s called for a new era of locally led buildings but the formal, Western design education undertaken by Addo and Olumuyiwa meant that they were operating from the same model as the white architects that came before them. We are not in the early days of African independence anymore, and yet there is still a bias in design curriculums—and all educational curriculums—where techniques and styles developed by Black designers go ignored.

Thankfully, there is a new generation of designers circumventing colonial educations and using their practice to illuminate their cultural heritages, including Demas Nwoko, Joe Osae-Addo, and Diébédo Francis Kéré. Nwoko incorporates modern technologies with traditional African techniques to highlight his African roots in his designs. Joe Osae-Addo, the acclaimed African architect, is evangelical about centering Africa in his practice. His firm uses a system that brings together architecture, urban planning, building technology, and landscaping that is geared toward the creation of “inno-native” design solutions. Similarly, the practice of Burkina Faso-born architect Diébédo Francis Kéré openly points to Afro-futurism as the organizing principle for his work.

#### **DESIGN AS SOCIAL COMMENTARY**

Jackie Ormes, known as the first African American woman cartoonist, could have had a lot of fun illustrating the exclusion of Black architectural achievements and Black women from the public record. Her work on the *Chicago Defender* and *Pittsburgh Courier* during the 40s and 50s presented a nuanced, powerful image of Blackness. Conversely, fellow artist Charles Dawson appeared to have a different viewpoint on what constituted progress for Black lives. Although he did not think the abolition of segregation was essential to the prosperity of the Black community, he was deeply concerned with the predicament of African Americans and acted to elevate their position in society through the curation of the little-known American Negro Exposition held in Chicago in 1940. What I find essential about Dawson’s viewpoint is the very fact that it differs from the expected Black discourse of the time while still showing commitment to the advancement of African Americans. In Dawson’s divergence, we’re reminded that there is no singular Black mindset.

Emory Douglas’s involvement with the Black Panther Party was pivotal in his assertion that design should be a call to action and a means of overthrowing oppression. Art Sims and Emmett McBain both took

paths that focused on Black designs for Black audiences. Sims's film posters were prolific in the 80s, and his signature hand was utilized for various Spike Lee films as well as Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple*. Any stardust absent in the offerings of McBain is compensated for by his seminal ad in 1968, "Black is Beautiful." Common to the output of both designers is the choice to work on briefs where Black people are the stars of their own show. Being reliant on Black endorsements meant that both designers could, (and in Sims's case, continue) to design without a studied eye on the reaction of the white establishment. Their work creates an intimacy with their Black audience and a model for design rooted in freedom.

Today, a new generation of graphic designers are using their craft to satirize popular culture and the Black tropes that exist within it. Of particular note is the work of Liz Montague who is (probably) the first Black cartoonist for *The New Yorker*. Her work centralizes Black characters with a layer of humor that act as a knowing nod to the double frustrations of Black women in a society that is at turns sexist and racist.

To all of these designers, from Ann Lowe to Kenneth Ize, Jackie Ormes to Liz Montague, Paul Revere Williams to Diébédo Francis Kéré, and to the many that I have not been able to cover in this book who are doing meaningful, vital work, I feel a great debt. As seismic shifts have taken place in the world that have directly affected the experience of Blackness, their approach to their practice has suggested a way to navigate these realities. What their work and trajectories provide is a feeling of hope, the sense that things are moving, are becoming better, and that at some point Black people—designers or otherwise—might have the freedom and space to really be seen.







# FASHION



# INTRODUCTION

There is an intimacy at play when you wear the clothes of a fashion designer. The garment is badged with their name, and the silhouette and material point to the individual (or the fashion house) as the maker. Therefore, when you choose who to wear, you are communicating both a look and an alignment with the label that made it. Some people take this process very seriously and appreciate how their fashion choices can speak to their values and perspectives on the world. Others demonstrate less consideration, but whether you have contemplated your fashion for hours or made a snap decision, what you select says something about who you are, what you care about, and the society we live in.

Black fashion designers and their stature in the cultural landscape can act as a tracker for the dialogue taking place between white and Black society. When we look at the Black female designers Ann Lowe and Elizabeth Keckley, who contributed to the historical canon of First Lady fashion, we see that Black craft was often coveted, while the designers behind that craft were not. The discovery of Zelda Wynn Valdes as a polymath points to the surface-level attention that was (and often still is) paid to the work of Black female creatives. Dapper Dan, Patrick Kelly, and Willi Smith's relationship with Blackness and Black communities speaks to the complexities Black people can face in pursuing success within and outside of their own communities. The assessment of how value is bestowed upon and reclaimed by Black fashion designers walks through the trajectory of LaQuan Smith, asking what role social

media plays in providing and limiting Black power, while in the work of Sindiso Khumalo and Kenneth Ize we question what it means for Black people to redefine what success is. Finally, the efforts made by Bianca Saunders and Telfar Clemens to bring the entirety of their Black experience to their work is reflective of a wider revolution of Black people escaping the confines of code-switching to celebrate their culture in their professions.

Together, these chapters survey a patchwork of progress made, obstacles negotiated, and barriers presented while Black fashion designers have sought to assert their identities and creative language in a space that has not readily afforded them the opportunity to do so. In viewing the trajectories of their careers, there is something to be learned about the boxes Blackness has been placed into within the architecture of creativity and the joyful outcomes that ensue when those structures begin to collapse.



# FIRST LADIES

Since 1912, the First Lady has donated a dress, traditionally their inaugural gown, to represent her in the First Ladies Collection at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. What began as a casual handing over of the garment has evolved into a national media event; by the time Michelle Obama presented her ivory, one-shouldered, embroidered Jason Wu, as well as a red gown also designed by Wu for the second inauguration, the now formal presentations were covered in the *New York Post*, the *Hollywood Reporter*, *USA Today*, and a host of other outlets. Hysteria peeked when the Smithsonian unveiled the First Lady portrait by Amy Sherald with Obama, wearing a stretch cotton poplin dress with corset-style lacing by New York label Milly, perched on a chair. *The Washington Post* suggested that "The dress has caused a stir not simply because it will be enshrined in history but also because it has such a central place in such a nontraditional portrait."<sup>1</sup>

To investigate this "stir" brings us to a simple truth: the First Lady and the First Lady's clothes say something about what society should value. Michelle Obama is the First Lady. Message: Black people are not trash. Jason Wu is a New York-based designer who was born in Taiwan, raised in Vancouver, and regularly collaborated with RuPaul. Message: immigrants are Americans (yes, this needs to be relearned by some); American society should be inclusive. Milly, at the time co-owned by Michelle Smith and her husband, was designed and manufactured in New York with a price point that didn't widen the eyes. Message: American design is sophisticated and unburdened by class associations; female entrepreneurship is important. So what does it mean when former First Lady Jackie Kennedy, the benchmark for style and grace, refuses to name check the "colored dressmaker" who designed and

OPPOSITE: Michelle Obama wearing the white gown designed by Jason Wu for the inaugural ball, 2009.