

MCNY Blog: New York Stories

Iconic photos of a changing city, and commentary on our Collections & Exhibitions from the crew at MCNY.org

Reintroducing Ruby Bailey!

In 2004 the Museum of the City of New York acquired a collection of clothing and fashion mannequins from the estate of Harlem resident Ruby Hyacinth Bailey. Her work, alongside Ann Lowe's, represents highlights of 20th century African American design. The better-known Lowe designed Jacqueline Bouvier's wedding dress for her marriage to John Kennedy.



Museum of the City of New York, Gift of the Estate of Ruby Bailey

The Museum's Curator of Costumes and Textiles Phyllis Magidson described Bailey's apartment as ornate and filled to the brim with fabric. This makes perfect sense when you view her fashion designs: they are artisanal in a folk craft way; bold in pattern, texture, and surface embellishment. Several cocktail and evening dresses in the Museum's collection have intricate

beading, whereas her sportswear has bold graphic beading often dictated by the pattern on the fabric. She utilized border prints, textural fabrics like hemp, straw, and raffia, and full size plastic fruit, seashells, and beads in her designs. The concept of “less is more” did not factor into Bailey’s work.



Detail Ruby Bailey Afrocentric Jacket 2004.41.8



Detail Ruby Bailey Afrocentric Ensemble 2004.41.9



Detail Ruby Bailey "Rose" Dress 2004.41.2



Details Ruby Bailey "Rose" Dress 2004.41.2

The City Museum featured two of Bailey's dresses in recent exhibitions. The "Bug" dress, for which she allegedly won an award at the Savoy Ballroom, in *Glamour, New York Style* in 2005 and a dashiki style dress in *Black Style Now* in 2006. Inclusion in these two distinctly different exhibitions speaks to the range of Bailey's talent. Bailey reportedly often expressed sentiments such as, "I love my color! I love my race!" She was aware that her work did not receive the recognition it deserved because of the color of her skin.



Bug dress. Museum of the City of New York, Gift of the Estate of Ruby Bailey



Detail Ruby Bailey "Bug" Dress 2004.41.4

Ruby Bailey was born in Bermuda in 1905 and arrived in the US in 1912 with her mother and sister. She lived in Harlem until her death in 2003 at the age of 97. Growing up during the Harlem Renaissance, Bailey embraced both visual and performing arts, participating in fashion shows, art exhibitions, and theatrical productions at locales including St. Phillips Episcopal Church, the Savoy Ballroom, and Small's Paradise. She was well known for her portraiture and illustrations. W.C. Handy, often called the father of the blues, commented on her portrait of Richard B. Harrison, the actor who portrayed 'de Lawd' in the Broadway play *Green Pastures*,

in the *New York Age* on June 8, 1940, “[I]f I had a million dollars, I would gladly make you recipient of it in exchange for the picture.” The August 16, 1941 *New York Amsterdam-Star News* cited Bailey’s presentation of 19 original costume designs at the Alma Reed Galleries on 57th Street, noting she was the only “Negro” artist.

Bailey had the flamboyantly expressive personality often associated with New York generally and Harlem in particular. She was a member of many social and art clubs and a regular on the Harlem social scene, which necessitated an extensive wardrobe. Perhaps this fostered her fashion design career, since African Americans were not permitted access to mainstream clothing and other retail establishments at that time. Although Bailey’s work has not been documented outside of New York, the African American press, including the *Amsterdam News* and the *New York Age*, covered her extensively, publishing photographs of her wearing daring creations unusual in other parts of the country, but quite appropriate for the New York fashion scene. One such creation was a zebra printed “African” influenced jacket, featured in the *New York Amsterdam News* in 1949.

Included in the City Museum’s acquisition were 29 “Manikins” (mannequins). They are Barbie sized figures made with cotton fiber and glue. The detail of workmanship in the facial expressions, delicate fingers, poses, settings, and clothing designs rival the mannequins in the *Theatre de la Mode* produced by French designers after World War II. Bailey’s figures are dressed in beaded gowns, leather suits, fur coats, and African and Native American clothing. Their hairstyles include Afros, cornrows, and short blond bobs, appropriate to each character and clothing. Snake skin boots, sandals, gloves, and jewelry complement the clothing.



Ruby Bailey Doll: Wedding Gown 2004.41.28



Ruby Bailey Doll: Turquoise Patterned Harem Pant with Matching Top
2004.41.29



Ruby Bailey Fashion Doll: Striptease 2004.41.43



Ruby Bailey Fashion Doll: "There's a Man on the Moon" 2004.41.44

There are two Pearl Bailey (no relation) mannequins depicting Dolly Levi in her Broadway performance in *Hello Dolly*.



Ruby Bailey Fashion Doll: Hello Dolly Sailor Ensemble 2004.41.42



Ruby Bailey Doll: Hello Dolly/Pearl Bailey 2004.41.26



unknown photographer, [Pearl Bailey as Mrs. Dolly Gallagher Levi in "Hello, Dolly!"], ca. 1967. Museum of the City of New York.
82.12.9

Another mannequin replicates a beaded dress Ruby Bailey created for herself. Documentation accompanying her collection suggests that Ruby Bailey was a member of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union as a master beader. According to a *New York Amsterdam-Star News* article, April 9, 1949, Hollywood costume designer Adrian saw her designs at the St. Regis hotel and selected some to be adapted for his designs.



Museum of the City of New York, Gift of the Estate of Ruby Bailey



Ruby Bailey Fashion Doll: Floral Ball Gown 2004.41.39

Unlike Adrian of Hollywood, Ruby Bailey and Ann Lowe have never received proper recognition for their work. *The New York Times* described Ann Lowe's wedding dress for Ms. Bouvier in detail but did not mention the designer's name. *The Washington Post* described her as "the Negro, Ann Lowe." Although acknowledgement by the fashion industry was elusive, the talents of designers like Bailey and Lowe were not ignored. In 1949 civil rights activist and educator Mary McLeod Bethune invited Ms. Bailey to attend a conference in Harlem's Hotel Theresa sponsored by the National Council of Negro Women. Mainstream fashion industry

professionals including designer Mollie Parnis, Vogue managing editor Esther Lyman, and milliner Sally Victor addressed the conference. Later that year the National Association of Fashion and Accessory Designers (NAFAD) was established to help promote and integrate “Negro” designers into mainstream fashion.

“Fashion’s Racial Divide,” a New York Times article published on February 11, 2015, cited many of the same issues for present day African American designers that Bailey faced 56 years ago. Hopefully the talented and dedicated work of designers of African descent will begin to receive the recognition it deserves.

Little is known about Bailey’s life. If you have any information about Ruby Bailey that you would like to share, email us at collections@mcny.org

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