



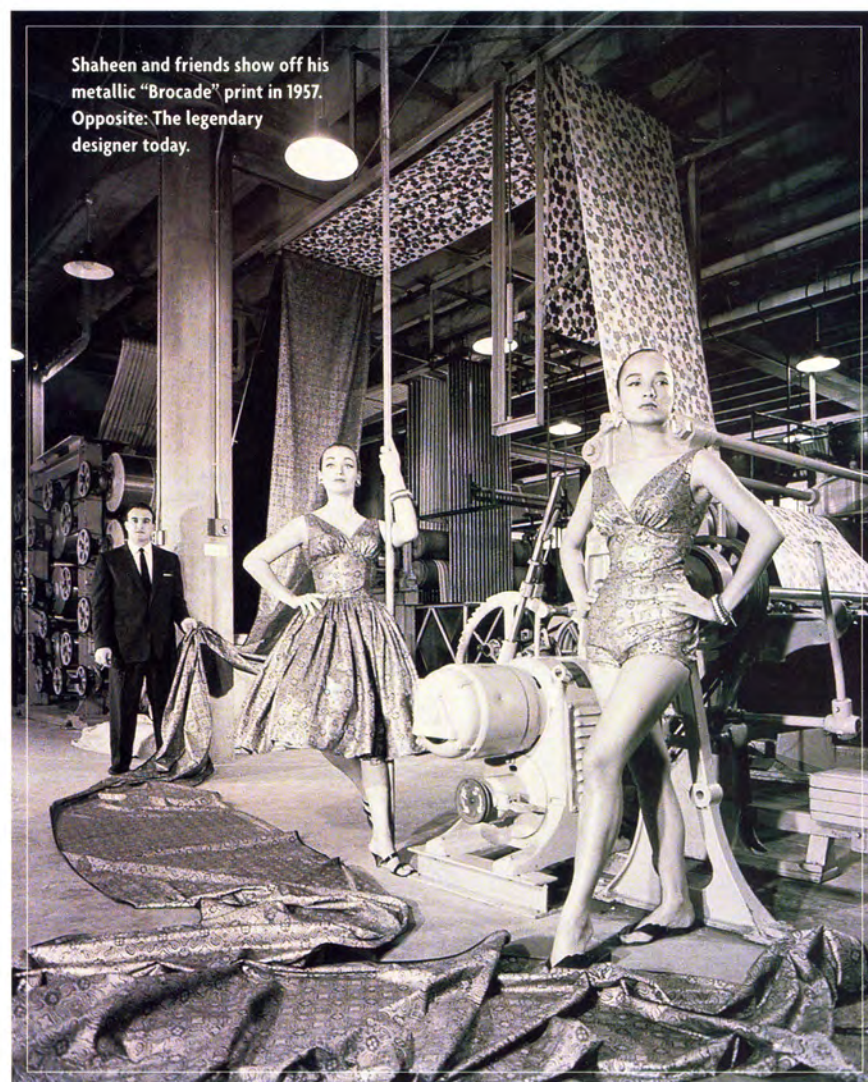
Man of the Cloth

Island Icons

The classic fashions of tropicwear innovator Alfred Shaheen

Alfred Shaheen is a man of few words. Mention to him the exalted place he holds in the pantheon of Hawai'i fashion-makers, and his lips remain as tightly sewn as one of his selvage edges. Bring up his pioneering 1950s forays to Tahiti for inspiration in the Polynesian aesthetic, and he says only: "I wanted to be authentic." Ask him about his landmark textile-printing plant, a first in Hawai'i, and he succinctly explains: "I needed to control the dry goods." Marvel over his efforts to pump out six different lines of apparel a year, and he'll comment concisely (but only after much prodding) that "the employees needed to have work."

But while Shaheen himself may be frugal with his words, his lavish, exotic creations speak volumes. The evocative magic of the Shaheen look materialized on the fashion scene just at the perfect moment: during the first flush of postwar America, when leisure went from being the forbid-



Shaheen and friends show off his metallic "Brocade" print in 1957. Opposite: The legendary designer today.

by Liza Simon

color photos
by Dana Edmunds

archival photos
courtesy of
Camille Shaheen-Tunberg



The "Tiare Tapa" print, worn by Elvis in *Blue Hawaii*

den fruit of the wealthy to the joyous harvest of the masses' honest labor. Right on cue, Shaheen's garments conjured up dreams of sultry islands that had once belonged only in the movies. Distributed across the Mainland, hundreds of thousands of Shaheen dresses and shirts were palpable postcards from Paradise. Outfitting, say, a mannequin in a Bullock's department store, the clothes offered a tangible way to drape oneself in the allure of tropical romance.

"You had to be different to succeed," is the designer's laconic comment.

"Even now, I don't think he realizes how influential he's been," says Shaheen's daughter, Camille Shaheen-Tunberg, who has been inventorying her father's classic designs from the brisk collectors' trade on the Internet. "His focus was always on perfecting the next step—stepping back and reflecting was not a luxury you could allow yourself."

Shaheen's roots are as exotic as his fashions. The son of Lebanese immigrants who settled in Hawai'i in the 1930s, Shaheen returned to the Islands after a World War II tour of duty in France to help his parents with their dress-making business. According to Camille, her grandparents passed on to her father a certain genetic disposition for risk-taking. "You had to have known my grandmother," she says, "in her long brocade robes and fair white skin, smoking a hookah."

From the beginning, Shaheen's clothing was attention-grabbing. "I knew how to make a fit that was flattering," says the seventy-nine-year-old designer, now retired from the fashion biz and an avid tennis player. "The fabric skimmed the body so that people found it very exotic."

Take, for example, his version of the "*holomu*," a contemporary synthesis of



"Chopsticks" print on the production line, 1954

the long-sleeved, high-necked Hawaiian *holokū* and the shorter, looser-fitting *mu'umu'u*. Shaheen blended these two missionary-derived styles and streamlined the waist, adding the nip and tuck of fitted darts. And then there was the "Shaheen neckline," in which he inserted elastics in the underarms, so that, for every woman who wore the dress, the tension lines across the bustline formed a pattern as individual as her fingerprint.

A builder at heart (before getting into his parents' clothing business, he had once wanted to be an aeronautical engineer), Shaheen was a local pioneer not only in apparel design but in manufacturing and retailing as well. When the cumulative effects of World War II and the Korean conflict halted the flow of printed fabric from Japan, forcing Hawai'i garment-makers to be dependent on slow boats that came from New York through the Panama Canal, he saw the entrepreneurial light and decided to open his own textile printing and finishing plant in a Quonset hut near the Honolulu airport. Unable to find machinery, he built his own using bicycle chains and other material he found in junkyards.

The factory's initially humble circumstances did nothing to deter Shaheen's dreams, and within a few years he had acquired a much larger facility on Kapi'olani Boulevard. At its height, his plant employed over 400 workers who hand-printed 4,000 yards of fabric a day on massive silk-screening tables.

Screening his own fabric also allowed Shaheen to pursue what would become his most distinctive fashion forte: "engineered" prints, garments emblazoned with lush, pan-Pacific imagery that formed a complete tableau when the item was buttoned and worn.



Fabric artist Bob Sato

"People want to see some meaning when they look at all that pattern," he explains with typical terseness. So he perfected the technique of painstakingly printing, cutting and sewing a shirt or dress so it would create a continuous scene that endlessly encircled the body: a Hawaiian chief, for example, accompanied by maidens and *kāhili*-bearers, or a geisha on a bridge, gazing at the river beneath.

To create the images, Shaheen recruited a handful of Hawai'i artists—including the man he calls his "right arm," Bob Sato—and sent them to exotic locales like Tahiti or Japan for weeks at a time to absorb the culture and find inspiration, a move that was unheard of even in the Mainland industry of the time, where most textile artists scraped by on freelance wages.

He also sent his artists to study Hawaiian artifacts at Honolulu's own Bishop Museum. One result that made him particularly proud was a reproduction of a subtle *tapa* print copied from the authentic bark-cloth original. Shaheen says the muted blends of tans and ochres helped dispel the stereotype that "Hawaiian print" meant loud and brassy.

Meanwhile, during a personal excursion of his own to Tahiti, Shaheen came up with one of his best-known patterns: the "Pualani Pareau," a simple red-and-white floral print that quickly became the rage for many Waikiki and Mainland entertainers.

From the outset, Shaheen's urge to go global was partly a practical matter. "There wasn't enough of a local market to sustain a local manufacturer," he says. In addition, Island dressing customs at the time were a bit conservative for such sexy Shaheen styles as the "Suzie Wong" dress—a modified *cheong-sam* sheath



"Ali'i Procession" shirt, 1953

with a high slit up the side. Nonetheless, Shaheen's local staff reveled in their boss's experimentation and shared in his pride of ownership. As daughter Camille recalls: "Whenever a new style came off the line, my father would grab the first sample and fan it out like he was some Grand Master, and everyone around would applaud."

In his heyday in the 1950s and '60s, Shaheen had ten retail outlets in Hawai'i, in addition to shipping his lines worldwide, including to big-name Mainland department stores—most notably Bergdorf Goodman, Franklin Simon and Marshall Fields. Some of these legendary fashion emporiums even boasted entire Shaheen departments.

In *Blue Hawaii*, Elvis was wearing a Shaheen shirt when he belted out *Rock-A-Hula Baby*. In the '70s, Shaheen tried to introduce his Hawaiian fashions in Paris, but, as he frankly admits, "We laid an egg. We were an oddity compared to the sophisticated, subdued French look." Through the '80s, Shaheen's retail stores in the Islands continued to prosper, but rising real estate costs forced him to downsize and eventually close his Hawai'i factory. In 1988, he sold his operations and retired in Los Angeles.

In the age of "casual Fridays" and Tommy Bahama, leisure-wear "exotica" is, of course, huge, and Shaheen remains an honored founder. But it goes without saying that you'd never hear about from the man himself. Camille recalls once getting an e-mail from an excited cyberspace vendor who wanted to know if she was really the daughter of "the great Shaheen." When she downloaded the laudatory note and showed it to her dad, his murmured, characteristically depreciative comment was a simple: "Well, I'll be!" ♦