

LOCAL NEWS

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Alfred Shaheen, giant of garment industry

1922-2008

By **Gordon Y.K. Pang**
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Island textiles icon Alfred Shaheen was among the founders of the modern Hawaiian garment industry, helping revolutionize the business not only through innovative designs but by establishing a business model that allowed him to introduce Hawaiian wear to people around the world.

Shaheen, whose original pieces today can sell on eBay for hundreds and even thousands of dollars, died Monday in Torrance, Calif., from complications due to diabetes. He was 86.

"He was one of the giants of the Hawai'i garment industry," said Dale Hope, creative director for Kahala Sportswear and author of the book "The Aloha Shirt."

Shaheen "pioneered screen printing here in Honolulu like it had never been done before — he printed men's aloha shirts and women's dresses," Hope said. "To print rayon fabric in Ho-nolulu and with the vibrancy, colors and technique that he achieved was mind-boggling."

By 1959, Shaheen had built his own factory and showroom and was Hawai'i's largest manufacturer of aloha wear. He employed 400 people and was grossing more than \$4 million annually by selling garments worldwide, including at retail stores in Hawai'i.

Shaheen said he was able to do this by being able to print and produce his own fabrics locally.

"He was a genius," said Hope, who himself has spent a lifetime in the local textiles industry. "Nobody came close to having the deep knowledge, and having the respect for the artists, the art, the printing, the distribution and the retailing. To be a vertical manufacturer — where you create your own art, make your own piece goods, sell them at your own retail stores and do wholesale accounts worldwide — that was pretty darn impressive."

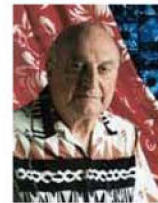
Linda Arthur, a professor of textiles and clothing at Washington State University and formerly at the University of Hawai'i, said Shaheen's designs had a profound impact on the international textiles design scene.

Rather than buying pieces of art to turn into textiles, she said, Shaheen took the then-unusual step of hiring his own designers, most of whom were from Hawai'i. He then



Alfred Shaheen, in his garment factory, pioneered screen printing in Honolulu, and helped market aloha shirts to the rest of the world.

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Alfred Shaheen's aloha shirt designs are still marketed

Dana Edmunds
Photography

sent them off to learn the art and culture of other Pacific Island and Asian nations, said Arthur, who co-wrote "The Art of the Aloha Shirt" with DeSoto Brown.

"He would take them to various places and say, 'Try to absorb their kind of art and culture and bring that into the textile design,'" Arthur said. "And in looking at his designs, there's stuff from India, Thailand. You name it. Incredible art, done in textiles."

Arthur added: "He brought the whole idea of East-meets-West into the apparel industry. And in some ways, you could say that he very well may have started the globalization of fashion with that."

Today, she said, upscale designers copy old Shaheen prints and market them as their own.

And while Shaheen closed up shop in 1988 and retired, Hawai'i folks can still wear classic and vintage Shaheen designs through the Alfred Shaheen Collection of shirts and dresses manufactured under license by Reyn Spooner.

Another legacy of Shaheen was his ability to design dresses that brought out the best in women, Arthur said.

"He knew how to maximize a woman's potential," she said. "Good clothing, when it fits well, helps to shape the body, and very few people know how to do that anymore."

Daughter Camille Shaheen-Tunberg said her father's innovativeness and boldness set him apart from others. An aeronautical engineer who flew combat missions over Europe in World War II, Shaheen came home to Hawai'i from the war and put his talents and energies to work learning all that he could about the textiles industry, Shaheen-Tunberg said.

Shaheen built Surf 'n Sand Hand Prints, his first print plant, in a Quonset hut on the outskirts of Honolulu. He scoured Hono-lulu's junkyards for parts used to build his equipment, Shaheen-Tunberg said.

"He was strong, he was courageous, he never quit and he took chances," his daughter said.

Shaheen is survived by daughters, Susan Mulkern, Camille Shaheen-Tunberg, Cynthia Rose and Marianne Kishiyama; son, Alfred Shaheen II; five grandchildren; two great-grandchildren; sister, Joyce Bowman.

A service is being held at St. James Church in Redondo Beach, Calif. at 10:30 a.m. Saturday. His ashes will be interred at Oahu Cemetery at a later date.

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