

Alfred Shaheen: The *Hawaiian* Bombshell

Text **GRETCHEN HIRSCH**

ALFRED SHAHEEN (1922-2008), IS ONE OF THE MOST VIBRANT and inventive designers of the 20th century. Known for his colorful Hawaiian Aloha shirts and Tiki dresses and for his unusual prints, Alfred Shaheen garments are highly collectible today. A Shaheen “bombshell” dress is a lust-worthy piece of fashion history—and the prized possession in many a vintage-lover’s closet.



Tahitian Girl dress by Alfred Shaheen

ARTWORK AND PHOTOS COURTESY OF CAMILLE SHAHEEN-TUNBERG



Alfred Shaheen was known for his vibrant, shapely Tiki dresses made with his original prints.

While Shaheen’s menswear has been the subject of much writing, modern-day sewists agree that his women’s fashions are infinitely intriguing, with their intricately-folded bustlines, beautifully draped sarong skirts, and lush, bold prints. Shaheen’s daughter, Camille Shaheen-Tunberg, collects her father’s pieces—particularly the women’s wear—and runs the Shaheen website [alfredshaheen.com]. As she says, “My women’s collection is my pride and joy.”

A GARMENT INDUSTRY FAMILY
Alfred Shaheen actually wasn’t a native Hawaiian, but a first-generation American

from a Lebanese family. His parents, George and Mary, relocated their family from New Jersey to Oahu in the late 1930s and brought with them their hard-won knowledge about the garment manufacturing industry. The Shaheen family had been garment industry workers for generations. Mary, who was only 15 when she married, created a business from the ground-up with her husband. Part of that business was her own label, Margo’s, which specialized in bridal, evening, and prom dresses.

Camille Shaheen-Tunberg describes her grandmother as “an amazing seamstress” who was adroit with difficult fabrics like

chiffon and tulle. So when her son Alfred wanted to start his own business focusing on garments made from simple cotton, she found the sewing a breeze. Mary headed up Alfred’s first team of workers in 1948—four seamstresses who worked in the family home.

A FASCINATING EXAMPLE OF SHAHEEN CONSTRUCTION

When asked for juicy sewing details of her father’s work, Camille told a fascinating story of the Shaheen Sheath, a stunning creation that featured interesting pleats near the bodice straps. An advertisement boasted that this dress was: “One of those rare strokes of designing genius that’s dazzling on almost everyone. Top secret of superlative fit: ingenious adjustments in the bodice and sashed waist.”

The design of the dress really is ingenious. The neckline does not appear pleated on its own; the pleating is created when worn because of the clever use of elastic stays inside the dress. A strip of elastic is sewn at the neckline of the dress (where the pleat will form), sandwiched between the fashion fabric and the lining, and ends at the waistline seam on the bodice back. The elastic settles under the arms when worn, creating a flexible stay that keeps the neckline pleats in place as the wearer moves.

Unfortunately, as elastic deteriorates over time, even vintage Shaheen Sheaths in otherwise perfect condition have lost elasticity in the stays, confusing both sellers and buyers as to how the dress was worn. (One seller I talked to confessed that she thought the stays were just there to hang the dress.) Fortunately, this is an easy flaw to fix—even for novices.

ICONIC DESIGNS

Another iconic look from the Shaheen line is his sarong dress, the kind that makes you think of Dorothy Lamour or Bettie Page. With a boned bodice held snug to the body with

Madeleine for February 1952

Alfred Shaheen
wowowow
 creates beautiful scenes
 full of color, drapery,
 glitzy, splashy tropical fish
 hand-printed on fine cotton.

For sunning, his string-strap
 halter dress, 8 to 10, \$7.95
 For swimming, his little-
 boy halter, 10 to 20, \$2.95
 Bath in lagoon blue,
 sun yellow or hot pink.

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Alfred Shaheen represented on the mainland by Charles Ross Associates, 1407 Broadway, New York City

Alfred **SHAHEEN**

From Alfred Shaheen's very own fabric printing plant in the mid-Pacific, comes the tropical splendor of Mother's "Tomboy" swim-suit with detachable straps. Available in 10 to 20 they will retail at around \$12.00. Her Puka Jacket (not shown), S.M.L. at about \$6.00. Daughter's suit 3 to 6x, about \$6.00; 7 to 14, about \$7.00. Puka Jacket, 3 to 6x about \$5.00; 7 to 14, about \$6.00. Lagoon Blue, Hibiscus Red, Ti-Leaf Green or Mahogany Brown.

As seen in: **BAZAAR**



Hibiscus dress



Lei Medley dress



Cereus dress

The ads for Alfred Shaheen's dresses were almost as "Mad Men" elegant as the garments themselves. The **Shaheen Sheath**, shown in the ad at right, was a stunning creation that featured interesting pleats near the bodice straps and called a "**Smart Mixer for Cocktails.**" Another advertisement boasted that this dress was: "One of those rare strokes of designing genius that's dazzling on almost everyone. Top secret of superlative fit: ingenious adjustments in the bodice and sashed waist."

Alfred Shaheen *smart mixer for cocktails* sheath 29⁹⁵

elastic shirring, a wiggly draped skirt, and a detachable shoulder sash and halter strap, this style exuded glamour. The most recognizable design detail, however, is the asymmetrical bias fold that wraps around the top of the right bust and ends at the left waist.

Other memorable—and collectible—designs include Shaheen's full-skirted sundresses, matching boleros, brocade evening sheaths, and romper-style swimsuits.

TEXTILES

Alfred was definitely a pioneer in the

fashion field. But his influence and innovation went further. Hawaii was a relatively isolated group of islands at the time, and depended on textiles from the mainland, which would take months to arrive. Instead of settling for this dependency, Alfred created his own textile business. With his own artists and his own production team, he was able to have his designs screenprinted onto cotton and rayon right in Hawaii. His daughter describes him as fiercely loyal to his employees, providing them with excellent job security and ben-

efits. Soon the company was printing more than 60,000 yards of fabric a month.

Perhaps as a result of his own multicultural upbringing, Alfred was profoundly interested in other cultures. As his textile production grew, Alfred began to send teams out to other countries to immerse themselves in these cultures and to then design print collections based on what they absorbed. His famous '60s collection "Hong Kong" was a direct result of one of these expeditions. Alfred also ventured into the world of home



Shaheen's mother, Mary Shaheen, was a superbly talented seamstress.

LIKE MOTHER, LIKE SON

Though Mary designed all-American prom dresses and Alfred created sophisticated Tiki garb, it's easy to see a connection between their design sensibilities. Intricate bustlines are a recurring theme in both Margo's and Alfred Shaheen garments. Mary was clearly a master of the "shelf bust," a built-up bustline that has a multi-tiered look, often involving ruffled chiffon or tulle on top and then a boned bodice supporting it. This design is particularly interesting because of the use of scallops at the bustline.

Similarly, one of Alfred's iconic looks is the "petal bust," a design with multiple pleats and folds at the bust, as in the "Cereus" design. The pleats could be worn flat or opened up, like a petal.

Alfred's designs were made of humble cotton but constructed like evening gowns with boning, bust padding, and ingenious stays in his dresses. In his dresses and playsuits, however, a casual detail was the use of elastic to create Shirred backs, which add a playful, summery touch.



A "shelf bust" dress



Luau dress

sewing, with printed panel fabrics sold by the yard and a sewing pattern line.

The company closed in 1988 with Alfred's retirement. His textile designs, however, are alive and well, with prints licensed to fabric companies like Westminster and Duralee.

Alfred Shaheen was a garment industry pioneer, a textile artist, an enterprising businessman, and a fascinating designer who produced an incredible body of work—but the real testament to his legacy is how coveted and copied his looks are today.

GRETCHEN HIRSCH is a sewing blogger (blogforbettersewing.com) and the creator of the popular Craftsy.com online course "Sew Retro: Perfect Bombshell Dresses" which focuses on a Shaheen-style dress.