

North Carolina Museum of Art Presents *Inspiring Beauty: 50 Years of Ebony Fashion Fair*
Exhibition explores the 50-year history of the Ebony Fashion Fair (1958–2009)

Raleigh, N.C.—Beginning October 28, 2017, the North Carolina Museum of Art (NCMA) presents *Inspiring Beauty: 50 Years of Ebony Fashion Fair*, which tells the remarkable story of an extraordinary fashion show. The exhibition explores the 50-year history of the Ebony Fashion Fair (1958–2009), an unparalleled charity fashion show event that redefined the concepts of beauty, fashion, and empowerment for African Americans. It features 40 stunning ensembles by designers such as Stephen Burrows, Pierre Cardin, Christian Dior, Givenchy, Patrick Kelly, Christian Lacroix, Yves Saint Laurent, Bob Mackie, Alexander McQueen, b. Michael, Missoni, Jean Patou, and Vivienne Westwood. The exhibition also includes archival photographs and memorabilia from *Ebony* magazine and Ebony Fashion Fair.



A spectacle of glamour and performance, the traveling Ebony Fashion Fair grew out of the pages of *Ebony* magazine (first published in 1945). It was founded by Eunice Johnson, who owned Johnson Publishing Company—distributor of *Ebony*—with her husband, John Johnson. Far more than just a display of fabulous clothes, the show challenged conventions of beauty; made high fashion accessible to a broader audience; and, as a philanthropic event, contributed millions of dollars to charities focused on education, health care, and civil rights.

“This stunning exhibition will not only highlight some of the most iconic fashion ensembles shown during the Ebony Fashion Fair, but it will also explore the impact that this show had on African American identity, style, and success,” explains Jennifer Dasal, NCMA associate curator of contemporary art and co-curator of the exhibition. “By featuring black models, fashion designers, makeup artists, and consumers, the Fashion Fair and Eunice Johnson helped redefine concepts of beauty and fashion in America—and in doing so, played a key role in empowering African Americans nationwide.”

Themes explored in the exhibition include:

- **A way to look:** A full outfit (from hat to shoes) was a way to confidently present oneself to society. Rather than fading into the background, women felt empowered to make bold statements with their fashion.
- **Impact of color:** The fashion show was known for featuring clothes with bold colors and extravagant, beautiful outfits.
- **The body attitude:** Many of the outfits were attention-grabbing and daring, meant to shock and delight. Designers used see-through fabrics, cheeky images, and bold silhouettes that both highlighted and revealed the shape of the body.
- **Innovation:** Eunice Johnson pushed boundaries in the fashion world, showcasing avant-garde fashion, including innovative looks that weren’t available at local department stores.
- **Power:** The Ebony Fashion Fair empowered women with aspirational images, and by providing equal access to African American consumers, designers, and models, it changed the fashion industry.

“Ebony Fashion Fair was a true agent of change, raising tens of millions of dollars for numerous African American charities over its 50 years, providing positive images for black men and women, and launching the careers of many

black fashion designers, models, makeup artists, and hair stylists,” says Linda Dougherty, the NCMA’s chief curator and curator of contemporary art and co-curator of the exhibition. “We hope that by hosting this exhibition, we continue the mission of positive change and community empowerment and encourage our visitors to rethink their own concepts of beauty.”

Additionally, to demonstrate the interconnectivity of art across various media, visitors will be prompted to compare and relate the featured fashion ensembles in the exhibition with works of art in the Museum’s permanent collection.

Inspiring Beauty runs through January 21, 2018.

About the Exhibition

Inspiring Beauty: 50 Years of Ebony Fashion Fair
October 28, 2017–January 21, 2018

Inspiring Beauty: 50 Years of Ebony Fashion Fair was developed by the Chicago History Museum in cooperation with Johnson Publishing Company, LLC, presented by the Costume Council of the Chicago History Museum, and toured by International Arts & Artists, Washington, DC.



In Raleigh the exhibition is made possible, in part, by the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources; the North Carolina Museum of Art Foundation, Inc.; and the William R. Kenan Jr. Endowment for Educational Exhibitions. Research for this exhibition was made possible by Ann and Jim Goodnight/The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fund for Curatorial and Conservation Research and Travel.

Image Caption

Givenchy by Alexander McQueen, Evening Dress, haute couture, fall/winter 1997–98, synthetic raffia mounted on silk gauze, appeared in *The Jazz Age of Fashions*; Photo courtesy of Johnson Publishing Company, LLC

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About the North Carolina Museum of Art

The North Carolina Museum of Art’s permanent collection spans more than 5,000 years, from ancient Egypt to the present, making the institution one of the premier art museums in the South. The Museum’s collection provides educational, aesthetic, intellectual, and cultural experiences for the citizens of North Carolina and beyond. The 164-acre Museum Park showcases the connection between art and nature through site-specific works of environmental art. The Museum offers changing national touring exhibitions, classes, lectures, family activities, films, and concerts.

The Museum opened West Building, home to the permanent collection, in 2010. The North Carolina Museum of Art, Lawrence J. Wheeler, director, is located at 2110 Blue Ridge Road in Raleigh. It is the art museum of the State of North Carolina, Roy Cooper, governor, and an agency of the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, Susi Hamilton, secretary.