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WORLD | OBITUARIES

## Arthur McGee Broke Down Barriers for Black Fashion Designers

Detroit native headed design team in New York and made clothes for Cicely Tyson, Dexter Gordon and other stars



Arthur McGee, seen in 2009, learned fashion sense from his mother, who was a seamstress. PHOTO: THOMAS EVANS/PATRICK MCMULLAN/GETTY IMAGES

By *James R. Hagerty*

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In his later years, Arthur McGee was often described as the dean or godfather of African-American clothing designers in New York.

When he was trying to break into the business in the 1950s, however, he was told there were no jobs for people of color.

Mr. McGee, who died on July 1 at the age of 86, did find work, mainly in the background, and set up a workshop in Manhattan. He made clothes for Broadway stars and other celebrities. In 1957, he got a job designing for the Bobbie Brooks label and became the first African-American to head a design team on New York's Seventh Avenue, according to *Women's Wear Daily*. He later had his own clothing shops in New York and Miami.

His customers over the years included Cicely Tyson, Stevie Wonder and

Dexter Gordon. Yet many in the industry didn't recognize him. If he showed up at an office with an envelope under his arm, receptionists sometimes mistook him for a delivery man.

He had a playful sense of humor. When one boss ordered him to come up with something new, Mr. McGee produced a sweater with three sleeves, he recalled in a 2009 video interview recorded by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "I said, 'Is that what you want?' He said, 'OK, touché.'"

In 2009, when the museum held a lunch to honor his career, the sponsors included Lord & Taylor, a retailer that had featured some of his clothing. Among those present were Ms. Tyson and Aziza Braithwaite Bey, a designer and former professor at Lesley University who worked as Mr. McGee's design assistant in the 1960s.



In 2009, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York held an event to honor Mr. McGee's career.  
PHOTO: CLINT SPAULDING/PATRICK MCMULLAN/GETTY IMAGES

Mr. McGee "had an elegant casualness about his clothes," said Audrey Smaltz, a former fashion commentator for *Ebony* magazine. "They were easy to fit, easy to wear, but they had a good look." He made countless custom wedding gowns. An otherwise classic tuxedo he designed for Mr. Gordon was adorned with sequins that seemed to cling to the black fabric like silvery raindrops.

Born on March 25, 1933, in Detroit, Arthur McGee learned fashion sense from his mother, a seamstress who made her own patterns out of newsprint. As a teenager, he began making hats for her.

When he was 18, Mr. McGee earned a scholarship to study at the Traphagen School of Fashion in New York. He also studied briefly at the Fashion Institute of Technology. In his early days, he worked for the designer Charles James and for the College Town of Boston label.

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In the mid-1960s, he had a Manhattan clothing shop for his designs known simply as the Store. He told Women's Wear Daily he wasn't trying to appeal to fickle customers always looking for the latest twist. "I am interested in the woman who wants to build a wardrobe of simple, unadorned, clean dresses in good fabrics made in ways that mass production would prohibit."

He wanted his clothes to be known as interesting rather than different. "I certainly didn't invent the dart," he said. "Nice clothes aren't different. They are sensible because there are real people around and they want to be clothed."

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