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Pioneering Designer Arthur McGee, 86, to Be Honored at Memorial

The New York-based designer helped to pave the way for a legion of African American designers.

By [Rosemary Feitelberg](#) on July 19, 2019



📷 Arthur McGee, the designer B. Michael and Cicely Tyson.

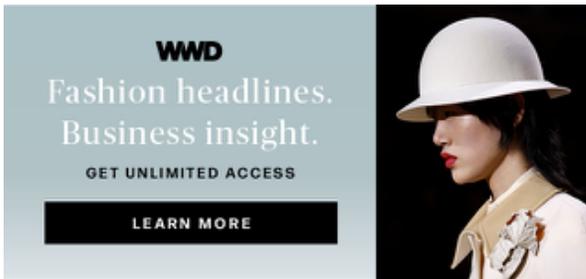
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A memorial service will be held on March 25, 2020, in New York to celebrate the life of pioneering designer Arthur McGee, who died July 1.

McGee, 86, passed away at the Amsterdam Nursing Home after a series of aneurysms over the years, according to his friend the cultural historian Aziza Braithwaite Bey, who worked as McGee's design assistant in 1965.

"What distinguished Arthur from other African American designers was that he not only had his own shop, but he also was selling his collection to department stores and working on his own on Seventh Avenue. He opened the door and behind him others were able to come through," she said.

Born in Detroit, McGee's mother was a dressmaker who could make patterns from newspaper. He started designing hats for her at the age of 15. He first came to New York after winning a scholarship to Traphagen School of Design, and later studied millinery and apparel design at the Fashion Institute of Technology. During that time, he also worked at Charles James for a period. After being told that there were no jobs for black designers, McGee ditched the academic route and set up his own downtown operation catering to actresses. He later segued into making clothes for Broadway actors and working for Seventh Avenue companies such as College Town of Boston. McGee said in a 2009 video that when he started, he was "working in backrooms designing whole collections with no credit."

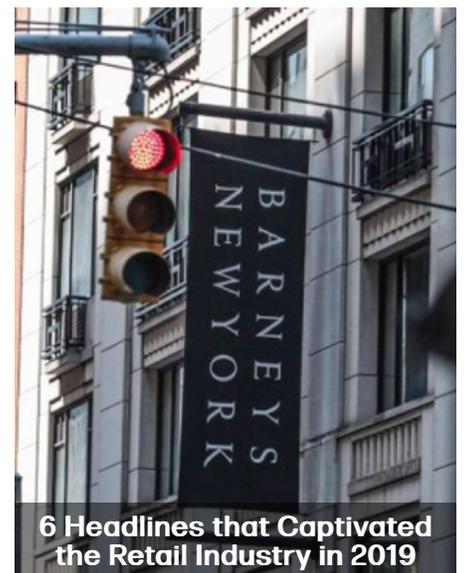
Well-mannered and gentle, McGee forged into fashion at a time of great racial divide in the U.S. Inspired by definitive designers like Claire McCardell and Adrian, McGee was not to be deterred.



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“When you love fashion, you do it no matter what. They try to keep us in a corner but I know I’m good, and I’ll be designing when I’m 95.”

In 1957, McGee was tapped to run the design room for the sportswear company Bobbie Brooks, making him the first African American to lead a Seventh Avenue house. Eventually, he ventured out on his own working from a St. Mark’s Place atelier. He also designed the Tammy Andrews juniors label at one point for the company Stacey Ames. In 1965, he opened his own store on Third Avenue aptly named “The Store.” His collection of clean styles was also sold via Bloomingdale’s, Henri Bendel and Saks Fifth Avenue. Combining African fabrics with Asian-inspired silhouettes, McGee’s apparel appealed to a wide range of shoppers crossing all ethnicities.

Through the years, he suited up notable clients such as Cicely Tyson, Sybil Burton and Lena Horne, jazz musician Dexter Gordon, Stevie Wonder, and Dance Theatre of Harlem founder Arthur Mitchell. A custom suit designed by McGee for Gordon’s trip to the Academy Awards was appraised on PBS’ “Antiques Road Show” for \$5,000. His designs were showcased at the Museum at FIT, the Black Museum of Harlem and the African American Museum before it merged with the Smithsonian to become the National Museum of African American History and Culture. He was also honored at a luncheon organized by Harold Koda, the former curator in charge at the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)’s Costume Institute. McGee guest lectured at Virginia Commonwealth University, FIT and the College of St. Elizabeth at the request of Bey. “Whenever you asked, ‘Arthur, what do you think or we need your help.’ Boom — Arthur was there,” the cultural historian said.

Tyson said Friday, “He was the forerunner. He set a standard for black designers. A man in fashion recently told me how he thought, ‘If Arthur could do it, I could do it. Because he did it at a time when they said, ‘It could not be done,’” Tyson said. “Arthur being in the forefront made young men and women realize that they could follow suit — whatever their desire was in that field. If he cracked it, he cracked it for them.”



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A few months after opening The Store in December 1965, McGee explained that he wasn't interested in the fickle shopper, who is always looking for a new store. "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 continued, "The clothes in my shop are ever-changing. That's the beauty of the store. That is what a boutique means. The Store is interesting — don't say different. I certainly didn't invent the dart. Nice clothes aren't different. They are sensible because there are real people around and they want to be clothed."

Tyson remembered how McGee called one day to tell her that he was opening a store called The Store. "Well, did I get a kick out of that. I would call information and ask them to give me the number of The Store [laughing heartily.] And they would say, 'Why yes, but was is the name of the store.' I would say, 'The Store.' It just went on and on, 'Ma'am, would you please give me the name of the store?' I would say, 'Ma'am, the name of the store is The Store,'" Tyson said. "I do remember getting quite a charge out of that."

Known for his dry sense of humor that was often punctuated with a slight smirk, McGee once staged a fashion show at Fabulous Fakes — a Third Avenue museum-like shop of art that's all fake — even the walls. His intent with The Store was "to have a specialty shop with real specialties," he told WWD in 1966. "I use just a few good bodies and do them in many fabrics...cashmere, camel's hair, doubleknit, men's wear worsted flannel, chiffon in tailored clothes and brocades." (A smock dress, for example, was offered in a crinkled cotton for spring and in cashmere herringbone with rhinestone buttons for fall.)

In the late Sixties, McGee was one of early black designers to run his own business. Jimmie Daugherty, John Weston, John Simmons, Stephen Burrows, Jon Higgins and Scott Barrie were among the others. McGee was a supporter of the Fashion Coalition, a group formed in 1968 to promote the advancement of blacks in the fashion industry and to encourage more to join. Addressing the issue with WWD in 1969, McGee said, "What I

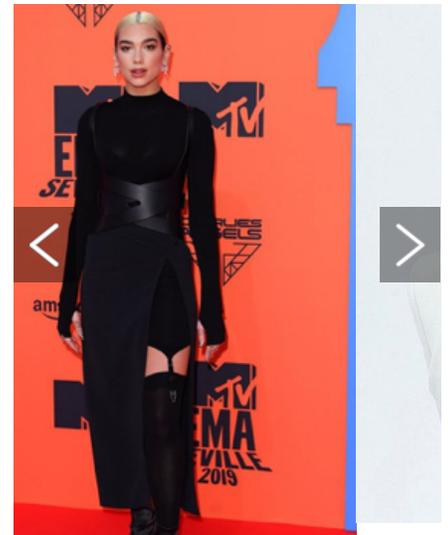


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think they should do is go into the backroom and take John and George and Mary and put them to work out front. They know more than the president of the company. How can you expect a guy who's been working in the shipping department for 10 years not to know the business?"

McGee added, "It sometimes still happens. I walk into some textile firm for an appointment and I happen to be carrying a package under one arm. The secretary at the front desk, without even bothering to look up, says, 'Leave it.'"

McGee, Bill Smith and Barrie were among the black designers who were to have been featured in J. Robert Wagoner's documentary about the dynamics of creativity and marketing within the fashion world, and the challenge of entrepreneurship for blacks on Seventh Avenue. The project was canned because NET's program manager and the executive producer considered the subject to be irrelevant. Wagoner, the winner of four national honors for documentaries and TV, was baffled. His objective was to "use the experience acquired doing that film to create a worthwhile positive how-to film on the fashion industry." He wrote to WWD at that time, "I have not produced a documentary product that was as good as that film had started to be."

McGee understood the art of self-promotion. In 1967, he was among the designers at Gimbels in Philadelphia for "A Fashion Affair With New York" — a Clairol Total Look promotional idea. With help from "The Newlywed Game" host Bob Eubanks, McGee "explained the whys and wherefores of his fashions to a breathless audience," according to a WWD report at that time. In 1972, McGee opened a more affordable sportswear division called Pieces, featuring items that retailed from \$6.75 to \$19.75.

Bethann Hardison, a former model, agent and longtime supporter of diversity in fashion, recalled Saturday how Bloomingdale's invested in McGee because they believed in him and wanted to help him. "When I think of Arthur McGee, it reminds me of what was good and is long gone now," she said.

McGee also was a trailblazer in the nontraditional bridal business, creating more of-the-moment looks such as a dress made with layers of organza over Chinese silk, topped off with a very spare jacket with high vents on each side of the back. Another option was a pair of white wide-legged pants and a crepe blouse to wear with the aforementioned jacket. In the years that followed, he designed more wedding gowns than he could keep track of. “One after the other — that’s why I had an aneurysm, because of wedding dresses,” he once said.

In researching McGee’s career as part of an event committee organized to pay tribute to him by the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)’s Costume Institute in 2009, the designer B. Michael said that he was “just blown away after learning what his contribution and legacy was all about.” The fact that he was running a major Seventh Avenue business in 1957 was “unheard of. As a black American designer, who listened to him explain what his experiences were like back then — meaning the prejudice that he faced — I find it tremendous that he was still able to get up every morning and go do it,” Michael said. “That gave me a new kind of conviction that I can’t just be a fashion designer. It really has to be about, ‘How do we disrupt and continue that trail that Arthur McGee and many others began?’ Frankly speaking, it’s still very much the same in many ways — especially in the luxury space of fashion.”

Upon receiving a lifetime achievement award at the Harvey’s Bristol Crème’s Tribute to the Black Designer in November 1981, McGee said, “It’s more difficult to succeed now than in the Fifties when I started in fashion. But it’s all about green,” he said referring to the bottom line of profit.

He also mentored whatever designers dropped by his studio. “I wanted to do something all the time and not just go and sit in a design room and sketch,” McGee said.

Unable to remember when McGee was not in her life, Tyson said she spent many hours at his atelier just watching him work, creating something from nothing. “His talent is beyond words. I call him ‘the grandfather of all black designers.’ He was out there before anyone else I knew, who followed,” Tyson said. “I have always been slight and he was doing a big look — billowing

pants and a jacket and coats. I said, ‘I can’t wear that. I’m too small.’ But when he put it on me, you could tell it was done by an artist. There was nothing about it that made me look like I was wearing my grandma’s coat and pants. It fit perfectly.”

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