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Careers in Fashion Design

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Careers in Fashion Design

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Fashion design is a popular subject of study at many colleges and universities around the world. Creative minded students are drawn to fashion design because it offers them the opportunity to express themselves artistically by designing apparel products. Fashion designers share characteristics in common with other artists. They have an inner drive to create. A historically recurring feature of artists' personal biographies is the notion of their "calling" to the profession (Menger 2012: 141). As with other artists, aspiring fashion designers "have a strong emotional involvement with fashion" (Skov 2012: 278). They find camaraderie and recognition among their peers. However, like acting, singing, and other creative industries, many are "called" to be fashion designers, but few are "chosen."

Fashion design is a highly competitive field. Thousands of fashion students graduate each year hoping to "make it big" in one of the world's fashion capitals. Some graduates aim to have their own fashion labels. Because of the considerable investment and time needed to launch a fashion business, few succeed as independent designers (Skov 2012: 279). Many others find that it is not easy to get a good-paying design job in an established fashion company. Yet, now more than ever, the fashion industry needs graduates who understand design (Corner 2014).

For every successful fashion designer or fashion brand, a legion of employees helps to design, develop, produce and sell the collections that bear the company's name. Design is a critically important component, but it is only one component in creating a fashion product. The fashion business is a complex, fragmented industry with lots of opportunities for talented young professionals. According to the *Business of Fashion*, design and development of samples is only the first step; securing sales is step two, production is step three, and marketing is step four (Amed 2014). For all fashion companies, these functions are intertwined. This expands the responsibilities of today's fashion designer. Most production takes place in factories in low-wage countries that are represented by vendors. Consequently, it takes constant vigilance by design and development teams to ensure production of accurately sized, assembled, and finished fashion products for on-time delivery.

So if you have a passion for fashion, know that many job titles exist in addition to "designer." It is the goal of this article to introduce you to the range of careers in fashion design through biographies of recent college graduates.

Biographies of Recent Graduates

To gain more information about exactly what fashion graduates do in their jobs, we polled ten recent graduates from the University of Rhode Island (URI) who work in the U.S. fashion industry. The Textiles, Fashion Merchandising and Design Department at URI offers a bachelor of science degree with three specializations: fashion design,

fashion merchandising, and textiles. The Department also offers a business-focused bachelor of science program in textile marketing. Many of the graduates in the fashion design specialization enter the design world as assistant designers, production assistants, sourcing specialists, and technical designers.

Using a combination of LinkedIn, Facebook, and email, we corresponded with alumni from our program who concentrated in fashion design. We asked the following questions:

1. What title do you currently hold and for which company/designer?
 - a. What is your day-to-day work like?
 - b. What are your responsibilities?
2. Which classes in TMD help you with your career?
3. How do you find the scope/future of Fashion Design in terms of career opportunities and options?
4. Why should the students choose Fashion Design as their undergraduate or postgraduate major?
5. Finally, would you like to share any best practice tips with future students and practitioners?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

All of the graduates received Bachelor of Science degrees in Textiles, Fashion Merchandising and Design. Some earned a second bachelor's degree in another subject. Others minored in art or theater costuming. A majority participated in some form of study abroad to prepare them for work in the global fashion industry. Many completed internships. All of them showed their collections in the TMD Department's annual fashion show and were passionate about their chosen major.

Notice the different job titles and the variety of roles performed by the graduates. Also observe the technical skills required to be successful in fashion design, particularly the knowledge of textiles, patternmaking, merchandising and retailing. Color is an important component of fashion design that is addressed. The graduates work in companies that range from luxury to mass market, and from local to global. Some of them work in New York City, but not everyone.

Amanda Ravener, 2012

Amanda works as an *associate designer* for Jones New York Knitwear – Collection. The Jones Group, headquartered in New York, is a large corporation that designs, markets, and wholesales over 35 fashion brands focusing on apparel, footwear, jeans, jewelry and handbags. The company also sells directly to consumers through specialty retail stores and outlet stores.

Amanda started out as an assistant designer, but was promoted to associate designer after twenty months. Her daily routine ranges from designing necklines for the next season's tops to preparing samples for sales meetings. She also updates charts for overseas vendors stipulating changes for garments about to go into production. She manages overseas production through the charts, which have sketches of the garments, style numbers, stitch information, colorways and delivery dates. She handles all trims, which means that she designs and selects belts, buckles, embellishments and jewels; she approves the samples sent by vendors before they enter production. Another responsibility, which she enjoys a great deal, is researching trends and providing design inspiration to the design director. She constantly uses Photoshop and Illustrator. Also, she knows what has sold in previous seasons to forecast what will sell in future seasons.

"There are many more aspects to fashion design than designing garments," Amanda notes. A designer's job also involves fabric research, planning, merchandising, and sales. The courses she took while in school that she now finds most valuable are apparel construction, textile science, and fashion history. Amanda advises aspiring fashion designers to "do what you love." She minored in Art and Art History. She studied in Florence, Italy for two summers.

Katie Imswiler, 2009

Katie is *founder, designer, and creative director* of her own company, IMSY swimwear, based in Rhode Island. She has a few employees, but mostly she is responsible for all aspects of developing her own line of swimwear. This includes developing storyboards; doing the initial patternmaking and grading; designing textile prints, collections and web content; overseeing production; traveling to expositions and shows to sell the product. To help pay the bills, she also works in design and product development for a local manufacturer.

IMSY is designed for young women who like to surf. The unique designs are fully reversible and have no ties to catch on a surfboard when riding the waves. IMSY is sold in over thirty stores and through several online retailers.

Katie minored in Studio Art. She studied abroad in Florence, Italy for one semester. She wishes she had taken more courses in textiles; she says that she references the textbook for her textiles class at least once a week.

Alison Van Hemelrijck, 2007

Alison's job title is *designer/developer* of women's accessories and printables (e.g., tee shirts, hats, caps, jewelry, socks) at OBEY Clothing, a medium-sized company based in Los Angeles that designs and produces men's and women's streetwear basics. The founder's vision grew out of the punk rock and skateboarding countercultures. The company is known for printing graphics on tee shirts that bring awareness to different charities, social issues, and relevant artists. Most of the tee shirts are made in Los Angeles.

Alison's responsibilities include designing and developing all women's accessories and printed body wear. She creates the original designs, drafts the technical flats, and builds the technical packs for vendors, who will manufacture the product. Her typical day begins by answering emails from overseas vendors in China and India who produce the company's clothing. She meets with overseas vendors' agents and visits domestic factories. She is constantly monitoring her designs from creation to finished product: she supervises fit sessions, approves fabric swatches and trims, and develops specialty washes and dye treatments. She works with the other designers to develop seasonal mood boards, and she makes presentations at sales meetings.

Alison previously worked at BCBG and 7 For All Mankind as a technical designer. She credits her patternmaking classes with preparing her, as a designer, for communicating with patternmakers to achieve the correct fit for a company's creations. She completed a minor in Philosophy along with five business courses.

Alexandra Burke, 2010

Alexandra is *associate sweater designer* at Ralph Lauren in the Childrenswear Division, which includes babies, boys, girls, and pets. She sketches designs, making sure that they fit the overall image of the brand. She grades the patterns for each size range, sends out the specs for producing the sweaters, and approves trims. One of her responsibilities is approving lab dips which are swatches of fabric test dyed to match a color standard. She makes patterns and completes the layouts for the factories. She uses the CAD skills she learned in college, particularly Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator, on a daily basis.

Alexandra says: "I love fashion." "By working in fashion, I never consider it a job; it is a passion." She started out designing for the Anne Klein brand at Jones Apparel Group. She has been working in New York City since graduating from URI. She recommends starting out in a company that represents the kind of career you'd like to have. She also recommends doing several internships to gain experience before entering the industry after graduation. Alexandra minored in Studio Art.

Nicholas Cloutier, 2012

Nick is a *design assistant* at Naeem Khan in New York City. Khan is the grandson of an Indian textile entrepreneur who came to the U.S. to study, but ended up working for the famous American designer Halston. His eponymous company, founded in 2003, specializes in beaded and embroidered gowns and wedding dresses for the luxury market. His gowns are worn by actresses and celebrities as well as Michelle Obama, the U.S. First Lady.

Nick is responsible for production of four ready-to-wear collections and two bridal collections per year in collaboration with Naeem, who is head designer, and other assistants. He has a wide range of duties including preparation of mood boards, ordering fabric from domestic and overseas sources, preparing color standards and tech packages for overseas vendors, approving the quality of embroidered samples and print strike-offs.

He supervises production of in-house samples and fittings, and he manages design interns.

Flat pattern and draping are the classes that help him the most in his job. He says, “Pattern making is one of those skills that separates the weak from the strong. If you can become fast and accurate at making patterns, you are worth your weight in gold.” Nick observes that designers who can sketch and drape are “a dime a dozen, but do they know how to source fabric, or negotiate prices with factories, or write elaborate tech packs?” Despite the challenges in the fashion design field, Nick says you should choose design “if it is what you were born to do and that it is in the essence of your soul.”

Nick earned a degree in Italian while earning his degree in fashion.

Sarah Bolton, 2011

Sarah is *associate technical designer* at Jade Marketing Group, a company located in West Hartford, Connecticut that designs and develops moderately priced women’s denim jeans. It creates its own in-house brands that are sold by department stores as well as lines developed for private label customers. “Private label” means that one company, in this case Jade, does all the design and manufacture for another company, which might be an apparel brand or a retail store. The denim industry is subject to fashion change in that jeans are constantly being tweaked for cut, fit, stitching, wash, and distressing. Sarah spends her days working out problems with the style, fit, and finish of jeans being produced by overseas vendors. Her work includes reviewing the patterns that come back to Jade for approval.

Sarah credits her apparel production class with introducing her to the supply chain of an apparel product. She is skilled in flat pattern, which allows her to communicate with the overseas patternmakers when problems occur at points along the pipeline. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in French at the same time as completing her bachelor’s degree in TMD. She studied abroad for a semester in Paris, France.

Cindy Yang, 2012

Cindy is *assistant technical designer* for Sachin & Babi, a contemporary women’s fashion company headquartered in New York City. Sachin and Babi Ahluwalia are the husband-and-wife design team who founded the label after working for many years in textile design. Their lines are available at retail stores in North and South America.

As technical designer, Cindy digitizes patterns created by the patternmaker, develops technical packages, and prepares for and attends fittings. Sometimes she creates computerized patterns. An important part of her job is to communicate with the factories that manufacture the product. She must make sure that the aesthetic is maintained between the showroom samples and the products that are ultimately shipped to the stores.

Cindy is originally from Taiwan. She came to the US to study fashion, but also to perfect her English. She participated in the TMD Department's winter study tour to London and Paris.

Alexa Knox, 2010

Alexa is a *colorist* at Ann Inc., the parent company of the Ann Taylor and LOFT specialty retailers of fashionable women's clothing. The Ann Taylor brand is known for high quality working women's attire. The company is vertical in that it designs, produces, and retails all the products sold in its stores. Headquarters are in New York City.

Alexa's job involves working with design teams on development of seasonal color palettes. She reviews all color throughout their many lines so that products work well together in the stores. She reviews lab dips and compares sample colors under different light sources (daylight, incandescent, and tungsten). The design, color science and textile sciences courses she took as a student have been invaluable to her in her work.

Alexa minored in Studio Art. She participated in the TMD Department's winter study tour to London and Paris.

Ginger Dominguez, 2007

Ginger is *studio manager* at Marchesa, a New York company founded by British-born designers Georgina Chapman and Keren Craig. The brand is known for elegant evening gowns and wedding dresses. Marchesa gowns are favorites on the red carpet. The ready-to-wear lines are sold in exclusive stores around the world.

Ginger is directly responsible for the workflow of cutters and sample makers in the in-house studio. She supervises the couture, bridal, and Notte lines. She coordinates with the design team to ensure that all garments are ready on time for special clients, runway shows, and production fittings. She says that her patternmaking classes have been essential; she also cites textile history and theatrical costuming as helpful for the luxury market.

Ginger minored in Theater Costume Design. She attended Kent State University's New York City Studio for one semester.

Sarah Smith Combes, 2006

Sarah's job title is *project development lead* for New Balance Athletic Shoe, Inc. in the Lifestyle Product Division. New Balance is headquartered in Boston, Massachusetts. The company designs and manufactures athletic apparel as well as footwear. New Balance also has retail stores. The majority of the design and marketing takes place in the United States. About 25% of the manufacturing is done in the U.S., particularly the custom athletic shoes, which can be completed in two days at their domestic factory. Sarah is responsible for the development of around 150 unique footwear styles each year; she also supervises a team of product developers. A big part of the job is communicating with manufacturing facilities in Vietnam, China and Indonesia. At any time, she might be

working on development calendars for three different seasons, referred to in business as “quarters” of the year. For her product lines, she coordinates production of salesmen’s samples and finalizes product specifications. She is always on the lookout for ways to improve design and production in order to get new products to market more quickly.

Sarah cites textile science as a key component of her knowledge base as well as patternmaking, product development and retailing channels. She points out that while most American companies do the majority of their manufacturing overseas, the design function happens in their U.S. offices. Thus, many job opportunities will continue to exist for college graduates.

Sarah minored in French and Theatrical Costume Design. She studied at the Sorbonne in Paris for one semester.

Conclusions

This article reveals multiple career possibilities for young people who have studied fashion design. Programs that focus solely on the creative side of fashion disadvantage graduates who are trying to make it in this competitive field. Increased opportunities exist for graduates who have studied the science of textiles and color, the technical aspects of creating fashion products – particularly patternmaking and computer aided design – as well as marketing.

The URI graduates echoed the findings of the research mentioned in the beginning of this article. They advise young people to go into fashion if that is what they love. Even though the fashion industry is intensely competitive, they find the field immensely rewarding. Fashion is a fast-paced industry, and the days go by quickly. Every day is different.

The graduates offer aspiring fashion designers one last piece of advice. Keep up with technology, particularly computer-aided design. Take classes that work with Illustrator, Photoshop and specialized software like In Design. Having technical skills puts a graduate in a different category than a graduate who knows only the creative side of the fashion business.

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