

Only the fittest survive the fashion biz

Viewpoint by Margaret Wood, Navajo/Seminole

Clothing has long been a method of displaying individuality and self-expression for all people. Today, Native people wear suits, dresses and jeans like the rest of the world, but display their heritage through tribal influenced garments. Many Indian fashion designers, mostly women, make it their life's work to create tradition-based, contemporary apparel.

The Fashion business is a difficult taskmaster. Design, construction, manufacturing, quality control, marketing, distribution and cash flow are just a few of the factors that have to be balanced to be successful. In this relatively new industry, there are a number of Indian of Indian fashion designers who have managed to survive for years in the business.

In this issue, you'll read about several Navajo designers-Virginia Yazzie Ballenger, Bess Yellowhair and Aresta LaRusso-who demonstrate longevity and dedication to the field. All three have transformed their fashion careers by opening retail stores. Virginia has operated a wholesale showroom since 1989 and recently opened the Navajo Spirit retail store in downtown Gallup, New Mexico. In 1999, Bess Yellowhair opened the Edgewater Gift Shop-the only Indian fashion retail store on an Indian reservation at the Navajoland Days Inn in St. Michael's, Arizona. Bess, her mother and seven sisters have produced clothing for thirty years.

Aresta LaRusso opened Deerwater Designs, in Flagstaff, Arizona, in 1994. Her storefront is home to her own creations, a variety of casual-dressy women's wear inspired by Navajo and other tribal clothing styles. No less dedicated is Jennifer Tsoie (Navajo), also of Flagstaff, who has produced award winning elaborate appliquéd jackets and velveteen separates since 1985. Bonnie Woody (Navajo), of Ganado, Arizona, has created contemporary garments inspired by Navajo and other tribal clothing styles since 1990.

Established designers throughout the rest of the country include Quawpaw/Osage designer Ardina Moore, who has operated her store, Buffalo Sun, since 1983 in Miami, Oklahoma. She produces a variety of contemporary-to-traditional fashions that borrow from traditional aesthetics. Of her work, she likes to say she makes everything "from buckskins to silks". Out of Norman, Oklahoma, Patta LT Joest (Choctaw) has operated The Dancing Rabbit since 1987. She reduces a high-fashion line based on American Indian traditional clothing and legend. Margaret Wheeler (Chickasaw/Choctaw), who lives in Joplin, Missouri, has been hand-weaving garments inspired by Indian clothing styles and Indian mythology since 1980.

Celebrated designers of the Northwest Coast include Dorothy Grant (Haida) and Betty David (Spokane). Dorothy opened her elegant Vancouver, British Columbia, Boutique in 1994 after having worked since 1977 as a button blanket maker and fashion designer of garments adorned with northwest Coast-style designs. Betty has been creating shearling coats decorated with Northwest Coast embellishments since 1994. She opened Betty David's Shearlings store in Seattle, Washington, in 1998 and will open a New York store later this year.

These women deserve kudos for surviving the challenges of the fashion biz. She is a demanding mistress and those who have survived it for six or more years would be the first to warn newcomers, "Don't quit your day job." Most designers learned to sew as children, sewed their own clothing, then progressed to producing garments for sale, usually at Indian fairs and markets. Many work full time, and sew and sell on the side. Some wholesale their work to retail stores. Others participate in or produce fashions shows to generate sales. Many have faithful clients who buy over the years and spread the word among their friends. A few have opened retail shops. Several are reaping the benefits of e-commerce and have set up Web sites.

The established Indian designers mentioned above have demonstrated their dedication to this work, promising a strong and vibrant future.