

Origin and Development of Aloha Shirt

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Introduction

The functional use of creative colors and the amazing artistic renderings in aloha shirts certainly capture the simplicity and spirit of Hawaii. The innocence with which Hawaiians formerly translated their life and heritage onto fabric ranks these shirts with the finest of American folk art. The old-guard designers considered integrity toward their work a factor as essential as technique, and this most certainly is a lost art form. Technology and mass-production have rendered obsolete the artistry and individuality there once was. Today, the local shops carry plenty of tropical garments, but the original silk, rayon, or cotton shirts are not to be found. Most of what is offered now shares the identical, mass-produced, synthetic prints. In this study I considerate the origin and development the aloha shirts as seen in its wearable arts.

Main Subjects

1. Origin of aloha shirt

"ALOHA" is the Hawaiian word that extends the warmth, friendliness, and pride of the Hawaiian people to their island's visitors. The aloha shirt truly symbolizes aloha spirit to islanders and visitors alike. In July of 1936, a shirtmaker named Ellery J.Chun coined the term "Aloha Shirt", an apt characterization for such an eloquent garment. He was the first to make the shirt on a commercial basis—through Wong's Products, which previously had manufactured work clothes. The shirt sold for as little as a dollar in Chun's own King-Smith store.

The early shirts utilized traditional Polynesian designs, the most notable being motifs from tapa cloth. Tapa cloth is the traditional art form of the South Pacific islands. The motifs were produced by hand painting or stenciling of designs left by the impressions that were hand carved on blokes of wood.

In the mid 1930s, the growing number of visits by tourists, as well as United States Army and Navy personnel stationed in Hawaii, increased the souvenir market. To meet this demand, two companies underwent a transition from tailor made to factory-made production of sportswear. In that period the fabric generally was designed in Hawaii, printed in California, and sent back to Hawaii to be manufactured into shirts. Two of the most popular prints of the time were the "shell tapa" Polynesian design and the "aloha tapa".

2. Patterned Shirts

The designs and imagery of hibiscus, ukeleles, and leis prevalent in the patterned shirts were so popular that garment manufacturers employed innovative means to supply the demand. While maintaining the basic print, they simply changed the background tints, allowing customers a choice of favorite color combinations. The more popular the print in any series of these shirts, the more numerous the color changes. For example the hibiscus pattern was produced in as many as twelve different color variations. The reason this was practical was inherent in the silk-screen process of fabric printing itself. All-over pattern that were made to repeat themselves on the long bolts of fabric were the work of the designer himself and not a computer, which does that task today. Depending on the design, there was always a proper size to use the image on the shirt, and these shirts did it well.

3. Border Shirts

Probably the most artistic and striking of the Hawaiian shirts are the border shirts. Designs were specifically created to take into account all the particular areas on a shirt. They were cut a bit longer than the other types of shirts in order to feature their handsome designs, which were either centered in the middle of the front and back sections or worked to the seams. Subordinate designs were also worked to the sides or around the bottom, thus suggesting the name-tag border shirts. Some prints never repeat themselves within the same shirt. The more collectible shirts have patterns that match along the front plackets, the pockets, the side seams, and even the collar, so that the design is not interrupted. With all this in mind, the manufacturers still produced these artistic creations with little concern for cost or waste.

4. Picture Shirts

Picture shirts were a unique breed. They involved the use of actual photographs that were adapted to the photo silkscreening process. Today there are merchandized methods of achieving a similar effect photographically through light sensitive emulsions on fabric, but the earlier shirts were hand screened by highly skilled craftsmen. Because full-color process printing was costly and the possibility existed that misregistering of the colors could ruin entire bolts of fabric, many mass-produced picture shirts were one-color photo prints in blue, red, brown, or green. The full-color shirts that were produced, with their airbrushed sunsets and radiant palm trees, are suggestive of collages and remain some of the most appealing offshoots of aloha shirts ever produced. Shirt picturing scenes of note in California, Florida, and New York were also produced in this process.

5. Hollywood Hawaiian

Hollywood was greatly instrumental in popularizing Hawaiian fashions to a worldwide audience. The appeal of the Hawaiian image was exuded often in Hollywood productions,

ranging from Dorothy Lamour's sarong to Elvis Presley's shirts in his popular movie "Blue Hawaii", and its best-selling record. Bob Hope and Bing Crosby traveled the tropical trail more than once in their "Road To..." film series. Ginger Rogers had seductive gowns made from Hawaiian fabric, Montgomery Clift, Burt Lancaster, Ernest Borgnine, and Frank Sinatra sported Hawaiian shirts made by the Cisco Company. Even political celebrities such as Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower gave magazines cause to write articles about their leisure-time tropical wardrobes.

6. Made in Japan

The reality was that Japan could manufacture and produce quality garments for less than Hawaiian made goods cost, a fact that still holds true today. Japanese influence in shirt production became particularly evident in the late 1940s, although silk and rayon materials were being imported from Japan as early as the 1920s. Production accelerated after the war, and fabric designs began to change. Traditional motifs were being substituted for by tigers, eagles, and dragons; Diamond Head was replaced by Mount Fuji. Among the major department stores, the J.C. Penney chain laid claim to the Japanese-produced Hawaiian garments during the 1950s. Hawaii was a melting pot of cultures, and the postwar designs reflected the changes.

Conclusion

The genuine aloha shirt is now regarded as a work of art and avidly sought out by collectors. When tourism came to Hawaii in the late 1920s, these unusual shirts were among the first things that visitors had to have. Local designers and tailors worked quickly to meet the demand and began to expand the range of decoration to include palm trees and romantic beaches, tropical jungles and volcanoes, exotic flowers and scenes from Polynesian legend. Therefore the aloha shirt had been born. Aloha shirts are dresses those display mystery and charm of Hawaii and cultural symbols of condensed Hawaiian mind. Hawaiian fashion went international, leaving the spirit of local design far behind. It became less definitive of Hawaii and more worldly.

References

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