

Local designers go global to create their unique styles

Mary Chao • Staff writer • November 14, 2010

When you think fashion design, you don't think of Rochester.

Sure, Hickey-Freeman and Adrian Jules outfit businessmen, but runway-style clothes? All those designers are in New York City and California, right?

Not necessarily.

Rochester's creative lifestyle, family-friendly culture and low cost of living have helped foster a cottage industry. The inaugural Fashion Week last month showcased some of our fresh new talent, but some artists actually have been designing from Rochester for years.

Some also make their own clothes. Others, like Nita Brown, take advantage of technology to make it work. Known as converters, they design their lines locally and outsource their manufacturing at plants from India to Italy. Brown relies on seamstresses in her native Ghana.

Even people steeped in fashion can be surprised by the level of local work. "I knew there was talent in Rochester; I didn't know the depth of it," says Meghan Mundy, owner of In the Closet wardrobe consulting services in Brighton, who made the discovery in her research as chief fashion officer for Fashion Week of Rochester.

Creative influence

Nita Brown came to Rochester a decade ago to work for Eastman Kodak Co. after earning her MBA from Georgetown University. In her own wardrobe, she has always combined styles from Ghana with Western influences, and people would often stop her on the street and ask her where she purchased her clothing. Two close friends encouraged her to start a design business.

She left Kodak in 2004 and actually started two

businesses: MansaWear, her design company, and a travel company called Red Sandal Tours. She stays in Rochester because she wants to raise her daughter, Mansa, here.

Ghanaians have a very distinct sense of style that's different from other parts of Africa, Brown says. The clothes are form-fitting and figure-flattering.

Take for example the Kaba n' Slit — which translates to shirt and skirt, Brown says. Ghanaians wear these outfits in an array of fabrics, including the very popular batik print.

Brown puts her own touches on the Kaba n' Slit, such as a yellow polka-dot shirt, where she enhanced the polka dots with embroidery and flounced the skirt in a mermaid shape.

In her attic studio in her Park Avenue-area home, Brown custom measures each of her clients, then has the garments made by seamstresses in Ghana. Brown hosts trunk shows at her home for clients twice a year and sells her apparel online at www.MansaWear.com.

Custom-made clothing is much more figure-flattering than clothing that's purchased off the shelf, Brown says. Curvier women especially benefit from a dress that's custom fit, she adds, noting that MansaWear is not just for the model-thin clientele.

"I cater to every woman," she says.



Designer Nita Brown's clothing line, Mansa-Wear, is influenced by Ghanaian fashion; form-fitting and figure-flattering. (MATT WITTMAYER)

Testing the waters

For an artist, a city the size of Rochester is perfect for testing the waters in the design business, says Zach Bentley of Twelve 21 [Clothing](#) in Rochester.

"You can feel the talent here in a smaller market," says Bentley, 23. "You won't get swallowed up."

Bentley grew up in Webster and studied business at Monroe Community College. He used \$5,000 from his own [savings](#) to start his clothing company, while working two different jobs as a waiter.

"I couldn't get a loan," he says.

Bentley grew up in a creative family with a mother who is a painter. He enjoys designing and considers his sewing machine to be his artistic tool, much like a sculptor uses clay to mold or a painter uses brushes to create.

Bentley follows urban trends in designing his T-shirts, henleys and hoodies emblazoned with his signature Twelve 21 logo (or 12 21).

While he enjoys the camaraderie of designers in Rochester, he is currently [saving](#) up to relocate to New York City, where he thinks he can grow his business.

Bentley's target is twentysomethings, and he sells online at [www.twelve21clothing.com](#), during fashion events and at G Inc. on Monroe Avenue, which sells the work of six area designers.

"There's a lot of creative talent in Rochester," says G Inc. owner Victor Gomez, 33, of Rochester, who also has his own clothing line. "Until I opened my store, I didn't realize how many designers there were here."

The G Inc. line by Gomez has the signature G Inc. logo and shirts and hoodies with sayings like "Stay humble" and "Stay focused."

Gomez, like many Rochester designers, needs to be creative outside the studio as well. Since he doesn't have a large marketing budget, he'll use what he calls guerrilla tactics such as trying to get visiting celebrities to wear his clothes. He aims big: Nicole Polizzi (Snooki of *Jersey Shore* fame), who didn't bite. But he succeeded with hip-hop artist Method Man. All in a day's work for a Rochester designer.

Staying the course

Lucky Nahum, 55, grew up in the clothing business in Rochester. He is the son of the late Quint and Angela Nahum, a master tailor and seamstress who ran Nahum's men's apparel shop in Brighton. He joined the family business in 1978 and worked

there for 16 years before venturing into design, selling his men's shirts, which are made in Italy, at high-end shops around the country. In Rochester, they can be found at Eye-Candy Clothing.

"You have to innovate in this business," says Nahum, who's been in the design business since 1994.

Since the downturn in the economy coupled with the desire to be home more, Nahum started selling his lines under the brands Identity, X and "x te da me" directly to consumers through [www.alwaysgetlucky.com](#) and has ventured into social networking such as Facebook and Twitter.

The business is serious, but he also has a bit of fun. He has always loved the touch and feel of textiles, so he uses high-end woven cotton. Fans of his work also enjoy the silk he uses for his Italian-made ties and soft knits for his line of casual wear.

He adds his signature V-shaped notch on the back of collars and includes a tag that reads, "Really Really Made in Italy."

"That's a joke in the industry," Nahum says, referring to a practice whereby some clothing bearing a "Made in Italy" tag is actually made in a country *near* Italy.

Nahum, whose heritage is Italian-Jewish from North Africa, combines European and American aesthetics

in his designs. A knitwear line features casual favorites such as hoodies and sweatpants with a big handprint.

Nahum works out of a third-floor studio in his Park Avenue-area home. He has made his company, Always Get Lucky Inc., a family affair. Wife Maria is president and CEO, and she holds down the fort during Nahum's frequent trips to Europe.

As an artist, he never knows where his ideas will come from, whether it's looking out his window or looking at an exhibit at the Guggenheim.

"An artist should get out," Nahum says. "You need to see to create."

One of the latest trends is, not surprisingly, inspired by the AMC series *Mad Men*: skinny neckties.

So trendy design *is* alive and well in Rochester. Discovering that should be no surprise, says Shawn Dunwoody, owner of Four Walls Gallery and one of the Fashion Week organizers. Rochester has always had a good arts scene, "helping the creative juices flow."

MCHAO@DemocratandChronicle.com