DIRECTOR’S LETTER

RECYCLING FASHION’S REMNANTS: RESIDENTIAL AND COMMERCIAL TEXTILE WASTE

2016 NATIONAL DESIGN AWARDS GALA

THE 21ST-CENTURY NEIGHBORHOOD LIBRARY

GETTING TO WORK IN NEW ORLEANS: TEN YEARS OF PARTNERSHIP WITH COOPER HEWITT’S EDUCATION TEAM

HARLEM IN THE JAZZ AGE

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DEAR COOPER HEWITT FRIENDS,

Offering a cultural experience only possible at America’s design museum, Cooper Hewitt has seen its audiences burgeon and break records this past year. Telling design’s story through exhibitions that expand and deepen the public understanding of design, we encourage visitors to actively engage in the design process and discover how every one of us is equipped to be a creative problem-solver. As we continue to innovate the Cooper Hewitt experience in the galleries, we are also working hard to make sure our resources are available to all, raise our profile as a global voice for design’s influence, and strengthen our ties with design communities here and abroad.

Twitter lit up with shout-outs from design fans around the world the day we officially announced that the entire contents of the permanent collection were now online, an accomplishment made possible by a transformative gift from the Morton and Barbara Mandel Family Foundation. We’ve opened doors to thirty centuries of design history and are reaching new audiences on a global scale. And celebrating Cooper Hewitt’s role as the nation’s design museum, Trustee Shelby Gans and her husband Fred hosted a very special evening for Cooper Hewitt in her beautiful San Francisco home. We look forward to collaborating with all the new friends who joined us to celebrate the opening of Scraps: Fashion, Textiles, and Creative Reuse and By the People: Designing a Better America.

This issue of Design Journal, we take an in-depth look at the larger issues that inspired these two important exhibitions, as well as enjoy an enticing preview of what’s ahead at Cooper Hewitt for 2017. A breathtaking installation that transforms something as prosaic as textile waste into heartfelt poetry, Scraps illuminates the work of three textile designers from different parts of the world—Luisa Cevese, Christina Kim, and Reiko Sudo—who have developed innovative and sophisticated reuses of textile materials and resources. With the vision of these three women as inspiration, turn to page 5 to read a passionate appeal for greater accountability for textile waste and wider services for textile recycling. Written by Jessica Scheiber, founder of the textile recycling service FABSCRAP and longtime advocate for recycling and sustainability in New York City, “Recycling Fashion’s Remnants” reminds us of the important role we all play in reducing the massive and dangerous amounts of textile waste generated each year.

NOVEMBER 2016
“How do we create the future that we wish to see?” asks Darren Walker, Director of the Ford Foundation, in the catalog for our exhibition By the People: Designing a Better America. Throughout the museum and out in the world, Cooper Hewitt directly engages audiences in design thinking to generate and realize new ideas. On page 8, we interview Amy Peterson, founder of Rebel Nell, a jewelry design company featured in the garden, and thank you for everything you do to make Cooper Hewitt soar! Sincerely,

Caroline Baumann
Director
@baumstagram
@baumtweet
facebook.com/cooperhewitt
cooperhewitt.org

Maison Lesage’s extraordinary embroidery for France’s haute couture fashion houses is the subject of our International Design by Hand series, made possible with the generous support of Van Cleef & Arpels. It was wonderful to have Smithsonian Secretary David Skorton on campus the day of our hands-on workshop led by Lesage’s talented embroiderers.

This year, New York City residents throw away 200,000 tons of clothing and apparel and businesses trash eight million tons in landfills. What is the solution to keep the city from being buried?

Where there is discussion of textiles, let there be talk of trash. Balancing the glamour with the waste is a necessity as fashion finds its way into the landfill at an alarming rate. Every year, New York City residents discard 200,000 tons of clothing, shoes, accessories, and textiles. Fashion is now 6 percent of New York City’s residential waste.

It can be hard to visualize this amount of discarded material without context. Picture instead the granite and limestone towers and steel wire cables of the iconic Brooklyn Bridge. The weight of the discarded clothing is the equivalent to the weight of the Brooklyn Bridge—fourteen times over. The bridge itself can hold just over 90,000 tons. To hold the weight of clothing thrown out, we would need the suspension capacity of two Brooklyn Bridges. Every year. Just for New York City’s textile waste.

The crisis of residential clothing disposal has been well documented. The EPA estimates the average U.S. citizen will throw out 70 pounds of textiles every year. And though 1.9 million tons of clothing are donated, reused, or recycled, that is only 15 percent of the total textile waste. The other 85 percent, or 10.75 million tons, is going straight into the ground. Every year. Just in the United States.

It’s time now to make a critical distinction. Not all waste is counted equally. Commercial waste is NOT included in the numbers above. Residential waste, as described above, measures the discards of people, families, or individuals. It’s the trash that is created by the use of items. It is also known as “postconsumer waste.” Commercial waste measures the discards of businesses. It’s the trash that is created in the development and production of items. It is also known as “preconsumer waste.” As it relates to textiles, the preconsumer waste of fashion includes fabric headers, cutting room scraps, unsellable samples, muslim mock-ups, and overstock bolts. As with a casuka cutter, when a pattern is cut from a sheet of fabric, there will be remnants.

By Jessica Schreiber

Residential and commercial textile waste

By the People: Designing a Better America

Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum

We are committed to reporting tonnages picked up, to share the destination of the material, to characterize it by its contents. According to Annie Leonard in her book The Story of Stuff.
Industry manufacturers face obstacles to textile recycling in the areas of scale, space, and shipping. While excess bolts and large remnant pieces can be donated or resold, a single designer or brand may produce more fabric scraps and cuttings than local arts organizations or schools can use. Conversely, a single designer or brand may not have the available storage to accumulate the high minimum volumes required by industrial recyclers. In both cases, the designer or brand must also plan for the transportation of the material as well.

There are market challenges. The rise of fast fashion has repercussions reverberating beyond the residential waste stream. The traditional non-profit funds the operational costs of processing donations with the revenue from what can be resold in thrift stores. As the quality of donated clothing declines, the proportion for which an individual item can be resold follows suit. Therefore, the nonprofit must focus its resources on procuring and sorting donations to recover the garments of highest quality for the current season. There is little or no resale value in mixed-fiber textile waste unless it is sorted specifically by fiber content. Many nonprofits find it’s not worth the time or effort to adapt their sorting methods to examine it, and prefer not to accept preconsumer textile waste at all.

There is also a lack of technology. Shockingly, all textile sorting (of both pre- and postconsumer streams) is still done by hand. Though this is extremely inefficient, someone must touch and visually inspect every item. Identifying a garment’s wear and tear is by far simpler than determining the fiber content of an unmarked cutting room scrap. The vital step to a real solution is mechanized sorting by fiber. Once mixed fabrics can be sorted by like content, fiber-to-fiber recycling technologies will have meaningful volumes of clean and consistent feedstock. Processes for cotton and polyester are just now in development and represent the first opportunities for a truly circular supply chain.

Finally, there are proprietary concerns that do not exist in the postconsumer waste stream. Certain garments and fabrics are not suitable for reuse. Some uniforms—fabric with trademarked patterns or logos or confidential design mock-ups, for example—are designated for destruction before disposal.

With these constraints in mind, the current recycling options are not convincing. The first and best option is reuse. Redistributing fabric of any size from where it is unwanted to where it is wanted not only saves it from the landfill, but also reduces the need for more resources to be used in new production: However, we cannot rely on reuse as a solution for the massive volumes of waste. The second option would more appropriately be called downcycling. If not destined for landfill, preconsumer material is most often shredded into rough fibers and re-spun into low-quality yarns to create shoddy. Shoddy can be used as insulation, as carpet padding, as moving blankets. Though this is a less ideal downcycling is the likely fate of most fabric waste.

There is one huge obstacle to reducing the volume of fabric that can be downcycled. Spandex, Lycra, and elastane fibers melt during the shredding process, contaminating the other fibers. The growing popularity of the athleisure lines, which emphasizes stretch, is troublesome. It would further complicate sorting and reduce diversion options for both residential and commercial textile waste streams.

Addressing textile waste is daunting, but not without hope. Personally or professionally, everyone utilizes textiles. Everyone can pay attention to what’s being thrown out and where it’s going. If it’s not immediately apparent, look for answers. Seek out options and allies. For postconsumer textiles, use garments as long as possible and learn to repair them. Bring your unwanted goods to thrift stores and buy secondhand whenever possible. Residents of New York City can request a re-fashionNYC bin in their building, which makes it even more convenient to recycle old clothing. For preconsumer textiles, ask your company’s building management what waste cunters they use and whether or not they have a textile recycling partner. Connect with jabbers who buy unused fabric and recycling services like FABSCRAP for smaller pieces.

There is a growing community of large brands, independent designers, cutting rooms, textile artists, fashion schools, reuse organizations, and regional processors working toward solutions. Only through conscious collaboration will we find a path to sustainability. This is the fashion industry’s greatest chance to be creative.
Amy Peterson, a Detroit lawyer, envisioned Rebel Nell—an enterprise that creates unique jewelry from scrap pieces of graffiti—after moving next to one of Detroit’s shelters. While walking her dog, she began talking to women she met, and after listening to their stories and challenges, Peterson started a social enterprise with a vision to help women transition to an independent life. Peterson engaged friend and fashion retailer Diana Russell to launch Rebel Nell and design “defiant jewelry with a purpose.”

Cooper Hewitt: What was it that moved you to begin Rebel Nell?

Amy Peterson: Hearing how incredible and courageous these women are. They realized that they needed to get out of whatever situation they were in and walk away. A lot of them are brilliant, but in bad situations. They’d lost their jobs after moving to the shelter and needed an opportunity. In addition to hearing stories of physical and emotional abuse there were stories of financial abuse. Many of them had had jobs but someone else controlled their paycheck. I figured I could provide some assistance with getting these women a better understanding of finances. That was really an aha moment for me.

CH: How long did it take for you to get up and running?

AP: We didn’t wait long at all—Diana loved the idea and wanted to volunteer. I asked her to join with me as a co-founder. We met with some caseworkers at the shelter and they loved our idea. To get funding, we entered a pitch competition called Detroit Soup where we won fourteen hundred dollars. We took that money and made the first round of jewelry ourselves. The first round of sales helped us get some seed money so we could start hiring.

CH: Can you talk about the structure of Rebel Nell and how it has grown since 2013?

AP: We started with just Diana and myself and then hired three women from the shelter as Creative Designers. Financially speaking, we should have only hired one. But we took a big risk—and they also took a big risk on us, because we were a startup with really no idea what we were doing. Now, we fluctuate between five and eight on the team. What has worked best for us is to focus on the individual and their situation they were in and walk away. A lot of women have heavy debt loads. We provide an opportunity to earn as we grow even after doing this for four years. We’re constantly evolving and learning as we grow even after doing this for four years. We’re constantly trying to grow the business, education, life skills, legal aid, and housing resources. We keep our group small to focus on each individual and their various needs. There is a step-by-step support and learning system. For instance, working with the individual to build up her credit so she can eventually get a car involves many steps. We have tremendous relationships with community partners that provide services. A local bank provides financial education classes. A financial advisor comes in once a month to provide personalized advice, particularly because many of them have heavy debt loads.

CH: What other kind of support does Rebel Nell provide?

AP: We’re constantly evolving and learning as we grow even after doing this for four years. We’re constantly trying to graduate women out so we can bring new ones on board. We fluctuate between five and eight on the team. We’re constantly trying to graduate women out so we can bring new ones on board. What has worked best for us is to focus on the individual and their personalized growth. If we get too big we lose our culture. We are housed in a small twelve-hundred-foot space accessible to the shelter. One of the reasons we took the space is because it is on a main bus route. Therefore, we are housed in a small twelve-hundred-foot space accessible to the shelter. One of the reasons we took the space is because it is on a main bus route.

CH: What do the financial literacy programs look like?

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We’re just part of the learning curve. We actually think the real impact is going to come with the children of the women.

CH: Did you come into this with that vision?

AP: I can’t honestly say that I understood exactly what we were going to be doing when I started it. I knew it was going to be challenging, but I had no idea to what extent, nor did I have any idea how deep the problems are and how badly the system is broken. That has been eye-opening to me.

One thing I realized is I was very, very blessed to have an incredible support system growing up. If you don’t have that, it’s amazing how quickly and how fast you can fall. We are a support system. We are here to give a hug, have your back, encourage you. That’s it.

Yes, we provide employment, but what really works is this atmosphere of love and support and family that we give everybody who walks in the door. I hope someday we will have cleaned all women out of shelters. I hope that there’s no one left to fight for, and as a result we close our business. That would be an absolute joy.

CH: What are the barriers for entry in other cities?

AP: The barriers to entry are affordability and space. The maker community is growing and credit goes to consumers who are coming back to appreciating handmade products. People are willing to pay extra for understanding that jobs are being created locally.

CH: Why do you think Rebel Nell is viable now?

AP: We have an incredibly supportive community that’s been able to help us grow. Word of mouth about us and our mission has been overwhelming as has support for our initiatives. I don’t know if I’d be able to do this in any other city as quickly as we did it here.

CH: Can you talk about the name Rebel Nell?

AP: Yes, we love it! Diane and I were trying to come up with a powerful name, and we wanted to pay tribute to a woman who was a trailblazer. We adore Eleanor Roosevelt and everything she stood for—she was an incredible humanitarian, women’s rights advocate, and civil rights advocate. Her dad nicknamed her “Little Nell.” We thought she was worthy of a stronger nickname, and that’s how we came up with Rebel Nell. We also think it works because the women that we hire are rebelling against what society has dealt to them, and we are working with graffiti, so that’s rebellious, too. That’s how we got our name.

Rebel Nell is one of sixty designs featured in *By the People: Designing a Better America*, a Cooper Hewitt exhibition currently on view through February 26, 2017.

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**2016 NATIONAL DESIGN AWARDS GALA**

Cooper Hewitt celebrated the 17th National Design Awards in the spectacular Arthur Ross Terrace and Garden at Cooper Hewitt on Thursday, October 20, 2016.

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**National Design Awards**

*By the People: Designing a Better America* is made possible by major support from *National Design Awards* programming is made possible by major support from **Additional funding is provided by Design Within Reach and Facebook.**
THE 21ST-CENTURY NEIGHBORHOOD LIBRARY

By Julie Sandorf

“Whatever agencies for good may rise or fall in the future, it seems certain that the free library is destined to stand and become a never-ceasing foundation of good to all inhabitants.”

—Andrew Carnegie

Andrew Carnegie, whose magnificent New York City mansion is now home to Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, bestowed a legacy extending far beyond East 91st Street. Between 1893 and 1919, Carnegie funded the construction of 1,687 public libraries across the United States, including sixty-seven neighborhood libraries in New York. Carnegie’s prolific philanthropic activity left an everlasting physical, social, and intellectual imprint on community life, as relevant today as it was a century ago.

Today, New York City’s 207 neighborhood libraries attract over 40.5 million visitors annually—more than all of the city’s professional sports teams and major cultural institutions combined. New York City’s public library system comprises three units: the Brooklyn Public Library (BPL); Queens Library; and New York Public Library (NYPL), which serve the boroughs of Manhattan, the Bronx, and Staten Island. Together they constitute the city’s single most important resource for lifelong learning, serving to acculturate new generations of immigrants, and amplifying and supplementing the education of children from the youngest ages. The branches offer new media and technology to over three million New Yorkers without access to high-speed internet service, while continuing to serve an essential role as repositories for books and information. Free programs such as NYPL’s TechConnect and career and resume help provide assistance to people of all ages. Libraries are civic hubs for cultural life—offering live performances and author readings, and acting as neighborhood art galleries and creative maker spaces for all ages.

Above all, branch libraries are ideally suited to what architecture critic Sarah Williams Goldhagen calls “third places—offering vibrant, informal, attractive, noncommercial community places where people of any age, class, gender, race, religion, or ethnicity can gather and obtain access to resources vital to full participation in contemporary life.”

The designs of many New York City branch libraries range from the lovely facades of brick and stone so clearly identifiable as “Carnegies” to the small cinderblock “Lindsay Boxes” designed or built during Mayor John Lindsay’s administration between 1966 and 1973. Through a donation of the Andrew Carnegie Corporation, his libraries—built through 1929 and located in all five boroughs—are concentrated in Brooklyn and Manhattan. Designed by three architectural firms—McKim, Mead, and White; Carrere and Hastings; and Babb, Cook, and Willard (who notably designed the Carnegie Mansion)—these tend to be larger than most other branches. The high ceilings and large windows create a temple-like atmosphere where books are revered and learning is nurtured. The same architectural appointments make staffing, operating, and maintenance challenging.

The “Lindsay Boxes” are conversely of lower-quality construction, built with cinderblocks, lower ceilings, and poor lighting and ventilation. Most branches, regardless of pedigree and architectural distinction, are now marked by decades of disinvestment and currently require an estimated $1.5 billion to meet basic capital needs. Many branches are unable to adequately meet the technology demands of the digital age, nor do they have the space and interior layouts to accommodate the multiplicity of 21st-century patrons.

The map below shows where New York City’s 206 public library branches are located. The shaded circles, with a radius of a half mile, indicate walking distances to these branches.

Data Sources: NYC DCP, DOITT, NJDEP, NYS CSCIC
Prepared by the Pratt Center for Community Development, 11/2012
of programs, services, and community uses demanded by the public in a space-starved city such as New York.

NEW VISIONS FOR THE URBAN LANDSCAPE: BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY

Assert a modern-day Carnegie or a massive infusion of public funds to rebuild branch libraries, how might branches routinely limited area to meet not only significantly increased demand but also diversified needs for space? The BPL, which singularly among the three library systems is burdened with the highest levels of capital needs across its sixty branches, is taking the lead in deploying new design models that are cost effective, community minded, and adaptable for use in multitudes of branches across the city. With funding from the Charles H. Revson Foundation, BPL and partner organizations, including Spaceworks, the Center for an Urban Future (CLF), and the Fifth Avenue Committee, are taking on the challenge of reinventing community libraries that align with twenty-first-century needs while making best use of precious limited community space.

Spaceworks, a nonprofit organization dedicated to expanding the supply of affordable workspaces for visual and performing artists, partnered with the BPL to transform the derelict and unusable second floor of Brooklyn’s first “Carnegie” library—the Williamsburgh library—into a vibrant arts center that is fully integrated into the programs and services of the library. Made possible by $650,000 in funding from NYC’s Department of Cultural Affairs, the 4,400 square-foot space now accommodates studios for visual artists, a classroom for local arts education, and a 1,200-square-foot rehearsal space/multipurpose room designed for dance, theater, and community programs. There is also a rehearsal space/community space designed for music and outfitted with a piano, a drum kit, microphones, a guitar, keyboard amps, and a digital mixing console. In addition to offering desperately needed affordable artists’ space, Spaceworks@Williamsburg Library has made it possible to partner with local community organizations to significantly expand its public programs in the arts and education. In just a year since the renovation, the number of programs offered to the public has increased by 17 percent, program attendance increased by 23 percent, and the number of visits to the branch jumped by 49 percent. Some of the programs include Free Art Fridays with L’Ecole Des Beaux Arts for children, a Middle Eastern dance workshop, acting classes, and Pilates mat sessions. Following the 2014 publication of “Re-envisioning Libraries,” CLF’s groundbreaking assessment of the impact of gross underinvestment in the upkeep of NYC’s branch libraries, CLF and the Architectural League of New York selected five interdisciplinary design teams to devise innovative solutions to meet the needs of a twenty-first-century urban branch library. One team, led by Marble Fairbanks, explored the idea of mixed-use development of branch libraries for the purpose of meeting two pressing needs: twenty-first-century libraries and affordable housing. The Fifth Avenue Committee—a highly respected community development corporation based in Brooklyn—is partnering with the Brooklyn Public Library to build the city’s first mixed-use branch library/affordable housing development in the Sunset Park neighborhood. The Sunset Park Library, which has one of the highest rates of use in the city, is far too small to accommodate the burgeoning demands of its community and is burdened with an outdated, concrete “Lindsay Box” that has multimillion-dollar capital repair needs. The Fifth Avenue Committee and the BPL are involving local residents in the redesign of the library through outreach to diverse constituencies, community meetings, and design charrettes. Redevelopment will increase the size of Sunset Park Library from 12,200 to 21,000 square feet and add forty-nine units of affordable housing above the library. In another innovative and cost-effective solution inspired by CLF’s report, a design team led by Situ Studios identified thirteen categories of library-based programs, each with a distinct set of spatial requirements and amenities. They developed a kit of parts—composed of folding chairs, stacking stools, mobile bookshelves, media display shelves, folding tables, bleachers, electrical reels, pin-up boards, and storage closets—to allow for wildly different uses of limited space. In Staten Island, a lecture and tutorial space refits into exhibition and reception areas; and the BPL Macon Branch kit of parts turns its maker space into a teen center, which morphs to hold a fully operational cooking class. Certain components can be stored away neatly while not in use and furniture can be quickly and easily rearranged. With an overhead system of electrical reels, even rooms with few or no electrical outlets can immediately accommodate technology and maker programs.

BPL is currently embarking on the Making Spaces project to adopt, prototype, and test this idea. The kit of parts will be designed to support an expanded range of programs, classes, and community events. With an initial focus on community rooms and children’s spaces, BPL is advancing a new and cost-efficient approach to reimagining the branch libraries’ physical footprint with the ever-expanding services of the community library.

Julie Sandorf has served as president of the Charles H. Revson Foundation since January 2008. Before joining Revson, she was a co-founder and executive director of Nextbook, a national organization dedicated to the creation and promotion of Jewish literature, culture, and the arts.

NOTES

(1). Andrea Carnegie, Carnegie Corporation Website.
GETTING TO WORK IN NEW ORLEANS:

TEN YEARS OF PARTNERSHIP WITH

COOPER HEWITT’S EDUCATION TEAM

By Michelle Cheng

“St. Bernard Parish was totally devastated by Katrina. Every house, everything, was destroyed, and there’s a lot of planning and design that can take place in [students’] own neighborhood. I tell the kids, you are all going to be the ones to rebuild. It’s the younger generation that has to rebuild if they are going to keep the community alive.”

—Albert Carey,
St. Bernard Parish Schools

In 2006, one year after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, Cooper Hewitt educators traveled to the Crescent City with one simple idea in mind: empower the New Orleans education community and youth—people without a background in design—to help New Orleans’ recovery using design thinking. Cooper Hewitt had just begun the process of building a national educational platform for introducing design thinking into classrooms across the country. While design thinking had long been shared in design studios and colleges, and even migrated to urban planners the educators focused on diving into the design process in a safe, restorative environment.

These newly trained citizen designers returned to their classrooms in the fall of 2007, ready to share these tools with their students and work collaboratively to identify a challenge or opportunity to tackle. Dozens of design proposals came to realization during this school year.

At the end of the school year in 2008, Cooper Hewitt hosted its first Design Fair in New Orleans. The destruction from Hurricane Katrina was still recent, but designers and organizations had started taking action to construct new buildings, repair communities, and more. The Design Fair showcased the design projects that Cooper Hewitt–trained educators led during the school year. Local design firms such as CITYbuild, Concordia, Global Green USA, and National Design Award winner Make It Right were invited to show the work they were doing in New Orleans and rebuild the city. For the first time, students’ voices were heard alongside those of the men and women tasked with rebuilding the students’ communities. This moment was monumental—and it motivated us to continue to connect students with the rebuilders of their community.

Our professional development program in New Orleans became an annual event. And as its reputation grew, the program evolved with the needs of the students, the educators, and the schools as they moved beyond the immediate aftermath of Katrina. We invited educators from other cities across the United States, including San Antonio, Chicago, Chattanooga, and others, to travel to and participate in our New Orleans workshops, which now encompassed design challenges beyond disaster relief. In the program’s current form, educators focus specifically on a curriculum challenge, so they leave with something that they can immediately implement in the classroom. As Cooper Hewitt started to extend its national reach and develop a design-based curriculum for integration into K–12 classrooms, we invited educators to show the design projects that they were doing in their communities and to continue to connect students with the rebuilders of their community.

Michelle Cheng is the Professional Development Manager and Kim Robledo-Diga is the Deputy Director of Education and Interpretation at Cooper Hewitt.
By Ryan Maloney

In April 2017, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum will open The Jazz Age: American Style in the 1920s, an exhibition examining transatlantic influences in the creation of a broad spectrum of design, reflecting evolving American tastes, from skyscraper furniture to textiles, fashion, jewelry, and accessories. As we explore the changing rhythms of life in the 1920s—with expanded freedoms for women and the cultural impact of African American expressions—coming to the fore—we look north to Harlem, where much jazz innovation is rooted, to find out more about the Jazz Age’s origins.

When you enter The National Jazz Museum in Harlem you are greeted by two pianos—a beautiful, if otherwise conventional-looking, baby grand and a staid, upright player piano. The baby grand is white with lovely hand-carved wooden filigree adorning its sides and music rack, but in truth, if seen outside of a museum, it would be considered simply a piano. The player piano, on the other hand, is a feat of engineering, with dozens of moving parts for each of its eighty-eight keys—it was the first technology that allowed “recorded” music, in the form of a piano roll, to be distributed for in-home enjoyment. By the late 1890s, it brought the ragtime of African American composer Scott Joplin into the American home. An upright or spinet piano was a fixture in many New York sitting rooms at the turn of the twentieth century. The piano was a point of pride, a place where the family gathered to sing, dance, and entertain. The presence of a piano also promoted music literacy, and piano lessons were considered a rite of passage for children even then. The piano was the tool Bach, Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Liszt, and European composers (Beethoven, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and many more) used to advance their art and share their genius.

The white baby grand piano at The National Jazz Museum in Harlem belonged to Ellington, who used that very instrument as he wrote many of the 1920s compositions that launched his career. He attained the kind of popularity that transcended racial barriers, establishing once and for all that an African American composer and musician could be acknowledged as a peer of not only his contemporaries such as George Gershwin, but also of the nineteenth-century European masters to whom our contemporary orchestras still pay homage. The player piano, sitting only a few feet from the baby grand, is also significant to Ellington; it represents the technology that allowed the music of Harlem to reach America, and Europe. This process helped spawn a new lilting rhythm known as swing, which, as Ellington characteristically put it, “encouraged the terpsichorean urge.” At dance venues like the Savoy Ballroom—with its marble staircase, mirrored walls, cut-glass chandeliers, and block-long dance floor with bookending bandstands—Harlem musicians were not alone in bending their creations informally, for friends at parties. In a way, they were precursors of Johnson’s leading disciple, Fats Waller, who had an extensive classical background and could keep a party going all night with his improvisational flights of genius, synthesizing the varied elements into his next composition.

WINNING RHYTHMS AND DESIGNS

The innovative African American jazz musicians in Harlem took great joy in combining their own musical discoveries with elements from Africa, Cuba, South America, and Europe. This process helped spawn a new rhythm known as swing, which, as Ellington characteristically put it, “encouraged the terpsichorean urge.” At dance venues like the Savoy Ballroom—with its marble staircase, mirrored walls, cut-glass chandeliers, and block-long dance floor with bookending bandstands—Harlem musicians were not alone in bending their creations informally, for friends at parties. In a way, they were precursors of Johnson’s leading disciple, Fats Waller, who had an extensive classical background and could keep a party going all night with his improvisational flights of genius, synthesizing the varied elements into his next composition.

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WINNING RHYTHMS AND DESIGNS

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into abstraction and avant-garde thinking. Designers, authors, painters, architects, and socially progressive thinkers gathered at the Savoy and in similar social settings the world over, unencumbered by the segregation of the era, with jazz as the soundtrack. Fashion also underwent a similar infusion of modernity, with the introduction of highly stylized forms of dress; as one elder Harlemite shared with us, “you didn’t go out unless you were dressed to impress.”

It is easy to glamorize this rich period of cultural expression, but it is important to also understand that even in Harlem, segregation and racism were still very much a part of everyday life for African Americans. Though these establishments were segregated, African American musicians in Paris didn’t necessarily find a larger audience or a more financially secure career path, but, compared with life in America and the strictities of touring the segregated South to make a living, the more accepting social climate of Paris was a welcome relief. It comes as no surprise, then, that by the early 1900s the first serious jazz scholarship and criticism emerged in France.

As early as 1919, Swiss conductor Ernest Ansermet closely showed his appreciation of the innovations of African American musicians when writing about a performance in London of Sidney Bechet with William Marcon Cook’s Southern Syncopated Orchestra. Ansermet praised Bechet’s “richness of invention, force of accent, and daring in novelty and the unexpected,” concluding that Bechet’s “own way” is “perhaps the high-water mark in the whole world will swing along tomorrow.”

Incubating Stylistic Vibrations

By the mid-1920s, commercial radio and the popularity of the phonograph began to replace the role of the piano in the home, and this changed the way people accessed music. It was no longer necessary to purchase sheet music, which often included Art Deco and Modernist cover art, to be able to hear your favorite song. You simply purchased a recording to play on your elegant Victor Talking Machine. What was once music that existed only in the other—largely improvised—heard live, once, and then never the same way again—was now available over the airwaves and reproducible through the grooves of a record.

These developments in technology and industrial design forever altered the significance of the piano in the home. In 1919, 366,000 pianos were sold in the United States—only 180,000 were sold ten years later in 1929. Big bands were filling dance halls with Lindy Hoppers, and jazz reached the airwaves and reproducible through the grooves of a record.

The music of the Hellfighters was not altered the significance of the piano

The impact of the innovations that took place in Harlem in the 1920s are not yet fully understood or accepted as we as a country continue to belatedly acknowledge the full contributions of African American art and culture.

In the face of this oppression, many African American musicians were drawn to more socially and artistically hospitable cities overseas, with Paris as the hub. The music of black America was already of interest to Parisians, in large part due to the concerts that took place in Harlem in the 1920s. The music of black America was already of interest to Parisians, in large part due to the concerts that took place in Harlem in the 1920s. The music of black America was already of interest to Parisians, in large part due to the concerts that took place in Harlem in the 1920s. The music of black America was already of interest to Parisians, in large part due to the concerts that took place in Harlem in the 1920s. The music of black America was already of interest to Parisians, in large part due to the concerts that took place in Harlem in the 1920s. The music of black America was already of interest to Parisians, in large part due to the concerts that took place in Harlem in the 1920s. 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LUISA CEVESE

Luis Cevese’s body of work gives new life to materials that would otherwise be considered useless. After being exposed to the incredible amount of waste produced by the textile manufacturing industry, she began sourcing various remnants to repurpose in her line of bags and accessories. Using an innovative material called 11 (eleven), she artistically composes found materials like selvedge, offcuts from patterns, loose threads, and even food waste into creative patterns. Her choice to work with waste is an expression of her belief in the moral responsibility of designers to build a better world for everyone.

COIN PURSE

$30.00 / MEMBER $27.00
5" W x 4" H

Ảnh: Matt Flynn © Smithsonian Institution

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WAYS TO SUPPORT:

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INCLUDE COOPER HEWITT IN YOUR ESTATE PLANS
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COVER IMAGE (FRONT AND BACK)

Front and Back Cover: Egyptian Bracelet, ca. 1925; Produced by Lacloche Frères (Paris, France); Diamonds, turquoise, sapphires, mother-of pearl, onyx, black pearls, smoky quartz, tourmaline, gold, platinum; L x W: 17.9 × 4 cm (7 1/4 × 1 5/8 in.); Private Collection; Photo: Matt Flynn © Smithsonian Institution.

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$45.00 / MEMBER $41.00
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CARD HOLDER

$35.00 / MEMBER $31.50
4"W x 3"H

SMALL COSMETIC BAG

$65.00 / MEMBER $58.00
8.5"W x 6"H (45" Strap)