

**PATRICK KELLY: WHY THIS MISSISSIPPI BORN FASHION DESIGNER MAKES HIS
BIGGEST MARK ON EUROPE AND NOT THE UNITED STATES**

BY: KATHRYN NORUNGOLO, FOR [ADVANCED COMP, ETSU, FALL 2016](#)



Patrick Kelly in his trademark over-sized overall outfit.

From the author: Patrick Kelly was brought to my attention in a merchandising class in college. I became intrigued with why a man born and raised in the United States had to go all the way to Paris, France to receive any worthy recognition. Then it hit me. Could it be because a black man, who designed clothes closely embodying the Old South and who gave out derogatory dolls concerning race was too much to handle for an “uptight” America in the 1980s? Could it be he had “too much” personality in his career? I think it had everything to do with that.

There is chatter all around the room. The audience members are twisting and turning in their seats in anticipation. Cameras flash to test the lighting, reporters ready their pens and fellow Parisian designers are ready to size up their competition. The lights dim and everything else goes silent. A short, African American man adorned in overalls that swallow his frame tip-toes onto the stage. Only the tapping of his shoes is heard. Eyes follow along the glistening runway to a hanging piece of blank canvas. Out of the man’s overalls he pulls a can of red spray paint. After one shake of the can, he draws a big red heart before turning around to face the audience, arms wide open. This big reveal triggers rock music blaring at a volume almost criminal.

The Patrick Kelly fashion show is underway,

One would think it would be easier for an aspiring designer to break the barriers of the American market as opposed to France, the couture center of the world since the 1700s. Patrick Kelly, an American raised in Mississippi, broke into the couture culture with great strides in the 1980s. Kelly is both the first black person and the first American to be admitted into the prestigious Chambre Syndicale du Prêt-à-Porter, the trade association of France for ready-to-wear designers. His designs of big bows and multi-colored buttons represent his southern roots. His massive overalls can be considered the front-runner for rappers “sagging.” His explosive fashion shows and interesting gifts to everyone he came in contact with were all accepted, anticipated and loved in Paris, but why not in the United States? It was not until after Kelly made his statement in Paris that American consumers became intrigued with one of their own. Kelly’s homage to southern expression, found in his clothing and in his culturally-proud gifts, made him different even in the more fashion-forward Paris, allowing him to shine in the city already so bright.

Background:

Most top designers have a significant event in the beginning to head start their careers, like Karl Lagerfeld, who won a design competition in Paris when he was 14, and from there, went on to become the head designer of Chanel. Patrick Kelly, however, taught himself to sew when he was a child, and practiced all through high school. Upon graduation in 1972, Kelly went to Jackson State University in Mississippi but quickly realized his designer dreams were never going to flourish there; he left two years later for Atlanta. Atlanta provided some attention, but not money. Before moving to New York, Kelly volunteered to decorate a Yves Saint Laurent boutique, a designer whom he admired. Once in New York, Kelly enrolled in the Parsons School of Design but did not stay to make it big before his final move to Paris.

Throughout his trials to get to the point of being a major fashion figure, Kelly never stopped designing. He remade old clothing, coming up with unique designs that he would then sell on the street. Once Kelly moved to Paris, he continued to turn out designs on the street as he did in Atlanta and New York, the only difference was he finally achieved notable recognition. Kelly was hired as a costume designer for the nightclub Le Palace, but really started making strides in 1984 when an exclusive Parisian boutique called Victoire hired him and provided him with his own showroom. By 1985, Kelly had received enough recognition to venture into launching his eponymous line.

Exotic Kelly:

Margot Hornblower quoted former Elle editor Nina Dausset in her 1989 TIME magazine article “An Original American In Paris: PATRICK KELLY” saying “[Patrick Kelly is] very

exotic to the French. He has his own folklore.” Kelly broke away from a rigid idea of fashion, putting his own spin on the classics such as his “little black dress” that were decorated with bows or buttons or both. He “plasters gardenias on his gowns, makes hats in the form of watermelon slices and



Patrick Kelly dress designs, showcasing his own take on the “little black dress”.

flaunts pink flounces,” all of which are designs that stem from the southern

roots that he embraces (Hornblower 2). However, seemingly everyone else in the United States was not willing to accept these subversive designs. When Kelly was finally making his mark on Paris, race was not to be discussed. Parisians did not seem to care that a black American had



Kelly spray-painting one of his red hearts before a fashion show.

come into their society because of the freshness that he offered the fashion industry. However, the mindset was different in the United States at the time and people scrutinized race.

“Patrick is refreshing because he isn’t trying to be divine” Kelly’s main claim to fame, other than his expressive designs, was his charismatic attitude and refreshing aesthetic that he brought to the world of fashion. If you found yourself walking past Patrick Kelly on the streets of Paris in 1985, he could most likely be found in overalls ten times too big and neon high-top sneakers. “Patrick is refreshing because he isn’t trying to be divine,” as Margot Hornblower quoted Mary Ann Wheaton (formerly in charge of Kelly’s business operations) in her TIME magazine article. Consumers and designers alike are attracted to Kelly’s aesthetic because it is loud and wild and unlike anything that had been seen in a classic fashion world like Paris. He brought a touch of old South to a couture center and everyone gravitated toward this “something different.”

The Man, The Gift, The Legend:

If in attendance at a Kelly fashion show, or even a meet-and-greet, Kelly would give “a tiny brown doll with molded black hair that could be most accurately described as a pickaninny” (Givhan 1).

A pickaninny is a racist and derogatory name for children of African descent, and during the time of Patrick Kelly’s reign in



A display of Patrick Kelly’s pickaninny dolls and bags.

the 1980s, Americans were weary to support Kelly because of his antics like giving out these dolls. Growing up in the south, in Mississippi especially, Kelly experienced racial tensions

firsthand. He wanted to take those feelings and use them in his life, rather than let his race be something he was ashamed of. Kelly wanted to alter the fashion world to fit women of color, and America, unlike Paris, wasn't quite ready for that. When Kelly introduced a line of shopping bags with golliwogs (another term for pickaninny) adorning the covers, he had no intention of bringing them into the United States, but instead keeping them only in Europe. This is an example of the opened-minded Europeans as opposed to the close-minded Americans as a reason that Kelly was so successful in Paris. However, Pamela Johnson in her Essence Magazine article titled "Patrick Kelly: Prince of Pairs" quoted Kelly saying

"When Bette Davis gave David Letterman one [a pickaninny doll] on TV, then everybody wanted one. It was like 'Oh, this is the right thing to do.'" Americans were afraid of the ridicule of embracing his race, whereas Kelly didn't see the point of that.

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"While the fashion industry was ignoring questions of race, he [Patrick Kelly] was embracing the doll as a totem," wrote Robin Givhan in his 2004 Washington Post article "Patrick Kelly's Radical Cheek". This doll is a testament to Kelly's character, and these racial moves are a testament to the type of clothes he designed. His clothes broke away from the norm as much as he did. Givhan also wrote in his article, "No other well-known fashion designer has been so inextricably linked to both his race and his culture. And no other designer was so purposeful in exploiting both." Kelly preferred to embrace the stereotype of his culture rather than ignore it, and in Paris, people did not see his color but rather his ability to create fashion. Pamela Johnson quoted New York designer James Daugherty in her "Patrick Kelly: Prince of Paris" article saying "In Europe, people are more open to new ideas, different kinds of designs," a pivotal point in Patrick Kelly's success there.

Gone Before 40:

Kelly's dramatic success in Paris was short-lived due to his death on New Year's Day in 1990 at the age of 35. When Kelly went out on his own in 1985, he accumulated five solid years of design in high-fashion before his death. He was never able to take his career to its zenith, though he undoubtedly left his imprint on fashion culture. Kelly's historic admission into the trade association Chambre Syndicale du Prêt-a-Porter meant becoming canonized among the likes of Chanel, Yves Saint Laurent and Dior. Few Americans have broken into this high-fashion couture world, but Patrick Kelly's outlandish demeanor and lasting designs, which kept him repressed in the United States, allowed his transformative art to flourish in Paris.

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