

HGA Student Fashion Design Challenge: Inspiration, Education, Expanded Horizons

by Gussie Fauntleroy

Here's the challenge. Teams of university-level fashion design and textile students are each given a lovely HGA Convergence® bag containing the same kind and amounts of hand-dyed yarns, along with a journal and colored pencils. The journal is for documenting the students' experience as each team designs and creates an ensemble of two or more pieces using some of each skein of the yarn. The fiber can be woven or used in a non-woven way, and the designs can also incorporate any other yarn, fibers, fabric, trim, or embellishments.

The Handweavers Guild of America's Student Fashion Design Challenge is not a contest, despite what the name might imply. It is an invitation for students to challenge themselves, as individuals in creative collaboration, to start with yarns provided by HGA and finish with a one-of-a-kind ensemble. Each Challenge features the specific yarns custom-designed for Convergence® of that year. The resulting creations are modeled in the Convergence® Runway Fashion Show and displayed in the Fashion Show Exhibit.

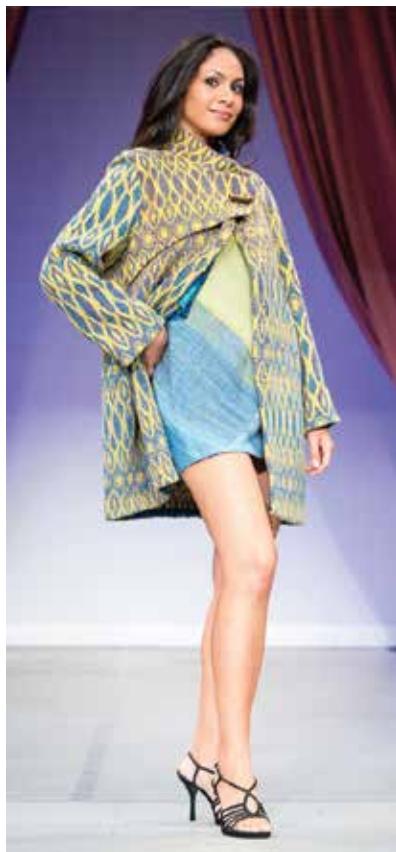
But as participating students and instructors discover, the program's results reach far beyond the runway. Students experience the value of teamwork as they juggle schedules, combine skills, set aside artistic egos, and work together toward a collective goal. Just as importantly, students who often are highly focused on either textiles or fashion design are introduced, in a hands-on way, to the full continuum of garment creation—from concept, to fabric making, to construction, to seeing the finished product on a model—with all the learning opportunities that happen along the way. As expressed in its mission statement, the Challenge aspires to "encourage, educate, and inspire by bringing together designers who emphasize excellence in fabric design, fashion design, construction, and fiber techniques." In doing so, the project acknowledges and celebrates the "interdependence and value of quality in all aspects of the fashion design process—creativity, craftsmanship, fit and ease of movement, technique, and construction."

Genesis and development

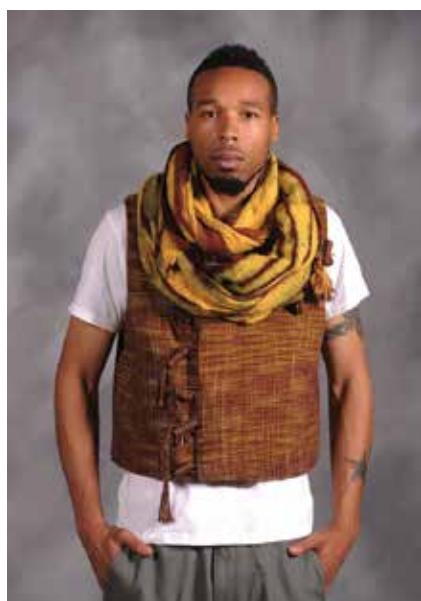
The idea for the Student Fashion Design Challenge emerged as HGA was planning Convergence® 2008 in Tampa, originating from a collaborative project involving professional designers. Every conference features specially designed and dyed yarns that in some way represent the event's location for



Chelsea Briggs and Moss Rabin, student design team from FIDM, documented their creative process.



**Jeanne James and Lauren Mangeri,
Student Design Challenge, Kent
State University.**



**Figure 1. Amaris Cox and Katelynn
Weiger, Student Design Challenge,
Kent State University.**

that year. As organizers considered the gorgeous silk, rayon, and cotton yarns dyed in tropical colors to reflect the Florida environment, they imagined designers being presented with these yarns, using them to create fabrics, and incorporating the fabrics in fashion ensembles of their own design. The first Fashion Design Challenge featured three teams of professional designers. Student teams from North Carolina State University, under the direction of (now retired) Professor Vita Plume, were also invited to exhibit alongside the professionals. For subsequent Convergences®, additional universities were invited to take part, and in 2014 the Challenge was reconfigured as student-only, to give university-level students the full spotlight.

Florida-based HGA board member and Convergence® Education Coordinator Candy Barbag was among the 2008 Convergence® organizers who put together the initial Fashion Design Challenge. She has been involved with the project for each subsequent Convergence® and will serve as coordinator for the Student Fashion Design Challenge for Convergence® 2016. In considering schools to invite, organizers look in particular to universities with both textile/fiber arts and fashion design departments. Schools that have taken part in the past include Kent State University in Kent, Ohio, the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising in Los Angeles, California, Philadelphia University in Pennsylvania, and Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan.

"I've been really impressed with what the students have done," Barbag says. "They're innovative, they think outside the box. It's wonderful to see what the next generation is coming up with." Over the years, the benefits of the Challenge have emerged as an opportunity for students to fine-tune their craftsmanship as they strive to meet the HGA entry and exhibition criteria, while giving their professors an opportunity to encourage them to achieve excellence in a national venue. Along with using the materials provided, additional requirements include the following: Teams must document their creative process; must complete and ship their ensembles to HGA by the deadline; and must provide a finished-edge "touch" panel for each ensemble. Participating students in accredited fiber arts programs also can apply for HGA Convergence® student assistantships, which pay for transportation, lodging, entrance fees, and classes at that year's Convergence®. This allows student assistants to work alongside experienced fiber artists, designers, and workshop leaders while learning about various fiber arts techniques.

Another approach to learning

At Kent State, Professor of Art Janice Lessman-Moss has incorporated HGA's Student Fashion Design Challenge into the school's curriculum as a for-credit option for textile students. (The school's fashion design students participate on a non-credit basis.) Generally in their junior year, students in Lessman-Moss's Design & Production, Textile Accessories, or Jacquard courses, or in an independent study program, may choose the Design Challenge as that year's final project. "What I find exciting is that the students collaborate, really for the first time. It can be difficult to get them to trust someone else, especially as artists who have their own visions. When I see them having conversations and listening to other ideas, it's exciting," Lessman-Moss says.

One of Kent State's 2014 teams consisted of Katelynn Wieger and Amaris Cox, both of whom will graduate in 2016. The two knew each other a little before beginning and soon discovered



Figure 2. Bradon McDonald and Abby Billings, Student Design Challenge, Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising.

think about the size of the loom for the width of the garment. It was something we had to keep in mind." See Figure 1.

Especially for students focused on fashion design, envisioning a fabric before it's woven and planning its use in a garment can be difficult, notes Anne Bennion, chair of the Textile Design and Fashion Knitwear departments at the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising (FIDM). "Fashion design students are introduced to a whole new world. They don't have the ability to conceptualize fabric like a weaver can. They may not realize how much drape will be in the fabric." She adds that FIDM's teams have displayed remarkable responsiveness, adjusting the structure of a garment, for example, to take advantage of a softer drape. Yet even students with weaving experience express delight as they watch their concepts become a reality.

The benefits of being challenged

Participants at FIDM face an additional hurdle, having just two weeks, outside of class during spring break, to complete the project. As with other aspects of the Challenge, working quickly as a team replicates conditions often faced in the professional fashion design field. This experience turned out to be excellent practice for FIDM graduate Bradon McDonald, who as a fashion design major took part in the 2012 Challenge. The team he was on designed and created a dress with fabric produced on a Stoll knitting machine, paired with a sculpted jacket made with a combination of two handwoven fabrics. "It was all new to me. I hadn't engineered a full fashion before that; it's usually just yardage," McDonald says. See Figure 2. As it turned out, working swiftly was among the most valuable aspects of the experience. In 2013 McDonald was selected to take part in the Project Runway television series, where he finished among the top four finalists out of 16 designers at the season's start. "It's a lot of pressure. Each week you create something new, from scratch, in one or two days. It's eight hours before the runway show and you know your name and design will be out there in front of millions," he says.

they shared a similar aesthetic, inspired by nature. Their ensemble for the Challenge featured a men's plain-weave cotton vest with loop-and-toggle closures and two shibori-dyed scarves connectable by another toggle closure. Cox did most of the weaving on the vest, while Wieger focused on the design and construction end, as well as dyeing the yarn. Majoring in fashion design with a minor in textiles, Wieger found herself appreciating aspects of the design process she hadn't considered before. For example, she says, "When you're thinking about the dimensions of the garment, you have to



Figure 3. Now a professional designer, McDonald served as a judge for *All That Jazz at Convergence®* 2014, where some of his garments were featured on the runway.

The Challenge produces other sometimes unexpected benefits as well. “Collaboration has inspired friendships and additional creative exchanges,”

FIDM’s Bennion says. Among these, McDonald and a teammate, having developed a good working relationship, went on to collaborate on a screen printed project for one of McDonald’s runway collections. Today McDonald has a successful tri-part design business, creating one-of-a-kind pieces for private clients, costume design for dance and opera companies, and introducing a mass-market dancewear collection through the retailer Capezio in March of 2015. As a professional designer—his second career, after fourteen years as a professional dancer—he finds it valuable to have an understanding of the fabric-making process. In appreciation of HGA’s important role on his creative path, McDonald agreed to serve as a judge for the Runway Fashion Show at Convergence 2014, where as an invited artist he also featured some of his own creations. See Figure 3.

In the current work and future aspirations of 2012 Challenge participant Crystal Hobson, collaboration also plays a vital role. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln graduate took part in the project during her senior year, under the direction of UNL textiles Professor Wendy Weiss and fashion design Professor Barbara Trout. Hobson and teammates Enoch Pugh and Art Wiafe were all majoring in textiles, fashion design, and merchandising at the time. The three each sketched out ideas, decided together on designs for a dress, cape, and crocheted necklace, and worked around class schedules in dividing up the jobs of weaving and garment construction. Hobson is currently a pattern maker with design input for an Omaha company producing inflatable mascots. She has

interned in costume design for the Nebraska Repertory Theatre and hopes to attend graduate school for costume design. “I don’t know if I want to design for film or theater, but I know costume designers sometimes need to create their own fabric, and they work with other artists who create fabric,” she says. See Figure 4.

Art, apparel, and fun

Some Challenge participants lean toward the wearable art end of the spectrum—Lessman-Moss remembers a “really fun” cape whose fabric was woven using HGA yarns for the warp and plastic bags for the weft. Other students are more drawn to apparel that is both fashion-forward and ready-to-wear. Brittany Jacobi, also a 2012 UNL graduate, remembers her team wanting to create an ensemble that could be worn out to dinner, was not overly fancy, and reflected current trends. The students came up with a knee-length, one-shoulder, form-fitting dress made from a recycled black wool suit, with a detachable peplum, or overskirt, in handwoven color-block panels. Inspired by a Van Gogh painting of an iris, the team used a needlepoint machine to embellish the dress



Figure 4. Crystal Hobson, Enoch Pugh, and Arthur Boamah-Wiafe, Student Design Challenge, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

with flattering designs in iris colored threads. See Figure 5. Today Jacobi's position as clothing manager and purchaser for a Harley Davidson store in Lincoln—she owns and rides a Harley—reflects her combined interest in fashion and wearability. Her dream job, down the road, would be design leader for the company's clothing line.

Over the years the HGA Student Fashion Design Challenge has seen a variety of highly creative submissions from sculptural to inspirational. Barbag notes that recent entries, however, have been "wonderful—very wearable, with a lot of thought put into them." Yet regardless of the outcome of the students' efforts, the experience is universally described as positive. "It's great for them to put together something that combines handmade fabric with what they're learning in fashion design," Weiss says. Bennion adds that "every student who has participated has said it was fantastic; they thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity and wanted to encourage me to offer it to future students."

For more information on HGA's Student Fashion Design Challenge, contact <hga@weavespindye.org>.

Gussie Fauntleroy is a southern Colorado-based writer who contributes to national and regional publications, primarily on the topics of art, architecture, and design.



Figure 5. Brittany Jacobi, Caitlin Ratzlaff, and Lindsay Ducey, Student Design Challenge, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Save the dates!
Georgia FiberFest
September 10-12, 2015
Columbus Convention and
Trade Center Columbus, GA
Introducing fiber artists to the
wonders of natural fibers
visit: www.gafiberfest.com

ASHFORD DRUM CARDERS & DYES

Fiber preparation made easy

Ashford Dyes - rich vibrant colors for all protein fibers. Available in 10gm, 50gm or 100gm pots. Choose from 11 colors, or primary color kits. Safe and easy to use. 10gm dyes 2.2 lbs of fiber.

The Ashford Drum Carder - for easy fiber preparation and blending. New 2 Speed for more flexibility and control.

To locate your local dealer contact the USA Distributor:
Foxglove Fiberarts Supply
Phone: (206) 780-2747
www.FoxgloveFiber.com

Ashford Book of Dyeing - new revised edition. A comprehensive text on chemical and natural dyes.

ashford
WHEELS & LOOMS