

Fashion Designer

Snapshot

Career Cluster(s): Arts, A/V Technology & Communications; Business Management & Administration; Manufacturing

Interests: Art; creativity; design; fashion

Earnings (Yearly Average): \$73,790

Employment & Outlook: Decline Expected

OVERVIEW

Sphere of Work

Fashion designers create original clothing, accessories, and footwear. They sketch designs, select fabrics and patterns, and give instructions on how to make the products they design. They may work for larger apparel companies, or own their own businesses, including e-commerce options to forego costly traditional brick-and-mortar stores.

Work Environment

Fashion designers primarily work indoors, sketching designs and assembling prototypes. However, they may also travel internationally to attend fashion shows and conferences, meet suppliers and manufacturers, and simply for inspiration. Fashion designers occasionally work many hours to meet production deadlines or prepare for fashion shows. Generally, designers who freelance are under contract; these



A fashion designer at work in the studio. Photo via iStock.com/scyther5. [Used under license.]

designers often have long workdays that require them to adjust to their clients' schedules and deadlines.

Occupation Interest

Fashion designers have a love for art, design, clothing and fashion, and the latest trends. Moreover, designers strive to be the next trend, and work hard to influence what people wear. Designers with an entrepreneurial spirit may want to be their own boss and sell their designs directly to customers, either in brick-and-mortar or online, or both.

A Day in the Life—Duties and Responsibilities

Larger apparel companies typically employ a team of designers headed by a creative director. Some fashion designers specialize in clothing, footwear, or accessory design; others create designs in all three fashion categories.

For some fashion designers, the first step in creating a new design is researching current fashion and making predictions about future trends, such as by reading reports published by fashion industry trade groups. Other fashion designers create collections using a variety of inspirations, including art media, their surroundings, or cultures they have experienced and places they have visited.

Duties and Responsibilities

- Studying fashion trends and creating designs that will appeal to consumers
- Deciding on a theme for a collection
- Using computer-aided design (CAD) programs to create designs
- Visiting manufacturers or trade shows to get samples of fabric
- Selecting fabrics, embellishments, colors, or a style for each garment or accessory
- Working with other designers or team members to create prototype designs
- Presenting design ideas to creative directors or showcase ideas in fashion or trade shows
- Marketing designs to clothing retailers or to consumers
- Overseeing the final production of designs

Profile

Interests: Things, People, Data

Working Conditions: Both Inside and Outside

Physical Strength: Medium Work

Education Needs: Bachelor's Degree

Licensure/Certification: Usually Not Required

Opportunities for Experience: Internship, Apprenticeship

Interest Score: AER

After they have an initial idea, fashion designers try out various fabrics and produce a prototype, often with less expensive material than will be used in the final product. They work with models to see how the design will look and adjust the designs as needed.

Although most designers first sketch their designs by hand, many now also sketch their ideas digitally with Computer-aided Design (CAD) programs. CAD allows designers to see their work on virtual models. They can try different colors, designs,

and shapes while making adjustments more easily than they can when working with real fabric on real people.

Designers produce samples with the actual materials that will be used in manufacturing. Samples that get good responses from fashion editors or trade and fashion shows are then manufactured and sold to consumers.

The design process may vary by specialty, but it generally takes 6 months, from initial design concept to final production, to release either the spring or fall collection. In addition to releasing designs during the spring and fall, some companies release new designs every month.

The Internet and e-commerce allow fashion designers to offer their products outside of traditional brick-and-mortar stores. These designers ship directly to the consumer, without having to invest in a physical shop to exhibit their product lines or collections.

OCCUPATION SPECIALTIES

Accessory Designer

Accessory designers design and produce items such as handbags, suitcases, belts, scarves, hats, hosiery, and eyewear.

Clothing Designer

Clothing designers create and help produce men's, women's, and children's apparel, including casual wear, suits, sportswear, evening wear, outerwear, maternity clothing, and intimate apparel.

Costume Designer

Costume designers create costumes for the performing arts and for motion picture and television productions. They research the styles worn during the period in which the performance is set, or they work with directors to select and create appropriate attire. They also must stay within the production's costume budget.

Footwear Designer

Footwear designers create and help produce different styles of shoes and boots. As new materials, such as lightweight synthetic materials used in shoe soles, become available, footwear designers produce new designs that combine comfort, form, and function.

WORK ENVIRONMENT

Immediate Physical Environment

Many fashion designers work in-house for wholesalers or manufacturers. These wholesalers and manufacturers sell apparel and accessories to retailers or other marketers for distribution to individual stores, catalog companies, or online retailers.

Self-employed fashion designers typically create high-fashion garments and one-of-a-kind (custom) apparel. In some cases, a self-employed fashion designer may have a clothing line that bears his or her name.

Human Environment

Fashion designers should expect to work with others when working for an apparel company, including superiors, while those who design and sell their own clothing may work independently, or with a small team. Most designers travel several times a year to trade and fashion shows to learn about the latest trends. Designers also sometimes travel to other countries to meet suppliers of materials and manufacturers who make the final products.

Technological Environment

Fashion designers must be comfortable operating all equipment needed to outline and produce their creations, from sketch to prototype. The more adept they are, the more polished the prototype will look. Further, if the designer plans to sell his or her creations directly to the public, they must be prepared to create not just a prototype, but a final product ready for purchase. Computer-aided design programs and graphics editing software aid in this creation process. Entrepreneurial designers should also be familiar with e-commerce platforms and business management software to connect with customers and manage business operations.

EDUCATION, TRAINING, AND ADVANCEMENT

High School/Secondary

Although it is not essential for fashion designers to have a bachelor's degree to work in the field, high school students should be aware that it greatly increases the chances of being hired, and, therefore, should plan to attend postsecondary school. High school courses should be geared towards art, design, and business.

Students should also seek co-op or similar programs to gain real-world experience and make contacts in the industry.

Suggested High School Subjects

- Algebra
- Art/Design
- Biology
- Earth or Life or Physical Science
- Economics
- English
- Entrepreneurship
- Geometry
- History
- Physics
- Political Science
- Psychology
- Trigonometry

Related Career Pathways/Majors

*Arts, A/V Technology & Communications
Career Cluster*

- Visual Arts Career Pathway

Business, Management & Administration Career Cluster

- Business Information Management Pathway
- General Management Pathway
- Operations Management Pathway

Manufacturing Career Cluster

- Manufacturing Production Process Development Pathway
- Production Pathway
- Quality Assurance Pathway
- Logistics & Inventory Control Pathway

Postsecondary

Many fashion designers have a bachelor's degree in a related field, such as fashion design or fashion merchandising. Employers usually seek applicants who are creative and who have technical knowledge of the production processes for clothing, accessories, or footwear. In these programs, students learn about textiles and fabrics and how to use CAD technology. They also work on projects they can add to their portfolio, which highlights their designs.

Transferable Skills and Abilities

Artistic Ability

- Expressing vision for design through illustration

Communication Skills

- Communicating effectively throughout the design process, such as instructing sewers about garment construction

Computer Skills

- Using CAD programs and graphics editing software

Creativity

- Working with a variety of fabrics, shapes, and colors to realize ideas that are unique, functional, and stylish

Decision-making Skills

- Deciding which ideas to incorporate into designs

Detail-oriented

- Having a good eye for small differences in color and other details that can make a design successful

Fast Fact

The t-shirt is one of the world's most popular items of clothing, with about two billion sold annually.

Source: thefactshop.com



Two billion t-shirts are sold annually around the world. Photo via iStock.com/PeopleImages. [Used under license.]

For many artists, including fashion designers, developing a portfolio—a collection of design ideas that demonstrates their styles and abilities—is essential. Students studying fashion design often have opportunities to develop their portfolios further by entering their designs in student or amateur contests. When making hiring decisions, employers rely on these portfolios to gauge talent and creativity.

The National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD) accredits more than 360 postsecondary institutions with programs in art and design, and many of them award degrees in fashion design. These schools often require students to have completed basic art and design courses before entering a program. Applicants usually must submit sketches and other examples of their artistic ability.

Related College Majors

- Fashion Merchandising
- Industrial and Product Design
- Interior Design
- Marketing
- Studio Arts
- Theater Design and Stagecraft

Adult Job Seekers

Adults seeking employment as fashion designers will have better opportunities for job prospects if they come from a related industry and especially if they have a portfolio to show prospective employers or clients, if freelancing.

Additional Requirements

Fashion designers often gain experience in the fashion industry through internships or by working as an assistant designer. Internships introduce aspiring fashion designers to the design process, help to build their knowledge of textiles and colors, and provide real-life experience on how the industry works.

EARNINGS AND ADVANCEMENT

Earnings depend on the industry in which fashion designers work—such as entertainment, management, or apparel—and whether they are employed by a company or work under contract as freelancers. Median annual earnings of fashion designers were \$73,790 in 2019. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$37,260, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$149,010.

Fashion designers may receive paid vacations, holidays, and sick days; life and health insurance; and retirement benefits. These are usually paid by an employer. Self-employed fashion designers must pay for their own benefits.

EMPLOYMENT AND OUTLOOK

Fashion designers held 28,300 jobs in 2019. As most apparel continues to be produced internationally, employment of fashion designers in the apparel manufacturing industry is expected to decline 4 percent through the year 2029.

Applicants who have formal education in fashion design; are proficient in technologies such as CAD; have excellent portfolios; and have industry experience will have the best job prospects. However, strong competition for jobs is expected because of the large number of people who seek employment as fashion designers and the relatively few positions available.

In addition, it may be necessary for some fashion designers to relocate, because employment opportunities for fashion designers are concentrated in New York and California.

Related Occupations

- Art Director
- Floral Designer
- Graphic Designer
- Industrial Designer
- Jeweler/Precious Stone and Metal Worker
- Model
- Purchasing Manager/Buyer/Purchasing Agent

MORE INFORMATION**Accrediting Commission for Community and Precollegiate Arts Schools (ACCPAS)**

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American Apparel & Footwear Association (AAFA)

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Council of Arts Accrediting Associations (CAAA)

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National Office for Arts Accreditation (NOAA):
www.arts-accredit.org/national-office-for-arts-accreditation

Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA)

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National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD)

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United States Fashion Industry Association (USFIA)

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Stuart Paterson



Conversation With...

ALI VON PARIS

Founder & CEO
Route One Apparel, Towson, MD
Entrepreneur, apparel industry, 10 years

What was your individual career path in terms of education/training, entry-level job, or other significant opportunity?

I started Route One Apparel in my dorm room when I was an undergraduate at the University of Maryland, which has a huge campus along Route 1. I was a double major student and have a bachelor's degree in finance and another in supply chain. I realized early on that I would be dealing with global logistics, so I wanted to fully understand the process of forecasting inventory, negotiations, and import knowledge. Marketing and design come more naturally to me.

Throughout my education I worked minimum wage jobs: at a bagel shop, at restaurants. I really wasn't sure what I wanted to do in a career. I was told what I should do, that I should study finance. I got an internship with a financial company, and it wasn't what I wanted to do.

At the same time, there was a popular bar near campus that was closing, and I thought it would be great for people to have a memento of all the good times there. I was in my junior year, and I designed a t-shirt to pay homage to the bar. It took off on social media, and I started making and selling t-shirts in my dorm room. While I was considering my profession, I was seeing my enterprise grow. I built "street teams" who helped market the t-shirts on campus. I was running all over campus building my business when the University of Maryland Dingman Center for Entrepreneurship reached out to me. They corralled me and said, "You need to get yourself under control and have a 5-year plan." They sat me down and repositioned my thinking. They forced me to think about words and ideas, business and future planning, and they encouraged me to compete in Cupid's Cup, a competition for entrepreneurs who are students. The prize was \$15,000 in startup money. I didn't win, but it was a business boot camp. I placed top five and losing actually fueled me even more to prove the judges wrong.

The financial company where I interned offered me a full-time job that would start after graduation. But I turned it down because I wanted to see my business grow. From that point on, I never had any other job other than working for myself.

I created Route One Apparel as an online fashion company that linked people with a sense of community by focusing on Maryland motifs including the state flag design and crabs. Then as our first customers got married and started families, we added baby clothes to our line. We continue to evolve. We have deep and growing relationships now with companies closely identified with Maryland and the region including Old Bay, Utz, and National Bohemian. And we've expanded beyond apparel and now sell some food and drink products. We are growing our custom product capabilities as well. For example, we've custom-made face masks and other items for over 250 businesses, organizations, and charities this year. We also are collaborating with other vendors on products. Most recently, we're working on a collaborative collection with the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore. We now have about 20 employees.

I'm not the first entrepreneur in my family. My great grandfather founded a moving company in Baltimore, and it's been in my family for 150-plus years. Business talk has always been a topic of conversation in my household and with extended family—that, and music. Both are deeply rooted in my family. Without even realizing it at the time, I felt very comfortable starting my business. I didn't tell my parents what I was doing until after I graduated. They were obviously worried I wouldn't be applying my studies to a "career" starting out of college, but they were willing to let me see how things went and were very supportive. My dad actually works for me now.

What are the most important skills and/or qualities for someone in your profession?

You have to be confident and know that you aren't going to know the answers to everything. You need resilience. If you don't succeed in a certain decision, don't give up. I've actually learned more from things that didn't go well. You need organization and structures because you're going to be wearing many hats. Celebrate the small wins and big ones. Don't be intimidated by other people's success. The reality is everyone is kind of navigating their own life story, everyone has a beginner story. Don't see progress as a leap. Focus on tasks and make small steps. Don't be upset if people don't take you seriously when you're starting out.

What do you wish you had known going into this profession?

I wish I'd known how government policy affects working for yourself. We're all so much more connected to how our government makes policy than we think. I was on financial aid in college; and when I graduated, I started paying off my student debt. At some point I realized my interest rate was the same as my monthly payment, and I paid off my loan early to avoid those interest payments. I paid off the loan, and I was taxed 30 percent. I didn't know I couldn't deduct the loan as a business expense.

Are there many job opportunities in your profession? In what specific areas?

I am 100 percent for starting a small business. I've gained understanding of my own self-worth, and it's empowered me.

Online e-commerce is the future. The cool thing about internet businesses is that a lot of people see things they are frustrated with, and they come up with solutions. You don't need to be the first to make something; you just need to have a good solution.

Design and marketing will never go away and are becoming more digital.

How do you see your profession changing in the next 5 years? How will technology impact that change, and what skills will be required?

E-commerce is going to be huge. The barriers to entering will be a little tougher because e-commerce websites are getting more expensive.

Fulfillment is becoming more automated. In some areas, robots fulfill orders, or a third party is used to fulfill orders instead of a company stocking its inventory. Rules are changing in digital marketing in terms of what data is collected, how it is stored, and how it can be used.

What do you enjoy most about your job? What do you enjoy least about your job?

I started my business because I didn't want to dress up in a corporate world, and I wanted to make my own hours. But I feel like I work more. It's in my DNA, and I have this guilt when I'm not working.

I least like the mental strain. The business is your baby, and you put a lot of your personal life on hold to take care of it. I have a hard time separating myself from the business. When people ask me how I'm doing, I say, "Route One is great." Stepping away is probably the hardest thing.

Can you suggest a valuable "try this" for students considering a career in your profession?

Almost every college has an entrepreneurship center, and they welcome people to reach out to them. Don't expect pay in the beginning but volunteer to help in the entrepreneurship center. You'll get so much exposure to the different types of businesses and ideas and just be immersed with creative minds. Build a relationship with the career center and don't be afraid to ask questions.