

Exploring the design of Mardi Gras Indian costumes

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Tulane University student and Golden Eagle Mardi Gras Indian Queen Tahj Williams explains the reason for her designs. (Video by Carolyn Scofield)

Four colorful and intricately-detailed Mardi Gras Indian suits served as the focal point for a discussion Wednesday evening on local artistry and design hosted by the [Tulane School of Professional Advancement](#) (SoPA) as part of Design Week.

The discussion, titled “Creating New Orleans Culture through Design” was organized and moderated by SoPA senior professor of practice in digital design Carrie Lee Schwartz. Panelists were Tahj Williams, a Tulane student and Golden Eagle Mardi Gras Indian Queen, Ryan Banks of the Zulu Tramps, and Jennifer Williams, youth and family program manager at the New Orleans Museum of Art.

The role of art and design, specifically the creation of unique Mardi Gras suits, was the center of the discussion based on keeping local traditions alive.

“We make so many Mardi Gras suits every year that there’s not enough room for them in every museum or gallery in the city,” said Banks. “The original Zulu Tramps used soot to cover their face, the grass around the ground to make their skirts and coconuts as their throws. That’s the same thing we do now, but our costumes have become more individualized.”

As a “masking Indian” Tahj Williams said she hand-stitches her entire Mardi Gras suit each year incorporating contemporary elements, such as beaded pencil skirts, into her design.

“I look at myself as the leader of the younger generation,” she said. “I make suits in non-traditional styles to grab the attention of young people and involve them more in this culture.”

“Black ‘masking Indians’ have existed in New Orleans for over a hundred years and providing that information is a way for us to continue this culture,” said Jennifer

Williams. "Tahj is a great example of an individual who has taken this to a contemporary level in the design of her suits. Ryan has gone out from this purchasing and outsourcing of suits back to the making of the suit, which was the original purpose."

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