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# RUTH E. CARTER: DIGITAL CATALOG

## INTRODUCTION

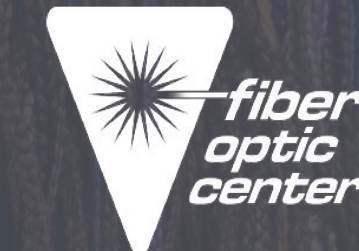


**New Bedford Art Museum/ArtWorks! (NBAM), in collaboration with the New Bedford Historical Society, New Bedford Free Public Library, New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park, UMass Dartmouth CVPA, and Massachusetts-based archivists Rememory Consulting is proud to announce:**

*Uncommon Threads: The Works of Ruth E. Carter*, a solo exhibition celebrating Massachusetts-born Ruth E. Carter's 30-year career as an Academy Award-winning (*Black Panther*, 2018) costume designer.

*Uncommon Threads* examines Ruth E. Carter's use of research, pattern, color, and style to create and affirm identity through costume design.

Celebrating Carter's artistry and exploring her Massachusetts roots, the exhibition documents over thirty years of her work as a costume designer and takes us on a journey throughout the African diaspora. The featured costumes and ephemera from Carter's studio illustrate how her innovative costume design has shaped how we understand the authenticity of Black culture.





# RUTH E. CARTER: DIGITAL CATALOG

## COLLABORATORS



### CURATORS

Jamie R. Uretsky *NBAM Curator*  
Julia Zimmerman *NBAM Curatorial Assistant*  
Jane Gleason *NBAM*  
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Rufai Shardow *New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park*  
Lindsay Compton *New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park*  
Julia Long *Ruth E. Carter Design Curator*

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Bethany Coito *New Bedford Free Public Library*  
Samia Walker *3rd EyE Youth Empowerment*  
Alison Wells *Alison Wells Fine Art Studio & Gallery*  
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Olf Leyindamouyaka *New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park*

### DESIGNERS

Ziddi Msangi *CVPA*  
Armani Marquez-Chaves *CVPA*  
Sarah Dorman *CVPA*  
Naeem Wilson *CVPA*  
Peiqi Jia *CVPA*  
Mike Venuti *CVPA*  
Kat Gunther *NBAM*  
Jamie R. Uretsky *NBAM*  
Alexandra Copeland, *New Bedford Free Public Library Curator*  
Jes Neal *Rememory Consulting*  
Micha Broadnax *Rememory Consulting*  
Janine Da Silva *New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park*  
Rufai Shardow *New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park*  
Lindsay Compton *New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park*  
Julia Long *Ruth E. Carter Design Curator*

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# RUTH E. CARTER: DIGITAL CATALOG COLLABORATORS



## CONTRIBUTING ARTISTS



Darnel Staley



Deborah Macy



Fitzcarmel M. LaMarre



# RUTH E. CARTER: DIGITAL CATALOG

## A VIEW OF YOUNG RUTH



### **Ruth E. Carter's ability to capture authentic storytelling**

has made her one of the most renowned costume designers. Born in Springfield, Massachusetts, she participated in local community staples such as the Boys and Girls Club, Camp Atwater, and Temple No. 13 of the Nation of Islam. Carter first explored her creativity through sketching and sewing.

With a passion for acting and the performing arts, Carter graduated from Hampton University, a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in Virginia, with a major in Theatre Arts. In addition to her studies, she also participated in several productions as an actor and costume designer. She held an internship at the Springfield theatre company, StageWest, which proved to be foundational in her career's next steps.

Carter worked as a costume apprentice for the Santa Fe Opera and then began her Hollywood film career in 1988 on Spike Lee's *School Daze*.





# RUTH E. CARTER: DIGITAL CATALOG



A COSTUME DESIGNER IS A STORYTELLER. THEY TELL THE STORY THROUGH THE COLORS. IT ACTUALLY PAINTS A WORLD THROUGH TEXTURE AND FABRIC, AND CHARACTER.

- Ruth E. Carter

Costume designers are responsible for clothing, stylizing, and accessorizing actors. Costume designers are visionaries. As a leading team member of a film crew, they collaborate with directors, producers, writers, and set designers to develop characters' visual persona. Depending on the production, costume designers coordinate several artists to sketch, create, buy, alter and produce clothing to outfit characters.

Ruth E. Carter's process is rooted in her research. When working on a film, she begins by reading the script several times to develop each character's image.

Then, her extensive research process begins. Carter reviews books, historical photographs, archival material, and magazines to determine possibilities for color palettes, fabrics, and accessories that create authentic period pieces.

Carter worked as a costume apprentice for the Santa Fe Opera and then began her Hollywood film career in 1988 on Spike Lee's *School Daze*.





# RUTH E. CARTER: DIGITAL CATALOG

## ROOTS

### ROOTS: INDIGO

The groundbreaking 1977 Roots miniseries is one of the most culturally and historically significant broadcasts in American history.

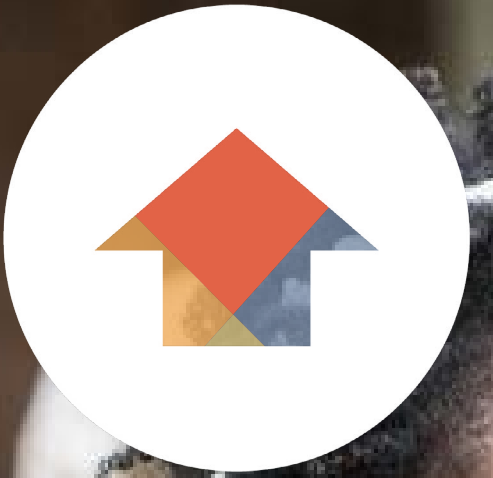
The 2016 remake allowed Carter and other production team members to explore new opportunities to retell the stories of tragedy and triumph that span generations. In the 1740s, indigo was a cash crop in South Carolina, overtaking the rice industry within a short period. Carter uses this blue multiple times in her designs for Roots, with a deep resonance for the cultural tradition and historical ancestry.

We see the deepest blue in Kunta Kinte's clothing worn in his village and again for this wedding jacket. Belle wears a blue turban later in the series, and Kizzy has a dress with blue after she is sold to Tom Lea. Clothing Kunta in an indigo jacket and turban visually connects him to his homeland.

Carter's use of the blue indigo for Kunta's outfit and throughout the series was to demonstrate how he "stubbornly resist[ed] transformation" to being an enslaved person and maintained the "cultural greatness of Africa."

The outfit placed great value on keeping his African ancestry pure, heroic, faithful, and primarily Muslim in a Christian-dominated culture. Kunta's unapologetic stance was to shun western civilization.

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# RUTH E. CARTER: DIGITAL CATALOG

## ROOTS

### ROOTS: THE FIDDLER

Ruth Carter says Fiddler “was trying to be a winner in this world of slavery,” an idea which she conveys very effectively through his costuming.

A suit like this could be given to Fiddler as livery, a fashionable uniform like one might associate with a butler, or Fiddler could have earned money performing at events on various plantations. Slave owners would “rent” artisan enslaved people to other plantations, taking the bulk of the earnings, but sometimes giving the enslaved person a small share that could be saved to purchase their freedom or a suit of clothing. A musician like Fiddler may have been able to use that money and additional freedom of movement to order and pay for his own garments from a local tailor. If he purchased the cloth, a seamstress within his community could have made the garment for him. In the costuming for this character, Carter has conveyed this unique position by dressing Fiddler in a tailored European style jacket and trousers in luxurious brocade and velvet fabrics.





# RUTH E. CARTER: DIGITAL CATALOG

## ROOTS



### ROOTS: THE FIDDLER


While this costume is subdued in its embellishment, it is of noticeably high quality when it is first introduced. An important historical element that Carter conveys with this particular costume is that a suit of this quality would have been worn and washed many times. Fiddler's brocade jacket ages through the series as time jumps forward; this is a visual element that helps the viewer contextualize the progression of time within the story. For an enslaved person, wearing clothing that was patched or worn was not necessarily unfashionable; in fact, slave garments made or repaired on a plantation might incorporate African design elements in terms of color sense by using dyes or patches in bright or contrasting colors. Though the cut of the clothing most often followed European style trends, enslaved people had their own style of wearing these pieces, which set them apart.





# RUTH E. CARTER: DIGITAL CATALOG

## MALCOLM X

A white circular button with a brown left-pointing arrow.

Malcolm Little was born in 1925 to Louise and Reverend Earl Little in Omaha, Nebraska. From childhood, Malcolm experienced many hardships, often due to racist terrorism, which caused the family to move from Omaha to Milwaukee, and eventually settling in Lansing, Michigan. During this time in his life, he becomes known as “Detroit Red” (due to the natural red tint of his hair) and gets heavily involved in street life in both New York and Boston. Eventually, street life caught up to Malcolm, and he was sentenced to 10 years in prison for theft, breaking-and-entering, and possession of firearms. From 1946 until he was paroled in 1952, Malcolm served time at several prisons, including Concord Reformatory — where he converted to the Nation of

Islam — Norfolk Prison Colony, and Charlestown Prison, here in Massachusetts.

Marked by the long coat, high-waist, wide leg, and tight cuffed, the intentional oversizing of zoot suits were interpreted as a symbol for rebellion. Appearing right after the Great Depression, the excessive use of fabric was considered flashy.

Against the drab colors used in suiting, Carter uses color and pattern to depict Malcolm during his “Detroit Red” days. Malcolm’s red zoot suit can be seen in direct opposition to the gray-suited Malcolm we meet later in the movie.





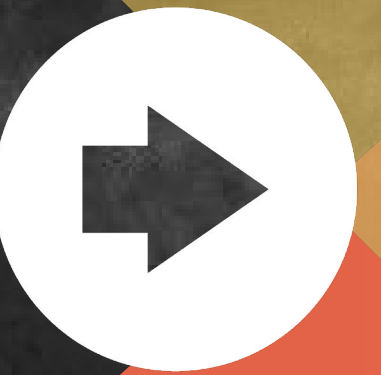
# RUTH E. CARTER: DIGITAL CATALOG

## MALCOLM X



There are several iconic accessories worn in Malcolm X, such as the kufi cap worn by members of the Nation of Islam and the Crown lambskin hat Malcolm that became his iconic go-to accessory in the final months of his life. Civil and human rights are global issues, yet the uniquely dichotomous relationship of racism within the United States has long, complicated relationships between white and African Americans.


Through styling, Carter has respectfully brought attention to Malcolm's seriousness and strength developed during his years with the Nation of Islam.





# RUTH E. CARTER: DIGITAL CATALOG

## SELMA



In 1965, the world watched as **courageous civil rights activists in Selma, Alabama, were beaten and brutalized.** Alabama, like many other states, enlisted policies, and enacted violence to suppress African American voting. To protest this injustice, organizers, activists, and townspeople walked 54 miles from Selma, Alabama, to Montgomery's state capital.

Carter refers to the Kings' costumes as his personal armor. It was not uncommon for suits and dresses to also be worn as protest attire.





# RUTH E. CARTER: DIGITAL CATALOG

## DOLEMITE IS MY NAME

IT WAS IMPORTANT TO ME THAT THIS NOT BE A FLAT VERSION OF THE SEVENTIES. I WANTED IT TO HAVE DEPTH; I WANTED TO FEEL THAT SENSE OF THOSE ENVIRONMENTS, THAT ATMOSPHERE THAT I REMEMBER BEING SO COOL AND BEING SO RICH WITH NEIGHBORHOOD CULTURE.

- Ruth E. Carter

For the film *Dolemite is My Name*, Carter shared that her research involved reading *Ebony* and *Jet Magazine*'s past issues and viewing the *Bad Bunch* (1973) film. These resources helped Carter and her team better understand "Urban Dandy" and urban style to capture this style's essence during this period. As a child of the 70s, Carter seamlessly recreated garments using textures, colors, and accessories she had seen and even worn herself that bridged the gaps from Blaxploitation to disco and all the timeless signature styles in between.





# RUTH E. CARTER: DIGITAL CATALOG

## DOLEMITE IS MY NAME



### WHO IS RUDY RAY MOORE?

Eddie Murphy portrayed Rudy Ray Moore, the so-called “godfather of rap” in Craig Brewer’s 2019 film, *Dolemite is My Name*. Moore developed the character of Dolemite while working in a Los Angeles record store, performing his comedy on the side and gaining his fame through word of mouth.

He developed, produced, wrote, and starred in the 1975 blaxploitation film *Dolemite* and its subsequent sequels. He came to be regarded as a significant influence for many rappers, including Snoop Dogg, who said, “[...] without Rudy Ray Moore, there would be no Snoop Dogg, and that’s for real.”





# RUTH E. CARTER: DIGITAL CATALOG

## DOLEMITE IS MY NAME

### WHAT IS BLAXPLOITATION?

A mixture of soul, funk, sex, humor, and crime, Blaxploitation films depicted Black heroes and captured the beauty in the mundanity of everyday life.

These films found success in the idea that African Americans could see themselves on the big screen using language and cultural touchstones that represented their community. Blaxploitation films were a creative means for Black people in America to control their own stories and create authentic representations of Black experiences.





# RUTH E. CARTER: DIGITAL CATALOG

## DO THE RIGHT THING

**Do the Right Thing takes place on the hottest day of the summer in Brooklyn, New York.**

The main character, Mookie, played by Spike Lee, works for Sal's Famous Pizzeria as a delivery person. Proudly Italian American, Sal's has been in the Black Bedford-Stuyvesant for 25 years and is distinctly the only white-owned business in the neighborhood.

We are introduced to Mookie fulfilling the first half of his shift as a pizza delivery person in a Brooklyn Dodgers (1884 -1957) Jackie Robinson jersey.

The intentionality of the costuming nods to the absence of the Dodgers baseball team that moved to Los Angeles, California, and the historic and heroic first of Jackie Robinson integrating the great American sport in 1947.

Mookie's African medallion accessories the jersey.





# RUTH E. CARTER: DIGITAL CATALOG BLACK LIVES MATTER



**While the film is over 30-years-old, Black and Brown people are still embroiled in the fight to have local and state authorities acknowledge, address, and remedy the blatant acts of violence and racism within their communities and places of employment.**

As an African-American woman, Carter has an intimate awareness of and connection to the struggles faced in minority communities.

Infusing her lived and witnessed experiences with storytelling, her costume design creates realistic, relatable, and accurate reflections of the Black experience in film.


Carter's understanding of the humanity, beauty, and struggle within these communities is poignantly manifested in every clothing choice. Both Carter and Lee use vibrant color palettes to avoid the "drab documentary palette of the city around them."

Through colorful costuming, Black power accessories, and sponsorship from the ever-popular Nike brand, Ruth provides a glimpse into 80s streetwear through clothing that makes fashion and political statements.





# RUTH E. CARTER: DIGITAL CATALOG DONORS



Thank you for helping us bring Ruth to New Bedford!  
We can't make exhibitions happen without your support  
– and that's the truth, Ruth!



*A special thank you to our Lead  
Sponsors Fiber Optic Center*

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## **What's Love Got to Do With It?**

The Black Whale

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Irene and Norm Buck

Deborah Ehrens

Victor Mailey and Bettina Borders





# RUTH E. CARTER: DIGITAL CATALOG

## CREDITS



### Do the Right Thing

Caroline Conzatti  
Cynthia Cummings  
Kathy Dinneen  
Leslie Lawrence and Ron Weingartner  
Margaret and Michael Nash  
Joseph Nauman  
Pimental Contractors  
Denise Porche  
Maria A. Rosario  
Eve Rounds  
Margo Saulnier  
Sherman Home Inspections, LLC  
Janine da Silva  
Jill Simoes  
Blair Walker  
Christina Connelly  
Slocum Studios

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Lindsay Carter-Monteiro  
Deborah Coolidge  
Robert French  
Olivia Melo  
Susan Perry  
Stasia Powers  
Susan Sargent  
Jen Smith  
Donna Cordeiro  
Margaret Dery



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### Spread the Love!

It's not too late to donate! Please show your love and support by helping us here at NBAM meet our fundraising goals for this exhibit. Seeing people interact with this exhibit has been such a joy, and we hope to continue to bring more social-justice based work to this community.

**Click *here* to donate!**