



The New York Public Library
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,
Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

Guide to the

Raven Chanticleer papers

1935-2006

Sc MG 881

Summary

Creator: Chanticleer, Raven

Title: Raven Chanticleer papers

Date: 1935-2006

Size: 0.67 linear feet (2 boxes)

Source: Gift of Herje Hellend, 2011.

Revision History: Finding aid updated by Lauren Stark.

Abstract: This collection contains files of biographical material; correspondence; articles written by and about Chanticleer; his fashion drawings; assorted programs from events in which he participated; material related to his role as the executive director of The Learning Tree; and material related to the African-American Wax and History Museum.

Preferred citation: [Item], Raven Chanticleer papers, Sc MG 881, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library

Language of the Material: English

Creator History

Raven Chanticleer (née James Watson) was a fashion designer, artist, sculptor, dancer and Broadway performer, journalist, philanthropist, and founder, proprietor, and craftsman of the African-American Wax and History Museum of Harlem. The exact year of Chanticleer's birth is uncertain; it is listed as 1928 in his *The New York Times* obituary although he claimed it was 1940. There is also some discrepancy about his place of birth: Woodruff, South Carolina or Harlem. A graduate of New York's Fashion Institute of Technology, Raven also studied at the University of Texas, the Sorbonne, and possibly the University of Ghana. As a fashion designer, at first for Bergdorf Goodman, and then freelancing, Chanticleer designed clothes for many prominent celebrities, including, according to him, President Nixon, Princess Grace of Monaco, Billie Holiday, and Josephine Baker. He also performed in several Broadway shows, including *Hot House Flowers*, *Jamaica*, *Golden Boy*, and *Hello, Dolly*, and founded his own dance troupe, the Raven Chanticleer Dancers. His chief philanthropic venture was

founding The Learning Tree in 1974; it functioned as an "educational entertainment group to package performers for several agencies, community centers, and state institutions". During the 1990s, Chanticleer added another facet to his varied career when he became a columnist for the *Daily Challenge*, a Black newspaper. He also contributed articles about Black performers to other newspapers, such as the *New York Daily News* and the *New York Amsterdam News*.

Chanticleer is known also for the creation of the African-American Wax and History Museum in Harlem in 1998, which featured 14 life-sized likenesses of prominent African American figures of his own crafting, which he hoped would promote Black pride, especially among young people. After visiting Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum in London and being dismayed at the absence of Black historical figures, he decided to found a museum featuring his own handcrafted life-sized figures of Malcolm X, Harriet Tubman, Muhammad Ali, Josephine Baker, and others in the basement of his Harlem brownstone. He offered tours to groups of school children and senior citizens. Chanticleer passed away in 2002 from lung cancer.

Scope and Content Note

This collection contains files of biographical material; correspondence; articles written by and about Chanticleer; his fashion drawings; assorted programs from events in which he participated; material related to his role as the executive director of The Learning Tree; and material related to the African-American Wax and History Museum.

Key Terms

Subjects

African American artists
African American dancers
African American entertainers
African American fashion designers
African American journalists
Authors, Black
Museums -- United States -- Management
Philanthropists -- United States
Sculptors -- United States

Names

Chanticleer, Raven

Container List

- b. 1 f. 1 **Biographical information 1935-2002**
- b. 2 f. 1 Includes high school diploma (1935), certificates of appreciation, certificate of completion from Fashion Institute of Technology (1965), obituary, and memorial service program.
- b. 1 f. 2 **African-American Wax and History Museum**
- b. 1 f. 3 **The Learning Tree, Inc 1976-1998**
- b. 1 f. 4 **Fashion design**
- b. 2 f. 2 Includes clippings about various fashion shows and original drawings, including designs for stout women, or "the forgotten women", as referred to by Chanticleer. Also included is what appears to be a page from a catalog with Chanticleer's home designs and furnishings.
Clippings and articles 1970-1999
Includes articles by and about Chanticleer, regarding fashion and his wax museum. Also includes one poster for a fashion show in 1979.
- b. 1 f. 5 **1970-1979**
- b. 2 f. 3
- b. 1 f. 5 **1980-1999**
- b. 2 f. 4
- b. 1 f. 6 **Programs 1973-2003**
Includes events in which Chanticleer participated or produced, and events sponsored by others; additionally, it includes a guestbook for a 1973 event honoring Chanticleer, sponsored by Arthur's Roundtable.
- b. 1 f. 7 **Correspondence 1972-1998**
Noteworthy are letters from President Richard Nixon for a specially-designed necktie; the National Arts Club for a life-sized figure of Mayor David Dinkins; U.S. Representative Charles Rangel on the unveiling of the effigy of President Nelson Mandela of South Africa; and Donald Trump thanking him for a sketch Chanticleer drew of Trump and his daughter, Tiffany.
- b. 1 f. 8 **Miscellaneous**