The opening of Crowns & Gowns: The Legacy of Miss Maroon and White, an exhibit covering the 68-year span of the Morehouse queens and her court, was an occasion fit for royalty.

There were no purple robes or gilded scepters; nonetheless, the current court and the more than 90 former Miss Maroon and White queens and attendants, family and Morehouse friends packed the African American Hall of Fame in the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel. On view were more than 100 photos that captured decades of beautiful women with effortless smiles, gowns made of organza, chiffon and, yes, polyester, and memorabilia from years past—all of which enraptured the crowd.

“It’s an absolutely fabulous, absolutely fantastic honor to have been here at a time when this was happening. This was [many] years in the making,” said Denise Burse-Fernandez, an actress who was attendant to her best friend Kathleen Bertrand, the 1972 queen, who is now a jazz singer and the vice president for the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau. “I had friends on the court and I’m happy to see them celebrated again.”

Decades of Style

During the exhibit’s opening night, the queens were introduced to the audience according to their years, revealing a marked difference in style from decade to decade. Courts from the ’80s and ’90s chose the traditional route with most of the women wearing a more subdued black, though there was a queen from the ’90s in a fierce, candy-apple red. The women from the ’70s draped themselves in plums, oranges and shades of blue. The ’60s were in brown and the ’50s preferred leopard prints and formal wear in pink. For the courts from the ’40s and the two from the ’30s, it was less about the dress and...
more about the women, whose accomplishments—the oldest known living queen, Gladys Forde, Miss Maroon and White 1938, is a retired Fisk University professor—only added to their august reputations.

Crowns and Gowns was more than a royal reunion; it also was a three-dimensional history in Homecoming, fashion and the evolution of how African Americans defined female beauty. Take, for instance, the two queens featured on the landing of the stairs that lead to exhibit in the Chapel, where the exhibit ran for four weeks.

In one corner was an enlarged photo of Nailah Flake, Miss Morehouse 1999-2000, in a billowing white gown and the actual gown on a mannequin. At the other corner was an equally enlarged photo of Janet White, 1970 Miss Maroon and White, in an African-styled, sleeveless maroon and white sheath with matching head-wrap, also paired with a mannequin in a replica of the gown.

Choice in style also reflected a growing consciousness of what it meant to be black in America. As students joined the burgeoning civil rights movement, the queens chosen tended to be darker in skin color and the dress became more Afrocentric.

The Rev. Herman “Skip” Mason, Morehouse archivist and “Crowns and Gowns” curator, calls the changes in dress and acceptance of darker skin tones in the different courts signs of the times. When Morehouse played Howard University in 1967, Howard’s queen “came tall, black and with an afro; it blew the Morehouse men’s minds,” he said.

The next queen, Pamela Vaughan, was the first one to sport an afro.

“Changes in society were reflected in the queens,” Mason explained. “From 1968 to 1972, all the queens were dark skinned and by 1973 they were back to a light-skinned queen. But in 1974, there was a darker queen. It was really about whatever the Morehouse men were feeling at the time.”

Gowns Galore

Amid the collection of homecoming programs and photos were tiaras and original game footballs—one flattened pigskin proudly showing its age—in a long enclosed glass case. Across from the case were life-size replicas of a float and a dance floor.

And there were gowns galore. Original gowns. Reconstructed gowns. Ball gowns. Coronation gowns. Not only formal attire was on display, but suits and sporty party dresses as well. Photos of Spelman women and Morehouse men interacting socially—at coronations and dances—in representative back-in-the-day apparel accompanied the gown display.

“It’s really something,” Demetrius Prather, a senior religion major at Morehouse said of the exhibit. “It’s excellent the way it bridges the historical connection to the Spelman sisters.”

Mason came up with the idea for the exhibit and the first-ever reunion of the surviving royal courts. “You’re required to honor your past, celebrate the best of you, and I saw this as a way of doing that,” he said.

Using the trademark tenacity and skills that have served him well in authoring several books on black Atlanta history, Mason began scouring Morehouse and Spelman yearbooks and alumni directories for contact Continued on next page
numbers and addresses of the queens and attendants. “I flooded them with information. They were very excited about it,” said Mason.

He sent nearly 40 e-mails requests for memorabilia—trophies, programs, newspaper clippings and, of course, crowns and gowns. The weekly Miss Maroon and White Update also kept the women abreast of his progress and needs.

“They were a tremendous help in helping me locate missing queens, several of whom live all over the country now,” said Mason.

### Documenting A Legacy

Though they were not in the spotlight, several students were a major component of the three-day ode to Miss Maroon and White. Not only were they escorts to the courts, but they also worked behind the scenes to make the weekend a success.

Brandon Tonjé, a junior psychology major, and Jarrell Cobb, a junior political science major, created the logo and other art designs for the weekend, including the exhibit’s launch. John P. Craig, a senior education major, and Clarence Sailor, a senior drama major, worked as researchers. Donald Cook and Josiah Laga, both junior business administration majors, and Justin Anderson, a senior psychology major, comprised the student production staff for the exhibit, as well as other activities surrounding the Miss Maroon and White homecoming weekend.

Rommorro Williams was behind the documentary “Crows and Gowns: The Legacy of Miss Maroon and White,” which was produced by the College Archives. As student cinematographer and editor, Williams turned interviews with queens, attendants and alumni like Ken Robinson, Morehouse’s first Tiger mascot, archived footage and photos into a 45-minute film. The documentary covered Morehouse traditions, but equally conveyed the historical importance of race and social change in the identities of Miss Maroon and White and her court.

Additional activities honoring the royalties during the three-day celebration included a luncheon at Davidson House, the on-campus residence of President Walter E. Massey ’58 and his wife, Shirley, and a coronation in the Chapel. About 90 of the former queens and attendants and the current Miss Maroon and White, Corrine Cater, and her court attended the events.

“I was pleased, surprised. This is a splendid honor,” said Sara Eloise Belcher, Miss Maroon and White 1937. At age 85, Belcher holds the honor of being the most senior of the living queens, and the second to ever hold the title. The first was Juanita Maxie Ponder, who was crowned a year earlier, in 1936.

“It was quite an honor, knowing that of all the students who were eligible to be selected, they selected you,” said Ella Gaines Yates, the 1948 queen and former director of the Atlanta Public Library, the first black to hold that position.

In the early days, the actual crowning took place at halftime during the Homecoming game. Though the first queen was crowned in 1936, the first coronation did not begin until 1952. The pomp and circumstance was nothing short of impressive and marked the beginning of a new tradition.

“A trumpet fanfare preceded the introduction of Miss Maroon and White, and two pages rolled out her royal carpet for her,” stated a Maroon Tiger article of the time about the coronation. “When she got to the steps of
the platform, she was presented with a maroon and white bouquet and white cape. At the top of the stairs she knelt humbly to be crowned and then proceeded to the throne.”

Five years later in 1957, the event had grown so much in stature that an article in the *Spelman Spotlight* called it the “biggest formal affair of the year,” imploring the women to be ready to flaunt their “ruffles and frills.” The coronation also was covered faithfully in the society pages of the black newspaper, *Atlanta Daily World*.

**A Royal Opportunity**

Anne Ashmore-Hudson, Miss Maroon and White 1962 and now a prominent clinical psychologist in Washington, D.C., related a story about her days as a student civil rights activist to underscore just how significant “the affair” remained years later. Selected queen earlier that spring, Hudson was jailed later in the year while trying to desegregate a lunch counter at Rich’s department store.

“As committed as I was [to the movement], I do recall thinking that if I’m gone too long, I could miss Homecoming and the crowning,” Hudson said. For the record, she was released before Homecoming began in November.

As did the other queens, Hudson said she felt a special privilege and responsibility at being chosen to represent the virtues of excellence the men of Morehouse represented. “You really didn’t want to let them down,” she said. Still very much the human rights activist, Hudson believes the College’s salute to its queens was especially well timed. “This is an honoring of your past, your ancestors, at a time when women are not well-honored.”

Belinda White, an assistant professor of economics and business at Morehouse who graduated from Spelman in the 70s, recalled the excitement that permeated the campuses when the new queens were announced and crowned.

“It’s almost like a religious experience,” White said. “It’s the whole idea of saying that women are queens because Miss Maroon & White represented all of us and was held in such high esteem. The men of Morehouse think a lot of us…and this is an example of that.”

Mason presented the Morehouse queens with a booklet of large photos of each Miss Maroon and White since 1936, a Morehouse Tigers pennant, and a new game football. Their appreciation for the gifts was obvious. However, perhaps the gifts they appreciated even more was the formal recognition and the camaraderie of being among their royal peers—many of whom they’d not met or at least seen for a long time.

“This is just beautiful, just beautiful,” said Jerri Devard, Miss Maroon and White of 1978 and now senior vice president of brand management and communications at Verizon in New York. “The women are still so beautiful after all of these years.”

 Asked to sum up her feelings about the tribute, Brenda Cole, Miss Maroon and White ’61 and now a superior court judge in Atlanta, didn’t miss a beat. “Fabulous, just fabulous. They’re still paying a wonderful compliment that has lasted more than 40 years.”

“I’m very honored to be with these outstanding women of character and accomplishment,” said Omelika Kuumba Bynum, the 1979 queen and a dance instructor at Spelman and Emory University. Her mother, Phyllis McKinney Bynum, who was first attendant to Miss Maroon and White in 1957, also attended the event.

“When Skip called and told me about this, I was honored all over again, but this time it was magnified 500 times,” said Omelika.