

The Incredible Rise of AFRICAN FASHION

As London prepares to host the third edition of Africa Fashion Week London, there is no time like now to turn our attention to a new generation of African talent claiming their heritage and fashion for the world to see.

Until recently Africa was the imaginary and oft exotic playground of Western designers' fashion fantasies — think Louis Vuitton's grass skirts and Vivienne Westwood's leopard and zebra print fabrics — today's new generation of African talent are putting African fashion firmly on the global map, blending contemporary aesthetics and cultural appropriations and showing the world how African fashion is done.

Of course, there have been greats who have paved the way in London long before Nigerian

entrepreneur Ronke Ademiluyi dreamt of putting together an African Fashion Week in the UK, with Ozwald Boateng, the first black man and the youngest designer to open a showroom on Savile Row, and one of *Vogue's* favourite womenswear designers, Duro Olowu, who masterfully combines bright colour and graphic prints.

The fact that Olowu, who's prices are not usually for the faint hearted, recently designed a more affordable range for American retailer JC Penney's, this is further proof of the rising popularity of African fashion. Moreover, thanks to the growing design talent and confidence of emerging designers and a growing number of retail platforms from the worldwide web to the high street, these pieces of Africa need no longer be kitsch holiday finds.

Kitsch is in fact the last adjective that comes to mind when you behold the elegant bespoke designs

African designers are finally having their moment on the international runways and Sinem Bilen-Onabanjo spills which names to keep an eye on



Set to be the next big names. From left: House of Farrah, Keto Couture and Yutees

MERCEDES-BENZ FASHION WEEK IMAGE BY SIMON DENIER
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'Africa has so much talent and creativity that it time that the global fashion industry took note'

Mercedes Benz Fashion
Week Africa 2012



Africa we ♥

London-based
Congolesse designer
Tina Lobondi



Emerging concept designer
Bull Doff, African Fashion
Week London 2012

of Adebayo Jones, London-based Nigerian designer who boasts a 25-year-long career and celebrated his silver anniversary with a glamorous gala finale at last year's Africa Fashion Week London. Affectionately known in the industry as 'AJ' with a tag line that reads, 'All that glitters in AJ', the glam golden gowns displayed by the designer could rival any fashion house. 'It is long overdue,' Jones muses. 'We have so much talent and so much creativity both in Africa and in the diaspora long ignored, that it is time that the global fashion industry took note. And I am very glad to see the African Fashion Weeks around the world providing our own talent with the platform they need to showcase their talent.'

WHOSE WHO?

While Adebayo Jones, alongside the stellar names of Nigerian fashion such as Deola Sagoe, Lanre Dasilva Ajayi and Lisa Folawiyo, may be leading the way on to global catwalks, African fashion is by no means the playground of publicity-rich Nigerian designers. Elsewhere in Kampala, Uganda, there is GloRia WavaMunno creating strikingly sharp cuts with raw African fabrics such as 'kitenge', and is incidentally a former intern of Ozwald Boateng. In New York, Ivorian design talent Loza Maléombho is known for fusing traditional Kente cloth and Indian linen to create modern womenswear. In Accra, Duaba Serwa's mixture of innovative intricate details, textures, structure and new types of volume has already wowed fashionistas at Arise Fashion Week Lagos 2012, the 2012 Ghana Fashion and Design Week and Mercedes Benz Fashion Week Africa in Johannesburg.

Already a major hub for fashion design talent, with four fashion weeks annually and a R20-billion-per-annum (US \$2,5bn), South Africa sets a worthy example for other African nations as the industry alone has created 200,000 jobs and has so far churned out talented designers like David Tlale, Abigail Betz, Thula Sindi.

Right back in London, the diasporan talent offers an African Union of fashion design with Congolese designers Tina Lobondi, Ghanaian Bestow Elan and bespoke jeweler Anita Quansah, Nigeria's Samantha Cole and Nkwo, Tanzanian Chichia; London is home to some of the designers who have garnered international runway and column inches alike.

Hot on the heels of established talent comes a new generation of concept designers. Senegal's Bull Doff is one standout name from 2012, blending fabric, traditional weaving and plastic material more commonly called Mbithie Mbithie, often used to decorate public transport and the front doors of traditional restaurants, into eclectic designs. Let's not forget the Ghanaian talent The House of Adjeiwaah, with playful designs featuring a powerful yellow palette and a mishmash of fabrics and the winner of Ethical Fashion Forum Innovation Award 2009, MIA by Mia Nisbet that fuses recycled fabrics and traditional Malawian textiles to produce a collection that combines the richness of African textiles with Western styling.

Returning this year all the way from Nigeria are three designers who are set to be the next big thing are House of Farrah, Yutees, Keto Couture and Ella and Gabby. Then there is the young talent; London-based Nigerian university student Mariam Afolabi with her label, Mademoiselle Aglaia and Abuja-based designer Stephanie Okeke behind the label Sally Intiego who made her debut on the global runway in 2012.

'The era of the hungry African child is over,' proclaims Princess Fifi Ejindu, Abuja-based business woman and philanthropist and Africa Fashion Week London 2013 patron. 'I believe Africa Fashion Week London is a great platform for African talent and a great opportunity for Africa to showcase the talent that we possess. It is now time for our culture to be recognised globally.' **BB&H**

African Fashion Week London will be taking place 1st - 3rd August 2013 at the Old Truman Brewery, F Block, Brick Lane, London E1 6QL. For tickets and more information visit www.africanfashionweeklondon.com

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