NEW AFRICAN FASHION
HELEN JENNINGS

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FOREWORD

by Iké Udé
In 1907 the storied, iconic oracle of modern art, Pablo Diego José Francisco de Paula Juan Nepomuceno María de los Remedios Cipriano de la Santísima Trinidad Ruiz y Picasso, simply known as Picasso, had an ‘African moment’.

It was his very first encounter with African art. The sublimely grotesque masks, nail-studded fetishes, scar-cheeked idols and distorted/disfigured human representations he saw were like nothing he’d ever witnessed or learned about in Europe or the East. This shocking encounter arrested his imagination. Soon after, he began and finished work on Les Demoiselles d’Avignon. This masterpiece marked a paradigm shift, a tabula rasa for a radically new kind of modernism with an African foundation!

In fashion, a bevy of designers from Yves Saint Laurent, Junya Watanabe, Ralph Lauren, Marc Jacobs and John Galliano to Alexander McQueen, Comme des Garçons and Jean Paul Gaultier have all quoted African art in part or in toto. Evidently, African art or African fashion is not new – quite the contrary. What is relatively new on the global stage are African artists and fashion designers deservedly operating with a creative autonomy that has not been seen before.

Enter the new or not-so-new African designers:

Xuly Bët by Lamine Badian Kouyaté came to public attention in the early 1990s and shook the fashion world with his seemingly Dada/punk attitude that, as it turned out, was culturally astute, economically informed and a seminal fashion moment. Xuly Bët’s genius wasn’t just that he recycled second-hands but that, like an excellent artist, he transformed what he found – one of the core lessons that Picasso learned from African art – to transform rather than transcribe.

The princely arbiter elegantiarum Ozwald Boateng is well noted to have alighted on Savile Row and peeled several layers of stodginess off the traditional home of bespoke tailoring. With an aesthete’s eye for suppleness of syntax, he infused his fitted suits, by turns, with whispery hues or shades of purple, green, red and at times with iridescent effects, while fastidiously indulging his Ashanti/Ghanaian disposition for bold, marvellous colours in the lining of the jackets.

Amaka Osakwe of Maki Oh is quite the darling and inventive maverick. There is in her work a clear gift of craftsmanship, sympathy for African sartorial classics, the impishness of the coquette, the insouciance of Fela’s ‘Shakara’ and a wonderfully infectious ‘girls-just-wanna-have-fun attitude’. Thanks to Maki Oh, African girls, and increasingly their counterparts abroad, are having such fun wearing her clothes.

Lawyer turned designer Duro Olowu’s prodigious, promiscuous appetite for and command of patterns and colours fondly echoes Henri Matisse, a Picasso contemporary who had his ‘African moment’, too.

The idiosyncratic, charming Adrien Sauvage is perhaps one of the wittiest designers working now, and surely a beacon of hope for loads of men who are sartorially challenged.

To be sure, the general Cubistic approach and detail-obsessed construction evident in the work of South Africa’s Black Coffee label, designed by Jacques van der Watt, winningly quotes Picasso’s African period with piquant poetics.

It was in 1907, Picasso admitted to the venerable French writer André Malraux, that he was so utterly stunned by his encounter with African art that he kept repeating the words ‘shock’, ‘revelation’, ‘force’ and ‘charge’. Collectively, the varied superb talents of designers ranging from the veterans Joe Casely-Hayford and Eric Raisina to new talents Gloria Wavamunno, Mataano, Pierre-Antoine Vettorello and Stiaan Louw are all by various degrees inevitably holding sway on a global scale – for good. Consequently, as happened to Picasso aeons ago, the fashion world is increasingly having its ‘African moment’ in this new millennium.

Helen Jennings’s book, New African Fashion – a first of its kind – frames this momentous, flowering movement beautifully and prefigures that inevitability, the ‘African moment’. Hers is an immeasurably overdue, much-needed book and utterly to the point! To all these protean, magnificently inspired designers, I say chapeau and keep at it!

Iké Udé was born in Nigeria and moved to the US in the 1980s. He lives and works in New York City. His artwork is in the permanent collections of the Solomon Guggenheim Museum, New York, the Smithsonian National Museum, Washington DC, and numerous private collections. Udé is the founder and publisher of aRUDE magazine, a quarterly devoted to art, culture, style and fashion. He is the author of Style File: The World’s Most Elegantly Dressed, a comprehensive monograph recently released by HarperCollins. A style icon, he was selected as one of Vanity Fair’s 2009 International Best Dressed Originals.
Africa is fashion’s new frontier. Having been sidelined by mainstream fashion for over half a century as little more than a source of aesthetic inspiration, the continent’s home-grown industry is now showing the world how African fashion is really done. Today’s generation of talented designers and image-makers are riding the broader wave of interest in Africa’s renaissance and attracting an international clientele by balancing contemporary fashion’s pursuit of the new with an appreciation of the ideals of beauty and adornment that are deeply rooted in Africa’s cultural and social consciousness. This new guard, which includes labels and designers such as Lagos’s Jewel by Lisa, Johannesburg’s Black Coffee, Accra’s Christie Brown, London’s Duro Olowu and New York’s Mataano, is creating the most exciting and original chapter in fashion’s discourse since Japan emerged as a major player in the 1980s, and helping to give African style its moment in the sun.

The history of fashion in Africa is one of constant exchange and appropriation, a complex though ill-documented journey with different influences coming into play across time and place. Contrary to the accepted view of African traditions as monolithic and unchanging, the evolution of dress practices and sartorial acumen confirms fashion’s role as a potent visual expression of a continent in constant flux. African aesthetics have travelled through empires, conflicts, slavery, migration, globalisation and urbanisation to cater to new contexts and markets. Body adornment – including clothing and accessories, tattoos, scarification, body painting and coiffures – has therefore fulfilled manifold roles. Serving as basic protection as well as a signifier of status, ambitions, beliefs and ethnic group, it becomes a second skin that gives the individual safe passage through the pageantry and ceremonies that mark each stage of life. It also exposes a dedication to looking à la mode regardless of one’s means or circumstances.

The earliest wearable African artefacts originate from Egypt, Nigeria, Cameroon and Sierra Leone, with some evidence dating back to 2000 BC and beyond. The practice of draping a single uncut length of cloth around the body formed the foundation of African dress. Arabian and Berber trade routes helped spread loom-spun textile technologies across Africa and from the 16th century onward, European travellers documented the changing tastes in fabrics, jewellery and other finery. In his 1874 book The Heart of Africa, Russian botanist Dr Georg Schweinfurth wrote of the east African Dinka tribe: ‘Heavy rings load their wrists and ankles, clank and resound like the fetters of slaves. Free from any domination … They are not free from the fetters of fashion.’ The Venetian glass bead trade in southern Africa was also certainly subject to the vagaries of fashion, with salesmen having to keep up with local tastes.

Cloth has acted as currency, gift, dowry, symbol of power, artisanal identity, method of communication and spiritual protection. Raffia, bark, woven, wax-printed and tie and dye varieties abound. Nigerian adire, for example, is a resist-dyed indigo cloth developed by Yoruba women in the 1800s. There are over 400 recognisable patterns, which are either hand-painted or stencilled onto the cloth before it is repeatedly immersed in the seductively deep-blue dye. Each symbol has an accepted meaning, giving a voice to the fabric and its wearer. Nigerian textile artist Nike Davies Okundaye teaches adire-making as a means of self-empowerment for women and emerging designer Maki Oh contemporises it for a modern audience.

Indigenous fabrics have survived and adapted to the introduction of cheaper industrially made products and imports of luxury fabrics including lace, silk, velvet and damask. In the late 19th century Dutch textile manufacturers entered the market with a product that mimicked Asian batik fabrics.
It was originally aimed at consumers in the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia), but proved more popular in central and western Africa, and so companies quickly tailored their designs accordingly. Vlisco was and remains the market leader with its patented Wax Hollandais fabric. ‘It’s made in the Netherlands yet Africans feel like it’s their product, which is magical,’ says Vlisco’s Ester Huigen. ‘Our design teams take inspirations from Africa and combine these with what’s going on globally to create each collection.’

Vlisco makes four womenswear and fabric collections a year and has also collaborated with designers including Lanre Da Silva Ajayi, Gilles Touré and Anggy Haif.

It currently competes with local and Asian printed fabrics, called fancy, Ankara or simply African print, which feature designs varying from the abstract to depicting political leaders and everyday objects. Originally the fabric of the poor, it has become the exemplar African fabric and having made it onto the runways of LAMB and Jean Paul Gaultier, it’s seen as a high-fashion material by designers worldwide.

As foreigners settled in Africa, locals adopted and transformed the outsiders’ styles of dress. Billowing and embroidered gowns, such as the boubou, agbada, rika and caftan, are considered the archetypal West African garments, yet are testament to the Islamic influence in the region since the 18th century. Bowler hats and walking sticks remain a staple for chiefs in the Niger Delta, having been introduced by British colonists in the 19th century. And the Ghanaian kaba combines an African-style wrapped skirt with a European-style blouse. The top half was originally encouraged by Christian missionaries who wished women to cover up their bare breasts. The ensemble remains popular and is viewed as entirely African.

Missionaries also helped to teach tailoring skills and in studios across Africa tailors now form the frontline of fashion, with those in Dakar and Bamako especially renowned. Before fashion design was a recognised profession, seamstresses and tailors were the ones who fed trends – and today’s designers, most of whom operate from workshop-based production, remain reliant on their skills.

FASHION IN FOCUS

The back catalogue of Africa’s celebrated 20th-century photographers tells us more than any history book about African style. Malian photographer Seydou Keïta (1921–2001) attracted the whole of Bamako society to his studio between 1948 and 1962. His formal yet intimate portraits employed an array of backdrops and props (everything
from a flower to a Vespa) to add an aspirational air to his subjects, who wore either African robes and headwraps or Western suits and army uniforms. Each image is a black and white memoir of a city’s reinvention of itself in the face of unrelenting modernity.

His fellow citizen Malick Sidibé photographed Bamako’s post-colonial youth in the 1960s and 1970s. Whether doing the Twist at a party, play-fighting on the beach or posing with their favourite James Brown records, his subjects wore the latest flares and minidresses with pride – and would flock to his studio the following week to marvel at the magical gelatin silver prints of themselves. Sidibé was commissioned by The New York Times Magazine to recreate his studio portraits for a fashion shoot in 2009. At first glance they look like images from his archive, but upon closer inspection the models (his family and friends) are wearing garments from Spring/Summer 2009 collections by the likes of Bottega Veneta, Chloé, Duro Olowu and Dries Van Noten.

Jean Depara (1928–1997) chronicled the élan of Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo. In 1954 he was made the official photographer of rumba singer Franco, which allowed him to stalk the city’s night spots, his camera strapped across him ‘like a bow’, in search of well-dressed, badly behaved revellers. Polka, tango and rumba resonated through the city, bringing a multi-ethnic crowd together.

Nigeria’s J. D. Okhai Ojeikere chronicled ‘moments of beauty’ to create an artistic commentary on ethnographic change. He is best known for his Hairstyles series, which began in 1968 and includes around 1,000 headshots of fanciful braided up-dos and geles. Shot mainly from behind, these abstract images freeze the ephemeral and celebrate the admirable lengths to which African women go in the name of looking good.

Samuel Fosso grew up in Nigeria but fled to Bangui, Central African Republic, to escape the Biafran War. By day he shot paying customers at his studio yet by night he turned the camera on himself. Fosso’s elaborate self-portraits began as narcissistic attempts at looking cool in his 1970s fashions (tight shirts, dark glasses, hot pants) but developed to incorporate costumes, make-up and sets to transform himself into different characters. In The Liberated American Woman of the 70s he wears heels and a Stetson while in The Chief who Sold Africa to the Colonialists he’s on his throne, sunflowers in his hand where his spear should be.

All these photographers were engrossed by an African youth culture that was in full bloom at the time when hipsters were hopeful for their futures and engaged in a dialogue with international fashion and music trends. Today’s leading African photographic artists, such as Andrew Dosunmu, Nontsikelelo ‘Lolo’ Veleko, Koto Bololo, Iké Udé, Chris Saunders and Hassan Hajjaj, each have their own unique practices that will leave behind the cultural documents for fashion historians of the future.
**Introduction**

Folorunsho Alakija join her in Nigeria’s fashion’s archive.

Pathé Ouédraogo grew up in Burkina Faso and opened his studio in Côte d’Ivoire in 1977. His label, Pathé’O, focused on modernised bubus and pagnes and has become presidential wear for leaders including Nelson Mandela. Malian Chris Seydou (1949–1994) achieved acclaim in Paris and across West Africa for his innovative use of bogolanfi ni. The mudcloth is made by Bamana women and is distinguished by its brown and white geometric patterns. It is believed to absorb *nyama*, a dangerous energy released while hunting and during circumcision ceremonies. Seydou was the first to turn it into a fashion fabric in the 1970s. While respecting its ritual significance, he carefully adjusted it to make Western styles. Today the Groupe Bogolan Kasobané, a collective of artists headed up by Kandioura Coulibaly, keep the fabric alive.

Ghanaian Tetteh Adzedu began the menswear label Adzedu of Shapes in Accra in the 1980s, where he also established a fashion school and was president of the Ghana Fashion Designers’ Association. Fellow Ghanaian Kofi Ansah graduated from the Chelsea School of Art in 1977 and is now considered one of the forefathers of Ghanaian fashion. His Art Dress line incorporates kente, the famous woven fabric invented for the Ashante royalty, and adinkra, a printed cloth associated with Akan funerals, into his designs.

Niger designer Seidnally Sidhamed, better known as Alphadi, co-founded the Fédération Africaine des Créateurs and in 1998 launched the Festival International de la Mode Africaine (FIMA) in the Niger desert, a landmark African fashion exposition bringing African and international designers together. His award-winning designs reference nomadic tribes. Oumou Sy is a celebrated Senegalese costume and fashion designer who founded the Carnival of Dakar in the 1990s. Her fantastical creations are often excessively decorated, both with the beautiful (feathers, embroidery, amber beads) and the absurd (CDs, perfume bottles, calabashes), and turn their wearers into goddess-like symbols of African power and liberation. And in South Africa, Errol Arendz and Marianne Fassler entered the fashion scene in the 1980s and remain major players, having cemented their reputation as founders of contemporary fashion in the country.

**GENERATION THEN**

Building upon past centuries of fashion development, the first generation of recognised fashion designers drew on local fabrics and styles as a means of showing pride in their African identities in the wake of a flurry of independence that swept across Africa in the 1960s. This in turn attracted international consumers, not least African-Americans who were engaged in the Civil Rights movement and who adopted African attire and hairstyles under the rallying cry of ‘Black is Beautiful’.

Nigerian designer Shade Thomas-Fahm trained at Central Saint Martins in London, where she also worked as a model. She returned to Lagos in 1960 to launch the Shade’s Boutique chain, offering modern versions of traditional garments. The pre-tied gele, turning iro and buba into a zip-up wrapper skirt and adapting a man’s agbada into a woman’s embroidered boubou were all her fashion firsts. ‘At the time Nigerian women wore imported dresses, they thought African wear was their mothers’ thing. But I was young and my dreams were tall’, she says. Fahm was patronised by Nigerian royalty and professional women alike and sold worldwide. Abah Folawiyo, Betti O and Folorunsho Alakija join her in Nigeria’s fashion’s archive.

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THE FRENCH CONNECTION

Yves Saint Laurent was undoubtedly the first internationally acclaimed fashion designer of African descent. He was born in Oran, Algeria, in 1936, a place he described as ‘a town glittering in a patchwork of all colours under the sedate North African sun’, and in later life he spent much of his time in Marrakech, where he owned the Jardin Majorelle. His designs repeatedly drew on the continent. His landmark Spring/Summer 1967 African collection featured a series of revealing shift dresses made from raffia, wooden beads and shells (a look re-imagined by Dolce & Gabbana in 2005 and by Gucci in 2011). *Harper’s Bazaar* described it at the time as ‘a fantasy of primitive genius – shells and jungle jewellery clustered to cover the bosom and hips, latticed to bare the midriff’. The following year he invented the safari jacket and successive collections included his take on tunics, caftans, djellabahs and turbans.

Yves Saint Laurent has influenced generations of fashion luminaries, among them Nigerian designer Duro Olowu. ‘A man always remembered women who wore Yves Saint Laurent, the clothes were extremely romantic and truly sexy’, Olowu wrote in *Tank Magazine*. ‘His African origins were very pronounced in his designs. Growing up in Africa, your first experience of a woman’s appearance would be the flowing of fabric, the way it held and framed the female form. He took a typical tunic shape and recreated it in such an incredible way, and his use of rich Orientalist colours borrowed from the North African palette.’

Other designers of African descent have taken up Yves Saint Laurent’s mantle. Morocco-born Alber Elbaz worked at Yves Saint Laurent Rive Gauche, Guy Laroche and Krizia, but it was his appointment as creative director of Lanvin in 2001 that propelled him to the status of fashion royalty thanks to his timeless, joyful designs. For Autumn/Winter 2010/11 Elbaz was inspired by a meeting with the UN held to discuss potential projects for the brand in sub-Saharan Africa to come up with his idea of ‘Africa in winter’. The collection featured dark dresses coated with feathers and amulet-like breastplates. He also supports African models, with Sudanese beauties Ajak Deng and Ataui Deng his most recent finds.

Tunisian Azzeline Alaïa established his brand in Paris in 1980 after stints at Christian Dior, Guy Laroche and Thierry Mugler and has been nicknamed the ‘king of cling’ for his signature body-conscious silhouettes. His collections have included python-skin dresses and footwear covered in cowrie shells, raffia and bells. Moroccan Joseph Ettedgui helped define luxury basics with his British brand Joseph, Tunisian Loris Azzaro’s Paris-based label excels at showstopping gowns and fellow Tunisian Max Azria reigns over his BCBGMAXAZRIA global empire, which encompasses over 20 brands, including his eponymous line and Herve Leger.
INTO AFRICA

Throughout the decades, these and other international designers have created fashion’s fantasies of the African aesthetic, cherry-picking from cultures, terrains and peoples. Thierry Mugler’s African fetish culminated in his Spring/Summer 1985 show in which Iman walked with a monkey perched on her shoulder and a straw parasol held over her by a black male model in a thong. John Galliano’s first haute collection for Christian Dior in 1997 included a series of silhouettes inspired by the East African tribes. Beaded hats, chokers and corsets were worn with long, silk evening gowns. Masai and Dinka warriors wear corsets but here Galliano crossed cultures with his use of the garment, which is more commonly regarded as originating from the 16th-century court of Henry II of France. Jean Paul Gaultier’s 2005 haute couture show featured models baked in red mud and wearing Afro wigs, feathered dresses, shields made from tortoiseshell and a bridal gown consisting of a huge white leather African mask. In the same year, Bernhard Willhelm’s Autumn/Winter 2005/06 menswear collection refigured the boubou into gaudy, baggy streetwear covered in gold Africanised and animal prints.

The tribal trend reached a crescendo for Spring/Summer 2009. Alexander McQueen’s kaleidoscopic prints hinted at savannah wildlife and landscapes. African fauna inspired Tsumori Chisato’s feather dresses. Louis Vuitton teamed grass skirts with wooden accessories. Junya Watanabe’s models wore towering headwear filled with sheaves of flowers. Vivienne Westwood tied and draped leopard- and zebra-print fabrics around the body. And Diane von Furstenberg, who has repeatedly returned to Africa in her collections since the 1970s, offered safari shirtdresses.

In 2010 Issey Miyake, Marc Jacobs, Kenzo, Gucci, Dries Van Noten and Eley Kishimoto all examined traditional textiles, in part due to the interest in Africa piqued by the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa. Sports brands also followed suit with African-influenced lines. Puma collaborated with Nigerian-American artist Kehinde Wiley, who used African fabrics as a backdrop to his portraits of football stars and as the basis of the prints in the collection. Meanwhile Paul Smith paid homage to Italian photographer Daniel Tamagni’s pictorial essay of La Sape (Société des Ambianceurs et Persons Élégants), a league of Congolese gentlemen known as ‘sapeurs’ who pray at the altar of designer fashion. The movement started in 1922 when G. A. Matsousa returned to the French colony from Paris dressed as a European aristocrat. Sapeurs in Brazzaville and Kinshasa now abide by a sartorial code of conduct that marks them out as local celebrities. Smith’s collection brought the aesthetic full circle by feeding La Sape style back into high fashion.

For Autumn/Winter 2011/12 Walter Van Beirendonck used an all-black cast of models to show off his fringed menswear worn with tribal hoop accessories and make-up. Sass & Bide did feather-print caftan dresses. And Thakoon combined Masai colours with the costumes of Versailles to create bright plaids and paisleys and silhouettes with high-low hemlines.
It’s those designers who collaborate with African artisans in order to harness authentic materials and techniques, and bridge the gap between African-born and African-inspired by basing socially responsible production on the continent, who create the most meaningful results. Ethiopian model, actress and philanthropist Liya Kebede aims to help Ethiopian weavers with LemLem. Her line of children’s and womenswear is hand-spun and embroidered in Addis Ababa and sold worldwide. Edun, which was established by Ali Hewson and her husband Bono and is part-owned by luxury group LVMH, is a similar ‘trade not aid’ initiative. The line is produced mainly in East Africa and its profits go to sustainable farming communities in Uganda, and to funding children in Kibera, the largest slum in Kenya.

Likewise, Suno was established by New Yorkers Max Osterweis and Erin Beatty as a response to Kenya’s post-election turmoil in 2008. The pair went to Nairobi, where they used Osterweis’s vast collection of vintage Kenyan kangas (colourful cloth with aphorisms printed on them) to create the brand’s first collection for Spring/Summer 2009. ‘I wanted to create jobs in Kenya, elevate the cloth and build a print-driven brand with an essence of optimism’, he says. Suno now shows during New York Fashion Week, creates its own kanga-inspired prints and employs up to 130 Kenyan tailors. ‘Already other designers are asking us about working out of Kenya. Suno speaks of Africa as a place to get things done, and as a source of inspiration.’

African designers have mixed feelings about the ways in which Western designers adopt the visual language of Africa. While it keeps the continent in style, clichés are inevitable. ‘European designers choose certain colours or materials without necessarily understanding their value. Now African designers have begun to be recognised for using their heritage in a way that contributes to the evolution of their culture by creating contemporary versions of their traditional crafts’, says Sudanese designer Omer Asim. ‘This is more interesting because it is relevant to young urban Africans who want to wear things that express their identity and also gives the diaspora a means of connecting with their homeland in a more authentic way.’

British/Ghanaian designer Joe Casely-Hayford is unsurprised by Africa’s continued influence on global fashion but sees its intelligent application as a positive thing. ‘Designers and artists are drawn to the unique vitality and purity of Africa and the prominence of the free spirit, which is sadly often found missing from our day to day lives. Today’s most influential designers have a global appeal while retaining an indigenous handwriting.’

This approach reflects the way in which African people have always combined cultures in their dress, a practice that contemporary African designers, working to international fashion seasons, have accelerated. They move beyond what is perceived to be the African aesthetic by embracing genuine fabrics and styles of dress yet looking to the rest of the world for inspiration. The fashion world is going global and the African influence has gone beyond a trend to become part of the fashion lexicon. The best design is no longer defined by its borders, yet recognises where it came from. It delivers desirable, inspirational pieces stemming from an open-minded environment, whether that’s in Luanda or London, Maputo or Milan, Nairobi or New York. The future holds joint partnerships and a level playing field that is not defined by destination.
Introduction

anybody who has a touch of jungle fever, Sozzani understands that we all go into society’s melting pot. Since 2007 so much has changed but we still have to keep our eye on the ball.’

‘When Alek Wek came on to the scene in 1995 she was called the real African beauty. In the fashion industry there was only room for one black supermodel at a time’, says Anna Getaneh, who these days runs the Johannesburg-based fashion enterprise African Mosaique. ‘So to have several African beauties with different looks working now is refreshing. It’s positive for Africa and also encourages aspiring models on the continent.’

Inspired by the crossover success of models such as Liya Kebede, Flaviana Matata, Honorine Uwera, Kinée Diouf, Agbani Darego, Ajuma Nasenyana and Ubah Hassan, the hunt is on to find new beauty on the continent. The major modelling agencies have African scouts. Elite Model Look has extended the global

When she witnessed the decline in popularity of black and African models throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, she was driven to speak up. ‘There were only a handful of African girls you could recognise, all the older girls were disappearing and hardly any new ones were replacing them.’

Exceptions to the rule include Alek Wek, Waris Darie, Kiara Kabakuru and Anna Getaneh. Hardison took action against fashion’s whitewash in 2007 by hosting the first in a series of ‘town hall’ meetings in New York that challenged the industry’s lack of diversity. The effects were felt immediately. The following seasons saw more black girls on the catwalks and in 2008 Vogue Italia’s editor in chief Franca Sozzani instigated the first all-black issue, which sold out twice over. Hardison helped cast models for the issue and has gone on to contribute to the Vogue Black website, where she profiles the growing swell of African girls such as Ajak Deng, Aminata Niaria and Georgie Baddiel. ‘Give me anybody who has a touch of jungle fever, I’ve got their back. Sozzani understands that we all go into society’s melting pot. Since 2007 so much has changed but we still have to keep our eye on the ball.’

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The rise of African fashion is inextricably linked to its models and muses. In 1975 Iman Mohamed Abdulmajid was presented to New York’s fashion scene a press conference tabled by photographer Peter Beard. He claimed that she was an illiterate tribeswoman whom he’d discovered herding cattle on the Saharan plains. In reality Iman was born in Somalia, the daughter of a diplomat and a gynaecologist, and spoke five languages. She had met Beard while studying at the University of Nairobi and was an accomplice in his mythologising scheme for three months. It worked: her first modelling assignment was for Vogue, she became an Yves Saint Laurent muse, and she remains one of the most successful African models of all time.

Paco Rabanne and Yves Saint Laurent were among the first designers to use models of colour in the 1960s, the decade in which Ugandan princess Elizabeth of Toro and African-Americans Naomi Sims and Donnyale Luna became the first black magazine cover-girls. Beverly Johnson was the first black woman to be on the cover of Vogue in the 1970s. It was also in the 1970s and 1980s that the catwalks of New York, London, Milan and Paris belonged to black girls. Africans Iman, Rebecca Ayoko, Khadija Adam, Katoucha Niara, Amina Warruma and Jinnie Tuomba joined Jamaican Grace Jones and African-Americans Sandi Bass, Pat Cleveland, Peggy Dillard, Billie Blair, Toukie Smith and Bethann Hardison in working for pro-black fashion houses such as Pierre Cardin, Courrèges, Stephen Burrows, Oscar de la Renta, Thierry Mugler, Givenchy and Halston.

‘It was a unique time. We were following the yellow brick road and didn’t even realise it. It was all brand new and it became our moment’, remembers Hardison, who set up her own model agency, Bethann Management, in 1984, and helped make Tyson Beckford’s career. She also formed the Black Girls Coalition with Iman in 1988 as a means of championing models of colour.
modelling competition to several African countries and South African TV network M-Net hosts an annual continent-wide search, *Face of Africa*. Oluchi Onweagba was the first winner in 1998 and remains its most successful export to date. And as the fashion industry burgeons across Africa, modelling is becoming a viable career choice for many.

Fashion weeks are multiplying fast. FAFA in Kenya, Mozambique Fashion Week, Swahili Fashion Week in Tanzania, Fashion Business Angola, Casablanca Fashion Week and Zimbabwe Fashion Week are just a handful of them. *ARISE* magazine hosts shows in London, New York and Paris as well as its own fashion week in Lagos. And African diaspora fashion weeks have also cropped up in New York, London and Dublin.

South Africa undoubtedly holds the best prospects for models, with numerous fashion weeks held throughout the year. Dr Precious Motsepe established African Fashion International (AFI) in 2006, which now produces Cape Town Fashion Week, Joburg Fashion Week and Africa Fashion Week. Tanzanian model Millen Magese is a mainstay of AFI events. ‘Our aim is to provide a platform from which African designers and models can launch international careers’, says Motsepe. ‘Ours is a land of diversity, a reality that is beautifully translated into our fashion. We can’t help but be noticed within an industry that is always looking for fresh talent.’

**GENERATION NOW**

The success of the new generation of designers, models and fashion scenes around Africa is a reflection of Africa’s success as a whole. The continent is gradually emerging as a global power thanks to increased trade and investment between Africa and the rest of the world and improved political stability and economic growth in burgeoning democracies such as Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Botswana and Ghana. According to a 2011 study by the African Development Bank, one in three Africans (313 million people) is now defined as middle class. Growing numbers are well-educated, well-travelled, living in urban areas and helping to drive future economic and cultural development.

Booming manufacturing, finance, corporate and technology sectors are being rivalled by the creative industries and big business and governments are beginning to take note. The fashion and textile industry is a significant contributor to the GDP of many countries. In South Africa, it typically employs 200,000 people and generates over R20 billion (US$2.9 billion) per annum. By working on a small scale and using local labour and resources, it’s creating jobs, keeping traditional craftsmanship alive, developing fair trade networks, bolstering retail and building a business model that benefits the African economy from the ground up.

African fashion is also being aided by a rapid increase in telecommunications. Due to improved cable and satellite connectivity, Africa now has more than 500 million mobile phone users, 110 million internet users and 25 million Facebook members. This allows for e-commerce, new media and social media to connect designers quickly, easily and cheaply to their customers and each other. Blogspot and Twitter both rank in the top 10 most visited sites in Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa, with fashion taking up no small part in the conversation. African and diaspora portals such as BellaNaija, Fashizblack, iFashion, HauteFashion, Ladybrille, African Style Daily, Style House Files, One Nigerian Boy and Shadders and e-commerce sites including My Asho, Heritage 360 and Agnes and Lola all transport African fashion to the world.

There has been a surge in African fashion periodicals too. While Condé Nast stirred up much debate by passing on the option of bringing out a *Vogue Africa* in 2010, African glossies such as *Canoe, Fab, Pop’Africana, Clam, True Love, African Woman, Thisday Style* and *ARISE* are all read by opinion-formers in search of quality African fashion editorials. *ARISE* chairman and editor in chief Nduka Obasighena says: ‘ARISE
magazine is leading the way in satisfying unprecedented demand for Africa’s finest designers. We’re here to show the world that Africa is at the cutting edge of international fashion.’

Designers have both the means and the channels of communication to achieve recognition. They are grounded in traditions but are exposed to international trends and tastes, allowing them to satisfy local demand, attract international interest and shape contemporary African identities. It’s this axis of influences and agendas that is making African fashion so exciting and vital right now.

CHALLENGING TIMES

The road ahead isn’t an easy one, however. The difficulties facing African fashion’s growth remain real. For example, there is a lack of formal fashion educational facilities, which creates weaknesses in all aspects of the industry from pattern-cutting and styling to marketing and PR. There is no continent-wide official body to unify and encourage funding for designers. And poor infrastructure in most countries means that frequent power cuts, lack of equipment and unreliable transportation pushes up costs. Designers can struggle to produce small orders to high standards within the timeframe and price points required to fulfil seasonal overseas orders.

The second-hand clothes market is a hot topic in Kenya, Zambia, Ghana, Tunisia, Zimbabwe, Rwanda and Senegal, where a significant proportion of donations to charities in the USA and Europe ends up. Their import, distribution, repair and resale has become a thriving industry and provides consumers with access to affordable fashion. In Kenya fashion-conscious shoppers use dressing agents who hand-pick the best items from each shipment before it even reaches the mitumba markets. The trade creates employment and choice, but at the expense of local designers who can’t compete on price.

Increasingly cheap imports of new clothing from Asia compound the problem. ‘Second-hand clothes sellers are a necessary evil here but as Kenyan brands come in and create more stable employment, they can pull from a pool of talent who have trained themselves in becoming merchandisers and salesmen’, says Jeffrey Kimathi of Nairobi-based streetwear brand Jamhuri Wear.

Some countries have tackled the issue by banning the import of fashion and textiles, or taxing them heavily in an attempt to stimulate local production, but this approach creates different issues. In Nigeria textile imports were outlawed in 2003, which resulted in a large number of manufacturing companies closing down and a rise in black-market imports. Although restrictions were somewhat lifted in 2010, the lack of choice of fabrics and factories remains an ongoing problem for designers.

But according to Lagos-based designer Folake Folarin-Coker of Tiffany Amber, creativity conquers all on a continent that has had more than its fair share of strife. ‘It’s true, there is still a lack of infrastructure, fabrics, technical know-how and government support. But these constraints only make us super resourceful and as more people train as fashion designers, it is becoming a domino effect. It’s been a long process but now we’re ready to compete. The future of African fashion is in the hands of great designers.’

*Dress by Tiffany Amber*
At Duro Olowu’s New York Fashion Week debut at the Milk Studios, his models, including Georgie Baddiel, Kinée Diouf and Sigail Currie, came into view wearing an elegant cacophony of colours, prints, fabrics and textures. Velvet, printed silks, vintage textiles, merino jacquard wool and Linton tweed were patchworked, layered, reassembled and panelled together to create sweeping floor-length, bias-cut dresses, fitted zip-up blazers, multi-peplum jackets, wide-legged cropped trousers and bell-sleeved cocoon cardigans. The look was in equal part noble, womanly and cozy.

’My intention was to create a freestyle, chic wardrobe for an independent spirit’, says Olowu, who cites South American gauchos, Mexican screen icon María Félix and African-American Harlem Renaissance photographer James Van Der Zee as the touchstones of the Autumn/Winter 2011/12 collection.
Married to Thelma Golden, chief curator of The Studio Museum in Harlem, and with customers including Michelle Obama, Iman, Bethann Hardison, Shala Monroque and Iris Apfel, it’s little wonder Olowu made the move to New York after several seasons at London Fashion Week. But his story begins elsewhere: in Lagos, where he was born and raised.

‘I was a child of the 1970s, I saw the world from the cushion on the floor and I always drew. Lagos was a bustling city, I loved the way people always made an effort in how they dressed. Nigerian clothes look very structured but are actually very light. It’s all about posture and mixing fabrics and prints. My mother had a very carefree style, she’d wear a Gucci scarf with a skirt made by a local tailor. It has all became part of my aesthetic.’

Olowu trained as a lawyer in London but, moved by Yves Saint Laurent’s vision of ‘attainable beauty’, he started the label Olowu Golding with his first wife Elaine Golding in the mid-1990s. After the marriage ended, he began his eponymous line for Spring/Summer 2004 and opened a boutique on Portobello Road, selling a capsule collection of voluminous empire-line dresses based on the Yoruba boubou. ‘It was a very joyful, effortless and comfortable dress. It had a deep V neckline, long sleeves and was made from viscose georgette so it flowed nicely when you walked. If you were in Paris, London or Lagos, you could have worn that dress, day or night.’
In 2005 US Vogue featured it, thus beginning a craze for what became known as the 'Duro Dress'. He won New Designer of the Year at the British Fashion Awards (the first brand to do so without having done a catwalk show) and gained stockists around the world, among them Barneys New York and Maria Louisa, Paris.

He’s since collected numerous accolades, including International Designer of the Year at the 2010 Africa Fashion Week Awards, and opened a new boutique in St James’s, central London. His loyal customers flock to this intimate space to graze on his instinctual union of reclaimed couture fabrics with his own kaleidoscopic prints, and talent for form-flattering tailoring and bohemian draping. His handcrafted, limited-edition pieces are ageless, sensual and above all celebrate the urbane woman. ‘I thrive on authenticity without being precious and want to make things that last’, he says. ‘You don’t have to be a size zero, or rich, to look good. I hope my clothes champion women and inspire them to feel dignified, confident and sexy.’
Helen Jennings
New African Fashion (US Version)

Paperback, Flexobroschur, 240 Seiten, 19,5 x 27,0 cm
250 farbige Abbildungen
ISBN: 978-3-7913-4579-6

Prestel

Erscheinungstermin: Oktober 2011

Vom Geheimtipp zum Laufsteg-Phänomen