

MADE IN AFRICA



AFRICA IS CURRENTLY REINVENTING ITSELF, USING ITS UNIQUE CRAFTS SKILLS TO CREATE HIGH-END CONTEMPORARY PRODUCTS, INCLUDING FASHION ITEMS. **DANIEL SCHEFFLER** TAKES A LOOK AT THIS NEW TREND

Africa needs a good make over. The continent, and every country individually within it, should be harnessing their ability, creativity and inspiration to produce luxurious, innovative products. Unfortunately, this vast spread of land, home to almost a billion people, is largely viewed as an unskilled, sluggish workforce. So it's time for Africa to reinvent its identity and create a unique, strong voice.

There is a massive opportunity to harness African craftsmanship and convert it into a viable resource. The end goal is to raise awareness of the quality of design and facilitate trade, so that an item that is made in Kenya, or 'Made in The Karoo' is as revered as something that carries the label 'Made in France'.

THE BELIEVERS

One believer, a trailblazer of sorts, is Bridget Russo who started Passion Projects, an organisation linking high-end American brands like Edun, Loomstate and Rogan Denim to African countries. Panel discussions at Russo's Design Africa conference included whether Africa's apparel industry could be "the next China in terms of pricing or the next Italy in terms of craftsmanship" and Russo brought to light the "imminent expiration of a fashion-friendly trade policy", allowing brands to import fabrics to less-developed nations in Africa, like Lesotho, without having to pay duties.

"Every African country is pushing their own production and talent as a means for commercialism and self-expression", Russo said at the time. Africa has an untouched tribal element that most of the world cannot compete with. So if the continent can position itself in a way that gives it both authority and value, it will be able to create its distinctiveness in a manner that can be internationally represented.

The editor of Italian *Vogue*, Franca Sozzani, quoted Goodluck Jonathan, the President of Nigeria who said, "Africa needs a rebranding". Sozzani is also Goodwill Ambassador for Fashion4Development, and has embarked on a global campaign to use fashion to assist the United Nations with their work in boosting Africa. She famously ignited an inferno with her all-black edition of *Vogue* in 2008. More recently, in May last year, she again gave Africa her ratification by launching an everything-African edition of *Uomo Vogue*. The issue portrayed a totally different outlook on Africa. The cover model: Ban Ki-moon, the Secretary General of the United Nations. In the magazine, Mr Ban Ki-moon is quoted saying that "Africa needs investment and partnership – not more negative thinking". For a world desperately seeking the next Big Thing, Africa brings a touch of unexpectedness and innocence. In recent years, the continent has been on the hot list for fashion inspiration. American designer Michael Kors based a collection on some of the continent's most iconic safari lodges, while Donna Karan channelled exquisite African-inspired prints in a number of her collections. However, inspiration is one thing, but artistry and dexterity are something entirely different.





by designers Rogan Gregory and Scott Mackinlay Hahn, who wanted to create a demand for certified organic cotton using socially and environmentally responsible methods of production. They currently work across the world, but also in Africa. So although the business might not be utilising African craftsmanship exclusively, it has certainly helped negate the perception of poor quality that is often associated with this continent.



AFRICAN FASHION WEEK

The various Fashion Week events across the continent have brought a great deal of attention to Africa, although there is some controversy surrounding whether they have been marketed and managed properly. Sadly, very few designers who have shown their talents during these events have made any impact internationally. Part of the reason for this is that African fashion schools and councils do not belong to a 'recognised' body.

New York's African Fashion Week (AFWNY) has aimed to create a platform for African fashion in the global realm, but even they have yet to make any real impact on the international fashion scene. The range of fashion weeks held locally in South Africa have also yet to deliver any great commercial or creative success.

However, there are a few African designers who have managed to emerge triumphant internationally. One of these is Laurence Chauvin Buthaud, the designer behind the contemporary menswear brand Laurence Airline. She utilises her French and Ivory Coast ancestry to create unpolluted silhouettes and commercial prints. Her latest fabrics are quite striking and combine a Japanese -inspired polka dot and Scottish plaid on a printed wax surface. With a benevolent cause to teach sewing to local communities and her specific focus on Paris, the designer is giving new meaning to the label 'Made in Africa'. 🇳🇬

THE EXPERTS

"The continent's craftwork, varying not just between countries but also to specific tribes, offers the jaded fashion world objects that have been touched by human hands - the greatest of luxuries in the 21st-Century", said Suzy Menkes in her *International Herald Tribune* feature in August last year. Menkes led the IHT's Luxury Conference in Rome in November entitled 'The Promise of Africa... The Power of the Mediterranean'. According to her, Africa is handing over their (mostly) natural resources to the West without being aware of their marvel and worth. Africa hasn't polished the proverbial diamond.

"I think that you have to remove yourself from Africa, and look back into it creatively. That is why the inspired collections of Gaultier, YSL and Galliano are so brilliant", explains South African-born milliner Albertus Swanepoel, who is based in New York. He believes that living in Africa sometimes leads to creating 'costumes' rather than clothing of an international standard, and that although

there is great craftsmanship available, it needs to be guided.

INVESTMENT INTO AFRICA

One brand that has invested hugely into Africa – and with some success - is Edun. Founded in 2005 by Ali Hewson and world-famous philanthropist Bono, the company's goal was to create a "global fashion brand bringing about positive change through its trading relationship with Africa and its positioning as a creative force in contemporary fashion". In 2007 they launched Edun Live, a branch of the company that produces T-shirts made in Africa. In 2009 LVMH bought shares in Edun Live to provide the necessary support, investment and infrastructure. Although the brand has worked hard to build long-term, sustainable opportunities, Edun Live has yet to become a success. Edun itself currently operates in Kenya, Morocco, Madagascar, Uganda and Tunisia.

Another brand that has invested in the continent is Loomstate. The company was launched in New York in 2004