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Africa's Fashion Diaspora
September 18–December 29, 2024
Curated by Elizabeth Way

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Cover: AAKS by Akosua Afriyie-Kumi, Hana Mini Tan Bag, 2023.

Photo: Cara Johnson. Model: Nyawargak Gatluak. Courtesy of AAKS.

Interior: Left page (from top left): Christie Brown, wax print and chiffon ensemble, spring 2016, Ghana, Gift of Christie Brown; Wales Bonner, silver and pearl embroidered wool tuxedo, spring 2017, UK; Kevan Hall, silk chiffon evening gown, spring 2008, USA, Gift of Kevan Hall; Fabrice, beaded silk dress, 1980s, USA/Haiti, Gift of Stacey Fabrikant; Right page (from left): Sindiso Khumalo, printed cotton dress, spring 2021, South Africa; The Cloth, indigo-dyed ensemble, 2019, Trinidad and Tobago. Unless otherwise credited, all images are © The Museum at FIT.

Africa's Fashion Diaspora



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Africa's Fashion Diaspora asks a question that has been previously posed by philosophers, writers, fine artists, and musicians: Do Black people across Africa and its diaspora create and maintain shared or related cultures? While this question has been theorized and shaped by thinkers and leaders as illustrious as W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, Nelson Mandela, Stuart Hall, and Paul Gilroy, fashion is rarely considered for its contribution to transnational conversations on Blackness, despite clothing's heavy recruitment for demonstrating Black identities and affiliations. The work of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Black fashion designers provides a dynamic way to explore considerations of Black cultural connectivity across national boundaries. Fashion and style are communicators unto themselves, circulating in unbounded networks, both physically and digitally.

The designers featured in *Africa's Fashion Diaspora* use their fashion practices for storytelling. They combine their aesthetic ideals—forged both within their immediate communities and through international influences—with deep considerations of themselves as modern Black people. They often draw on the craftspersonship of wider networks to channel their meditations and narratives into fashion design. Not every Black designer explores Blackness through their work, but *Africa's Fashion Diaspora* illustrates that certain designers have a lot to say on what it means to be a Black cultural subject within a varied and multifaceted international Black population. As much as art, music, or literature, their work is redefining transnational Blackness by exploring questions of identity, pushing back on misconceptions, amplifying Black histories and traditions, creating new networks, and generally troubling narrow definitions of culture dominated by Eurocentric ideals. Their fashion—a medium that straddles art and commerce—allows people of multiple backgrounds to participate in this storytelling, consciously or incidentally.

In order to contemplate fashion's engagement with the idea that Black people around the world contribute to shared cultural dialogues that transcend differences of gender, ethnicity, language, religion, sexual orientation, and locality, some parameters must be defined. Africa is a massive geographic area, home to thousands of ethnicities and distinct communities, as well as 54 political nations. But Africa is also an idea. Scholar Yogita Goyal writes, "Over the course of the twentieth century, Africa as a sign and as a place powered dreams of black liberation." These dreams manifested on the continent through independence and Pan-Africanism and around the world in many movements for Black solidarity, from Négritude to Afrofuturism. Africa also has many diasporas. This exhibition considers the cultural production of the continent and its Black Diasporas across North and South America, the Caribbean, and Europe. In this instance,

"Black" is used as scholars Annalisa Oboe and Anna Scacchi describe it, "as a loosely defined, adaptive signifier, disconnected from essentialized notions of 'race.'"

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Eurocentric scientific racism stereotyped and oppressed Black people through what it recognized as biological traits. We know today that race is a social construct. *Africa's Fashion Diaspora* recognizes Blackness as a self-identified cultural marker that Black people use to describe aspects of their identities. Therefore, this exhibition is interested in the ways that Black people explore and define Black cross-pollination across national and cultural boundaries. There is no doubt that this quest for connectivity has been driven by the violent severances of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism. Historically, Black people from different backgrounds sought unity based on shared experiences of oppression, but also some cultural similarities. Art historian Krista Thompson writes, "Since almost the beginning of the slave-trade, writers, thinkers, travelers, political leaders, and artists in the African diaspora ... across the world sought to align themselves with other people of African descent and saw themselves as parts of a larger black international community." Yet, borrowing the words of South African textile designer Nkuli Mlangeni-Berg, *Africa's Fashion Diaspora* is "very curious about what connects us as a people beyond the struggle."

Africa's Fashion Diaspora is an anthology of Black designers' investigations of African Diasporic identity and culture with designs grouped in nine themes: Reaching for Africa, Mothers & Motherlands, A Black Atlantic, Homegoing, History Is Political, Transcendent & Supernatural, Monumental Cloth, Tun Yuh Han Mek Fashan, and Ubuntu. These themes are suggestions of how each designer's narrative can be read and connected to other Black designers' inspirations, but it is readily evident that many of these designs could fit into other themes across the exhibition. That is because the designers' inspirations and executions are complex, reflecting the multidimensionality of Black identities, histories, and cultures. Yet throughout the exhibition, designers seek connectivity through their work—with their immediate families and communities, with diasporic homelands and pasts, with Africa as a location and an idea, or across the diaspora with Black cultures that pique their creative interest and illuminate something about their own experiences. *Africa's Fashion Diaspora* takes the stance that transnational Black cultures assert themselves through the work of Black designers who use fashion as creative, visual, and intellectual storytelling, but it does not seek to concretely define these discursive networks. It only emphasizes fashion's significant role in shaping contemporary ideas of modern and internationally connected cultures.

Elizabeth Way, curator

