

A Closer Look: Highlights From Africa's Fashion Diaspora Transcript

Join curator Elizabeth Way to take a closer look at nine objects, one from each theme, in *Africa's Fashion Diaspora*.

1. Introduction to Africa's Fashion Diaspora

Curator Elizabeth Way introduces the listener to the **Diasporic Crossings** audio tour.

1 minute, 1 second

Welcome to *Africa's Fashion Diaspora*. My name is Elizabeth Way and I am the curator of the exhibition. This exhibition is divided into nine themes looking at how self-identified Black fashion designers explore Black cultural themes in their work and how these themes relate to other Black cultures across geography, time, ethnicity, religion, language, gender, and other boundaries. What do Black communities around the world have in common? Many scholars, philosophers, political leaders and creators, from visual artists to musicians, have thought about this question. And fashion has much to add to this historical and ongoing conversation. In the following audio clips, I delve deeply into an object in each of the nine themes in the exhibition in order to think about how it relates to the other themes. I highlight the cross diasporic links between the designers' inspirations and the designs to emphasize the complex and multi-faceted narratives.

2. Reaching for Africa - "Angelina" Vlisco Print

Learn more about wax prints like this "Angelina" print from the Dutch textile manufacturer Vlisco.

1 minute, 23 seconds

This wax print fabric was created by the Dutch textile company Vlisco. Wax prints are also called African prints, Ankara, fancy cloth, and Kitenge, among other names, and they are a potent example of how goods, ideas, and styles circulate globally. Wax prints are modeled on Indonesian batik textiles. Batik is a wax resist dyeing method. During the 19th century, Dutch colonizers in Southeast Asia tried to displace Indonesian hand-dyed batiks with mechanized production methods, but Indonesian customers did not buy these copies. The lightweight and colorful fabrics, however, sold well at the turn-of-the-20th century in the Dutch-occupied Gold Coast, or present-day Ghana. Soon English and French manufacturers also produced wax print textiles for the West African market, selling to the areas they colonized. West Africa has been a vibrant region of diverse peoples, languages, and dress traditions from the pre-colonial period to today, and wax prints were adopted and adapted into local dress practices by the early-twentieth century. During the 1960s, as African countries gained independence,

wax prints and their communicative patterns spread across the continent and the Black Diaspora, including in the United States.

3. A Black Atlantic – Wales Bonner white tux

Emperor Haile Selassie I was an influential Pan-Africanist leader. Learn more about how he inspired menswear designer Grace Wales Bonner.

1 minute, 15 seconds

Grace Wales Bonner, who is a British Jamaican designer, was inspired by the Ethiopian political leader Haile Selassie I to design this white tuxedo. Wales Bonner amplifies an important international figure who is little known by contemporary western audiences. Haile Selassie was emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974. He was a key figure in helping to modernize Ethiopia and to reclaim it from Italian fascist occupation during World War II. During this period, he rose to international prominence for his anti-fascism, and was named *Time* magazine's Man of the Year in 1935. In 1945 Haile Selassie led Ethiopia's charter membership in the UN and in 1963 presided over the Organization of African Unity, an early Pan-Africanist institution. The emperor was a major player in twentieth century international politics, but is little recognized today. African histories, in general, are often ignored outside of the continent. Wales Bonner contributes to the political act of writing histories by illuminating important African figures and pushing back on dominant Eurocentric narratives.

4. Homegoing – Telfar

Telfar Clemens makes a powerful statement on fashion's global circulation and waste, but also on African style, ingenuity, and upcycling with his Liberian Olympic Uniforms.

1 minute, 22 seconds

Designing uniforms for the 2021 Liberian Olympic team was a way for Telfar Clemens to connect with his roots. The designer was born in Liberia in 1990 and moved to the United States with his family at age 5. Clemons based the uniforms on the style he observed while visiting Liberia when he was older. He saw ensembles created from Euro-American second-hand garments. Clemons and his business partner Babak Radboy explain how, [quote] "The garments tell the story of a journey of recognition — in which Telfar saw the roots of his design DNA all around him in the streets of a country with a history deeply entwined with America's own." [end quote] Liberia was founded in 1822 by Black American abolitionists who survived enslavement, but Clemons explains that Liberia's contemporary fashion connection to the United States comes [quote] "in the barrels and containers of used and surplus clothes from which much of Africa — and therefore the world — fashions itself." [end quote] Clemens's Olympic designs [quote] "trace [the] logistics of global distribution networks," as Clemons and Radboy state, because they reference the ways African people throughout the continent upcycle and restyle western cast-offs.

5. Mothers and Motherlands – Fabrice

Fabrice Simon works with Haitian beaders to weave his home country’s culture into his designs.

1 minute, 15 seconds

Fabrice Simon’s sister Brigitte Steibel notes of the designer’s work [quote] “Our Caribbean and Haitian heritage really influenced him. Not many people realized it, but there were a lot of voodoo symbols incorporated into the beadwork.” [end quote] Vodou is a syncretic, or blended, religion developed in Haiti by enslaved West Africans who drew influences from Yorùbá and Dahomey cultures as well as Catholicism. It is described by the historian Ina J. Fandrich as [quote] “possibly the most maligned and misunderstood religion in the world.” [end quote] Vodou suffered from a smear campaign by Euro-Americans after the successful overthrow of colonial rule enacted by the Haitian War of Independence between 1791 and 1804. Fabrice Simon’s beaded motifs, designed with Haitian artisans, nod to Vodou’s vèvè cosmograms. Vèvè are religious symbols that hold significant and specific meanings in Vodou religion and Haitian culture. The square grid on the right side of the skirt of this black silk dress, for example, refers to the crossed swords of the vèvè of the protective warrior spirit Ogoou Badagri.

6. History is Political – Esteban Africa

Learn more about Colombia’s first Black vice president, Francia Márquez, the young designer Esteban Sinisterra Paz, and their fashion diplomacy.

1 minute, 22 seconds

Esteban Sinisterra Paz made history when he dressed Francia Márquez for her inauguration as Colombia’s first Black vice-president. This dress is made from a classic wax print produced by the Dutch company Vlisco. Wax print fabrics were popular with 1960s Black American political activists and Sinisterra is drawn to the wax prints that are quintessential to West African style as an expression of his Black consciousness. He states, [quote] “First we accept and recognize that we have roots that connect us — which is Africa — but taking into account those roots, we also express the territory where we’re from, the Colombian Pacific.” [end quote] Sinisterra embraced African-inspired textiles after his family was violently displaced from their home in the Columbian town of Santa Bárbara de Iscuandé in 2004. The communities there are predominantly Afro-Colombian, and he notes, [quote] “In my hometown, I wasn’t aware I was a Black man — I was just a regular guy.” [end quote] However, his family faced discrimination and poverty in the larger cities where they moved, and Sinisterra founded his fashion brand to help support them while also creating visibility for Afro-Colombian culture. He describes the styles he designs for Márquez as “resistance” fashion.

7. Transcendent & Supernatural – Post Imperial/Lagos Space Programme

How is an old textile inspiring new fashion? Learn how Nigerian designers are reconceptualizing indigo-dyed Adire.

1 minute, 28 seconds

Nigerian American designer Niyi Okuboyejo of the brand Post-Imperial and Nigerian designer Adeju Thompson of the brand Lagos Space Programme both explore Adire fabric in their work. Adire eleko is an indigo resist-dyed cloth produced from the early twentieth century throughout Nigeria by Yoruba textile artisans. Dyers draw patterns on woven cotton with cassava starch which partially resists indigo dyes and creates beautiful blue-on-blue patterns. For Okuboyejo, partnering with Adire dyers in Nigeria emphasizes how his brand is [quote] “rooted in the African diaspora.” [end quote] It also reflects ethical responsibility in fashion materials and as he describes [quote] “the creative collaboration between artisans, matter, and the environment.” [end quote] Thompson connects historic and contemporary practices in his 2024 collection. He states [quote] “In traditional Adire practice, the artist would engage with the medium as a means of storytelling, thus creating a parallel with modern-day subcultures where queer communities share their stories through languages, symbols, and gestures exclusively to their own groups.” [end quote]. The sentiments of both Niyi Okuboyejo of Post-Imperial and Adeju Thompson of Lagos Space Programme underscore the centrality of Adire cloth in their designs.

8. Monumental Cloth – Thebe Magugu

South African designer Thebe Magugu made his family the stars of his spring 2022 collection. Listen to how his custom textile captures his family history.

1 minute, 12 seconds

South African designer Thebe Magugu included this ensemble, which incorporates images of his family members, as part of his *Genealogy* collection. It was presented in a short film featuring him sitting down with his mother Iris Magugu and his aunt Esther Magugu. The trio unpack a box of family photographs, sharing memories, stories of relatives, and laughs, as the split frame simultaneously shows models in Magugu’s designs inspired by each photograph. Their conversation weaves a vibrant and relatable family history marked by changing styles and past trends. Family photo albums document diasporic migration and have been central documents in the twentieth century and earlier to bring distant family closer, but Magugu’s collection also tells a specific story of his family in South Africa, from the development of their community in Ipopeng township to his mother’s work in Kuruman, a city two hours north, and their ties to relatives in Lesotho. To view the nine-minute video, look for “Thebe Magugu SS22 Genealogy” on the Thebe Magugu YouTube channel.

9. Tun yuh han mek fashion – NKWO

Fashion can be a force for good, both environmentally and socially. Learn how designer Nkwo Onwuka uses fashion to empower.

1 minute, 6 seconds

Nkwo Onwuka's Dakala cloth jacket is woven from existing denim fabric. By reducing new production and repurposing existing textile waste, it reflects environmentally conscious design. Onwuka also considers the sustainability of labor, people, and communities through the NKWO brand. Her spring 2019 collection *Who Knew* was inspired by people who have survived displacement and human trafficking. In 2017 she established the NKWO Transform Initiative with the United Nations to empower and employ women living in a camp for internally displaced people. Onwuka partnered with ten women in Abuja, Nigeria, stating [quote] "These women have lost their access to homes because of the Boko Haram insurgency. The tales are horrible, but these women still find time to learn new skills and have a better life." [end quote] NKWO is an innovative brand that works toward social justice through the fashion business, offering a model that can inspire other designers and work to reduce fashion's negative environmental and labor impacts.

10. Ubuntu – Stella Jean

Learn how Italian designer Stella Jean uses her fashion platform for racial justice activism.

1 minute, 19 seconds

Stella Novarino regularly partners with the Ethical Fashion Initiative in order to collaborate with textile artisans around the world to design and produce fabrics for her Stella Jean brand. By doing so, she creates sustainable collections that pay artisans fairly. Novarino uses her platform as a designer for social justice at home in Italy as well. Novarino is the only Black designer in Italy's predominant fashion organization, the Italian National Fashion Chamber. In 2020 she co-founded the "We Are Made in Italy" foundation to urge the chamber to include and support Italian designers of color who are largely ignored and passed over for recognition and investment. Novarino refused to show at Milan Fashion Week until she was no longer the only Black designer included. Her outspoken identification of racism in the Italian fashion system, and the nation more generally, resulted in professional retaliation and death threats, but she continues to protest racial injustice. While the Italian National Fashion Chamber offered support for Black designers between 2020 and 2022, they reportedly pulled back, leading Stella Jean and other "We Are Made in Italy" brands to boycott Milan Fashion Week in February 2023.

These audio recordings were created for The Museum at FIT's exhibition, *Africa's Fashion Diaspora* (September 18–December 29, 2024). For more information, visit fitnyc.edu/museum.