

Modern African design on display at London Craft Week

Merchants on Long, the Cape Town-based concept store that champions contemporary African design, is hosting an exhibition showcasing African brands to an international audience at London Craft Week, taking place from 8-14 May.



Source: Supplied

Launched in 2020, London Craft Week celebrates British and international creativity by bringing together over 250 established and emerging makers, designers, brands and galleries to present workshops and exhibitions that uncover an essential nature of design.

Curated selection of fashion and homeware

Merchants on Long is presenting an eclectic selection of locally-made homeware and fashion from across the African continent. From beadwork to intricate telephone-wire weaving and woodcarving, the curation introduces an exciting selection of modern African design.

All pieces move beyond an established idea of African craft. Hand-beaded décor pieces made by MonkeyBiz in South Africa and Sidai design in Tanzania have been selected for their quirky and stylish reinterpretation of this ancient craft. Both initiatives, as well as creating beautiful objects, work with employing and empowering women from local townships and rural areas to support their communities.



Source: Supplied



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Crafts such as tie-dye, weaving, and batik are interpreted in modern fashion with looks from a range of African designers. Awa Meite of Mali, and NKWO of Nigeria, use traditional tie-dye techniques in elevated contemporary design pieces. Kente Gentlemen from the Ivory Coast is known for modern menswear made from traditional handwoven 100% Ivorian cotton. Sophisticated silhouettes from Ghanaian brand 189 are made with age-old batik-worked fabrics.

Further brands include Frances VH which uses pure mohair in her blankets and throws, thereby working with a natural colour palette reminiscent of the semi-arid Karoo region of the Cape, where the majority of South Africa's mohair is produced.

Handcrafted in Ghana, AAKS creates handbags that seek to conserve the provenance of weaving as an art form, accentuated with the bright exuberant colours of Africa.

Okapi's range of accessory and lifestyle products is strongly committed to raising awareness around community and the environment all with the goal of long-term sustainability. Using available resources that include the off-cuts and by-products of the South Africa's ostrich farming industry such as feathers and leather, Okapi offers new life to materials that would otherwise be discarded.



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Bridging worlds with artisanal products

Altogether, the showcased brands tell a story about the many African creative scenes that can be found on the continent, reflecting how ultra-contemporary labels can bridge different worlds by creating desirable artisanal products that resonate with different markets.

“All the brands chosen raise awareness that designers in Africa can create and thrive on a global platform,” says Neith Assogbavi of Merchants on Long. “These creatives can also be seen as activists who use their medium to produce attractive products and contribute to the cultural preservation and jobs creation in their respective countries. As a result, they open a truly meaningful conversation between the past and the present and invite customers to discover African design through a nuanced and curiosity-led lens.”

The Merchants on Long exhibition is taking place at the Frieze Art Gallery on London's Cork Street. There are two parts to the activation - an intimate breakfast followed by a full open day on 10 May. Christine Checinska, lead curator of the Africa Fashion exhibition at the V&A Museum, will also present a talk on African fashion.

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