

African fashion has the look

Leopard-print in acid pink and orange show African fashion with a twist, flinging curio-like interpretation off the ramp as local designers seek to show their diverse talent and find global appeal.



From outrageous denim couture to muted safari-chic in flowing white and khaki, the ramps at the just-ended Cape Town Fashion Week sought to prove the continent should no longer be pigeonholed as a provider of stereotypical prints and fabrics.

"It is important not to take Africa too literally. It doesn't always have to be brown and burnt orange," says Chris Kilchling of Undacova, whose 1980s inspired leopard-print underwear and unconventional use of African symbols takes the trend of clashing prints and gives it a local feel.

Africa's top designers have made inroads globally, but the nation is still often relegated to sideshows on global ramps or inspiration for safari looks.

"I think it is just about educating. The African fashion scene is actually very diverse," says Stephanie Viera of the Cape Town Fashion Council, adding most of the designs "could be from anywhere".

"It is certainly not just stereotype Afro-chic. It is about modern Africa."

South Africa's fashion scene struggles to find a common platform, with organisers staging competing events all year, making it difficult for buyers to pick one that stands out to showcase what the continent has to offer.

The first annual Cape-to-Cairo style effort was recently held in the financial capital Johannesburg, bringing designers from Egypt to Botswana with collections that ranged from futuristic metallics to 1950s-nostalgia.

The aim was to create a space and market in the cluttered international fashion week calendar, said organiser Precious Moloi-Motsepe of African Fashion International.

"Our continent is very very diverse," Moloi-Motsepe told *AFP*. "It's been challenging for most African designers. African designers are always expected to show almost like your costume type of designs that is very theatrical."

"We know that they are capable of producing ranges that can be saleable on the market that is ready to wear, that is contemporary, but has an African aesthetic to it.

For trend analyst Dion Chang, instead of an "oh shame, we must really help Africa" attitude, an international aesthetic needs to be developed which does not smack of what he calls "curio-continent".

"If you want to be taken seriously internationally, you have to give that international aesthetic," he said. "It's a business. You're trying to sell clothes at the end of the day."

Top South African designer David Tlale, who has notched up awards and shown on catwalks in fashion capitals, said he is often asked if he is based in London when he travels abroad with his clothes.

"I'm from Johannesburg, South Africa. They go 'really, with that collection?'," he said.

"In the past people have always said 'oh Africa is not ready, Africa does not deliver, Africa does not know how to do it'. My take as a designer is to prove that statement wrong, to say Africa has it all."

Having moved temporarily to Australia during apartheid in the 1980s, South African designer Craig Jacobs of label Fundudzi recalls being asked by local children if he had a pet giraffe or lion.

"That's the perception that a lot of people have about the rest of Africa," he told *AFP*.

"I don't think they know about design, they don't think about it like that. There's a lot of information that still needs to go out there."

Source: AFP

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