

Models of colour are not a trend, we are here to stay - Naomi Campbell

By [Liam Freeman](#)

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South Africa is so close to London-born Naomi Campbell's heart that she considers it her second home. "When you think of South Africa you think of Nelson Mandela and that's the way it will always be," she says of her late friend (whom she affectionately calls "Grandad") and the first democratically elected president of the country.



Naomi Campbell speaking at the CN Luxury Conference. Image credit: Heather Shuker

It was with Mandela she would often stay when visiting South Africa, and to this day it's to the Mandela family that she makes a first call when in Johannesburg.

On this occasion, the original supermodel is in the country's Mother City, Cape Town, for 48 hours and has just come off the stage at the Condé Nast Luxury Conference where she spoke alongside Gucci CEO Marco Bizzarri about the fashion house's recently launched initiative for diversity and inclusion, as well as the wealth of untapped design talent from the continent. We meet at this year's conference venue, The Lookout, which has a 360-degree panorama of the city, including Robben Island where Mandela spent the majority of his 27 years in incarceration.

Campbell's unlikely friendship with Mandela was forged in 1994, the year he became president and finally brought an end to the brutal apartheid era. Campbell had come to The Palace of the Lost City in South Africa's North West Province to judge Miss World, and decided to donate her fee to his ANC party. "When I came off the stage I got a call to say that I was going to meet President Nelson Mandela," she remembers. "I screamed because he was a symbol of hope for me and for so many others. [He represented] solidarity, freedom, [he was] non-judgemental, humble."



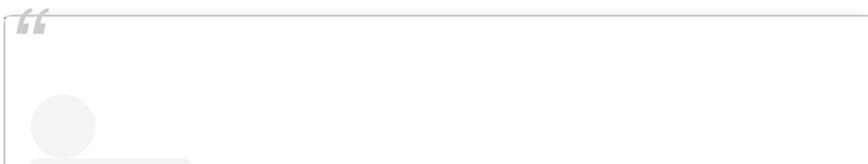
From left: Suzy Menkes, Vogue International; Naomi Campbell; and Marco Bizzarri, Gucci. Image credit: Heather Shuker

Never did he demonstrate these qualities more than when he decided not to run for a second term. “He told me he was going to step down from being president and I asked him why,” Campbell remembers. “He explained that it was much easier for him to take care of the children of the future in South Africa being non-political [because] he could get more help from outside.”

“Grandad told me to speak my truth, to not be in fear of that and to use my voice to help others,” she continues, choosing her quotes carefully as she has to save some for an upcoming book that’s on the horizon. Although her trip is short, she has made time to visit children at the Amoyo Performing Arts centre and Marian RC Secondary School.

This [past] Sunday 14 April, Campbell tells me, marks her 33rd year in the fashion industry – she had her first fashion shoot a month before her 16th birthday. It was the late 1980s and at that time Campbell was one of the only models of colour on the runway.

“I used to have to fight for the same fee as my [white] counterparts doing the same job,” remembers the 48-year-old. And were it not for her sisterhood of supers, namely Linda Evangelista and Christy Turlington, “jeopardising their own careers” by insisting designers “who were not into even thinking of using a model of colour at that time”, Campbell would never have been cast in their shows.



making them part of the bigger network by affiliating them with agencies in London, Milan, Paris and New York.”

She goes on to commend the casting of the Valentino SS19 couture show where more than half the looks were modelled by women of colour: “They took four months to do the casting and you can see they put time into it. We are not a trend, we are here to stay.”



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Campbell also wants to see better representation among designers and more African-based designers reaching the international fashion arena. Today she is wearing a fitted, black, knitted shift dress embroidered and fringed with colourful threads – the work of Johannesburg-based designer Marianne Fassler. Among her other favourite designers from the continent are Tiffany Amber (Nigeria), Rich Mnisi and Thebe Magugu (both South Africa), and Kenneth Ize (also Nigeria) who, along with Magugu, has been shortlisted for the 2019 LVMH Prize for young designers.

“I do believe that an African designer is going to walk away with the LVMH Prize this year,” says Campbell optimistically. “Instead of having Western designers use African designer’s textiles and not get it right, let them do it, give them the credit. Because that’s what happens, they don’t get the credit and it’s wrong.”

There are obvious setbacks for designers in Africa due to a lack of infrastructure in terms of production, mentorship and connections to the wider design community. Through the Gucci initiative – which will see partnerships with schools in Accra, Lagos, Nairobi and Cape Town as part of its multicultural design scholarship programme – Campbell is determined this will change.

“ In conversation with [@SuzyMenkesVogue](#) at the CNI Luxury Conference, discussing my mission on changing the narrative of Africa and my role as a member of the [@gucci #ChangeMakers](#) program alongside president and CEO, [#MarcoBizzarri](#). [#CNILUX #NAOMIAFRICA](#) <https://t.co/LfCArrLGfH> pic.twitter.com/zcAw2HTVjG — Naomi Campbell (@NaomiCampbell) April 11, 2019 ”

Details of the initiative were released in February amid accusations that a balaclava-style sweater available in Gucci stores evoked blackface. Campbell – a global advisor to Bizzarri and a member of Gucci’s Changemakers Council – sees the label’s response (“listening and taking action”) as a positive one and she hopes other brands will follow suit. “This is something that will give back to them in the long run. They will now get to see the new, young, up-and-coming designers on the continent first,” she says.

More broadly speaking, a large part of the reason why African designers are under-represented in the industry, Campbell believes, is that up until recently, people have been fearful of travelling to Africa, leading to widespread misconceptions and lack of understanding about the continent. “Africa has become a vacation destination, this is a place for everyone,” she says.

“Edward [Enninful] and I went to Ghana at Christmas and now I can’t tell you how many people are going – we are scurrying for places to stay. You can never rely on what others say,” she adds. “You have to go and experience it for yourself.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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