

'Chasing Evil' collection,
IAMISIGO, Kenya, Autumn/
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The Art Of Agency

London's Victoria and Albert Museum celebrates eight decades of African fashion. A perspective.

BY ALASTAIR HAGGER

an entire constellation of African fashion ideas, in all its joyful diversity.

"Now feels like the right time, because as far as we're concerned, we can see that African fashion creators are absolutely shifting the geography," says Dr Christine Checinska, the museum's Curator of African and African Diaspora Fashion.

"It's one of those moments where everything aligns. We want to give a platform for these creatives to speak about their work in their way: it is

this idea of many, multiple voices."

The *Africa Fashion* exhibition, which will run through to April 2023, will trace an effervescent path from "iconic mid-20th century to contemporary creatives through photographs, textiles, music and the visual arts". In 10 sections – *African Cultural Renaissance*, *The Politics and Poetics of Cloth*, *Vanguard*, *Capturing Change*, *Minimalism*, *Mixology*, *Artisanal*, *Afrotopia*, *Sartorialists* and *Adornment*, the show will be more than just a feast for the eyes; it

will be a living, breathing conversation about eight decades of cultural dynamism.

"The theorist Stuart Hall said that African diasporic cultural expression often evolves around music, movement and the body, where style becomes the thing that's really going on," says Checinska. "The body is a canvas for expressing identity, for expressing one's culture. And this is often the way in which we enter into the African fashion scene – through photography, or film, or digital platforms, and the body is central to those kinds of arenas. It's about 'movement culture', where it's not just the garment; it's the gesture, it's the walk, it's the performed identity through fashion. One of the reasons the exhibition jumps off from the mid-20th


continent will absolutely shape the work I do in coordinating with the three new curators in rippling the African fashion events throughout the museum. This change is non-negotiable. We're in it for the long term."

One of the creatives whose work is featured in the exhibition is Nigerian designer Adebayo Oke-Lawal, founder of Orange Culture, a brand very much aligned with the exhibition's appreciation for the differentiated voice. "I really wanted my brand to be about representation," he says. "Orange for me felt like more than a color; it's the idea of this secret, this thing that is misunderstood. It personifies the idea of individuality. Orange Culture is basically a culture of safe spaces."

Oke-Lawal is proud of the brand's 11-year growth, and the statement it makes about Nigerian entrepreneurship and resiliency. "From a third world country with an industry that is so young, that doesn't even have the support of our government, we're still able to create something beautiful from nothing," he says. "And so it's allowed us to celebrate our culture and our backgrounds, and the beauty of our individuals. Your brand is who you are. It should be the things you feel passionate about. Anyone who is building something needs to contribute to change; everybody should contribute to where they've come from."

His brand "covers universal silhouettes with an African touch", and "answers to just about anyone who's interested in telling a story with the way they present themselves." These stories often address preconceptions about masculine identity, and the role of fashion in gender identity, sexuality and individuality. "We've always been a brand that has challenged or opposed this idea of toxic masculinity," says Oke-Lawal. "It's about telling African men that they can be different, that they can have different expressions of themselves. It's about expressing the richness of my culture through non-shaming."

This defiance has a broader objective: an articulation of the desire for a re-calibration of external attitudes towards African fashion, which have tended to demand a specific visual narrative rather than demonstrating an openness to idiosyncrasy and innovation.

"It's basically just teaching people our own stories, rather than allowing them to tell us what those stories are," he says. "And I think we've allowed that for too long. I don't go to China and say, 'Why don't you put chopsticks in your designs?' You know? I think that that's one of my favorite things about this exhibition – it's really just allowing us to finally say, 'Hey, this is who we are. This is finally ours, and this is what we're telling you. So now you need to listen.'" 

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– Dr Christine Checinska

century is that, yes, it's that galvanization of creativity that is centuries old, and it's that moment of agency. It still has political relevance, I think, and artistic relevance, and I feel that contemporary designers are almost taking it back and reclaiming it."

The show will cover a broad portfolio of topics with both Africa-specific and global relevance; from LGBTQ+ issues, to sustainability, to women's empowerment, to cultural appropriation.

"We've always felt that this exhibition needed to give a glimpse of the glamour and politics of the African fashion scene, and so you'll be able to read, hear and see the creatives voice themselves," says Checinska. "We felt it was important to tell a story of agency, abundance and unbounded creativity, but tell it from the creators' point of view."

This shift in perspective can also be seen as the beginning of a fresh era for the museum; the V&A has just recruited new curators within the Africa focus. "We see it as the start of a deeper and sustained engagement with African creative excellence," she says. "And what we learned through the conversations we've had with the creatives on the

Photo by Maganga Mwagogo

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FRICA FASHION MEANS THE past, the future and the present at the same time" is the apposite sentiment by Moroccan designer Artsi, fronting the publicity for a major new exhibition launching in July this year at London's Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). As the world finally begins to embrace the idea of Africa as a thrilling and vibrant continent of powerful, individualized creativity, rather than as a collection of recycled assumptions and stereotypes, the stage feels perfectly set for an exhibition that celebrates