

The African Fashion Movement and Afrofuturism in Celebrating Identity

By: Sarah Williams

Africa's rising fashion movement could not come at a better time. The dominance of local influence in textile conception and production, and the Afrofuturism aesthetic both signal sustainability of distinctly African contributions to the apparel industry in a political climate of racial antagonism and downright discrimination. To enter this creative space calls for Africans to reconstruct, define, and decolonize their identity through a tactile, transcendence, and wearable form of art.

The African "fashion renaissance" (CNN Style, 2018) while extensive in its breadth and scope can stylistically recognised by a singular quality— an unapologetic attitude. In describing Johannesburg's street style, Tanzanian-born designer Anisa Mpungwe highlights the importance of political awareness and an, "unapologetic attitude and sense of pride in identity, whether condoned or not" (CNN Style, 2018). This identity is displayed in daring use of patterns and colours, which are often bright and eye-catching. They are not simply beautiful but also distinct and recognisable amongst foreign designs. Manufacturing has rapidly improved allowing for the entire creative process to stay local, with textile factories popping up throughout Johannesburg, Casablanca, Lagos and Nairobi (CNN Style, 2018).



The interplay between identity and empowerment in textiles is explored by Ghanaian designer and artist Serge Attukwei Clottey in his exhibit entitled 'My Mother's Wardrobe'. The installation, displayed at Gallery 1957, shows fabric as a means of communication and connection between mothers and their children (Financial Times, 2017). The garments were displayed against larger yellow wall hangings made out of squares of

plastic gallon containers which are meant to bring to light the water shortages in Accra. There one sees the multifaceted interplay between identity, politics, culture, and design, which brings a much-needed African narrative into a very Western-

centric story of fashion.

Nigerian designer Amaka Osakwe creates all of her clothes completely in her place of birth. She, too, celebrates her culture through the use of bold prints and *adire*, a "manual textile dyeing technique passed down by the Yoruba people of West Africa." (Jiang, 2017) Osakwe was recently headliner of Lagos

["#FNLROM: Fashion – The Royal Ontario Museum – Toronto, Ontario"](#) by [Alanna Joanne/Mainstream](#) is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#) – *Distinct and bold use of pattern and colour.*

Fashion Week and displayed her brand Maki Oh in New York Fashion Week. According to data by Euromonitor, “Sub-saharan Africa's apparel and footwear market is reportedly worth \$31 billion” (CNN, 2018). It is no surprise, then, that Beyoncé and Michelle Obama have worn Maki Oh clothing.

The key to keeping the movement distinctly African is generating knowledge and creative opportunities in the continent while using an afrofuturist narrative to encourage mainstream and widespread representation. The latter concept of afrofuturism can be referred to as, “an unlikely fusion of parts: Egyptian and other non-Western mythologies, mysticism and magical realism with Afrocentricity, modern technology and science fiction... A visual metaphor for empowerment, (it) permits black men and women to take charge of their image.” (Ferla, 2016). The imagery and aesthetics of the movement give youth the means to imagine themselves in socially and technologically expansive environments that they felt unable to access before. Mainstream examples of the movement include Solange's "Cranes in the Sky" music video, Janelle Monáe's ArchAndroid album cover, and the “Black Panther” movie (I-d, 2017). It is creative thought that does not limit identity, but which credits and acknowledges the influence of African culture and identity.

Nigerian fashion blogger Temi Otedola is working towards improving the infrastructure of the Nigerian Fashion industry in order to increase the representation of African identity in mainstream sources. When asked about Afrofuturism, she explained,

“Although previously undermined in creative industries, but often appropriated from, a large proportion of art, music and design is rooted in black culture. How is it that we are often the innovators of popular culture trends but left behind in the monetization of such trends? I can slowly see black entrepreneurs and creatives taking a hold of our own ideas.” (OkayAfrica, 2017)



[“Walé Oyéjidé \(Ikire Jones\)”](#) by [Adomako Aman](#) is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#) - *His apparel design can be seen in the upcoming Marvel Studios film "Black Panther"*

It is clear that the African Fashion movement is gaining momentum and will only become more prominent in future years. The 31-billion-dollar industry is on the rise; with the support of newly mainstream local manufacturers, designers, and African art styles, the African identity is finally becoming pivotal in an industry that has largely been the territory of its white and Western counterparts.

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