

Retail | Industrie
Africa is putting
the continent's
brightest designers
on the map. By *Flora
Macdonald Johnston*



Africa, all sewn up

How can you promote young designers across the entire breadth of the second-largest continent in the world? And how do you categorise 54 unique and autonomous fashion ecosystems, each steeped in its own history of craft and design? The answer: Industrie Africa.

Millennial entrepreneurs Nisha Kanabar and Georgia Bobley, both 30, launched their website in June to promote young designers from across Africa. In doing so they have brought together all manner of different traditions, talents and products. The website acts as a one-stop shop and directory for international buyers, press and consumers, and showcases some of the continent's brightest young fashion stars.

There's everything from streetwear brand PopCaven, launched by Nigerian-born sisters Joan and Doreen Caven, who produce graphic, brightly coloured slogan tees, to makers of mixed-media artisan jewellery such as Rwandan designer Teta Isibo, whose Inzuki Design label uses all local materials, and Senegalese womenswear label Tongoro, which showcases impeccably structured blazers and printed palazzo trousers.

"Africa's fashion industry is undeniably bursting with potential, full of breakout designers, engaging opinion leaders and deep-rooted culture," says Kanabar. "But the world tends to perceive the continent as a single frontier. It's paramount that we emphasise and celebrate each country independently, as you would any other."

For the designers represented on the site, it's a way of challenging stereotypes. "Africa is so often turned into an island," says South African menswear designer Rich Mnsi (see below). "Industrie Africa has created a platform where people can educate themselves about African brands — our diversity and different points of view."

Although Africa is still a relatively untapped source for fashion, the continent's financial potential is huge. According to a 2018 luxury goods study published by Deloitte, the total sales of clothing in Europe and North America are falling. Those areas had more than 50 per cent of the global market in 2017, but less than half in 2018, while sales in Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and Africa combined are all set to increase.

Africa may not yet have the buying power of the Asian market, but it's slowly becoming more of a player. This year, Uche Pézard, chief executive of consultancy Luxe Corp, launched the inaugural Luxury Connect Africa conference to promote African fashion, craft and luxury goods on a global scale. Held in Paris, the conference reached more than one million people online and offline. "The wealth of Africa's creative and cultural heritage is unparalleled," says Pézard, "and I'm pleased the world is finally able to discover this."

Industrie Africa is one of the first sites to cater specifically to the African fashion market. Kanabar, who is from Tanzania, came up with the concept after a 10-year career in the



'If you are a buyer in Lagos, how would you know about the scene in Maputo or Dakar?'



fashion industry, in which time she worked for both Indian and US Vogue. "I returned home in 2016, and the move triggered questions about the disconnect in Africa's fashion community," she says.

"There was an overwhelming amount of information and creativity, but a lack of clarity on how to approach it. Even as an African myself, the dots just didn't connect.

I didn't even have a way to access neighbouring countries of mine."

Kanabar then approached Bobley, a New Yorker whom she had met in Dubai, where Bobley was launching the online magazine and retail site PopSugar Middle East. Bobley, who is moving to Nairobi in September, had the online skills that helped complement Kanabar's plans for a multi-brand site.

Clockwise from main: Taibo Bacar, Mozambique, AW17; Lisa Folawiyi, Nigeria, SS18; I AM I, Kenya, Closure Series 2018; Georgia Bobley (left) and Nisha Kanabar (right); Walls of Benin, Cameroon, SS18 — Industrie Africa

24 countries and now we stand at about 90 designers on site."

The duo has since hired a design team to build a site that's easy to navigate. "We've created a filter system to deal with the huge range in diversity, and that's really key," says Bobley. "You can shop by country or product category. The sustainability category was also very important to us and has actually proved to be instrumental since launch — more than half of our brands are sustainable."

The site is organised so that international buyers and press can navigate the individual designers and download collections, while consumers can search for points of purchase and stockist details. But perhaps the most innovative feature on site is the contact button, which not only allows buyers, press or consumers to get in touch with designers directly, but lets the designers themselves interact. Previously, communication and collaboration had been difficult.

There are still larger, continent-wide issues that need to be addressed. "Most [African] designers have the same challenges," says Kanabar. "The industry lacks the infrastructure and distribution networks to support the marketability and scale that fashion designers require, and real local and international demand to support the supply. Internally, members of the industry struggle with sustaining businesses and integrating with ecosystems of support, from retail and sales to media representation and production cycles. Production is a major issue that designers face. We have to think about this when choosing who to represent."

Neither of Industrie Africa's founders are sure about what the future holds. "Part of the guaranteed success of our site is maintaining the current profiles," says Bobley. "We need to chase designers for lookbooks, update details, stockists and press contacts. That is our biggest challenge."

But with plans to expand the site and team within the next year, both are feeling optimistic. "We see Industrie Africa as the beginning of a much-needed conversation about the continent's role globally," says Kanabar, "one that maintains and celebrates regionalism without marginalising it."

Continental shift: the five young African designers you need to know

Super Yaya

Rym Beydoun had her first fashion breakthrough five years ago, when she sent models at her Central Saint Martins' graduate show down the runway in veils and customised Nike sneakers. The 27-year-old Lebanese-Levantine brings the same subversive swagger to her Super Yaya label, mashing up traditional textiles, classic unisex streetwear and pop cultural references from her hometown of Abidjan. At her online "superstore" you'll find velvet trousers, reversible puffa jackets and T-shirts, and jumpers splashed with "100% Africosmic" slogans. super-yaya.com

Orange Culture

Nigeria's Adebayo Oke-Lawal launched his gender-fluid menswear line in 2011, with designs that combine elements of

urban streetwear with androgynous silhouettes. His current SS18 collection showcases silk kimonos in colourful prints and tabard linen tunics with the words "wear at your own discretion" printed across the front — a nod, perhaps, to his challenging vision of masculine style. This year Oke-Lawal became the first African to be nominated for the prestigious International Woolmark Prize. orangeculture.com.ng

I AM I

A jewellery designer with a rough, eclectic sensibility and a striking sense of design, Ami Doshi Shah is the first Kenyan to be nominated for London Fashion Week's 2018 International Fashion Showcase. Using a broad range of locally sourced materials — including crystal, copper, leather and rope — she

creates powerful geometric pieces with a whimsical edge. amidoshishah.com

Rich Mnsi

Soweto-born designer Rich Mnsi only started his namesake brand three years ago, but has already proven himself a mercurial talent. Among his vast range of eclectic designs are sculptural dresses that look like art installations to more wearable knitted jumpers (pictured right). Bold in his use of colour and texture, and unafraid to embrace exaggerated forms, Mnsi is also a trailblazer for South Africa's LGBT community. richmnsi.com



Flora Macdonald Johnston

Reform Studio

How do you create beautiful accessories and also solve your nation's waste problem? Hend Riad and Mariam Hazem — founders of this Cairo-based design studio — think they've found the answer. They take discarded plastic bags and turn them into a material they've dubbed Plastex, which is used to make everything from quirky ankle boots to woven backpacks. Aside from tackling one of the world's most pressing environmental problems, the duo are also helping to restore Egypt's weaving industry. The brand is going from strength to strength and last year collaborated with Ikea. reformstudio.net



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Jean genius: Slvrlake SS18 — Adrian Mesko

Are these the perfect jeans?

Shopping | Denim devotee *Jo Ellison* thinks she's found the best fit yet

Is there such a thing as the perfect pair of jeans? Probably the ones we're wearing. But that doesn't stop us from searching for more. Dedicated members of the perfect denim cult will always be persuaded to try another pair.

Right now, the jeans I yearn for are an all-American Bruce Springsteen shade of blue. They should look vintage without seeming deliberately aged, or bleached, or blotched, or tampered. They should have no rips or tears. They should have a high waist and crucially, regardless of the current whims of fashion, they should not grip the calf. I've never understood why a woman (or man) would want their lower legs to resemble shrink-wrapped joints of meat, but frighteningly many still insist on wearing skinny silhouettes. The cast of *Queen Eye*, for example, love a foreshortening leg shape that makes them look like a party of leprechauns. Your jeans should be slim, but they should never, ever cling.

Should you also be in pursuit of the sort of thing described above, you'll be delighted to know that such a jean exists. For women at least. It's called the London, and it's a straight-leg jean by Slvrlake, a premium denim brand that launched earlier this year and is now available on Moda Operandi online, Intermix in the US, and, as of this month, Selfridges in the UK. They cost £310. Which is a lot. But, you know, they're perfect.

They are the creation of Louise and Gary Edgley, a husband-and-wife team who launched their California-inspired label in Los Angeles last year, having relocated from London in 2013. Both have had long careers working in denim. Louise studied fashion and is an expert in fit, while Gary is a former buying manager at Selfridges.

For all their expertise, the decision to enter a very crowded market was not one they took lightly. Jeans sales generated more than \$40bn in the global market in 2016 and, despite the increasing popularity of the yoga pant, denim remains a dominant fashion category. Premium denim, meanwhile, has become one of the most important and fastest growing segments in the apparel industry.

Regardless, the Edgleys decided to go ahead. "We have worked in the denim industry for the entirety of our careers," says Louise. "But we didn't feel that 'premium denim' was very premium. The fits were lacking, and they were fewer timeless silhouettes." Adds Gary: "I'd noticed a shift in quality and craftsmanship in the market as it moved more towards fast fashion and looking toward the next hem trend. There was a real loss of integrity in the quality of garments."

Their mission was simple, says Louise. "To design and develop the kind of jeans that you wear every day."

I'm convinced they've nailed it. Not just because I like the fit, shape and colour of the London, but because, every time I wear them, people ask me where they're from. "The London jean was the first jean we developed," says Louise. "The question we asked ourselves was 'if you could only own one jean, what would it be?' It would have to be timeless, soft and comfortable enough to travel in, chic enough to wear to the office, and sexy enough to wear to dinner. The London meets all of those demands."

I'm sure many of you will be itching to point out that a similarly vintage-looking garment could be purchased at a fraction of the price on a vintage denim stall. And I believe you. But I bet they wouldn't fit as well. And I'm not that crazy about wearing clothes that have known another woman's groin. For the time being at least, I've found my perfect fit. The London by Slvrlake are the jeans of the year.