

The Condé Nast International Luxury Conference descended on Cape Town earlier in April. All fashionable eyes are once again turning to Africa, considering the continent not only as a source of inspiration and consumers for global luxury goods, but as a creator of them too. This topic has become ever more hotly debated over the past decade as Africa has rapidly grown in creative, entrepreneurial, and economic confidence, but has it now reached its tipping point?

One glance at South Africa's doorstep attests to much progress, with designer Thebe Magugu shortlisted for the 2019 LVMH Prize. He joins MaXhosa Africa's Xhosa-inspired knitwear, Pichulik's artisanal accessories, Sindiso Khumalo's richly printed womenswear, and Rich Mnisi's Beyoncé-endorsed designs as some of the luxurious offerings gaining traction both internationally and locally, not to mention stores such as Merchants on Long putting Made in Africa first.

It's a similar picture in the major cities across Africa. In Lagos, Maki Oh with her sensual Adire (indigo cloth) pieces and Kenneth Ize with his Aso Oke (Yoruba cloth) tailoring are both rising stars who look to home for their textiles, prints, and silhouettes and are coveted as much worldwide as they are in their city's concept stores such as Alára. Meanwhile, in Accra, Studio One Eighty Nine recently won the CFDA Lexus Sustainable Fashion Award, and AAKS raffia bags sell as well at the city's Elle Lokko boutique as they do in Urban Outfitters.

What designers and brands such as these have in common is an appreciation for elevating Africa's vast artisanal heritage and developing fresh approaches to handmade craftsmanship for discerning consumers, wherever they may be. They are helping to build a new modern luxury through an appreciation of ethically made, beautiful objects that tell their own authentic stories. As the world shrinks and resources dwindle, the

global luxury industry is looking for original sources of unique goods, and the continent's diverse aesthetics and history of sophisticated dress practices lends themselves to this demand.

Now is a pivotal moment for luxury, as the industry faces its dismal environmental footprint. Fashion generates about 20% of the world's waste water and releases half-a-million tonnes of synthetic microfibres into the oceans annually. It also accounts for 8% to 10% of global carbon emissions. As fashion's often-designated last frontier, Africa's approach to the language of mindful luxury can help change the industry's damaging practices. African purveyors are less about jumping on the eco bandwagon and more about the necessities of working within the local context. They are supporting dying skills, uplifting communities, and protecting environments already under threat from climate change.

This all speaks to the theme Suzy Menkes, Vogue International editor, gave the Condé Nast International conference: The Nature of Luxury. She frames the conversation not so much around the idea that Africa is finally catching up with other regions, but rather on the fact that all worlds now collide in their shared appreciation for artisanship, and in the need to prioritise better production practices. "I have often talked about the power of human hands, and sewing, dyeing, and embroidery. What the West celebrates as essential skills for the highest levels of couture have been part of daily life for centuries across the countries of Africa," Menkes writes, adding that she hopes that by engaging meaningfully with Africa, the luxury industry will prioritise goods "that promote the protection of our planet [and] meld age-old traditional talent with a digital future".

The underlying driver for the global sector's interest in the continent is its rapidly changing demographics and growing urbanisation. With about 70% of Africans under 30, millennials are

becoming early adopters of both homegrown and international luxury brands. They are also spearheading technological advances helping to connect the continent through social media, e-commerce, and cellphone banking.

Add to this that Africa is the second-fastest developing region behind Asia, with an expanding middle class and rising numbers of high-net-worth individuals. The total individual wealth held in Africa is expected to reach \$3.1-trillion by 2027, according to the AfrAsia Bank Africa Wealth Report 2018, which also calculates that the African luxury sector generates about \$6-billion a year, with South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Morocco, and Egypt topping the league.

So it's little wonder that the likes of Louis Vuitton, Burberry, Cartier, Coach, Ermenegildo Zegna, Dolce & Gabbana, Prada, and Gucci have invested in stand-alone stores in South Africa, making it the most established gateway for the African luxury market. This Africa focus could also in part account for the greater representation of black and African models on runways and in campaigns, and noticeable collaborations with African influencers and ambassadors. The broader global interest in all things African, from its literature and visual artists to its celebrities and lifestyle experiences, can't help but be felt in the luxury landscape too. The Wakanda effect is, thankfully, real.

While it's true that African luxury consumers are just as label-conscious as shoppers elsewhere, they are also increasingly interested in reflecting their adherence to local luxury values in their choice of purchases. Therefore, global brands would be wise to work meaningfully with their African counterparts, and to not focus only on the super rich, but also to consider a more sustainable business model in all senses of the word.

Africa is also ripe in terms of its production capacity. This is an area the continent's designers have long struggled with, due to the lack of

AFRICAN LUXE GROWS UP

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and brands are drawing on
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reliable workshops and tailors and consistent sources of materials. Often, when factories are available, their small orders cannot compete with larger ones from overseas. More insurmountable still is the fact that, across much of the continent, major flaws in infrastructure, such as electricity, transport, and internet connectivity, present huge challenges to productivity and production for most sectors. Just as troubling is the fact that so much of Africa's precious raw materials and minerals are shipped abroad to be refined, which is where their value then soars.

There are increasing numbers of projects addressing some of these concerns, such as the Ethical Fashion Initiative (EFI), a programme of the International Trade Centre. Its aim is to use fashion as a vehicle to reduce poverty and empower women in developing countries; it's best known for connecting artisans to international supply chains. Successes include nurturing

own problems and adopt the mindset of creating brands that will outlive us."

Katherine-Mary Pichulik, founder of Pichulik (South Africa) "Global brands should be outsourcing production to Africa or collaborating with African brands to provide both market access and revenue and to keep our crafts alive. They must understand and respect the cost and uniqueness



"Africa is the second-fastest developing region behind Asia"

co-ops in Burkina Faso, Mali, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda and facilitating product development for Stella McCartney, Vivienne Westwood, Stella Jean, and Edun. EFI has also just teamed up with Roberta Annan's African Fashion Fund to launch the €100-million Impact Fund for Africa, which will support African creatives with the resources and investment they require to compete in the global industry.

This is a laudable step, but it will take a truly united effort — from the individual creators up to policy level — for the African luxury space to truly thrive. We speak to eight experts to garner their views on what the industry needs next.

Laduma Ngxokolo, founder of MaXhosa Africa (South Africa) "We must build universities and museums dedicated to African textiles. And we must not emulate elsewhere, but rather establish our own systems that solve our

of our artisanal pieces, and appreciate that the value chain is informal and often requires innovative thinking on procurement and distribution. Finally, emerging African luxury brands need pragmatic mentorship — not just publicity, but programmes and development."

Simone Cipriani, head and founder of the Ethical Fashion Initiative (Switzerland) "What we want to focus on is a generation of designers who can produce everything on the continent. The Impact Fund for Africa will act like an accelerator to allow designers to grow. We also work with artisans, because it is their work that gives a product its human touch and that enables customers to engage with how it is made. By facilitating them to form social enterprises, they can connect to the supply chain and receive fair wages and decent working conditions."

Sunny Dolat, creative director and co-founder of The Nest Collective (Kenya) "With Africa's growing confidence, it is important for us to be seen and feel considered when it comes to luxury products and services. Now there are many luxury brands produced in Africa that prove you can manufacture here. For a long time, we weren't able to tell our stories, but now we are using design to express our heritage, who we are, and where we're going. That is the most beautiful thing."

Leanne Tlhagoane, founder of Re-Fashioning Africa and Fashion Handbook South Africa (South Africa) "African designers are changing luxury by unfolding modern narratives that are derived from cultural heritage, sustainable approaches, and artisanal skill. We must now focus on investment, education, and leadership and look at regional alliances for ethical production that can make commercial sense. Africans are more than just consumers and influencers."

Diana Opoti, PR executive & founder of Designing Africa Collective (Kenya) "There is a rising luxury consumer, and we are finding ways to reach them through cross-brand experiences. We should realise the importance of local production for local consumption and invest in facilities that help designers to compete."

Molly Keogh, co-founder Osei-Duro (Ghana) "At this point in fashion the phrase 'African luxury' is meaningless. I think luxury is at best a misnomer; at worst it is extremely problematic and totally unsustainable. It is a backwards reach to emulate dying fashion houses. It is more useful to think about elevating locally made fashion through high expectations, research, careful experimentation, and long-term investments in training and relationships. Understanding concerns in the specific context is crucial and solutions cannot be applied universally or top down. Outside forces can provide infrastructure and machinery, but real change must come from the producers themselves."

Nisha Kanabar, co-founder Industrie Africa (Tanzania) "What many people have overlooked until recently is Africa as a home of luxury: an exporter of storied products and unique experiences. Where luxury once was synonymous with exclusivity and aspiration, today it resonates with a much younger consumer through pillars of authenticity, emotional connection, and environmental consciousness. In Africa, luxury is not about price, but the strength and depth of the story that a brand seeks to tell through its craft: be it a new take on indigenous textiles, a reinterpretation of artisanal techniques, or a genuine understanding of their identity. True luxury brands on the continent are the ones that speak from a place of innovation and clear provenance."

design

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