

# STYLE

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## Under African skies

*Designers as disparate as Oscar de la Renta, Marc Jacobs, Frida Giannini of Gucci and Dries Van Noten are embracing the exoticism of pan-African influences*

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The Na'vi, the blue-skinned clan of the planet Pandora in James Cameron's screen blockbuster *Avatar*, scale treetops and mountains, and even fly, with a loose-limbed elasticity that Tarzan would have envied. At once exotic and familiar to fans of adventure films, the Pandorans wear latticed animal skins and brightly colored beads, and score their faces with chalky tribal markings.

Jake Sully, the former Marine assigned to infiltrate the tribe, can't take his eyes off Neytiri, a regal member of the clan. When he first encounters her clambering along a slender tree branch, he is drawn unstoppably into her world.

A similar exoticism is casting its spell over the style world of late, as vanguard retailers like Barneys New York, mass marketers like American Apparel and designers as disparate as Oscar de la Renta, Marc Jacobs, Frida Giannini of Gucci and Dries Van Noten embrace pan-African influences, responding, as if in concert, to some far away drumbeat.

Western fascination with African art and design has blown in gusts for over a century, of course, ever since Picasso and Kandinsky filled their canvases with tribal motifs. As recently as the 1970s, Yves Saint Laurent introduced a collection of "African" dresses constructed from raffia, shells and wooden beads.

Now another Afrocentric wind is rising. "Its beauty is in having crossed all sorts of racial barriers," said Malcolm Harris, the creative director of Unvogue, a popular fashion-focused Webzine. "It doesn't matter who you are or where you're from. People are incorporating bits and pieces into their wardrobes and their lives."

That may be because in the popular imagination, African jungles, deserts and plains retain a near-mystical allure, which the reality of the continent's political turmoil and poverty have never entirely dispelled.

"Africa has never become quantifiable or entirely knowable," said Rick Carter, the production designer who helped to conceive the Edenic universe of *Avatar* with its obviously African elements. "It still suggests romance, and a sense of the abundance of life. Threatening or benign, it has something to teach us."

To armchair travelers in the fashion world, many of whom are tapping the heritage of Kenya, Mali, Nigeria or Senegal in search of inspiration, Africa is playing the role that India had until recently, its themes embraced in the hope of making cash registers hum. "The fabrics and the colors are lively, and the timing seems right," said Humberto Leon, an owner of Opening Ceremony, the downtown Manhattan boutique and showcase for the spirited prints of Suno, an artisanal line produced in Kenyan workshops.

Hints of a global fashion trend first appeared more than a year ago in London, where the glossy magazine *Arise*, published in Nigeria, has been highlighting the work of African designers. A thriving music scene also lent impetus.

"London is awash with African influences," said Ed Burstell, the buying director for Liberty of London, which is hard-pressed to keep in stock a collection of Masai-inspired wooden bangles, horn cuffs and hammered metal collars. People are responding to their rough-hewn appearance. "They want items today that don't seem slick and polished," Burstell suggested.

Like the American work wear and handmade jewelry that have also been popular of late, African-inspired designs offer an antidote to what Max Osterweis, the filmmaker turned fashion designer behind the Suno label, calls "a luxury market filled with brands that lately have become machines for mass-produced, logo-covered status symbols."

Beyond the runways, that appetite for authenticity is showing up in clubs and lounges where world music is heard, and on Broadway as well. Audiences are gyrating to the rhythms of Fela Kuti, the Nigerian father of Afrobeat, whose music and activist passions are being celebrated in *Fela!*, which transferred this year to the stage of the Eugene O'Neill Theater from off-Broadway, where its music and costumes drew raves.



Yinka Shonibare, above, poses beside a model of his proposal for Trafalgar Square's fourth plinth, titled *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle*, at the National Gallery in London in January last year.

Shonibare's theatrical fiberglass sculpture *Leisure Lady (With Ocelots)*, below, is ripe with allusions to colonial history, excess and desperate housewives. Three ocelots with rhinestone collars pull at leashes held by a headless female mannequin wearing a Victorian dress made from African fabrics.

PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG

Pop enthusiasts are as captivated by the music and style of Maya Arulpragasam, aka MIA, a Londoner of Sri Lankan origins, who has made tribal leggings and flamboyant African prints essential to her persona. Art lovers are drawn to the imagery of Yinka Shonibare and Kehinde Wiley, both of whom incorporate African-influenced textiles in their work; Shonibare's headless mannequins, clothed in Afro-colonial garb, were exhibited last summer at the Brooklyn Museum. Wiley's stylized canvases, featuring Afro-American hipsters in heroic poses, command prices of up to US\$80,000 at auction.

Come spring, tastemakers may find themselves snapping up a kinetically patterned jumpsuit by Marc Jacobs, its serpentine piano keyboard design clearly inspired by riotous African prints. Others planning to get ahead of the season are trekking to the source, wandering beneath the pastel-tone plastic archway of the Malcolm Shabazz Market on West 116th Street in Harlem to buy indigo mud cloth from Mali or woven raffia Kuba cloth, beckoning from rows of cramped stalls.

"All of this is fashion now," said Dame Diouf, indicating a selection of brightly colored textiles on display in his booth, which was warmed on a rain-soaked day last week by a miniature space heater. "People are buying these fabrics to use as belts, handkerchiefs, bow ties and cummerbunds," said Diouf, who is Senegalese. "They want to mix them up with American designs."

Only a handful of Western designers are as brazenly showy as Duro Olowu, a Nigerian designer based in London on the Portobello Road. But work like Olowu's, which juxtaposes feverish colors and geometric designs, seems to speak to a widening audience. The Afrocentric tunics and dresses of another Nigerian, Deola Sagoe, will be unveiled in New York next month during Fashion Week.

Osterweis of Suno, who stitches his pieces from

sarong-like kangas, said the number of stores selling his designs had tripled in the last year. His line was partly conceived to convey a social message. "I started it as a direct reaction to the post-election violence that took place in Kenya two years ago," Osterweis said. "I decided that by creating jobs and developing skills in Kenya at a time when it really needed support, I could do some good." Michelle Obama has worn Osterweis' eye-popping prints.

Statements of heritage and politics have filtered, if somewhat obliquely, into MIA's elaborate stage regalia, the performer's way of thumbing a nose at ready-made notions of identity. Referring to African music in a recent documentary, Arulpragasam said: "We have all these preconceived ideas of a kid in Africa... dudes in their African cloths singing under a tree with a stick." But, she insisted, "It's not like that. It's way more progressive."

Maya A. Lake, the 26-year-old designer of Boxing Kitten, a line incorporating Dutch wax-resist fabrics and West African prints, drew some of her inspiration from the turbans and dashikis adopted by African-Americans who were part of the black power movement of the 1970s. "I often think about the political connotations behind those fabrics," Lake acknowledged. "They definitely give people something to think about."

She insisted, however, that there was no explicit message behind her designs. "Sometimes," she said, "fashion can simply be fashion."

