



News Release

## 45 designers from over 20 countries feature in landmark *Africa Fashion* exhibition

*Africa Fashion*

Supported by Gregory Annenberg Weingarten, GRoW @ Annenberg  
Gallery 40

2 July 2022 – 16 April 2023

With additional support from Bank of America and Merchants on Long  
With thanks to Africa Fashion Foundation

Tickets now on sale at [vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/africa-fashion](https://vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/africa-fashion) | #AfricaFashion

Exhibition trailer with designer quotes can be viewed [here](#)

Press Images available at [pressimages.vam.ac.uk](https://pressimages.vam.ac.uk)

Opening this Saturday 2 July, *Africa Fashion* is a landmark exhibition celebrating the irresistible creativity, ingenuity and unstoppable global impact of contemporary African fashions. The exhibition is the UK's most extensive exhibition of African fashions to date, celebrating the vitality and innovation of this vibrant scene, as dynamic and varied as the continent itself.

Over 250 objects are on display for the exhibition, with approximately half of these drawn from the museum's collection, including 70 new acquisitions. Many of the garments on show are from the personal archives of a selection of iconic mid-twentieth century African designers – **Shade Thomas-Fahm**, **Chris Seydou**, **Kofi Ansah** and **Alphadi**, marking the first time their work will be shown in a London museum. The exhibition also celebrates influential contemporary African fashion creatives including **Imane Ayissi**, **IAMISIGO**, **Moshions**, **Thebe Magugu** and **Sindiso Khumalo**. *Africa Fashion* showcases these objects and the stories behind them alongside personal insights from the designers, together with sketches, editorial spreads, photographs, film and catwalk footage.

New acquisitions highlighting fashion trends of the day from across the continent, paired with personal testimonies, textiles and photographs, are on display for the first time. Highlight objects include photography from 10 families answering the public call-out, an **Alphadi** dress of cotton and brass gifted to the museum by the designer and a new piece designed specifically for the exhibition by **Maison ArtC**.

**Dr Christine Checinska, Senior Curator African and African Diaspora: Textiles and Fashion, said:** *Our guiding principle for Africa Fashion is the foregrounding of individual African voices and perspectives. The exhibition presents African fashions as a self-defining art form that reveals the richness and diversity of African histories and cultures. To showcase all fashions across such a*

*vast region would be to attempt the impossible. Instead, Africa Fashion celebrates the vitality and innovation of a selection of fashion creatives, exploring the work of the vanguard in the twentieth century and the creatives at the heart of this eclectic and cosmopolitan scene today. We hope this exhibition will spark a renegotiation of the geography of fashion and become a game-changer for the field.*

Starting with the African independence and the liberation years that sparked a radical political and social reordering across the continent, the exhibition looks to explore how fashion, alongside music and the visual arts, formed a key part of Africa's cultural renaissance, laying the foundation for today's fashion revolution. Across contemporary couture, ready-to-wear, made-to-order and adornment, the exhibition also seeks to offer a close-up look at the new generation of ground-breaking designers, collectives, stylists and fashion photographers working in Africa today. It explores how the digital world accelerated the expansion of the industry, irreversibly transforming global fashions as we know them. From global fashion weeks to celebrity wearers and the role of social media, *Africa Fashion* celebrates and champion the diversity and ingenuity of the continent's fashion scene.

The exhibition forms part of a broader and ongoing V&A commitment to grow the museum's permanent collection of work by African and African Diaspora designers, working collaboratively to tell new layered stories about the richness and diversity of African creativity, cultures, and histories, using fashion as a catalyst.

The exhibition is accompanied by a wider public programme focused on *Africa Fashion*, including in-conversations and talks, learning events, music performances and free to attend live events.

**Omoyemi Akerele, Founder and Director, Lagos Fashion Week and Style House Files** said: *African fashion is something that has existed forever, something that has been a part of us. African fashion is the future. African fashion is now. It's not just designers, there's a whole ecosystem of models, make-up artists, photographers, illustrators – imagine bringing everybody's work to life season in season out. Fashion that's created by our people for our people and for the benefit of growing and developing our economy. This exhibition is important because for the very first time fashion from the continent will be viewed from a diverse perspective which spans centuries.*

**Thebe Magugu, Womenswear Designer** said: *I feel like there's so many facets of what we've been through as a continent, that people don't actually understand. Now more than ever African designers are taking charge of their own narrative and telling people authentic stories, not the imagined utopias.*

**Artsi, Fashion Designer, Maison ArtC** said: *Africa Fashion means the past, the future and the present at the same time. The joy of life and the joy of colour is completely different and very particular to the continent. It's a language of heritage, it's a language of DNA, it's a language of memories.*

## About the exhibition:

The exhibition begins with a contemporary ensemble that combines shimmering silk with exuberant layers of raffia by **Imane Ayissi**. Born in Cameroon, the couturier sits at the crossroads between fashion systems, bridging historical and contemporary periods, continental and Global Africa, artisanal craft making and haute couture. This ensemble introduces the idea that African fashions are beyond definition and that creatives can and do choose their own paths.

The ground floor of the exhibition continues with an **African Cultural Renaissance** section that focuses on the African liberation years from the mid-late 1950s to 1994. The political and social reordering that took place galvanised a long period of unbounded creativity across fashion, music, and the visual arts. On display there are protest posters, publications and records embodying this era of radical change. Early publications from members of the **Mbari Club**, established for African writers, artists, and musicians, sit alongside the cover artwork for **Beasts of No Nation** by **Fela Kuti**, a call-to-arms album which embodied the communal feeling of frustrations with the politics of the time but also the energy of Africa's creativity and its artists' drive to create beautiful things.

**Politics and Poetics of Cloth** considers the importance of cloth in many African countries and the way in which the making and wearing of indigenous cloths in the moment of independence became a strategic political act. Wax prints, commemorative cloth, àdìrẹ kente and bògòlanfini will be shown – fragments of a rich textile history that includes thousands of techniques from across the continent. Highlight objects include a strip of printed seersucker cotton from the V&A collection featuring the image of an open palm and the words 'freedom in my hand I bring' incorporating the newly independent Ghana insignia – a visible expression of community concerns as well as national, and individual identities. Also on display is a commemorative cloth made in the early 1990s following the release of **Nelson Mandela**, featuring a portrait of the soon to be first Black President of South Africa and the words 'A BETTER LIFE FOR ALL – WORKING TOGETHER FOR JOBS, PEACE AND FREEDOM'.

**Shade Thomas-Fahm (b.1933), Chris Seydou (1949 – 1994), Kofi Ansah (1951-2014), Alphadi (b.1957), Naïma Bennis (1940–2008)** and their peers represent the first generation of African designers to gain attention throughout the continent and globally. Marking the first moment in which their work is shown in a London museum, the next section, **The Vanguard**, traces their rise and impact, their creative process, and inspirations, brought to life by real stories from those who loved and wore their distinctive designs. Highlights include a re-imagining of the traditional Nigerian ìró by **Shade Thomas-Fahm** – known as 'Nigeria's first fashion designer'. Alongside will be a dress of silk and lurex from 1983 by **Chris Seydou**, known for promoting indigenous African textiles like bògòlanfini on the global stage. Ghanaian fashion designer **Kofi Ansah's** iconic fusion of African and European aesthetics will be represented in a blue robe with traces of the Japanese kimono, the European judge's robe and the West African agbádá robe. The innovation of **Alphadi**, described as the 'Magician of the Desert' is shown with a dress of cotton and brass from 1988, gifted to the museum by the designer.

**Capturing Change** focuses on photographic portraits of the mid-late 20<sup>th</sup> century, capturing the mood of nations on the brink of self-rule – each shot documenting the modernity,

cosmopolitanism and fashion consciousness of individuals with agency and a desire to use it. The euphoria of decolonization coincided with the democratisation of photography made possible through cheaper film and lighter weight cameras. Photographic portraits taken in studios and domestic spaces became affirmations of agency and self-representation, making pride in being Black and African visible. Highlights from this section include studio photography from **Sanlé Sory**, **Michel Papami Kameni** and **Rachidi Bissiriou**. The stylish colour portraits of **James Barnor** also sits alongside domestic photography of 10 families gleaned from the V&A's public call-out in January 2021.

On the mezzanine level of the exhibition, the new generation of ground-breaking designers, collectives, stylists and fashion photographers working in Africa today is celebrated. A new piece designed specifically for the exhibition, 'A Dialogue Between Cultures', by **Maison ArtC** introduces this floor.

A first section on **Minimalism** features a look by Rwandan fashion house **Moshions**, known for re-imagining traditional Rwandan forms and cultural motifs into contemporary pieces. Paying tribute to the ceremonial attire worn historically by Rwandan royalty, the menswear look on show references the traditional *Umwitero*, a sash draped over the shoulder as well as beadwork and embroidery taking inspiration from Imigongo aesthetics.

**Mixology** features an ensemble from **IAMISIGO**'s Spring/Summer 2019 collection, 'Gods of the Wilderness' which references ancient west African masquerade costumes. For this collection designer Bubu Ogisi was inspired by traditional west African abstract performance art, and the unique visual identity and traditions of adornment which have been created by different individual cultural groups.

**Artisanal** showcases a blue and white ensemble of DAKALA CLOTH by **NKWO**, who work with small-scale artisan makers across the African continent that specialise in hand crafts such as hand dyeing, weaving, beading and embroidery. NKWO explores ways of using waste materials in her designs while still preserving traditional textile craft skills. DAKALA CLOTH, made from waste fabric is stripped and then sewn back together with a technique that gives the appearance of traditional woven cloth.

**Afrotopia** features a look from Thebe Magugu's Alchemy Collection that centres on African spirituality and the relationship we have with our ancestors. The designer collaborated with Noentla Khumalo, a stylist and traditional healer, on the collection. Alongside is a look by **Selly Raby Kane**, which takes inspiration from Afro-Futurism.

In **Sartorialists**, costume designer, stylist and photographer **Gouled Ahmed**'s self-portraiture revolts against cultural norms, mixing textured garments from the Horn of Africa with contemporary everyday materials to play with notions of identity. Ahmed's work challenges the lack of nuance in the depictions of non-binary Black Muslims'.

In **Adornment** a neckpiece made of brass, sisal and borax salt from **Ami Doshi Shah**'s 'Salt of the Earth' collection examines the talismanic properties of jewellery and the storytelling ability of materials drawn from nature.

**Co-Creation** spotlights personalised, contemporary twists on tradition with commissioned bespoke outfits made for the wedding of **Lady Ashely Shaw-Scott Adjaye** and **Sir David Adjaye**

**OBE by Kofi Ansah.** Over the course of four appointments at his atelier in Accra, Ansah and the couple discussed every aspect of the designs, made from Ashanti Bonwire kente cloth from the designer's extensive collection. The couple were later photographed for British Vogue magazine wearing their Kofi Ansah designs.

**-ENDS-**

**For further PRESS information about *Africa Fashion* please contact Callum Walker on [c.walker@vam.ac.uk](mailto:c.walker@vam.ac.uk) / +44 203 942 2502 (not for publication). A selection of press images is available to download free of charge from [pressimages.vam.ac.uk](http://pressimages.vam.ac.uk)**

**Notes to Editors:**

- The exhibition *Africa Fashion* will open 2 July 2022 in Gallery 40
- Adult tickets £16. Tickets are on sale now at [vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/africa-fashion](http://vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/africa-fashion)
- *Africa Fashion* is curated by the V&A's Dr Christine Checinska, Senior Curator of African and African Diaspora Textiles and Fashion assisted by project curator, Elisabeth Murray
- Africa Fashion is supported by Gregory Annenberg Weingarten, GRoW @ Annenberg, with additional support from Merchants on Long
- The exhibition is the latest in the V&A's series of revelatory fashion exhibitions and follows *Fashioning Masculinities: The Art of Menswear* (2022); *Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams* (2019); *Mary Quant* (2019-2020), *Fashioned from Nature* (2018-2019), *Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion* (2017 – 2018) and *Undressed: A Brief History of Underwear* (2016 – 2017).
- The V&A's fashion collection is designated as the UK's National Collection and is one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of dress in the world.

**Support for the V&A is more vital than ever. Please help us by acknowledging our supporters.**

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**About GRoW @ Annenberg**

GRoW @ Annenberg, a philanthropic initiative led by Annenberg Foundation Vice-President and Director Gregory Annenberg Weingarten, supports a broad range of innovative projects and organizations that address social and cultural issues, meet urgent community needs, and offer inspiration and collaboration—all with the goal of improving the quality of life in communities around the world.

**Supported by**



**About Merchants on Long**

Founded in Cape Town, South Africa in 2010, Merchants on Long is a concept store which

specialises in launching the most exciting emerging designers coming from Africa, it also serves as a home for more established brands. Everything stocked at Merchants on Long is made ethically and entirely on the African continent, focusing on designers for their authenticity, design and sustainable practices.

#### Further support from



#### About Bank of America

At Bank of America, we're guided by a common purpose to help make financial lives better, through the power of every connection. We're delivering on this through responsible growth with a focus on our environmental, social and governance leadership. An important part of this work is forming strong partnerships with not-for-profits to bring together our collective networks and expertise to achieve greater impact.

#### Further support from



#### About African Fashion Foundation

African Fashion Foundation supports fashion designers and creative professionals from the continent and its diaspora to enable them to compete in global markets. Founded by investment specialist and philanthropist, Roberta Annan in 2011, AFF provides professional and educational development opportunities in partnership with established players in the fashion industry to support the success and progression of the African creative economy.

#### With thanks to



#### About the designers in 'The Vanguard' section

**Sidahmed Alphadi Seidnaly**, known as Alphadi, was born in Timbuktu, Mali in 1957 grew up in Niger and is still designing today. Described as the 'Magician of the Desert', Alphadi is known for his cutting-edge, innovative designs which draw on the rich cultures and design practices of the Sahel. After establishing his brand in 1983, Alphadi broadened his skills at the Atelier Chardon Savard, Paris, and FIT in New York. Between 1985 and 1989 Alphadi spent his time working between Paris and Niger, collaborating with several renowned designers including Chris Seydou, Jean Paul Gaultier and Paco Rabanne. Alphadi founded the International Festival of African Fashion (FIMA) to promote the work of African creatives. First launched 1998 in the Tiguidit desert, FIMA has since had 11 editions.

Known as the 'enfant terrible' of Ghanaian fashion, designer **Kofi Ansah** propelled his country onto the catwalks of global haute couture. Born into an artistic family in 1951, he first made

headlines upon his graduation from London's Chelsea School of Art when he created a garment for Anne, Princess Royal. After establishing himself within Europe's fashion industry via the runways of Paris and London, Ansah returned to Ghana in 1992 to form Artdress, his design and creative concept company. Praised for using richly textured local fabrics and his iconic fusion of African and European aesthetics, he attracted a strong international following, collaborating with Vogue Italia's Franca Sozzani and mentoring the next generation of Ghanaian fashion designers.

**Chris Seydou**, born Seydou Nourou Doumbia in 1949 in Kati, Mali, was a pioneer in promoting indigenous African textiles on the global stage. He was particularly well known for his use of *bògòlanfini*, a handmade Malian cotton cloth dyed with fermented mud, a secular technique. In 1969 he moved to Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire and found success designing clothes for many of Abidjan's wealthy and influential women. Seydou moved to Paris in 1972 where he worked for several prominent designers including Yves Saint Laurent and Paco Rabanne, before returning to Mali in 1990. His daring mini-skirts, stylish bell-bottom trousers and modish bomber jackets, made with handwoven textiles from his country, gained him loyal clients in Mali and overseas and have inspired countless creatives since. Chris Seydou is the designer who knew how to make tradition the heart of contemporary African fashion.

**Victoria Omòróníkẹ Àdùkẹ Fọlashadé Thomas-Fahm**, professionally known as **Shade Thomas-Fahm** and often referred to as 'Nigeria's first fashion designer', set the pace for the Nigerian fashion industry in the 1960s and 1970s. Born in Lagos, Nigeria in 1933, she moved to London in 1953 to become a nurse, but quickly changed her plans to train in fashion design instead, studying at Barrett Technical College and then St. Martin's College of Arts (later Central Saint Martins). Alongside her studies, Thomas-Fahm worked at Stenoff and Sons Furrier, a couture house on Old Bond Street, and as a fashion model, before returning to Lagos in 1960. Thomas-Fahm is a passionate advocate of Nigerian textiles and often used *aso-òkè àdìre* and *òkẹ́nẹ́* in her designs. Focusing less on fashion glamour, she championed industry in fashion as a way to achieve economic freedom. She believed in modernising traditional West African attire because she felt 'it hindered a woman's time economy in getting, and remaining, dressed'. She re-imagined the traditional 'iro' (a Yoruba ladies wrapped skirt) with a concealed zip, created the sewn gele (historically a wrapped head tie) and created a female version of the men's flowing agbada robe. A creative visionary, Thomas-Fahm's store, Maison Shade (later Shade's Boutique) was known by local and international personalities as the place to go for men and women of style in Lagos.

Born in Casablanca in 1940, **Naïma Bennis** was one of several pioneering Moroccan women who, filled with the spirit of Independence, was determined to build a business in fashion. She established her first boutique in 1966 in the new Hilton Hotel in Rabat, Morocco, and later opened three more boutiques selling clothes, jewellery, and perfume. She catered to the international jet-set clientele of the hotel as well as local customers. Her atelier was just behind the shop, where Bennis worked with a team of craftsmen and seamstresses to realise her designs. Bennis's creations fused together multiple design traditions, mixing Moroccan and European aesthetics, old and new. She often paired Moroccan silhouettes with French couture fabrics for lightweight, elegant styles perfect for women in the city.