

The Museum at FIT FASHION CULTURE Podcast
Africa's Fashion Diaspora

[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES IN]

[VALERIE STEELE]

Hi, I'm Valerie Steele, Director and Chief Curator of The Museum at FIT, the most fashionable museum in New York City.

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[VALERIE STEELE]

Welcome to our Fashion Culture Podcast Series, featuring lectures and conversations about fashion.

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[VALERIE STEELE]

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[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Hi, my name is Tamsen Young and I'm Digital Media Manager for The Museum at FIT. I'm excited to talk to Liz Way today. She's Associate Curator of Costume here at The Museum and curator of *Africa's Fashion Diaspora*. Liz has been working at the museum at Fit since 2013. In 2016, she co-curated the exhibition *Black Fashion Designers* and just last year, she co-curated the exhibitions *Fresh Fly, Fabulous: 50 Years of Hip Hop Style* and *Food and Fashion*, which looked at the intersection of fashion with food trends and culture. Hi, Liz.

[LIZ WAY]

Hi Tamsen.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

So the first question I wanted to ask today was what led you to organize an exhibition on this topic of *Africa's Fashion Diaspora*?

[LIZ WAY]

Well, you mentioned that I co-curated an exhibition on *Black Fashion Designers* in 2016. I worked with my then colleague Ariele Elia, and that show turned out to be a really big hit with our audiences. And so our director, Dr. Valerie Steele, wanted to see what other ways we could explore this topic. And so I started working on the idea of *Africa's Fashion Diaspora* in 2020, right before the pandemic, in fact.

And while *Black Fashion Designers* was a survey of designers who'd really been left out of the narrative of fashion history, *Africa's Fashion Diaspora* is a much more focused and narrow topic that looks at the ways that fashion design has influenced ongoing conversations of transnational Black culture.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

The exhibition is organized around nine themes. Could you describe those themes and how they help reveal context for the objects in each section?

[LIZ WAY]

Absolutely. So we started the exhibition with a theme called "Reaching for Africa". And here I really wanted to look at the ways in which Black Americans specifically have conceptualized the idea of Africa in fashion. And there's a lot of reasons why Black designers from the mid 20th century to today look to Africa for inspiration. Of course, there are issues of cultural appropriation around this idea, but really, when it comes to Black designers, this is much, much more complicated. People are searching for their legacy, their lineages, their family histories that were severed in the transatlantic slave trade. So that opens the exhibition.

In our large gallery we have eight other sections, and one of the first is "Mothers and Mother Lands". And so here, I really wanted to explore that connection further and really think about first family lineage and the ways in which fashion design knowledge has been passed down through generations, but also think about mother lands as communities and cultures that have nurtured fashion designers, and how these influences come out in their fashion designs.

Another section is "The Black Atlantic", and this is a really pivotal section for the exhibition, because it's looking at the ways Black designers are taking inspiration from different Black cultures. For example, we have a piece by Olivier Rousteing, a French designer, who's looking at Black American cowboys as a theme for his collection. So this, in this way, we see these cross diasporic narratives and dialogs, people learning and reaching across the diaspora to other Black cultures and making these connections.

“Homegoing” is a section that looks at, really, second generation fashion designers who are thinking about their parents or their grandparents’ cultures and the ways that influence their design today. So many of these designers are based in the United States or Europe, but they have roots on the continent, or the Caribbean, and they really think about those cultures and those influences and how they can meld them into what we think of as a kind of Western fashion design.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

So do you address the history of politics as well?

[LIZ WAY]

Absolutely. So the pieces in the exhibition all date from the 20th or 21st century, but so many of the designers are taking inspiration from much longer, deeper histories going back to the 19th century and earlier. And it’s really important in the study of history to think about non-Eurocentric narratives. And fashion design is a way that these Black designers can bring up these histories of people in the Caribbean, of people on the continent, Black people who’ve done so much to change the world. And it’s a real political statement to really elevate these histories onto the same plane as when we think of American or European histories.

One of my favorite sections is the “Transcendent and Supernatural” section, because we look at the influence of religion and mythology and folklore and the ways that Black designers have incorporated it into their designs. So a lot of these traditions have been misunderstood. For example, voodoo has been an inspiration to the Haitian designer Fabrice Simon. And a lot of people have really kind of vague misconceptions about this religion. But we also look at other folktales and other traditions, and it’s such an interesting and potent source of inspiration for designers around the Black diaspora. And these themes that I explore are things that designers of all backgrounds look at. I’m just looking at this show specifically how they impact Black culture.

“Monumental Cloth” is a section that looks at the influence of textiles, and textiles are such an influential, significant, and beautiful kind of craft and artisanship that comes out of Africa. And we see so many diasporic cultures really pick up on these traditions. So Black designers, whether on the continent or in the diaspora, are really looking back to these textile traditions, whether it’s dyeing, like indigo dyeing and Adire, or ways of kind of piecing and quilting, like kente cloth, which is a strip of woven fabric that’s sewn together.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

It sounds like *Africa's Fashion Diaspora* is an exhibition that addresses a lot of themes of global consequence. Does this include sustainability as well?

[LIZ WAY]

Absolutely. So the “Tun yuh han mek fashion” section looks at the ways that Black designers in the diaspora have really innovatively addressed sustainability. “Tun yuh han mek fashion” is a Jamaican patois phrase that's inspired by an amazing scholar named Teleica Kirkland. She's a Jamaican British scholar, and she writes about all the innovative ways, especially in the Caribbean, designers are upcycling using new materials. And in the exhibition, we have designers who are especially addressing the issue of second hand clothing markets in Africa. So many clothing that are donated or thrown away in the US and Europe end up in Africa. And it's a big impact not only on their environment, but also on their creative design industries. So a lot of designers are really innovatively using these materials to create new fashion.

The last section of the exhibition is “Ubuntu” and this is a phrase that originates in South Africa that's really all about kind of community and connectedness. And we've seen people like Barack Obama or even Nelson Mandela use this phrase to speak about the African diaspora. But this section really looks at designers who are using fashion as a platform to create community, to support sustainable labor and fair labor. And really help people, especially women, to have safe jobs that support their communities and their families.

Fashion has a lot to offer as an industry. Even though we see a lot of the ways in which the global industry has affected people negatively. So many new emerging designers in the diaspora and elsewhere are really thinking about how fashion can be used for good.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

There are a lot of wonderful stories in this exhibition. Are there any that you would like to pull out now and tell in a deeper way? Any objects or designers that stand out that you want to add some additional information about here in the podcast?

[LIZ WAY]

Well, one designer I want to talk a little bit more about is Madame Willi Posey. So she was a designer based in Harlem in the 1940s, 50s and 60s. And we have a really beautiful ensemble from her from about 1970. And so I talk about her inspiration from Africa in the exhibition, and also how she was part of community of activist designers.

But what I don't get to address in the exhibition is that she's the mother of the artist Faith Ringgold. Willi Posey actually taught Faith Ringgold how to sew and collaborated on the artist's Story Quilt series. And I think that's a really amazing detail of this designer's work that I wasn't really able to address in the exhibition.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Absolutely. So how do you think your work on earlier exhibitions has helped prepare you for organizing *Africa's Fashion Diaspora*?

[LIZ WAY]

Well, my research and other exhibitions have definitely fed into the designers that are featured in Africa's fashion diaspora. Not only *Black Fashion Designers*, but I also co-curated a show in 2015 called *Global Fashion Capitals*, in which I was able to look at places like Lagos and Accra as fashion centers, and it really just exposed me to so many designers that I didn't know about before. Even for *Food and Fashion*. We had a section on *Food and Fashion* in the African diaspora, and the research there also fed into *Africa's Fashion Diaspora*. I find as a curator, so much of my research kind of builds on itself and I have themes that I explore in one exhibition that I expand on in other exhibitions.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Yeah, absolutely. It's a wonderful process. So what did lead you to the profession of being a fashion curator? It's not that common a path.

[LIZ WAY]

Well, when I was a kid, I really enjoyed fashion and I wanted to be a fashion designer. I think a lot of people in the scholarship side start out that way. I went to school for fashion design at the University of Delaware, but I also majored in history because it was just a passion of mine. After four years, I realized that I was not going to be a fashion designer. I did work for a while in pattern making, and in theater costuming, kind of exploring this intersection of fashion and history before I discovered fashion curation as a profession. So I went to NYU and I got my master's degree in costume studies, and that's what set me on this path.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Oh, excellent. So whose work has inspired you in particular for this exhibition? Can you offer the names of some scholars or compendiums that our listeners could look up? In advance of visiting the exhibition or to fill in some of the gaps of their knowledge?

[LIZ WAY]

Absolutely. For this exhibition in particular, I really looked outside of fashion studies. There's so much amazing scholarship written on kind of diasporic culture and its formation. So some scholars that were really important to this project were Paul Gilroy, who wrote *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. And then also kind of, scholars who have pushed back on ideas that he presented, a book called *Recharting the Black Atlantic* by Annalisa Oboe and Anna Scacchi was also really important. But we also have kind of more historic thinkers like W.E.B. Dubois or Marcus Garvey, who had really early ideas about what it meant to have this transnational black culture. Stuart Hall and Michel-Rolph Trouillot were also really important in helping me create the themes for the exhibition.

But inside fashion studies, Carol Tulloch, Monica Miller and Tanisha Ford have all written really influential works on Black fashion. And something that came up over and over again was an article by Vanessa Friedman of The New York Times. She wrote an article in 2020 called "The Incredible Whiteness of the Museum Fashion Collection". And I really saw so many fashion scholars and people who specialize in diverse design come back to that article as a flash point and almost a call to action. And so I've been really surprised and delighted in how many ways that article has shown up in my research.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

That's great. I've really enjoyed talking to you about your exhibition, Liz, and I hope our listeners get a chance to visit the exhibition in person and if not, can learn much more about it on our website at fitnyc.edu/museum.

[LIZ WAY]

Thank you so much for having me.