

*Africa's Fashion Diaspora*  
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The global fashion industry has been profoundly influenced by Africa's cultural heritage, with its distinctive designs, innovative materials, and authentic narratives reshaping contemporary fashion. The exhibition *Africa's Fashion Diaspora* at The Museum at FIT celebrates this impact, featuring 60 ensembles and accessories by Black designers from Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean, and Europe. This groundbreaking showcase examines fashion as a medium of cultural exchange within the Black diaspora, highlighting how designers draw inspiration from their Black identities while fostering connections across diverse cultures. Curated by Elizabeth Way, associate curator of costume at The Museum at FIT, the exhibition underscores the significance of fashion in exploring and expressing Black identity, transcending boundaries of nationality, gender, and other identities. Through nine thematic sections, including "Mothers and Motherland" and "History of Politics," the exhibition presents a multifaceted perspective on Black cultural practices, blending traditional aesthetics with contemporary interpretations. By honoring shared history, resilience, and the diversity of Black cultural expression, *Africa's Fashion Diaspora* challenges one-sided narratives and amplifies the dynamic stories of the Black diaspora.

One standout piece featured in *Africa's Fashion Diaspora* is the *Tswana Mother & Child Dress*, by Thebe Magugu, designed an updated Bohemia-style moss crepe creation that bridges traditional African artistry with contemporary design. This garment showcases a dynamic shirt collar and plunging neckline, softened by an attached neck foulard. Its ballooning sleeves, which expand dramatically before tapering into tight, elasticated cuffs, add a modern flair while maintaining elegance. A high slit offers a bold contrast to the focal element of the dress—a

striking Pop-Art motif of a mother cradling her child, depicted in traditional Tswana attire (*Mother and child heritage dress: Faculty press. THEBE MAGUGU*). This motif, designed by artist Phathu Nembilwi, celebrates African motherhood and cultural identity, grounding the modern silhouette in its heritage. Crafted from 100% recycled polyester and manufactured in China, the garment exemplifies the intersection of sustainable fashion and global production, embodying the themes of cultural exchange and innovation central to the exhibition.

In garment design, lines refer to the paths created by points moving in space, shaping the structure and aesthetic of a piece. Lines in a garment play a crucial role in guiding the eye, defining shapes, and establishing the overall mood or presentation (Bell & Ternus, 2017). They can be vertical, horizontal, diagonal, or curved, each evoking distinct visual effects and senses of movement or stability. In the authentic dress, Thebe Magugu designed the lines as integral to its design and cultural storytelling. The verticality of the high slit elongates the form, creating a sense of elegance and movement, while the curves in the ballooning sleeves add softness and fluidity, symbolizing nurturing and connection. The diagonal lines formed by the plunging neckline and attached neck foulard guide the viewer's focus toward the dress's central Pop-Art motif—a mother cradling her child in traditional Tswana attire. This motif encapsulates the Batswana cultural reverence for motherhood and childbearing, practices passed down through oral tradition and experiential learning (*Mother and Child Heritage Dress: Faculty press. THEBE MAGUGU*). The interplay of lines in the dress not only enhances its aesthetic appeal but also underscores the cultural narrative of care, protection, and continuity within the “losika” or clan.

Rhythm in garment design refers to the repetition or progression of design elements, creating a sense of movement and flow that guides the viewer’s eye through the composition.

This principle fosters harmony and balance within the design, offering a cohesive visual experience (Bell & Ternus, 2017). Thebe Magugu design gave a rhythm that was expressed throughout the repetition of soft, flowing lines and textural elements that create a unified aesthetic while reflecting cultural significance. The ballooning sleeves, with their gradual expansion and return to tight, elasticated cuffs, establish a rhythmic visual cadence that evokes the cyclical nature of care and nurture. The gentle draping of the attached neck foulard mirrors this rhythm, drawing attention downward toward the central motif—a depiction of a mother and child in traditional Tswana attire (*Mother and child heritage dress: Faculty press. THEBE MAGUGU*). This rhythmic design parallels the Botswana cultural practice of *botswetsi*, the postpartum seclusion period where a mother (*motswetsi*) and her newborn (*lese*) are given time to rest and bond. The flow of repeated elements within the garment symbolizes the continuity and balance of this sacred period, emphasizing the harmony between tradition and modernity within the dress's design.

Form in fashion refers to the three-dimensional volume of a garment, shaping how it fits, contours, and moves with the body. Influenced by factors such as fabric, structure, and silhouette, form plays a key role in defining a garment's overall aesthetic and functionality (Bell & Ternus, 2017). Thebe Magugu embodies the form of the dress through its flowing moss crepe fabric, voluminous balloon sleeves, and high slit, which together create a dynamic yet balanced silhouette. The form is both elegant and practical, allowing for fluid movement while maintaining a structured aesthetic. The gathered cuffs and the soft drape of the attached neck foulard add to the garment's sculptural quality, enhancing its visual appeal. This thoughtful use of form resonates with the Botswana cultural practice of *botswetsi*, a postpartum seclusion period marked by care and protection for both mother and child (*Mother and child heritage dress:*

*Faculty press*. THEBE MAGUGU). The flowing, enveloping nature of the dress reflects the nurturing and sheltering environment of this sacred time, while its modern silhouette bridges the connection between tradition and contemporary fashion. The garment's form, much like the *botswetsi* period, is designed to honor and protect, symbolizing continuity, identity, and familial unity within the cultural narrative.

Balance in garment design refers to the distribution of visual weight across a composition, ensuring stability and a cohesive aesthetic. Balance can be symmetrical, where elements are mirrored on both sides or asymmetrical, where contrasting components are offset yet harmonized to maintain visual equilibrium (Bell & Ternus, 2017). Thebe Magugu achieves balance through her garment through the interplay of its design elements. The symmetry of the balloon sleeves provides a sense of stability, while the high slit and plunging neckline create an asymmetrical focus that adds dynamic energy to the garment. The attached neck foulard introduces softness and continuity, guiding the eye across the dress and harmonizing the more dramatic components. This balance mirrors the principles of the *botswetsi* period, a time of careful restriction and nurturing for the mother and child. Just as the garment balances bold and subtle elements to create harmony, *botswetsi* balances rest and controlled interaction to ensure recovery and bonding (*Mother and child heritage dress: Faculty press*. THEBE MAGUGU). The design's equilibrium reflects the cultural significance of maintaining stability and harmony during this sacred phase of life, uniting tradition and modernity in its thoughtful composition.

Color in garment design refers to the use of hues, shades, and tones to evoke emotions, create visual interest, and enhance the overall aesthetic of a piece. Contrasts in color, such as light and dark tones or vibrant and muted shades, can highlight key design elements and add depth to the composition (Bell & Ternus, 2017). The colors Thebe Magugu used, gave earthy

tones and neutral hues to dominate the flowing moss crepe fabric, providing a subtle and elegant backdrop for the bold, vibrant colors of the Pop-Art motif. This central motif, depicting a mother cradling her child in traditional Tswana attire, bursts with rich, warm colors that stand out against the softer palette of the dress. This striking contrast draws the viewer's attention to the motif, symbolizing the importance of motherhood and the sacred bond between the mother (*motswetsi*) and child (*leseae*). The interplay of colors within the dress mirrors the nurturing practices of the *botswetsi* period, during which the mother is cared for and supported to ensure her recovery and ability to care for her child (*Mother and child heritage dress: Faculty press. THEBE MAGUGU*). Just as the contrasting tones emphasize the garment's key elements, the harmonious environment created during *botswetsi* highlights the significance of rest, nourishment, and maternal well-being. The thoughtful use of color in the dress reflects the cultural emphasis on vitality, care, and connection during this important time.

Dominance in garment design refers to the most prominent element that naturally captures attention and sets the tone or theme of the piece. This can be achieved through features such as color, size, or placement within the composition, making it the focal point of the design (Bell & Ternus, 2017). Thebe Magugu used dominance through the elements in the vibrant Pop-Art motif of a mother holding her child, prominently placed on the garment. This bold centerpiece contrasts sharply with the earthy tones and flowing silhouette of the dress, immediately drawing the viewer's eye and establishing the theme of motherhood and cultural heritage. The motif, depicted in rich, warm colors, symbolizes the bond between the mother (*motswetsi*) and child (*leseae*), encapsulating the dress's narrative focus (*Mother and child heritage dress: Faculty press. THEBE MAGUGU*). This dominance parallels the cultural significance of the *botswetsi* period, during which the mother and child are the center of attention

and care. Just as the motif commands focus within the garment, the health and well-being of the mother and child are prioritized within the family and community. The prominence of the motif reflects the cultural jubilation and reverence surrounding milestones like the healing of the umbilical stump, celebrated as the child's first rite of passage (*lesele le godile*). Through its design, the dress conveys both cultural pride and the profound importance of motherhood.

The dominant swatch for the *Tswana Mother & Child Dress* would be a bold, rich hue that draws attention, particularly the vibrant, warm colors of the Pop-Art motif featuring a mother holding her child. This central design serves as the focal point of the garment, with its vivid colors making it the dominant element. The dominant swatch is likely to include deep, earthy tones such as warm reds, oranges, or yellows, complemented by contrasting accents of black or other bright colors that enhance the mother-child imagery (*iTextiles.com*, SwatchKit, 2023). These colors not only catch the eye but also carry cultural significance, symbolizing the strong bond between mother and child within Tswana traditions. Culture resides in the people who practice it, and family members are the bearers of cultural practices shaped by their values, traditions, and customs (*Mother and Child Heritage Dress: Faculty Press*. THEBE MAGUGU). These practices are passed down through generations, primarily through oral traditions. Despite the unique nature of each African culture, Thebe Magugu shares practices across South African communities that reflect common themes of family and tradition.

In addition to the bold colors, the dominance of the fabric and texture in the *Tswana Mother & Child Dress*, Thebe Magugu design; further elevates its visual appeal and cultural significance. The garment's use of moss crepe fabric provides a soft, fluid texture that not only enhances the garment's drape but also contributes to its symbolic representation of motherhood and care (*iTextiles.com*, SwatchKit, 2023). The subtle texture of the fabric, combined with its

rich, earthy colors, mirrors the nurturing qualities associated with the Tswana cultural practices surrounding maternal care. The smoothness of the moss crepe creates a sense of comfort and warmth, aligning with the traditional practices of rest and healing that mothers experience during the *botswetsi* period. The texture, paired with the vibrant swatch, reinforces the dominance of the dress as a visual and cultural statement, highlighting both the importance of family traditions and the harmonious relationship between mother and child.

Repetition in garment design refers to the recurring use of specific elements, such as colors, shapes, or patterns, to create unity, consistency, and rhythm within a composition. This technique strengthens the cohesiveness of the design and guides the viewer's eye across the piece (Bell & Ternus, 2017). Thebe Magugu used repetition as evident in the recurring use of soft, flowing lines and earthy tones throughout the garment. The balloon sleeves and the fabric's draped silhouette echo the natural curves and movement of the moss crepe material, reinforcing the harmonious design. Additionally, the consistent incorporation of the Pop-Art motif's vibrant hues within smaller design details ensures that the theme of motherhood remains central to the overall aesthetic. The repetition in the garment reflects the cultural traditions of the *botswetsi* period, where rituals and practices are repeated to promote healing and protect both mother and child (*Mother and child heritage dress: Faculty press. THEBE MAGUGU*). Just as the recurring design elements create a unified and balanced garment, the repeated customs—such as tying a cloth around the waist and maintaining seclusion—reinforce physical recovery and cultural values. This parallel between design and tradition highlights the importance of continuity and rhythm in both fashion and cultural practices, symbolizing strength, unity, and resilience.

The *Tswana Mother & Child Dress* garment connects deeply to the African diaspora by reflecting the shared cultural practices and values that have been passed down through

generations within the Batswana community. This dress, with its vibrant colors, texture, and design, serves as a symbol of the cultural importance placed on motherhood, family, and community in African traditions. The garment echoes the significance of childbirth and the period of *botswetsi*, a time of seclusion for mother and child that is common across various African cultures (*Mother and child heritage dress: Faculty press. THEBE MAGUGU*). This seclusion ensures that both the mother and baby receive the care, rest, and protection they need after the physically demanding journey of childbirth. The dress, which honors these practices, represents more than just aesthetic beauty—it conveys the protective, nurturing role of the family, particularly the women, who pass down knowledge and traditions through oral history and experiential learning. In the context of the African diaspora, the garment acts as a bridge between ancestral traditions and contemporary expressions of cultural identity. It showcases the resilience of African cultural practices as they are adapted and preserved by communities around the world. The theme of the dress, focusing on the mother-child relationship and the importance of family support, aligns with broader African diaspora values, where the well-being of the family and the continuation of customs through generations remain central to community life (*Mother and child heritage dress: Faculty press. THEBE MAGUGU*). Furthermore, Thebe Magugu designed the dress to reflect the collective memory of African cultural rituals, connecting past and present by emphasizing the shared practices related to birth, care, and seclusion, which continue to define the lives of many African communities across the globe.

In conclusion, the exhibition featuring the *Tswana Mother and Child Dress* by Thebe Magugu offers a profound insight into the cultural practices and traditions of the Batswana people, while also celebrating the broader themes of motherhood, community, and resilience within the African diaspora. Through its vibrant colors, intricate design, and cultural symbolism,



the dress stands as a testament to the strength of family bonds and the importance of rituals passed down through generations. The garment not only highlights the significance of the *botswetsi* period—emphasizing rest, seclusion, and protection for the mother and child—but also serves as a living piece of cultural heritage that connects the past with the present. By showcasing this dress in the exhibition, visitors are invited to reflect on the shared values of nurturing, care, and cultural preservation that continue to shape the lives of African communities, both at home and in the diaspora. The *Tswana Mother and Child Dress* is a powerful representation of how clothing, culture, and tradition intertwine, preserving stories and practices that shape identities across generations.

Figure 1, *Tswana Mother and Child Dress* by Thebe Magugu



Figure 2, One at the *Africa's Fashion Diaspora* at The Museum at FIT



## References

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