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BUF 4900: Internship

A Visit to the Africa's Fashion Diaspora Exhibit at The Museum at FIT



The "*Africa's Fashion Diaspora*" exhibition at The Museum at Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) is an innovative exploration and admiration of the global impact and influence of Black fashion. Curated by Elizabeth Way, the exhibit explores into the cultured connections between diverse Black communities worldwide. The exhibit is supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and made possible thanks to the generosity of the Couture Council of The Museum at FIT (*Africa's Fashion Diaspora*). The African cultural influence can be visualized with each garment, showcasing how fashion serves as an outlet for cultural expression, identity, and unity. The exhibition showcases a wide variety of garments created by Black designers globally, representing Africa, Europe, the Caribbean and the Americas that all value and draw inspirations from African roots. The rich culture is expressed through various formats and displays, expressing common themes of heritage and tradition while valuing creativity and innovation.

The global influence of fashion's role in shaping international Black cultures can be visualized throughout the exhibition as many designers globally showcase similar values and inspiration from Africa's fashion diaspora. The designers who represent a global fashion network, draw inspiration from the diaspora, reflecting and expressing the connectivity regardless of differences geographically, economically, religion, ethnicity and genders. The exhibit showcases common themes that are representative of the Black fashion network globally, empowering themes such as "Mothers and Motherlands" and "Reaching for Africa" showcase the designers influence of representing Africa and creating a connection to the roots and cultural heritage and traditions that have transcended globally (*Africa's Fashion Diaspora*). The fashion displayed reflects the designers influence and importance of Africa's fashion diaspora and its influence of Black culture globally. Fashion is used as a powerful tool in being able to express unity, growth and connection to one's culture. The garments and fashion displayed tell similar stories, create a cohesive interconnected network of Black culture that is displayed relatedly globally regardless of the different makeups of societies.

The global influence grasps the diversity and richness of Black cultures globally. The innovation and creativity presented showcases sophistication while also challenging stereotypes and misconceptions about African fashion and its importance. The exhibit does great in fostering appreciation for the cultural diversity while also promoting social justice as can be displayed by the Denim Tears ensemble designed by American designer Tremaine Emory. The ensemble offers a beautiful interpretation of American fashion while also highlighting Black history, culture and African fashion diaspora influence. The outfit does a wonderful job of blending traditional American fashion using denim while countering it with powerful floral motifs, a cotton wreath to symbolize African American culture while celebrating Black heritage. The African fashion diaspora has traveled into North America to influence modern designers such as Tremaine Emory into creating fashion that connects and reflects their values and culture while blending fashion, race and history artistically.

The ensemble mainly features shades of light blue denim, a classic American fashion staple with a denim jacket and matching pants composing the piece. The cotton wreath motifs, a symbol of resilience and resistance of the African slaves that endured the terrible times of slavery in the cotton fields of the American South are scattered across the denim jacket and matching pants (*Denim Tears*). The wreaths are composed in a white paint that strikes contrast to the denim and draws attention to the designs scattered across the jacket and pants. The undershirt looks to be a

polo, displaying cotton fields that further display the sentiment of slavery and the resilience of American and African slaves and their forced contributions to America's growth. The calm light blue denim is overpowered by the rough looking white paint that gives a beautiful contrast while giving the cotton wreaths importance. The designer's appreciation of cultural history while also promoting social justice and celebrating Black heritage can be visualized in a great format that uses fashion to express and highlight Black culture and identity.

The first element of design is the composition and lines that create the presentation. A major part of the composition is lines, a direction, the way they are arranged determines the effectiveness of the presentations (Bell & Ternus, 2017). This ensemble combines various line directions that evoke different meanings. The straight lines of the denim jacket and pants provide the structural foundation of the outfit. The curviness of the motifs however creates a sense of fluidity and adds a sense of dynamic and sophistication to the garment. The blending of the straight lines and sharpness of the denim with the curves of the wreaths creates complexity and adds distinctiveness to the design.

The repetition of the wreaths throughout the garment creates a great sense of rhythm. Rhythm, self-contained movement from element to element, leads the viewer's eyes from dominant to subdominant objects (Bell & Ternus, 2017). The placement of these wreaths creates a flow that guides the viewer's eye across the garment. The cohesive placement and repetitive patterns create a great sense of balance. Even though the wreaths initially seem scattered, they are perfectly patterned and placed to create a great sense of rhythm and unity across the garment from the jacket down to the pants. The undershirt's connection to the wreaths works wonderfully too as it adds to the cotton theme and creates unity.

The composition groups the parts or elements of the ensemble to create a unified whole. The form creates a balance within the garment using different aspects to create a united fit (Bell & Ternus, 2017). The denim jacket and pants with the relaxed fitting undershirt creates a sense of casual yet modern American lifestyle fit. The loose-fitting aspects of each piece of garment allows for comfort and movement to give it great form aesthetically. The contrast between the wreaths and the denim also adds a sense of depth with the wreaths appearing to be three dimensional and almost popping out of the garments creating an enhanced visual aspect to the ensemble.

This outfit, while it can appear to be random, is strategically balanced with the jacket and jeans having the wreaths positioned evenly throughout the outfit. The composition is balanced with symmetry across the outfit, giving a visually appealing aspect to viewers (Bell & Ternus, 2017). The balance between the light denim, jacket and jeans and the patterned motifs creates harmony and a pleasing balance for viewers. Both the upper and bottom halves of the outfit are composed of the wreath pattern almost symmetrically to create a nice balance for the overall outfit. The neutral aspect of the undershirt and the cotton field also adds to the theme while not overpowering the main piece of the fit but casually blending in perfectly. While the left and right side of the garments aren't mirror images, the patterns balance themselves out evenly with some being smaller than others but still creating a nice balance and sense of harmony for the entire outfit.

The next element of design that is important in this composition is the contrast and juxtaposition of different objects and lines. Contrast refers to the use of opposite elements to create sharp differences for visual interest (Bell & Ternus, 2017). The contrast in this Denim Tears outfit is crucial beginning with the colors, creating contrast between the solid light blue denim and the white wreaths pattern throughout the outfit. The juxtaposition of the motifs brings viewers' attention directly to the motifs and the different sizes and patterns that they are and its intricate patterns that create them. The contrast can also be noted by the smooth texture of the denim material and the scattered paint, rough looking wreaths the give more emphasize to the motifs. The contrast and juxtaposition work wonderfully to draw viewers attention into the finer details of the outfit.

While the outfit is well balanced the dominant aspect of the outfit would be the cotton floral wreaths. Dominance refers to the focal point of design and in this Denim Tears ensemble, the cotton wreaths stand out in the otherwise simple fit. Viewers are instantaneously drawn to the cotton wreaths and their intricate design, sophistication and symbolism in the outfit. The bold and almost 3-D aspect of the wreaths, the rough painted and contrasting aspect of them create a dominant characteristic that leads the ensemble. The wreaths being placed throughout the outfit, on the jeans, in the front, sides and back of the jacket also highlight its significance and dominant value to the ensemble

In this Denim Tears ensemble, the proportions between the jacket, the jeans and shirt are all balance to create great harmony between each piece. Proportion refers to the relationship between sizes, scales and weight of different elements within a design (Bell & Ternus, 2017). The jeans and denim jacket are nicely proportioned to create a great balance of fit and size. The sleeves on the jacket and length of the denim each cut off perfectly at the ends, not appearing to big or small on the mannequin to visually please viewers. The wreaths appear in different sizes throughout the garment, but they all appear balanced with different motifs appearing randomly to not overwhelm any aspect and create unity. The proportions of the wreaths are also important as they are never sized too big to overpower the fit and draw away from other aspects, creating a nice balance of simplicity yet sophistication.

The repetition of the floral cotton wreath is the most important aspect from this ensemble. Repetition is the use of an element multiple times within a design (Bell & Ternus, 2017). In this Denim Tears ensemble, the repetition of the wreaths is the highlight of the outfit. It transforms an iconic American outfit of denim jeans and jacket into a symbolic, culturally important fashion statement with the emphasize of the cotton wreaths throughout the fit. As both the denim jacket and jeans have the pattern throughout each piece, the outfit appears cohesive and gives value and strength to the theme of the ensemble. As the top and bottom are both denim it also uses repetition to emphasize the American influence but also reinforces the value of African Americans with the wreath being more dominant.

The primary fabric used in this Denim Tears ensemble is denim. The denim texture provides a rugged texture for which the cotton wreaths motifs can be painted on. Denim is known to be a durable and versatile fabric (Bell & Ternus, 2017). While appearing rough the denim has a slight clean sheer that is complemented by the rough and imperfectly painted floral wreaths. The light blue denim is the perfect textile that contrasts the white painted cotton wreaths and allows for

cohesiveness and a great base for which the paint can endure. The appearance of this outfit appears to be causal and modern with the American vintage influence of the staple denim outfit. Tremaine Emory does a wonderful job in blending a renowned American textile in denim and transforming it into a cultural symbolic fashion piece with a subtle add of painted floral cotton wreaths that creates great significance that is visually appealing for viewers and consumers.

The "*Africa's Fashion Diaspora*" exhibition at The Museum at Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) showcases the enduring influence of African fashion on global culture. The exhibit recognizes the impact that Black designers have on the global scale, not just with fashion but impacting their societies with their appreciation for cultural diversity and proud heritage. With designers such as Tremaine Emory, Denim Tears has showcased the intersection between African American culture, African fashion diaspora and contemporary fashion. The global culture influence that African fashion has can be seen across various diversities including geographical, socioeconomic status, race, religion and sex differences. The exhibit showcases how fashion can be used as a powerful force as a means of cultural expression, identity and connectivity amongst societies.

The Denim Tears ensemble showcased in this exhibit, designed by Tremaine Emory, is a powerful reflection of this intersection between fashion, culture, and history. This piece not only showcases the designer's innovative approach to denim but also serves as a commentary on the complex legacy of slavery and the enduring influence of African American culture. "Emory sees the cotton wreath as a "talisman for Black people" and "a call to return back to what built this country," referring to an African American origin story that is rooted in both a history of enslavement *and* creative ingenuity borne out of resilience to racial discrimination. Thus, the wreath celebrates the contributions of Black people to the American experiment but mourns the suffering that accompanied them" (Square, 2022). This ensemble transformed a unique American staple into a symbolic fashion piece that's representative of the resistance, resilience and perseverance of African Americans as well as the African fashion diaspora.

This ensemble and many of the pieces in this exhibit show the powerful model of using fashion to explore social and historical issues as well as recognizing and empowering Black culture. Fashion can be used to communicate emotions, represent unity and challenge societal norms, shaping identity and fostering culture for many globally. Exemplified by the Denim Tears brand focused on using fashion to communicate on the legacy of African Americans, their trials and tribulations but most importantly their enduring influence in American society (Denim Tears). His fashion garments, company logo and brand awareness are focused on bringing awareness of the ongoing systemic racism and inequalities that still pertain not just in America but globally using fashion to express and communicate this very important message. Using fashion as an outlet and platform to speak and communicate promotion of societal changes, as well as a tool to shape culture, identities and self-expression globally will influence many just as Tremaine Emory was influenced by the African fashion diaspora that has persevered throughout time.



Fig 1. Denim Tears ensemble by Tremaine Emory from *Africa's Fashion Diaspora* Exhibition at The Museum at FIT

References

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