Africa's Fashion Diaspora Exhibit

Figure 1. Thebe Magugu, Tswana Mother and Child dress, 2023.

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One attended the Museum of Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) on 227 W 27th, New York, NY 10001. The *Africa's Fashion Diaspora* examines how fashion is expressed and shares an interdependence and interrelationship. The diaspora showcases the work of Black designers from diverse regions, highlighting the shared cultural influences and innovative approaches that unite most everyone (Gross,2024). One was particularly drawn to the *The Mother and Motherlands* exhibition featuring the *Thebe Magugu Heritage Collection Tswana "Mother and Child"recycled polyester dress, 2023 South Africa*. The dress, created in 2023 draws from *Magugu South African Tswana* roots, creative process and production technique. *Magugu's* work honors the matrilineal knowledge which speaks to the nurturing and protective role of mothers within the family and community. By using the recycled polyester, *Magugu* emphasizes sustainability, and the cultural importance of resourcefulness and care for future generations. This garment not only celebrates commitment, and the influence of the *Motherland* but the ancestral wisdom into modern fashion.

Elizabeth Way is an Associate Curator at The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT). The exhibit is currently open from *September 18th* to *December 29,2024*. *Way's* work sheds light on the often overlooked and underappreciated contributions of Black designers. In recent conversation insights were shared regarding *Africa's Fashion Diaspora*. The exhibition engages with concepts such as *Pan-Africanism*, *Black Consciousness*, *Négritude*, and *Afrofuturism,* recognizing the significant impact in which fashion plays in articulating Black identity beyond its national borders (Gross, 2024). *Elizabeth Way's* focus on *Mothers and Motherlands* in the "*Africa's Fashion Diaspora*" exhibition particularly in relation to the themes of motherhood. Way's showcase how designers from the Black diaspora bring traditional craftsmanship, cultural symbolism, and contemporary style. *Way's* wanted viewers to understand that *African* fashion is not monolithic but rather a diverse, yet vibrant expression of identity that spans across continents, drawing on the history of migration, colonization, and strength of characteristics. Through this exhibition, she hoped to honor how these designers celebrate their roots, challenge stereotypes, and redefine fashion by inspiring it with stories, materials and aesthetics of their *Motherlands*.

The Couture Council and T*he National Endowment for the Arts* sponsored the *Africa's Fashion Diaspora Symposium* at the Museum at FIT. *The Couture Council* aims to elevate the fashion industry by recognizing and honoring outstanding achievements in design (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2024). By supporting individuals like *Elizabeth Way*, it highlights talented individuals such as *Thebe Magugu* and many more Black designers. T*he National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)*, is committed to supporting artistic excellence and ensuring that most everyone has access to the arts. With both *The Couture Council and NEA* sponsoring the symposium it raises awareness about the challenges faced by *Black Diasporas* and the importance of documenting traditional textile, dyeing techniques, embroidery styles, pattern making and the use of recycled materials.

The fashion concept of the *African Fashion Diaspora*, broadens the context of which spans across continents, historical background, and social experiences (Garcia, 2024).T*he African Fashion Diaspora* showcases *Black Diaspora* from different parts of the world from

Africa, the Americas, Europe, and *the Caribbean*. The use of fashion is also celebrated and declares their *African heritage*. Black designers often draw on *African textiles*, traditional garments, motifs, to create a pattern that reflects modern-day reality. *The African Fashion Diaspora* emphasizes the idea of *Pan-Africanism,* and its beliefs that are shared politically, and historically *African-descended* people worldwide. Despite geographical distances, the exhibition highlights how African and *Afro-descendant* communities maintain their connections through cultural practices and values.

The concept of fashion which expresses gender, not only serves as a reflection of personal identity but also as a medium for challenging gender norms (Fome, 2024). Fashion has been a creative space attiring to dress codes, symbols, and cultural references with modern trends creating garments that speak to gender identities, including most everyone that challenges masculinity and femininity when wearing clothing. In many *African* cultures, traditional garments and accessories have historically embodied gender roles, however these particular roles were often more flexible than the rigid structures imposed by colonialism and *Western* influences. In some cultures, there was less emphasis on a binary understanding of gender, and clothing was used to express a wider range of identities. For example, in several *African* societies, such as the *Doek*, gender roles were not always fixed, and clothing could be a way of signaling social status, spiritual affiliation, or even power, regardless of gender.

In geography, the global migration of *Black* culture has led to the exchange of ideas, aesthetics, and traditions across geographic boundaries. *African* textiles, such as *Kente* cloth from *Ghana, Mudcloth (Bogolanfini)* from *Mali*, and *Dashiki* from *West Africa* (Padilioni Jr, 2024). Inspired clothing designs not only in *African* countries but also in *America*, the *Caribbean*, and *Afro-Latinx* communities. As these cultural traditions travel across regions, they adapt to local contexts and climates, resulting in designs that speak to the specific geographic and cultural experiences of *Black* designers in different parts of the world. For example, the influence of *African* prints in the *Caribbean* can be traced to the forced migration of enslaved *Africans* in the *Caribbean*, where traditional *African* fabrics were used with *European* colonial influences. Today, designers from both regions use these textiles to create vibrant, contemporary collections that reflect the history of *Black* people in the *Caribbean*.

Fashion concepts allow *Black* individuals to communicate sexual orientation through dress. *Black* communities have introduced styles and elements that include colors, patterns, and innovative techniques like draping, and accessorizing. For example, *African prints* like head wraps, and jewelry inspired by traditional *African Garb* have become prominent not only in *African American* fashion but also in *Western* fashion (Fome, 2024). *Black LGBTQ+* communities have shaped several fashion trends, significantly within streetwear and high end fashion. The ballroom scene, which emerged in *Harlem* during the *1980s*, exemplifies this influence, as it became a space for self-expression, challenging sexual orientations, and celebrating *queer Black* and *Latinx* identities.

In many *African* cultures, traditional religious practices incorporate clothing and jewelry as symbols of spiritual identity, status, and connection to ancestors. Colors, patterns, and accessories are often chosen for their specific meanings (Black, 2023). For example, white garments may symbolize purity and are worn in rituals, while specific bead patterns and colors

convey identity within certain tribes. Many *Black* communities in the *Americas*, especially in the *United States* and the *Caribbean*, are primarily *Christian*. This led to distinct interpretations of *"Sunday best"* attire, which is more formal and modest. Over time, this style evolved into what most everyone now sees as *"church fashion,"* featuring sophisticated suits, dresses, hats, and fine jewelry. *Black* cultures contribute to a tapestry where religion signifies and fashion intersect, giving acknowledgement to styles that honor heritage,

Understanding the influence of *Black* cultures in fashion concepts is significant because it highlights the power of culture and innovation. It reveals how fashion is not just about dress but also about identity, history, and shared humanity (White,2018). When people from all backgrounds wear and celebrate these styles, most everyone participates in a broader conversation that recognizes the significance of *Black* cultural contributions. It reveals appreciation rather than appropriation, creating an inclusive industry that honors the creativity, and vision that *Black* communities bring to fashion. This awareness also encourages respect and recognition for marginalized communities whose style and influence have often been overlooked or undervalued.

Research indicates that color is the first aspect people notice when shopping, even before size, fit, or price. This is because color evokes an immediate emotional response that can attract or repel customers. Bright, bold colors might grab attention and create excitement, while softer, neutral shades can create a sense of calm and sophistication (Bell and Ternus, 2017). The *Thebe Magugu Heritage Collection celebrates South African Heritage Dress,* culture, and storytelling through colors, and value. Blue is often associated with wisdom, and spirituality. The blue in the *"Mother & Child"* dress expresses feelings of protection and serenity, which reflect the nurturing relationship between a mother and child.

Blue is connected to water, an element vital to both life and cleansing, signifying renewal and resilient qualities attributed to mothers (Sayej, 2024). It symbolizes a universal sense of peace and trust between a mother and child, representing a bond that surpasses spoken language and culture. This color choice in such a garment reinforces the comfort, care, and strength found in this essential relationship (Sayej, 2024). When examining this piece, one can see the recycled materials which offer unique textures, colors, and patterns, adding a distinctive character to the garment. The use of earth Tones colors like brown, beige, and olive green are associated with nature, and stability. White is used as an accent that brings lightness and contrast guidance and ancestral protection. *Magugu* understanding the psychology of color creates a visually appealing and effective market of materials that resonate with a specific target audience.

In *Bell and Ternus's* book *Silent Hill*, *line* is a key visual merchandising concept which guides the viewer's eye and creates visual flow in a display. *Line* can be used to organize products, direct attention to specific items, or convey a brand's style and message.There are four primary *line* types to consider in visual merchandising: horizontal, vertical, diagonal, and curved. The mannequin's upright posture creates a strong vertical *line,* symbolizing confidence (Bell and Ternus, 2017). *Magugu* created a bohemian-inspired dress featuring a classic shirt collar and a

deep neckline, softened by a delicate neck scarf. The sleeves are dramatic, ballooning out towards the wrist before tightening at the cuff. With a high slit on the side revealing a print of a mother and child. The slight curve in the drape at the bottom left side of the skirt adds a touch of softness and movement. The *vertical lines* convey a sense of strength and power, while the *curved lines* add a touch of femininity and grace. These *lines* add a dynamic rhythm to the dress, visually guiding the eye upwards and conveying a sense of growth.

Bell and *Ternus*, described *rhythm* as an design principle that guides a viewer's gaze across a display in a specific, flowing manner (Bell and Ternus, 2017). In *Thebe Magugu* dress, the use of *rhythm* are vertical lines and alternating colors parallels. This *Doek* tradition creates a visual continuity that reflects a similar respect for heritage and family lineage. The repeating pattern of both blue and white helps express the repetitive and enduring nature of maternal care, heritage, and tradition in *Tswana* and *South African* culture. Laying and draping add depth, allowing the fabric to move in sync with the wearer, creating a visual *rhythm* as the dress flows. Together, these elements enhance the dress's *rhythm* and mirror *African* storytelling traditions where *rhythm* is used visually to carry forward themes of lineage and continuity across generations.

Bell and *Ternus* define form as the shape, structure, and outline of an object (Bell and Ternus, 2017). It affects how a product is perceived and how it interacts with surrounding elements in a display. In Magugu's design, textured forms are achieved through fabric choices like recycled polyester which add layers and depth of Mothers and the Motherland. The fabrics texture adds visual and depth to the form of the dress such as trim, panels, and layers, working together with polyester. The form mimics the delicate folds and layers of origami, reflecting *Magugu's* attention to craftsmanship. The manipulation of fabric, especially the pleats and folds, emphasizes a *sheen* which gives *volume* and *texture*.

Balance refers to the distribution of weight (Bell and Ternus, 2017). *Bell* and *Ternus* ensure creating a garment must feel stable and easy to wear, preventing any one area from feeling heavier than another. *Symmetrical balance* in the silhouette reveals how the neckline, hemline, and central patterns create a form. *Magugu* also incorporates *asymmetrical balance* through features, such as the use of textures and positioning of design details of the *Mother and child*. *Magugu* created a dress that both shares tradition and is forward-looking in its approach to fashion.

Contrast refers to the use of elements such as light and dark, soft and hard, or textured and smooth. This *juxtaposition* emphasizes the contrast between the bold, and the softer quality of the fabric's movement (Bell and Ternus, 2017). The *contrast* in skin tone and fabric, against the *Black* mannequins draws attention to the garment. The contrast in colors creates a focal point that draws attention to the dress while maintaining symmetry between the colors evenly distributed across the mannequin (Bell & Ternus, 2017). The blue of the dress covers the entire body, and the mannequin's skin tone acts as a neutral frame that does not overpower the visual symmetry of the entire look. The *Black* mannequin, representing *African* heritage, is in direct

juxtaposition with the modern design of the dress. The *juxtaposition* also lies in the *contrast* between the modern, structured design of the dress with the origami-like folds, sustainable materials, and sleek lines. The *Black* mannequin serves as a neutral backdrop that allows the colors, textures, and details of the dress to take center stage.

Dominance refers to the element within a display that naturally attracts the most attention due to its visual importance (Bell & Ternus, 2017). *Magugu* heritage dress, particularly the one featuring the *Mother and Child motif,* effectively uses *dominance* to highlight the central image. This imagery adds an emotional layer to the garment, drawing the viewer's eye immediately to the symbolic representation. The recycled polyester allows for *sleek lines* and structured folds, giving the dress a distinct quality. By placing this motif at the forefront of the design, the dress gives visual and symbolic *dominance* to the theme of the Motherland. The use of imagery connects viewers to the values of dress, and legacy that define many *African* cultures.

Proportion is the relationship between the size, the weight and scale against the visual display (Bell & Ternus, 2017). *Mangugu* relationship between the neckline, bodice, sleeves, and dress shows how *proportion* is used to create the overall silhouette. Dressmakers consider the wearer's body proportions, aiming to create a flattering silhouette that accentuates desirable features and minimizes perceived flaws. In *Magugu's* dress, the slit is positioned to *balance* the structure of the garment, creating a symmetrical effect that adds elegance and makes the body look more voluminous. By considering these factors, one can appreciate how *Manugugu's* heritage dress utilizes proportion to compliment the garment.

Repetition refers to the repeated use of certain elements such as shapes, colors, textures, or patterns. In *Magugu* dress recycled polyester has a consistent *textur*e and *sheen* throughout, giving the garment a unified look. The sleeves and hemline demonstrate *repetition* through their shared use of structured, origami-like folds. The necktie and the slit along the leg demonstrate *repetition* creating elongated, vertical shapes that lead the eye downward, enhancing the vertical flow of the dress. The necktie drapes down from the neckline drawing attention to the chest area. Additionally, the open space adds dimension, offering a glimpse of the skin. After carefully reviewing this piece, one can admire both beauty and power. *Mangugu Heritage dress* respects a woman's body shape, and invites deeper reflection on the values and stories that shape most everyone. This image adds the value placed on family, within African societies *Black/African* dress.

The dress is made from recycled *South African* polyester, which speaks to the heritage of *African* craftsmanship and environmental respect. Many *African* communities traditionally use local, natural resources in dress-making, whether it's through weaving, dyeing, or fabric sourcing, providing sustainability (Spedding, 2023). The recycled *South African* polyester gives the dress a *smooth*, almost reflective *sheen*. Additionally, the *sheen* brings a sense of refinement and draws attention to the dress's form. The *smooth texture* also contrasts beautifully with a structured feel, creating a dynamic visual effect. The use of recycled polyester allows the dress to

drape over the body without feeling heavy or restrictive. The design choices for the garment are both visually and comfortable, reflecting *Magugu's* attention to both form and functionality.

The *"African Fashion Diaspora"* exhibit at The Museum of Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) not only explores *Black/African* designers. But acts as a form of expression and activism, addressing societal issues such as race, gender, politics. During the *19th* and early *20th* centuries, *Doek* culture in southwestern *Nigeria* became idolized (Dahir, 2024). *Doek* women were experts in textiles, using traditional techniques like adire *indigo* dyeing and *Aso oke* handwoven cloth to create fabrics that were associated with status, ceremony, and marriage. In contemporary society, the *Doek* embraces the freedom of self-expression and adaptation.The production of the *Doek* supported local economies, providing employment opportunities for weavers, dyers, and tailors. The *Doek* inspired many fashion designers like *Thebe Mangugu*. Through creative reinterpretation, the *Doek* continues to be a part of both *African* and global fashion, showcasing the heritage which honors new, imaginative ways.

The *Africa's Fashion Diasporas* highlights *African* and *Black* history that confront, challenge, and reshape traditional beliefs. This approach not only commands *African* designers achievements but also brings attention to stories, identities, and voices that have been marginalized or misunderstood (Mbonambi, 2024). *Thebe Manugu* combines traditional *African* silhouettes and textiles with modern techniques, creating clothing that feels both nostalgic and forward-looking. The *Africa's Fashion Diaspora* exhibit also searches into the avant-garde, showcasing designers who boldly experiment with form and materials. The exhibition highlights *African* designers, illustrating the renaissance of the *"Made in Africa"*. This fashion movement includes iconic fashion designers *Thebe Manugu* past, present, and future choices. The evolution of art and fashion interconnects adapting to the influence of contemporary trends worldwide.

Photos



Figure 2, 3 and 4: Thebe Magugu, Heritage collection, Tswana “Mother & Child” recycled polyester dress, South Africa, Fall 2023, The Museum at FIT, 2023.55.1

Proof of Attendance

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Figure 1. Thebe Magugu, Tswana Mother and Child dress, 2023.

Figure 5, 6, and 7: *Rhonda Duncan* at the Museum of Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT)

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