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Contemporary and colourful African art hits London

London is alive with African culture and new designers creating homeware in vibrant colours and patterns

KATE BURNETT | Wednesday 7 August 2013 | [0 comments](#)



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African and Western designers inspired by traditional materials, colours and techniques are working together to create a new take on African design.

London is alive with African culture this summer – in the theatre (*A Season in the Congo*, at the Young Vic), in music (September's London African Music Festival) and in an abundance of art. Ghanaian artist **El Anatsui** has covered the façade of the Royal Academy with a glittering frieze of flattened Nigerian bottle tops. Across the river, Tate Modern is hosting two major shows of African artists, and others are exhibiting at smaller galleries around town.



On the line: South Africa's Zulu artists and makers weave telephone cables into richly coloured baskets

As part of this surge of African culture, the work of the continent's contemporary designers is also attracting attention. Bold, confident and colourful, it is increasingly visible thanks to the work of individuals and design collectives combining Western skills and ideas with



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with Africa, which are also major trends in Western fashion and interiors.

Graphic Africa: Habitat's Platform Gallery, September 2013

If you want to know more about African design, a great starting point is Graphic Africa, an exhibition hosted in September by high street retailer Habitat at its Platform gallery on King's Road, SW3. This is a capsule collection of contemporary African designers who have been brought together through an initiative called Design Network Africa (DNA). As well as working with DNA to create the exhibition, Habitat has also worked with one of the DNA designers, **Boubacar Dumbia** from Mali, to make a collection of cushions.

The show represents the second phase of DNA's work in Africa, with a new six-year phase about to start. The programme is directed by Trevyn and Julian McGowan, both directors of Source, a company based in Cape Town in South Africa which has been exporting African design to the rest of the world for more than a decade. They oversaw the selection of the 16 companies from 10 African countries from a shortlist of 120.



Drying: Malian Boubacar Doumbia's "mud" fabrics feature in a new Habitat range

"Many of these companies have unique skills in weaving, furniture, glass or metal, wood or clay and the resulting mixtures of companies and materials were intriguing. We're aiming for a different impression of what African design can be," comments Trevyn. "It's graphic and fresh with a very strong narrative."



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This blend of European and African design is not only happening thanks to the efforts of DNA and Habitat, but individual designers and companies are also experimenting with eye-catching results. In Africa companies like **Mabeo** in Botswana have invited celebrated European and north American designers such as **Patricia Urquiola** and **Garth Roberts** to apply their skills and thinking to contemporary products.

The resulting lines, exhibited at this year's Milan furniture fair, have an aesthetic that is modern but also distinctively African. Products can be purchased via Mabeo's website, and are then made to order in Botswana and shipped to customers worldwide in between six and 12 weeks.



Unmissable: furniture and artwork at Habitat's Graphic Africa Platform, SW3 (left); traditional weaving techniques are used to create contemporary furniture for the Graphic Africa exhibition (right)

Here in London there are more designers and retailers who are bringing their take on Africa to a wider audience. Three young female designers, all with African roots, have looked to African printed textiles



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and are increasingly popular and easy to find here.

Banke Kuku's studio is in west London from where she designs fabrics for use in accessories and upholstery. Born in Lagos, Banke was educated here and graduated from Chelsea College of Art & Design in 2010. Her designs, "a merger between African and western cultures which always tell an African story", will be available by the metre for the first time later this year via her website.

Eva Sonaike is also based in London and will launch her first fabric collection in September, again available via her website. Of Nigerian origin but born and raised in Germany, Eva trained in fashion in London and worked as a journalist before setting up her own label in 2009. Her mission is "bringing colour to life" and she uses her textiles to cover pouffes and other furniture. Her products are sold in London showrooms including Samson Soboye's store on Calvert Avenue in Shoreditch, and she has also exhibited recently in New York.



From left: Eva Sonaike's fabrics can turn any armchair into a statement piece (Ljoba print, POA; evasonaike.com); African basketwork often features deceptively simple geometric patterns

Laurence Kanza's products are also available through Samson Soboye and on her own site. Her family comes from the Congo (hence her company name La Petite Congolaise — little woman from the Congo)



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The vibrant colour and pattern of the textiles, and the confident use of materials may hark back to respected African traditions but these designers are creating a new definition for African design that is reaching a much wider but equally appreciative audience.

Find more online

- * habitat.co.uk
- * designnetworkafrica.org
- * soboye.com
- * mabeofurniture.com
- * afriqueauthentiqueauthenticafrica.com
- * bankekuku.com
- * lapetitecongolaise.com
- * evasonaike.com



From left: Laurence Kanza's vibrant Pascal cushions from La Petite Congolaise (£65; lapetitecongolaise.com); Mabeo Kika stool in red by Patricia Urquiola (mabeofurniture.com)

Earthy colours with the help of Malian mud

Habitat senior designer Rebecca Hoyes first visited Ghana in November



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cushions for Habitat. She worked with Malian designer Boubacar Dombia to design the cushions using Bogolon mud fabrics from Mali.

"We worked with print in a very raw form, using mud from the Niger river. The Bogolan technique is typically Malian and well-known for its rich, earthy colours," says Rebecca, who loves to explore techniques and processes as part of her design work. "Together with Boubacar we have developed four authentic designs for Habitat which also have a very contemporary feel."

* habitat.co.uk/platform



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