

01 Rug by The
Ninevites



RETHINKING AFRICAN TEXTILES

The last couple of years have seen a change in how we view African textiles. **Malin Lonnberg** explores the best rugs and fabrics by makers of African heritage in the market today

At the London Design Festival in 2013, UK furnishing chain Habitat put on an exhibition titled 'Graphic Africa', featuring the artisanal works of 16 designers from across the continent. A limited-edition cushion collection, a collaboration between textile designer Boubacar Doumbia from Mali and Habitat's senior designer Rebecca Hoyes, was launched for the public to purchase. Though the title of the show was ill-chosen ('Graphic Europe' would sound absurd to our ears, and the epithet implies a homogeneity of expression across communities that simply does not exist), the event marked a turning point in how we view African design.

It was a step away from the colonial 'safari' aesthetic that still occasionally rears its head in the interiors world, and an attempt to highlight and name individual designers and makers working in African countries; that is, afford them the same respect that is customarily given to European and American practitioners. More generally, it was around this time that more people started to understand the importance of recognising the origin of patterns and techniques, and promoting designers working in African nations or diaspora communities that have a genuine connection with them. The latter way of thinking can be seen as opposed to the cultural appropriation of motifs or weaving methods by big brands cherry-picking elements to satisfy a design fad.

The desire for various looks of different African origins is still strong in the world of interior design. This is especially true when it comes to textiles, with a plethora of brilliant brands led by designers drawing on their heritage to create beautiful products hitting the market.

Based in South Africa, The Ninevites proudly declare their work to be a 'celebration of black aesthetics'. The social enterprise uses textiles as one medium with which to explore 'under-told narratives of life from Southern Africa', producing rugs inspired by traditional patterns in wool sourced from Lesotho, South Africa, Peru and Namibia. The results are fresh-looking carpets that most often take geometric designs. All rugs are handwoven using time-honoured weaving techniques by artisans from Southern Africa, and via an artistic collaboration, Peru. The raw wool is spun and dyed by the artisans themselves.

Moving from the fledgling to the well-established, Dakar-based Aïssa Dione founded her company Aïssa Dione Tissus 25 years

◀ **People started to understand the importance of recognising the origin of patterns** ▶

ago. Born in France to a French mother and a Senegalese father, she moved to Senegal in her twenties and immersed herself in traditional techniques, learning from the last master weavers of the Mandjacque peoples. Now she employs more than 100 people, and her textiles are popular with luxury home décor brands such as Fendi and Christian Lacroix. The West African origin of her patterns is obvious when looking at works from the Classic Collection such as *Dogon*, but the designs have been given a twist courtesy of Dione's Fine Art training.

In London, Laurence Kanza runs La Petite Congolaise (The Little Congolese Girl). British born of Congolese descent, Kanza channels a childhood spent in homes mixing Congolese objects with European furniture when designing



02 *Dogon* textile in different colourways, Aissa Dione Tissus

03 Cushions by La Petite Congolaise



Photo: Mamiun Coas

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04 *Folk Kente* Cushion in Black/Green, Darkroom

05 *Yeta* raffia carpet, Theko



06 The Falomo Collection, Eva Sonaïke

'African accents for contemporary interiors'. Her main product line is wax-print cushions, in which earth tones and vibrant colours alternate. For example, while *Josiane* puts a floral motif against a hot magenta backdrop, *Marie-Jeanne* sports a pattern of interlocking circles in dark red and blue against sand. All La Petite Congolaise pieces are handmade and limited-edition, ensuring a sense of exclusivity.

Also based in the British capital is Eva Sonaïke, of Nigerian origin but born and raised in Germany. After gaining an MA from the London College of Fashion, where her area of study was contemporary African fashion and African textiles, she worked in fashion journalism before setting up her own business. Sonaïke's eponymous brand specialises in home décor, ranging from fabrics to interior products such as lampshades, cushions and pouffes as well as rugs. The company's mission is 'Bringing Colour to Life', and Sonaïke's textiles certainly live up to this objective. The *Ala* fabric comes in blue, green and purple, and has a parallel geometric pattern inspired by road markings. Green, in line with Pantone's colour of the year Greenery, also makes a strong statement in *Aluro*, another beautiful fabric.

In Mali, bogolan—dyeing with fermented mud—has an illustrious history but is also a living art form in the hands of Souleymane Coulibaly. It is in his studio that the I Ni Ce Bogolan collection (meaning 'Hello Bogolan!')

in Bambara language) of cotton and raffia carpets, carried by Theko, has been born. The *Yeta* rug mixes curving lighter and darker sections, symbolising people's different opinions, and how one person's perception is their own reality. The carpets are available in different dimensions, in sizes created with European homes in mind.

Kente cloth, a fabric made of interwoven strips in the lands of the Akan people in Ghana, has been in much demand in Europe and America in the last couple of years. There are plenty of collectors of antique pieces, but also

✦ **Makers of African heritage are staking their claim** ✦

many admirers of contemporary production. UK design brand Darkroom has worked with Ghanaian craftspeople weaving cloth in updated versions of conventional *kente* patterns, with exuberant results that represent the cutting edge of design. As can be seen from the above, talented makers of African heritage are staking their claim in the market for high-end textiles.

- www.theninevites.net
- www.aissadionetissus.com
- www.lapetitecongolaise.com
- www.darkroomlondon.com
- www.theko-collection.com
- www.evasonaïke.com