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MADE IN AFRICA

As much as Africa's economies are strengthening, it's also showing a maturation of design and innovation. Today, the international fashion industry is looking to Africa for new investment opportunities

Can the label "Made in Africa" carry the same clout as "Made in Italy" or "Made in Paris"? A few iconic African designs – such as the striking blue and red, checked Maasai cloth – have crossed over to couture runways, assimilated into the design streams of big fashion houses. But this approach doesn't send money our way.

There's massive opportunity to harness the craftsmanship on this continent, so that it becomes a viable resource for high-end contemporary products and feeds profits back to communities where designs and inspirations originate.

Trailblazers include Bridget Russo from Passion Projects, an organisation linking high-end brands like Edun, Loomstate and Rogan Denim to African countries. Last year she hosted the Design Africa Panel discussion in New York: a series of conversations aimed at raising awareness both of the continent and its design potential.

Edun, founded by superstar Bono, is positioning itself as a creative force in contemporary fashion and is making strong inroads.

Loomstate aims to create a demand for certified organic cotton using socially and environmentally responsible methods of production, mainly in Africa. Meanwhile, Freedom4Fashion aims to "address poverty one thread at a time"; it provides solutions to fashion design houses across the world for ethical production by encouraging community manufacturing, which is beneficial to both brands and



Louis Vuitton

workers. It correctly believes that the desire for "cheap 'n chic" has driven brands to exploit labourers, as has happened in over-exposed China and India.

Excitingly, these organisations prove that the desire for African goods is increasing globally. Our continent has a tribal aesthetic which is both unique and compelling. Now, if Africa could just position itself in a way that gave it both authority and ownership, it would be able to claim its long-overdue place in the sun.

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