



News Release
For immediate release

V&A announces Africa Fashion exhibition with a public call-out to uncover iconic designs

Today the V&A reveals plans to stage a major exhibition celebrating the irresistible creativity, ingenuity and unstoppable global impact of contemporary African fashions. Opening June 2022, the exhibition will celebrate the vitality and innovation of this vibrant scene, as dynamic and varied as the African continent itself.

Over 250 objects, drawn from the personal archives of a selection of iconic mid-twentieth century and influential contemporary African fashion creatives, alongside textiles and photographs from the V&A's collection will go on display – many for the first time. Starting with the African independence and liberation years that sparked a radical political and social reordering across the continent, the exhibition will look to explore how fashion, alongside music and the visual arts, formed a key part of Africa's cultural renaissance, laying the foundation for today's fashion revolution.

Across contemporary couture, ready-to-wear, made-to-order and street-style, the V&A will also seek to offer a close-up look at the new generation of ground-breaking designers, collectives, stylists and fashion photographers working in Africa today. The V&A will explore how the digital world accelerated the expansion of the industry, irreversibly transforming global fashions as we know them. From global fashion weeks to celebrity wearers and the role of social media and blogging, the exhibition will celebrate and champion the diversity and ingenuity of the continent's fashion scene.

Dr Christine Checinska, Curator of African and African Diaspora Fashion, said: *Our guiding principle is the foregrounding of individual African voices and perspectives. The exhibition will present African fashions as a self-defining art form that reveals the richness and diversity of African histories and cultures. To showcase all fashions across such a vast region would be to attempt the impossible. Instead, Africa Fashion will celebrate the vitality and innovation of a selection of fashion creatives, exploring the work of the vanguard in the twentieth century and the creatives at the heart of this eclectic and cosmopolitan scene today. We hope this exhibition will spark a renegotiation of the geography of fashion and become a game-changer for the field.*

Shade Thomas-Fahm (b.1933), Chris Seydou (1949 – 1994), Kofi Ansah (1951-2014), Alphadi (b.1957) and their peers represent the first generation of African designers to gain attention throughout the continent and globally. Marking the first moment in which their work will be shown in a London museum, the V&A will trace their rise and impact, their creative process and inspirations, brought to life by real stories from those who loved and wore their distinctive designs.

The public call-out seeks to uncover personal testimonies from those who have worn their beloved garments. Items the V&A are seeking for the exhibition include:

- Rare and early designs by Shade Thomas-Fahm, Chris Seydou, Kofi Ansah and Alphadi
- 1980s experimental garments in bògòlanfini by Chris Seydou
- Twentieth century kente, bògòlanfini, khanga and commemorative cloths from the independence and liberation years that connect to personal stories
- Family portraits and home movies from the independence and liberation years showing African and African diasporic fashion trends of the day
- Made-to-order garments, including aso ebi, co-created by local tailors, dressmakers and their clients, worn at festivals or to mark significant personal milestones, from 2010 onwards
- Copies of the Drum Magazine from 1950-1970

The V&A will showcase these objects and the amazing stories behind them alongside personal insights from the designers, together with sketches, editorial spreads, photographs, film and catwalk footage.

Members of the public with objects that fit the above description are asked to get in touch by email at africafashion@vam.ac.uk, and to share their pictures and memories on social media, using the hashtag #AfricaFashion

Dr Christine Checinska continues: *“Help us tell this visually compelling story of unbounded creativity, agency and self-fashioning. Check attics, trunks, family photo albums and home movies for the chance to feature in our exhibition.”*

Ryan Ansah, Joey Ansah & Tanoa Sasraku-Ansah, Founding Directors of the Kofi Ansah Foundation, said: *“When Kofi Ansah was suddenly taken from us in 2014, not only did he leave behind a magnificent and prolific body of work, he also laid a roadmap for successive generations of African fashion designers to follow – through his creative use of textiles, his precise and exacting attention to detail and his absolute refusal to compromise his creative vision, dating all the way back to his time at Chelsea College of Art & Design. At the time of his passing he was a man still in the prime of his career, bringing his designs to the catwalks and boutiques of Rome, New York and Johannesburg, in addition to his significant contributions to growing Ghana’s textile industry and his partnership work with contemporaries across the African continent... the Foundation, in collaboration with Fashion Forum Africa, are delighted that his life and legacy are to be recognised and celebrated within the V&A’s ‘Africa Fashion’ exhibition.”*

Imane Ayissi, Designer, said: *“This exhibition is a great initiative; it will be one of the first to bring an historical perspective on African fashion and it will show the rest of the world that African points of view on fashion and beauty didn’t start yesterday.”*

The exhibition forms part of a broader and ongoing V&A commitment to grow the museum’s permanent collection of work by African and African Diaspora designers and to tell new layered stories about the richness and diversity of African creativity, cultures and histories, using fashion as a catalyst.

ENDS.

For further PRESS information about *Africa Fashion* please contact Catherine Poust on c.poust@vam.ac.uk / +44 203 942 2683 (not for publication). A selection of press images is available to download free of charge from pressimages.vam.ac.uk

Notes to Editors:

- The call-out for Africa Fashion is launched today and will run until 1 May 2021.
- The exhibition *Africa Fashion* will open June 2022 in Gallery 40
- *Africa Fashion* is curated by the V&A's Dr Christine Checinska, Curator of African and African Diaspora Fashion.
- Africa Fashion is supported by GRoW @ Annenberg
- The exhibition is the latest in the V&A's series of revelatory fashion exhibitions and follows *Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams* (2019); *Mary Quant* (2019-2020), *Fashioned from Nature* (2018-2019), *Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion* (2017 – 2018), *Undressed: A Brief History of Underwear* (2016 – 2017) and *Shoes: Pleasure and Pain* (2015 – 2016).
- The V&A's fashion collection is designated as the UK's National Collection and is one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of dress in the world.
- Further details about the exhibition, including a special publication, will be revealed later this year.

Support for the V&A is more vital than ever. Please help us by acknowledging the support of our lead supporter of this exhibition GRoW @ Annenberg.

About GRoW @ Annenberg

GRoW @ Annenberg is the philanthropic initiative led by Gregory Annenberg Weingarten, a Vice President and Director of the Annenberg Foundation. GRoW is dedicated to supporting humanitarian efforts across the globe, as well as innovative projects in health, education, the arts, the environment and civic & cultural life.

Learn more at www.growannenberg.org

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About the designers featured within the call-out

Seidnaly Alphadi Sidhamed, known as Alphadi, was born in Timbuktu, Mali in 1957 and grew up in Niger. Described as the 'Magician of the Desert', Alphadi is known for his cutting-edge, innovative designs which draw on the rich cultures and design practices of the Sahel. After establishing his brand in 1983, Alphadi broadened his skills at the Atelier Chardon Savard, Paris, and FIT in New York. Between 1985 and 1989 Alphadi spent his time working between Paris and Niger, collaborating with several renowned designers including Chris Seydou, Jean Paul Gaultier and Paco Rabanne. Alphadi founded the International Festival of African Fashion (FIMA) to promote the work of African creatives. First launched 1998 in the Tiguiddit desert, FIMA has since had 11 editions.

Known as the 'enfant terrible' of Ghanaian fashion, designer **Kofi Ansah** propelled his country onto the catwalks of global haute couture. Born into an artistic family in 1951, he first made

headlines upon his graduation from London's Chelsea School of Art when he created a garment for Anne, Princess Royal. After establishing himself within Europe's fashion industry via the runways of Paris and London, Ansah returned to Ghana in 1992 to form Artdress, his design and creative concept company. Praised for using richly textured local fabrics and his iconic fusion of African and European aesthetics, he attracted a strong international following, collaborating with Vogue Italia's Franca Sozzani and mentoring the next generation of Ghanaian fashion designers.

Chris Seydou, born Seydou Nourou Doumbia in 1949 in Kati, Mali, was a pioneer in promoting indigenous African textiles on the global stage. He was particularly well known for his use of Bògòlanfini, a handmade Malian cotton cloth dyed with fermented mud, a secular technique. In 1969 he moved to Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire and found success designing clothes for many of Abidjan's wealthy and influential women. Seydou moved to Paris in 1972 where he worked for several prominent designers including Yves Saint Laurent and Paco Rabanne, before returning to Mali in 1990. His daring mini-skirts, stylish bell-bottom trousers and modish bomber jackets, made with handwoven textiles from his country, gained him loyal clients in Mali and overseas and have inspired countless creatives since. Chris Seydou is the designer who knew how to make tradition the heart of contemporary African fashion.

Folashade 'Shade' Thomas-Fahm, often referred to as 'Nigeria's first fashion designer', set the pace for the Nigerian fashion industry in the 1960s and 1970s. Born in Lagos, Nigeria in 1933, she moved to London in 1953 to become a nurse, but quickly changed her plans to train in fashion design instead, studying at Barrett Technical College and then St. Martin's College of Arts (later Central Saint Martins). Alongside her studies, Thomas-Fahm worked at Stenoff and Sons Furrier, a couture house on Old Bond Street, and as a fashion model, before returning to Lagos in 1960. Thomas-Fahm is a passionate advocate of Nigerian textiles and often used aso-oke, adire, akwete and okene in her designs. Focusing less on fashion glamour, she championed industry in fashion as a way to achieve economic freedom. She believed in modernising traditional West African attire because she felt 'it hindered a woman's time economy in getting, and remaining, dressed'. She re-imagined the traditional 'iro' (a Yoruba ladies wrapped skirt) with a concealed zip, created the sewn gele (historically a wrapped head tie) and created a female version of the men's flowing agbada robe. A creative visionary, Thomas-Fahm's store, Maison Shade (later Shade's Boutique) was known by local and international personalities as the place to go for men and women of style in Lagos.