

V&A Academy

Global Africa: Crafting Cultural Space and Securing Audience Footprints



Details

Friday 22 May 2026, 11:00 – 19:00, in person at V&A South Kensington, Learning Centre, Seminar Room 3, Level 4.

Arrival

On arrival, please use the Exhibition Road Entrance of the Museum and make your way to Seminar Room 3, Learning Centre, Level 4 where you will be met by **Janz Browne**, Senior Producer Africa and Diaspora, and **Esther Agbettor**, Visitor Experience Assistant - Operations. For details of the Exhibition Road entrance [please click here](#) for the digital map. For any accessibility requirements, please email courses@vam.ac.uk

Overview

Step inside! Look closer and be part of the conversation.

This study day is designed around your experience of the V&A, how you encounter Global Africa in the galleries, collections, stories, and spaces you move through. You've told us you want clearer ways to understand what the museum collects, why it collects it, where these histories sit, and how visible they are as you navigate the building. *Global Africa: Crafting Cultural Space and Securing Audience Footprints* invites you to explore these questions first-hand.

With over 5,000 objects linked to Africa and its global Diasporas, visibility can still feel fragmented. Through talks, tours, collections up close, screenings, and discussion, the event brings these encounters into focus, placing your curiosity, questions, and perspective at the centre of how the museum evolves.

Programme

- 10:30 Arrival, Registration, and Refreshments.
- 11:00 Welcome and Introductions, Janz Browne and Esther Agbettor.
- 11:15 **Session One** - *From Plunder to Shared Understandings*
- 12:30 Lunchbreak
- 13:30 **Session Two** - *Seeking Space for Global Africa*
- 14:45 Comfort Break
- 15:05 **Session Three** - *Stories of Acquisition and Interpretation*
- 16:15 **Session Four** - *10th Anniversary African Heritage Guides Tours*
- 17:15 Comfort Break
- 17:40 **Session Five** - *Global African Artists on Screen*
- 18:30 Event Ends

Session One - From Plunder to Shared Understandings

11:15 Maqdala and 19th-Century Ethiopian Collecting: Restitution, Reinterpretation, and Future Knowledge.

Alex Watson-Jones, Provenance Research Curator addresses Ethiopian objects at the V&A associated with a British military expedition and the looting of Maqdala in 1868. It examines some of the most famous objects associated with this episode, while also foregrounding lesser-known Ethiopian material in the V&A collection. It draws on current research examining how Ethiopian objects have been collected and recorded through many decades and explores recent efforts to revisit and revise their cataloguing, recontextualising objects as active sites of restitution, responsibility, and renewed interpretation.

11:40 Unity – A Landmark Moment of Renewal and Partnership.

Emefa Cole, Jewellery Designer-Maker, and former V&A Curator of Jewellery (Diaspora) centres this presentation on Unity, a powerful sculpture Emefa Cole, created in collaboration with master goldsmith Nana Poku Amponsah Dwumfour, goldsmith to the Asantehene. Developed through the Renewable Cultural Partnership between the V&A and Manhyia Palace in Kumasi, Ghana, Unity responds to a landmark moment: the return of looted Asante gold to Ghana on long-term loan from 2024, more than a century and a half after it was taken in the late nineteenth century. The session explores the inspiration, design and making of this historically significant work, now on display in the Silver Galleries.

12:10 Audience Q&A with **Alex Watson-Jones & Emefa Cole**.

12:30 **LUNCHBREAK & AUDIENCE FEEDBACK.**

***Please ensure you bring a packed lunch as the V&A Cafe will be busy at this time.** Light beverages will be available in the seminar room.

Network and share your thoughts about Global Africa at the V&A.

Session Two – Seeking Space for Global Africa

13:30 **A Case for a Dedicated Global Africa Space.**

Esther Agbettor, Visitor Experience Assistant (Operations) and Co-producer of this study day, explores the need for a resonant, responsive environment shaped by what visitors consistently ask about the presence, visibility and meaning of Global African art and design at the V&A. Drawing on reflections shared by the visitor, and Visitor Experience staff, the presentation highlights a clear desire for continuity rather than isolated moments of representation. It asks what a dedicated Africa Diaspora space might offer - a place where narratives can breathe, connect and evolve, and invites you to consider the commitments needed to make that possible.

14:00 **The Inaugural *Africa Fashion Exhibition*, conceived and curated for and by the V&A.**

Dr Christine Checinska, Senior Curator Fashion & Textiles (Africa & Diaspora), will discuss the research and development of Africa Fashion, the V&A's first major exhibition dedicated to African fashions. She will reflect on the exhibition's journey from its inception to its success as an international touring project, what it has meant to steward the exhibition as its originating curator, and what the V&A has permanently collected as a result. The session offers insight into how Africa Fashion continues to shape the museum's engagement with Global African creative excellence today.

14:25 **Audience Q&A with Esther Agbettor & Dr Christine Checinska**

14:45 **COMFORT BREAK & AUDIENCE FEEDBACK**

Light beverages will be available in the seminar room.

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Session Three – Stories of Acquisition and Interpretation

15:05 **Global Africa in Design 1900 – Now.**

From Neil Kenlock's photography to Althea McNish's textiles, **Anna Bates** (Curator, Product and Furniture Design, 1900–Now) and **William Seung** (Assistant Curator, Design and Digital) will explore different Global Africa narratives within the *Design 1900–Now* Gallery. This session invites participants to explore and interrogate the roles that design play in placemaking and activism.

15:30 **Before and After Staying Power: The Growth of Global African Photography at the V&A.**

Isaac Huxtable, Assistant Curator in Photography explores the V&A collecting of contemporary photography, which dates to the 1850s. This ever-growing collection has witnessed the emancipations, struggles and freedoms of Africa and its diaspora. Isaac charts the collecting histories and curatorial processes behind Black photography in the V&A's holdings, focusing on recent strategies designed to further populate and complicate works by African and African Diaspora image-makers. Spanning the 19th century to recent acquisitions, he reflects on how the V&A Photography Centre facilitates global thought and Black creativity.

16:00 **Audience Q&A with Anna Bates, William Seung, and Isaac Huxtable.**

Session Four – 10th Anniversary

African Heritage Guides Tours

16:15 Led by tour guides Avril Horsford, Joy Johnson, and Kim Sheldon.

These special tours celebrate ten years of African Heritage Guided Tours at the V&A. Curated especially for the study day, the tours invite you into active dialogue with the galleries, bringing Global Africa themes to life through shared looking, conversation and reflection. You are encouraged to ask questions, and exchange perspectives, discovering where key works are located and exploring gallery spaces you may not usually visit. A joyful, participatory pause in the programme, and a reminder that meaning is made collectively, through movement, curiosity, and exchange.

17:15 COMFORT BREAK & AUDIENCE FEEDBACK.

Light beverages will be available in the seminar room.

Network and share your thoughts about Global Africa at the V&A.

Session Five – Global African Artists on Screen

17:40 – 18:10 (30 min)

The following three short films are by artists and designers whose work connects making, material and public expression. They are also examples of, how through the medium of film, the Museum gives voice to living Global African artists, making their work more widely visible through online platforms.

1) The Youngest 92-Year-Old Artist | John Lyons' Trinidadian Carnival & Art

We're going to watch a short film featuring John Lyons, a Trinidadian-British painter, poet and cook. As you watch, note how carnival culture and Caribbean heritage inform his approach to making and daily creative practice.

2) Meet the Artist – Christopher Day in the Glass Art – V&A Glass Gallery with 'Emmett Till'

This film introduces Chris Day and his glass work Emmett Till in the V&A Glass Gallery. As you watch, consider how material, process and form are used to address historical memory and lived experience.

3) The Power of Design: the poster v racism (with Greg Bunbury)

This film looks at posters as a format for public communication and anti-racism, featuring designer Greg Bunbury and the Black Outdoor Art initiative. As you watch, note the design choices discussed and what's said about visibility and impact in public space.

18:30 **Final comments and Event Ends.**

This programme is subject to change.

Speaker and Contributor

Biographies

Esther Agbettor is a Visitor Experience Assistant (Operations) at the V&A and co-producer of *Global Africa: Crafting Cultural Space and Securing Audience Footprints*. Working across Front of House, programming and visitor research, she brings public insight, care and advocacy into the heart of museum practice. Her work foregrounds dialogue, accessibility and representation, championing cultural spaces shaped by visitors' questions, lived experience and collective responsibility.

Anna Bates is Curator of Furniture and Product Design, 1900 – Now at the V&A and the lead curator of *Make Good: Rethinking Material Futures*. Prior to this she worked as a tutor, journalist for the international design press and as co-founder and -editor of design magazine *Dirty Furniture*.

Dr Christine Checinska is the Senior Curator Fashion & Textiles (Africa & Diaspora) and was Lead Curator of the display *Between Two Worlds: Vanley Burke and Francis Williams in 2023*. Prior to joining the V&A, Christine worked as a womenswear designer, academic, artist and curator. Her creative practice and research explore the relationship between cloth, culture, and race. Christine's recent exhibitions include *Africa Fashion*, July 2022 - April 2023, an intervention for *Makers Eye: Stories of Craft*, July-October 2021, Crafts Council Gallery, and *Folded Life* February 2021, Johanne Jacobs Museum, Zurich, Switzerland. She is a co-editor of the Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of World Textiles, Volume 4. Her publications, amongst many include 'Africa Fashion,' 2022, that accompanied the V&A's ground-breaking exhibition of the same name.

Emefa Cole is a London-based jewellery artist fascinated by what time conceals, and nature slowly reveals. Her work channels the raw, majestic power of volcanic eruption and geological erosion into precious objects. From 2022 to 2025 she served as Curator, Jewellery (Diaspora) at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and currently holds an apprenticeship with the goldsmith to the Asantehene, learning the ancient lost-wax casting technique of the Asante kingdom.

Avril Horsford was born in the Caribbean and raised in Britain. Following advanced studies in art and design theory and practice, she became a Principal Lecturer and Head of Academic Diversity at the University of the Arts London (UAL), based at London College of Fashion, before joining the pioneers who formed the first intake of African Heritage tour guides at the V&A. After her first ten years as part of this trailblazing ‘family’ of guides, linked by shared heritage and united in purpose, Avril found such deep fulfilment in guiding at the V&A that she went on to become a guide at both the Tate and the British Museum, and speaks of being increasingly proud of her African heritage.

Isaac Huxtable is a Yorkshire-born, London-based writer and curator. He works across the photographic medium with a central focus on race, realism, and speculation. Isaac is currently an Assistant Curator in Photography at the Victoria and Albert Museum. He studied at the Courtauld Institute of Art, followed by roles at the British Journal of Photography and the Photographers' Gallery. His words have featured in the British Journal of Photography, Elephant Magazine, Galerie Peter Sillem, WePresent, The Photographers' Gallery, V&A, and South London Gallery. He is particularly interested in documentary practices, gender, class, and the body.

Joy Johnson delivers African Heritage Tours in the Europe 1600–1815 Gallery, where she provides interpretation of the African presence within European art and material culture. She holds a master’s degree in modern history, specialising in Europe and the British Empire. Her work is informed by a commitment to rigorous historical inquiry and to fostering thoughtful engagement with the V&A’s collections. Joy values the exchanges that emerges during her tours and is dedicated to creating an environment in which visitors can explore complex global narratives with clarity and confidence. Her background in travel and involvement in educational pursuits enhances her interpretive approach. She is guided by the principle: “*The only lasting beauty is the beauty of the heart.*”

William Seung is a curator and design historian specialising in contemporary design, digital and popular culture, and East Asian visual culture. Before joining the V&A, he worked at Somerset House in London on *CUTE* (2024) and at M+ in Hong Kong.

Kim Sheldon has spent ten years as an African Heritage Guide at the Victoria and Albert Museum, invited to become one of the only guides focused on highlighting objects linked to Africa and the African diaspora. She works closely with the collections, using clear, storytelling to connect objects to lived experience, in ways that feel immediate and real. During one tour, a printed fabric reminded a visitor of the Caribbean island where she was born, and the group shifted into a shared conversation about memory, identity, and belonging. Kim guides with that same openness, welcoming questions, creating space for reflection, and bringing forward voices too often left out.

Alex Watson Jones completed her PhD in 2024, a Collaborative Doctoral Partnership with National Museums Scotland and the University of St Andrews. Her doctoral research explored the collecting of Ethiopian material culture by British individuals and institutions, building on her curatorial work with the Ethiopian collections at the V&A where she previously worked from 2015-19. She rejoined the museum in January 2025 as of Provenance Research Curator, where she is responsible for leading on and coordinating research into the ownership histories of objects in the museum's collection.