

African Fashion, Global Style: Histories, Innovations, and Ideas You Can Wear.
Victoria L. Rovine. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. 315 pp.*

Reviewed by Karen Tranberg Hansen

This lavishly produced and well written book brings African fashion created by designers on the continent and beyond into the center of fashion studies by offering substantive insights into a subject that until recently has been relegated to the margins of conventional fashion scholarship and media reporting. Art historian Victoria Rovine is well known for her work on *bogolan*, a cloth from Mali, African designers in Paris, and African design as an artistic medium. The book provides a panoramic synthesis of African design in the global fashion market. African fashion, she argues, is propelled by change and innovation and engages with time and place. The stories it tells find inspirations in actual or imagined pasts, reshaping sources of inspiration into new forms of association that fuse local, regional, and global influences.

Rovine's African fashion panorama features two chief settings in which she has conducted research, Mali and South Africa, and incorporates observations in several countries in West Africa as well as Paris. She situates her work across contemporary African art history and the interdisciplinary field of fashion studies. Her methodology combines analysis of garments, the language that surrounds them, advertisements, fashion journalism, fashion magazines, and fashion shows. Her focus is on professional designers, both women and men, whose creative market is exclusive.

The panorama is framed by an introduction and conclusion about fashion and Africa as a scholarly concern that engages with important issues about cultural complexity both past and present. The five skillfully organized chapters unfold from considerations of indigenous fashion through modernity to contemporary cosmopolitanism as Afropolitanism, an outlook of people of African descent in Africa and elsewhere who are at ease between cultures, languages, and homes, in a global fashion culture. The chapter on indigenous fashion dwells on two distinct styles of men's dress in Mali that both rely on embroidery yet show different attitudes to innovation and the past in strongly regionally influenced garments without reference to the global fashion system. Shifting to French engagements with Africa, the next chapter offers a lively discussion of colonial expositions of African dressed bodies and the artists and designers who combined, adopted, and invented African forms during the early decades of the 20th century and on, including Poiret, Saint Laurent, Galliano, and Gaultier. Using beads and bangles, earth tones, exposed flesh, geometric patterns, and flora and fauna, these designers depicted an imagined Africa, turning the continent into a brand rather than a location.

The following two chapters turn to African designers on the continent and in Paris. Rovine distinguishes their designs in a constructive analysis identifying two approaches. "Classical" African fashion incorporates African style by invoking objects, practices, and histories as symbols of indigenous cultures and local histories. "Conceptual" design alludes indirectly or

* This editorially reviewed contribution was accepted for publication in *Museum Anthropology Review* on June 15, 2015. The work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

abstractly to Africa without recognizable stylistic references. The concern here is to make garments evoke emotions, cultures, and places. The chapter on African classical fashion introduces three generations of designers who use local forms within the framework of global style markets, using *bogolan* (Chris Sedou from Mali), handmade textiles (Aboubakar Fofana from Mali), *adinkra* (Ben Nonterah from Ghana), dress forms (Sun Goddess from South Africa), and beadwork (MaXhosa from South Africa). The chapter on conceptual design features two Paris-based designers, Xuly Bet (from Mali) who often draws used clothing into his repurposed designs, and Sakina M'sa (from the Comoro islands) who makes use of secondhand clothing in her design and community collaborations. Also featured is Dakar-based Ndiaga Diaw whose FITT brand includes *boubous* that combine a global hip-hop aesthetic with an African iconography.

The last substantive chapter showcases fashion design in South Africa against the backdrop of that country's troubled racial history. Rovine introduces Marianne Fassler, the grande dame of South African fashion, who has been active on the fashion scene since before the dismantling of apartheid. More recent designers include the brand Darkie, that reshapes used clothing; Strangelove, whose two founders use recycling as a key strategy both in design and performance; and the fashion collective Stone Cherrie, inspired not by indigenous dress but by the interracial cosmopolitanism of Sophiatown in the mid—20th century.

Taking African fashion seriously, this book also opens areas for fresh inquiry. Specialists may quibble about regional and thematic gaps in Rovine's panoramic approach. Some will question the near elision of "African" printed fabric as an important design element (except *isishweshwe* in South Africa). Unlike most of the rest of the continent where fashion is informally produced, South Africa has a fashion industry. Still, we learn of folded brands and failed collaborations with department stores. How do designers make it? Many designers are not trained formally. Where are the fashion infrastructure and the supply chain? Focusing on designer fashion's exclusive appeal hides from view the huge populations of fashion savvy people who dress in "the latest" from the tailor or seamstress, self-fashion from the China shop and the extraordinary possibilities provided by the secondhand clothing vendor. Drawing attention to the emotive materiality of African designer fashion is important, but is it not people, both wearers and viewers, who interact with and tell stories about clothes? How might future growth opportunities be located on the continent rather than in the global arena? This wonderful book would find a fitting sequel in explorations of how African design fashion translates into everyday dress practice and how this in turns inspires the fashion runway.

Karen Tranberg Hansen is Professor Emerita in the Department of Anthropology at Northwestern University. Of her many books in urban and economic anthropology, some focus on consumption and dress, including Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), and Hansen and D. Soyini Madison, eds. African Dress: Fashion, Agency, Performance (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.14434/mar.v9i1-2.19214>