

Global luxury industry shifts gaze to Africa

By  Lauren Hartzenberg

11 Apr 2019

The fifth annual Condé Nast International (CNI) Luxury Conference kicked off in Cape Town yesterday, bringing some of the biggest names in global luxury to African soil - from Gucci, Pucci and Tiffany & Co., to Estée Lauder Companies, Salvatore Ferragamo and Naomi Campbell herself.



Naomi Campbell; Jonathan Newhouse, chairman and chief executive, Condé Nast International; and Marco Bizzarri, president and CEO, Gucci.

Emceed by Jo-Ann Strauss, this year the event sought to explore the promise and value of the African market for the global luxury and fashion industry, and the power of the continent as a creative, manufacturing and retail hub.

“Africa, the eyes of the planet gaze on the continent’s second largest continent, with more and more brands looking to establish their presence here,” said Jonathan Newhouse, chairman and chief executive, Condé Nast International, as he opened Day 1.

While much of the growth in luxury over the last twenty years has been driven by Asia, Newhouse said that Africa will play a key role in the growth of the industry in the years to come. The continent holds the world’s largest millennial consumer population and fastest-growing middle class, as well as one of the fastest growing high-net-worth individual populations.

Respected fashion journalist Suzy Menkes, editor of *Vogue International*, is the driving force behind the conference. Fittingly, she led the event proceedings, accompanied by her quick wit and signature coif.



Suzy Menkes, editor, Vogue International, Condé Nast International.

Essence of African style

In her opening speech, Menkes shared that her inspiration for an Africa-focused Luxury Conference was sparked by “a hairdo”. In April 2017, she’d walked into the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris to view the Art Afrique collection. Here she saw photographs of the “extraordinary ways” that women in Nigeria have dressed their hair for centuries.

“Here was an art form created with extensions and braids on the heads of women, photographed from the back and sides. From nothing but the imagination, the creative minds of photographer JD 'Okhai Ojeikere and his subjects reimagined beauty.”



Image credit: Fondation Louis Vuitton

Menkes stressed that the intention of the Cape Town event is not to be a survey of fashion on the African continent, nor to be limited to Africa's local success stories, of which there are many. "Rather, we're going to look at the essence of style on this continent and what it can offer the rest of the world in the physicality of material or handwork," she said.

"It is time that the inspiration, the vision and the handwork across the African continent are supported and celebrated for its contribution to the world's luxury industry."

Handwork back in fashion

Menkes said that much of what is happening is in response to a sobering reality. With Chinese production of cheap clothing decimating local businesses, here and around the world, Africa needs to find another way to develop its workshops and factories into a sustainable industry.

Hundreds of years since the invention of machines took over the creation of clothes, handwork is now back in fashion. "Intricate work with wool, cotton and leather all result in beautiful garments and objects with that most important thing - the human touch," said Menkes.

In a related point, she touched on how handcrafted fashion is playing a pivotal role in the lives of many African women. In one example, she shared that in 2012 she travelled to Kenya with Simone Cipriani, founder of the Ethical Fashion Initiative. Here she witnessed Maasai women weaving bags; for the first time in their lives making money that didn't belong to, or wasn't controlled by, their husbands.



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Nature of luxury

The theme 'Nature of Luxury' was chosen for this year's CNI conference to explore the artisanal skills and creative talent on the continent, whilst examining the broader landscape of the global luxury market, as well as sustainability.

Menkes said that her aim in naming the conference was to make people think of the essence of those two words 'nature' and 'luxury' as we edge towards the third decade of the 21st century. "The way that luxury is envisioned, and particularly the direction the African continent takes, is going to shape the worlds of our children, and our children's children."

She closed saying that the entire event is about re-evaluating our relationship with luxury, and accepting that "there is nothing – however beautiful – more authentic than nature."

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