

Hit the Spot: Leopard Frock Rocks: South African Fashion

South African Fashion Week (SAFW), Johannesburg has showcased its designers for over 21 years. Celebrations, as part of SAFW's Autumn/Winter 2019 collections included a book launch for 'Twenty-One Years of South African Fashion Week' chronicling the talent of South African designers over these two+ decades, beginning with the Spring/Summer (S/S) 2018 collections and moving backwards in time to 1997, the start of SAFW.

Also, the exhibition '21 YEARS: Making Histories with South African Fashion Week' was staged at the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (Zeitz MOCAA) in Cape Town, 14 November 2018 - 16 January 2019. This survey exhibition highlighted key fashion moments from the late 1990s to S/S 2018. Appropriate to the celebration of this era, 21 selected South African fashion designers, both established and emerging, who have participated in SAFW presented 21 outfits that demonstrated the history and evolution of South African fashion's bold and diverse style.

Furthermore, there is discussion of Vogue Africa, encompassing the entire sub-Saharan continent, in the not-too-distant future - aiming to bring Africa's designers, photographers and journalists to world-wide attention. One problem is the vast nature of this continent and its 54 countries. Where would this Condé Nast-owned magazine be based? South Africa seems a natural choice as it is home to many publishing houses and possibly has the most advanced fashion industry within Africa. But cities such as Cape Town and Johannesburg are a long way from East and West African capitals. There is talk of Vogue Africa being overseen by Condé Nast International in London and Edward Enninful, British Vogue's editor-in-chief is ideally placed - born in Ghana and raised in London, he has many African contacts.

The time is clearly ripe for South Africa's contribution to the dynamic arena of post-apartheid fashion, furthering dialogue within the international cultural scene. Fashion has strong socio-economic value and is witnessing significant growth, especially evident in Africa's largest cities with their increasing upper-middle class. South African designers visualise powerful concepts, often with unique stories and a focussed narrative concerning their identity, rich history and deep culture. An emphasis on the hand-made and fair trade, bright colours and clashing prints, synonymous with an African look, are teamed with architectural silhouettes, challenging constructions and a distinct streetwear influence.

Iconic fashion designer Marianne Fassler is featured in the above-mentioned exhibition and book. Presenting individuality and vitality, her uncompromising eye mixes animal prints, stripes and tartans for clothing that simultaneously communicates rawness and sophistication. Based in Saxonwold, Johannesburg (one of the oldest parts of this city), her label 'Leopard Frock' is both eye-catching and thought-provoking. As this name suggests, her signature is the fashion-favourite leopard print motif. This title also conveys her playfulness - observing that many places are called 'Leopard Rock' she conjures up old-world charm with the word 'frock'.

Marianne Fassler began her studies in Fine Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, changing to Art History and Afrikaans/Dutch

Literature. She then began making clothes for herself and friends, discovering a passion that, for her, surpassed the traditional media of fine art. Learning classical couture from a Hungarian woman has led her to a career spanning over four decades - her ready-to-wear and commissions have a loyal following. Leopard Frock is known for complex layering, use of bright colours/relief textures/prints (African and animal), engineering/manipulation/embellishment of fabrics, and a strong love of craft. Marianne Fassler's artisans are well-versed in creative problem-solving and excel in hand beading and embroidery. Inspiration is taken from her surrounding environment of Johannesburg and South Africa, its particular climate, ensuing lifestyle as well as the world of contemporary art. Her interest in streetwear is apparent, drawing from observations and experiences of Johannesburg in the 60s, 70s and 80s. Also, an understanding of, and passion for, African tribal costume and ceremony is frequently at the core of her collections. Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher's foundation 'African Ceremonies Inc.' is important to her vision, and the Beckwith Fisher Archive, with its books, photographs, drawings, field journals and materials, inspires and influences. Marianne Fassler is a campaigner for sustainable and ethical fashion and being ever-resourceful and highly creative she utilises leftover fabric as patchwork and embellishment.

The Leopard Frock base is home to a shop, studio and archive. The archive holds over forty years of fashion with garments and folders of articles/interviews/notes that meticulously document Marianne Fassler's life, something she learned the merits of from her artist mother Hannatjie van der Wat, a painter. Part physical, part digitised, the archive contains the work of her dedicated team and is a valuable resource for anyone wishing to study an example of South African fashion. Here, clothes can be examined, writings read and the creative process demystified. What drives Marianne Fassler is not fashion as such, but an ongoing interest in why people wear what they wear.

Sarah E. Braddock Clarke