



# AFRICA FASHION

## REFLECTION AND LEARNING

In *Africa Fashion*, we see fashion as an expression of cultural, political, and personal independence. The exhibition begins in the 1950s and 1960s, when many African countries gained independence from European colonial rule, and continues through the present with work made as recently as 2023. Throughout these decades, fashion is “a self-defining art form” in the words of curator Christine Checinska, a meaningful expression in the everyday lives of people across the continent.

## FASHION AS SELF-REPRESENTATION

1. Curator Christine Checinska describes fashion as “a way of pushing back against invisibility, stereotyping, and the erasure of personhood.” As you move through the exhibition, where do you see examples of fashion as a political act? How do artists and others celebrate African identities following independence through their choices of materials and design? What do you seek to express through your own choices in clothing, jewelry, and hair style?
2. Choose one piece in *Africa Fashion* that stands out to you. Take a photo or make a sketch of the object and note the title, artist, and materials. What draws you to this piece? How might you feel if you wore this outfit? Where would you wear it?
3. What do you notice about the mannequins in *Africa Fashion*? How do they contribute to the look and feel of the exhibition? Listen to the Bloomberg Connects audio guide to learn more.

## MANY CULTURES, MANY NATIONS

1. “Africa isn’t a country, it’s a continent!... In Cameroon alone we have over 200 dialects; there is a profound complexity that I want to celebrate.” Couturier Imane Ayissi expresses a widely shared frustration with the static, homogenous view many non-Africans hold of the continent. This exhibition insists that we recognize the vast cultural and regional diversity of Africa and features work by artists from more than 20 nations. Which nationalities do you notice as you move through the exhibition? Are there commonalities among works by artists from the same region (for example, West, North, East or Southern Africa)? Which outfit do you find most surprising or unexpected?
2. *Africa Fashion* showcases the *agency*, *abundance*, and *creativity* of African people and cultures. Consider the meaning of each of these terms. How do you see them manifesting in the exhibition? How do they contrast with historical representations of African people by others?
3. Ghanaian artist El Anatsui has said that “cloth is to the African what monuments are to Westerners,” meaning that it is an important form of commemoration. Cloth can tell stories and mark moments in history. Find an example of a “monumental” cloth in the exhibition. What is the story it tells?

## MATERIALS AND ART-MAKING

1. Find an object (an outfit or adornment) in the exhibition that captures your interest and spend some time looking closely at it BEFORE you read the artwork label. Based on your observations, what might the object be made of? How might it have been made? How would you put it on and wear it? Next, read the label. What materials is the object actually made of? Are these materials natural or synthetic? Where did they come from?
2. Choose one outfit in the exhibition. What is the **cut**? Is it tailored or flowing? Form fitting or baggy? Creased, pleated, layered? How would you describe the **colors**? Is it patterned or solid? What is the **texture** of the garment? How might it feel to touch? What would you compare it to?
3. How many references to animals can you find in the exhibition? Write down the name of every animal you can identify, including patterns and materials as well as images. Choose one to sketch. On a roll? Repeat this activity with plants.

For *Africa Fashion* programs and additional resources, visit [portlandartmuseum.org/event/africa-fashion](http://portlandartmuseum.org/event/africa-fashion).

### SOURCES:

Dr. Christine Shaw-Checinska, *Disobedient Dress: Fashion as Everyday Activism*.

TedXEastEnd. YouTube. Feb. 22, 2016.

*Africa Fashion*. Edited by Christine Checinska. London: V&A Publishing, 2022.