

JEWELRY CONNOISSEUR

BY RAPAPORT

Golden touch: Emefa Cole

BY FRANCESCA FEARON - JANUARY 31, 2021



Inspired by her African heritage, this jeweler's bold, sculptural work is now on permanent display at a major London museum.

Ghanaian-born, London-based jewelry designer [Emefa Cole](#) was all set to study forensic science until, flipping through a magazine one day, she spotted a jewelry and silversmithing course that led her on a journey back to her African roots for inspiration, techniques and materials. She founded her business in 2012, creating brave and powerful sculptural pieces, including a ring that was recently acquired by London's [Victoria and Albert Museum \(V&A\)](#), which now features in its prestigious William and Judith Bollinger Gallery of jewelry.



18-karat gold ring with tsavorite garnets and diamonds, from the Heritage Afrika series.

Can you describe your distinctive style and inspiration?

I trained as a metalsmith, during which time I experimented with oxidizing and rhodium-plating, as well as creating bold statement rings and cuffs in silver — or in rhodium and oxidized bronze — which were then applied with layers of gold leaf. My earliest pieces were cracked cocoons, like prehistoric eggs, and my rings grew from these shapes. My Vulcan and Erosion collections are inspired by the deserts, sculpted sand dunes and volcanoes of Africa, and my fascination with the idea of weathering and erosion. Adding another layer is my interest in Greek mythology and Hephaestus, who was the Greek god of metalsmiths.



Lapilli oxidized silver and yellow gold vermeil ring from the Vulcan series.

How has your heritage informed your techniques?

I was born in Brong-Ahafo in Ghana, which was the original gold-trading region of West Africa; you literally walk on gold there. As a little girl, I heard stories of people finding gold in the dirt after heavy rains washed away the sand, but it never happened to me. However, I did have the rare experience of being tutored in the city of Kumasi by the goldsmiths of the Asantehene — the king of the Ashanti, one of Ghana's main ethnic groups — and learning their traditional lost-wax casting technique for gold. They carve molds into a mixture of clay and charcoal, apply a layer of beeswax and layers of clay before firing, and then attach a crucible of gold to fill the void where the wax has melted. It is a labor of love.



Igneous cuff in 18-karat gold vermeil and sterling silver, from the Vulcan series.

Are your gold and gemstones sourced from Africa?

I like to use traceable gold as we have to be responsible, buy sensibly and be conscious of where materials are from. I have been using recycled gold recently. The tsavorite garnets in the Strip ring from my Erosion collection are from Kenya. I have always loved rubies, but my eyes have been opened to other colors like fiery spessartite garnets, also from Kenya. I imagine making a volcano piece with them.



Savannah earrings in 18-karat gold with tsavorite garnets and diamonds, from the Heritage Afrika series.

Is the V&A's recognition indicative of a growing awareness of African jewelers?

It is still slightly unbelievable. Clare Phillips, one of the museum's curators, spotted my work at the London-based contemporary craft and design fair Handmade Chelsea, and emailed me a few weeks later asking about my Vulcan and Erosion rings, which she wanted to show to her colleagues. They settled on a [Vulcan ring](#). A lot of jewelers are inspired by Africa and African attire, but Africa never gets credit for it. I think consumers are becoming more aware of African jewelers, but I don't think people are buying from us because of the complexion of our skin.



Vulcan ring cast in one using the lost wax technique, oxidized silver with applied gold leaf.
Acquired by the Victoria & Albert Museum in 2020.