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# WRITING *their own* STORY

*African designers are shining a light on the continent's vast jewellery heritage and natural resources, discovers Jill Newman.*

*Illustration by Diana Ejaita*



For centuries, Africa has been plundered for its immense material and cultural riches, first by imperialism, and then for artistic inspiration by the likes of Pablo Picasso and Suzanne Belperron. Jeweller Vania Leles says it's time to rewrite the books that treat this complex continent as a homogeneous entity and use meaningless terms such as "exotic" and "tribal". "There is an African proverb that says that until the lion learns how to write, the story will always be about the hunter," she says. Leles is among a passionate group of female jewellers from the African diaspora who are reflecting that richness and diversity in their work, and setting new standards for socially minded jewellery brands, too.

Leles notes that although many of the world's precious materials originate from the continent, there is a noticeable absence of prominent Africa-based or African-born jewellery designers. "When I first started in this industry 17 years ago, I couldn't find anyone who not only looked like me but could also relate to my experience as an African woman," says Leles. She was born in Guinea-Bissau and founded Vanleles in 2011 after a decade working for Graff, De Beers and Sotheby's. Her designs draw on her heritage in subtle ways, such as the Enchanted Garden floral earrings set with vibrant rubies, emeralds and sapphires, which were inspired by traditional batik prints. As much as Leles's clients gravitate to the splendour of her work, her choice of materials is also enticing. Knowing, for instance, that her Out of Africa series is made exclusively with rubies sourced from artisanal miners in Mozambique, she says, makes each one-of-a-kind piece more meaningful. Leles is grateful for the education in fine jewellery and the exposure that being in Europe has given her to build her business, and is hopeful that future generations will be able to do the same in Africa itself. "The skills and riches need to be put back into the continent, and slowly there will be more African brands that are actually based there."

For Thelma West, imbuing her aesthetic with a combination of her Nigerian upbringing and her adult life in London comes naturally. "I've married my Nigerian half and my British half in my work," says the jeweller, who operates a by-appointment salon in Soho. West's signature SugarCane motif was inspired by memories of childhood treats at family parties in Lagos, and her Sade's Embrace collection features handmade pieces using flexible gold wire that reference the popular woven-gold pieces Nigerian women wear. "You need confidence to be that

authentic, to dig deep and say, "This is who I am," says West. Having grown up in Lagos, she says that big, chunky jewellery was a key part of women's wardrobes, the perfect match for their heavily patterned ankara fabrics. She, however, was drawn to the sparkle of diamonds and a scaled-down aesthetic, and, after studying engineering in London, went on to study diamonds at HRD Antwerp and work in the trade before establishing her brand.

First-hand experience in the diamond trade has helped entrepreneurs like West integrate responsible sourcing into their businesses and their dialogue with clients. Satta Matturi worked as a diamond valuer for the De Beers mining company for nearly 20 years. Now, the Sierra Leone-born jeweller, who splits her time between Botswana and London, is using that experience to pioneer the sourcing enterprise she has set up in Gaborone, Botswana, which uses locally mined diamonds, cutters and polishers. "It was my small way of showcasing that diamonds can be cut in a producer country, and a way of promoting the notion to the rest of the world," she explains.

"The richness of Africa as a continent and the poverty of the people living there don't add up," says Emeffa Cole, who was born in Ghana and has lived almost 30 years in London. Doing her bit to redress this issue, Cole uses only single-mine-origin gold that can be fully traced to its source, and gemstones from the likes of Marvin Wambua of Amor Gems in Kenya, who purchases the rough stones from mines and cuts them himself. "The stones are beautiful, and I like that there are no middlemen involved so the provenance is not lost," she says. The essence of Ghana looms large in everything she creates – from the techniques she learnt from Ghanaian goldsmiths to the landscapes and geology that inspire her large sculptural pieces. She is equally grateful to her tutors at London Metropolitan University for teaching her to constantly question and improve her work. "I'm a product of both places, it's important to me to combine both of them," she says. "It creates something that is uniquely me."

Fashion designer Duro Olowu, an avid jewellery collector, says he is grateful that jewellers of African descent are getting the attention they deserve, and are reflecting their individuality in creations that reject clichés often associated with African design. "Their work is not urban, it's elegant," he says. "And they are giving back inspiration, dignity and work to young people in their respective countries of birth." ■

From top: gold and diamond ring, Thelma West. Gold, diamond, morganite and onyx earrings, Matturi Fine Jewellery. White-gold, sapphire and diamond earrings, Vanleles. Brown-diamond, palladium and rhodium plated ring, £3,000, Emeffa Cole. Prices on request unless otherwise stated