

The artistry of Africa

There's a magnetism to African design that is long overdue acknowledgement on the global stage. But a shift is under way. The likes of Yinka Ilori, Amechi Mandi and Ozwald Boateng have done much to champion the continent's rich heritage of craft – a mantle that's being picked up by these rising stars

WORDS RODDY CLARKE

Amwa Designs

Founded by British-Ghanaian multi-disciplinary designer and curator Chrissa Amuah (left), Amwa Designs is a London-based studio where the textiles, furniture and art draw inspiration from and pay homage to African design sensibilities. Recent work includes the 'Asanka' table (pictured), which features, beneath its glass top, a jesmonite interpretation of a traditional asanka (a shallow clay bowl used in parts of West Africa to blend and grind food). Amuah says the table's wooden base is inspired by the Ghanaian Adinkra symbol Adinkrahene (represented as a series of concentric circles), regarded as the most important of all the Adinkra symbols and linked to ideas of authority and leadership. With its off-centre silhouette, Amuah's interpretation alludes to a combination of strength and vulnerability, and is available in multiple vibrant colour combinations. amwadesigns.com



Altin Studio reimagines
age-old Tunisian craft techniques
with an interstellar outlook



PICTURES: SOPHIA SPRING, BACHIR TAYACH

Altin Studio

Mehdi Kebaier and Yasmine Sfar (below) founded this Tunisian studio to celebrate local design through the application of native materials. Working with sea rush, clay and palm wood, they create extraordinary artisanal pieces, bringing together their backgrounds of interior design (Sfar) and civil engineering (Kebaier), and referencing the traditional crafts of the country by interpreting age-old techniques through the viewpoint of contemporary design. The studio's 'Ganymede' cabinet (left), named after the largest natural satellite of the planet Jupiter, is a highlight. Its woven sea-rush panels provide contrast in colour and texture to the earth-red metal of the chequer-board design on top – the metal squares reference the pattern of the solar panels that unfurl around a satellite. Altin's 'Petite Ourse' seat (below left), hand-carved from palm wood, also alludes to the universe: the title translates as 'Little Bear', referencing the constellation of the same name. altin.studio ►





Marcus-Bello's most recent series, 'Oriki', is a lyrically minded exploration of form, named after the practice of praise poetry among the Yoruba people of West Africa



Nmbello Studio

Based in Lagos, Nigerian designer Nifemi Marcus-Bello (above) says his design ethos is rooted in empathy and is connected to the continent through respect for people and places. With his humility prevalent in each project, the founder of Nmbello Studio has developed his body of work over the past decade while receiving several awards along the way – from the Hublot Design Prize in 2022 to the Curator's Choice: Design for Good Award at Design Miami in 2023. 'Oriki', his most recent series, explores materiality and form with its first edition, 'Act 1: Friction Ridge', featuring a collection of bronze sculptural benches (see left for detail). Named after the practice of praise poetry among the Yoruba people of West Africa, the seats were launched in 2023 as part of an immersive installation that also featured a soundscape of the artist's mother reciting his personalised oriki. nmbello.com

PICTURES: STEPHEN TAYO, IUTENDO WALAJI



Mash.T Studio

Located in Johannesburg, Thabisa Mjo (left) is the creative force behind Mash.T Studio. Producing furniture, lighting and homeware, she celebrates the rich cultural tapestry and traditions of South Africa through collaborations with communities of artisans, incorporating a variety of materials, from coloured beadwork (seen on her 'Bright Light' pendant, above) to repurposed telecommunication wire (used to create 'Sprinkled Light', above left, and '4Kona Light', below) – which is traditionally used by Zulu watchmen. Recent lighting collections pay homage to the customs of the Xhosa people and the circular architectural forms found in rural areas across the country. Vibrant palettes also reference the season of summer, which, in Xhosa culture, signifies abundance and festivity. In celebrating the artistry that defines the cultural identity of the region, the studio allows local crafts and artisan communities to flourish and be recognised around the world. mashtdesignstudio.com ➤





Rich Mnisi

Renowned for his sculptural and artistic flair, Johannesburg-born designer Rich Mnisi (left) graduated from the LISOF School of Fashion in 2014 and won multiple awards before setting up his own fashion label. Mnisi also turned his hand to collectible furniture, bridging the gap between function and art. Taking inspiration from the women in his life, queerness and his heritage, his work has a striking fluidity and organic elegance. Most recently, his 'Nwa-Mulamula' chaise (below) was on display in Los Angeles as part of Southern Guild's 'Mother Tongues' exhibition, marking the opening of the Cape Town gallery's new permanent space. The design references the shape of Mnisi's great-grandmother's reclining body. A similar affinity for sweeping silhouettes can be seen in new work 'Vutlhari (Wisdom)', a light crafted from bronze and resin (above). southernguild.com



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PICTURES: STEPHANIE VELDMAN, SOUTHERN GUILD, DENIZ GUSEL FOR GALLERY RAVEL

Xanthe Somers

This Zimbabwean artist (right) draws inspiration from the customs of her homeland. Her hand-built ceramic sculptures, often functional in the form of lighting and vases (collection 'In Bad Taste', pictured), incorporate a range of materials and techniques, and continually challenge the political aspects of design and how it has been manipulated by colonialism in Zimbabwe. 'I like to draw attention to Western overconsumption, cheap labour and the impact of eco-racist practices on the global south,' she says. 'I look at this in relation to patterns surrounding child-minding, caring, mending, fixing, stitching, cleaning, cultivating and crafting. My recent work looks to reimagine the everyday and examine the subtle treason of objects.' Thanks to her vivacious use of colour, exaggerated silhouettes and thought-provoking narratives, the sculptor has had work displayed in London's V&A Museum and at Somerset House's Collect show. xanthesomers.com ►





Don Tanani

Seeking to redefine the essence of Egyptian design while showcasing the country's depth of talent, this contemporary brand is gaining a name for itself, thanks in part to a new collaboration with Lina Alorabi (left). The designer, who has had her work exhibited at the Milan Triennale and Nomad, moved back to her homeland of Egypt in 2009, after studying in the UK and gaining design experience in Germany. Over the past decade, she has immersed herself in the dynamism of Cairo, working alongside craft experts and visionary creatives. Her first collection for Don Tanani was launched in 2021 and her second, 'Moruna' (pictured), landed recently. Oozing sophistication, it includes standout pieces such as a conversation chair, a curvaceous sun lounger and coffee tables with a tile pattern inset with glass. 'The aim is to reclaim our identity, which is often translated to us from outside,' says Alorabi. dontanani.com

By collaborating
with Don Tanani, designer
Lina Alorabi aims to
reclaim the identity of
Egyptian design



Chuma Maweni

This South African ceramicist (right) began his creative journey by crafting a series of vessels and conical pots using a pit-firing technique intrinsic to the artistic communities of the Nguni people. Maweni's design aesthetic featured dark, porous surfaces alongside hand-formed sculptural outlines and decorative surface patterns, which raised his profile within the world of contemporary craft. Going on to open his own studio in Cape Town in 2016, the visionary talent has also showcased work on a global scale, exhibiting at shows such as Design Miami and The Salon Art + Design in New York. In addition, his work has been acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. With his recent designs, such as the 'Imbizo' dining table and stools (pictured), being exhibited with Cape Town's Southern Guild gallery, Maweni continues to celebrate traditional craft through a fresh perspective and contemporary lens. southernguild.com **ED**



PICTURES: MICKY HOYLE / XIGERA / SOUTHERNGUILD

