

Sketches outpace stitches

Two weeks after SA Fashion Week (SAFW), Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Africa (MBFW) delivered its collection of African and local designers.



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Designers at MBFW Africa 2014 included Mozambique's Taibo Bacar, Cameroon's Kibonen, Nigeria's Mia Atafo and South Africans David Tlale and Marianne Fassler.

SAFW Autumn/Winter '14 showcased favourites Naked Ape by Shaldon Kopman, Black Coffee, Fundudzi, Colleen Eitzen and Ephymol.

The fact that one show follows the other so closely has caused some controversy and suggestions of a bitter rivalry between the two.

But as Africa emerges on the world scene, several Western designers are turning to its colourful clothing for inspiration. And the SA fashion industry has grown to such an extent that local designers feature regularly on major fashion shows around the world.

CMT industry revival?

Will this international interest revive the local cut, make and trim (CMT) industry? The SA Clothing & Textile Workers' Union (Sactwu) has its doubts.

According to Stats SA, the clothing, textile, footwear and leather manufacturing industry employed close to 220000 people in 1996. This had been shaved down to about 92000 by June 2014. The greatest number of job losses started to occur from 2002 onwards, as cheap Chinese imports began to flood into SA and the rand strengthened, says Sactwu research director Etienne Vlok.

"There are still weak linkages between local fashion (ready to wear/haute couture) design and local clothing manufacturing," says Vlok. "Instead, the major orders for the local manufacturing industry come from the retailers, and to a lesser extent from the state and the corporate sector. Fashion design has the ability to create many more jobs in the local clothing manufacturing sector, but for that to happen we need to strengthen ties with the manufacturing sector."

Johann Baard, executive director of the Apparel Manufacturers Association of SA, sees some benefit from fashion for sections of the production chain. "It is difficult to say, but I would imagine that there must be some positive impact on employment of pattern makers, sample machinists and seamstresses," he says.

In sketching a picture of the overall health of the CMT sector, Baard says it is buckling under "severe pressure" from the high levels of noncompliant CMTs, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal.

"Around 80% of CMTs in KZN do not comply with the minimum wages prescribed by the bargaining council," he says.

Battling imports

Though the battle against the influx of Chinese imports is far from won, there are some positive signs emerging. Baard says the last 18-24 months have brought increased awareness of issues like child labour, environmental standards and worker exploitation.

Some local retailers, such as Mr Price and Edgars, are supporting local designers. Anisa Mpungwe, of fashion house Loin Cloth & Ashes, has designed a collection specifically for Mr Price.

But a large part of what retailers stock is still imported. "We are also concerned that some retailers do not appear to have mastered the art of supply chain integrity, and continue to put orders into local manufacturers which transgress labour laws and exploit workers. This is a risky business for those retailers' brands and reputation," says Vlok.

Cape Town is known for its formerly thriving CMT industry and is home to several SA designers. Last week, Cosatu in the Western Cape and Proudly SA held a conference to focus on local procurement within the Western Cape and Cape Town.

Rushdeen Rose, a researcher at Lava Ink, a Cape Town-based clothing, manufacturing, branding and consulting firm, says it is difficult to determine the fashion industry's contribution to reviving CMTs. "Our sector has changed from a well-structured formal operation to a fragmented, invisible industry with dying skills and a small number of fabric and other material suppliers," says Rose.

He says remedies include the introduction of new local entrants into the clothing industry and the promotion of CMTs on an international scale. "We need to rebuild the supply chain, focus on design and innovate with confidence."

Source: Financial Mail

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