

Meet Russell Abrahams, the SA creative who caught the eye of H&M

 By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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H&M South Africa has just released its first locally printed collection, with illustrations designed by talented young Capetonian Russell Abrahams, better known by his studio name Yay Abe.



Russell Abrahams, founder and illustrator at Yay Abe. Source: Supplied

The Yay Abe x H&M collection launch marks the next chapter in H&M's South Africa's commitment to promote the local design industry, and follows on from its home decor collaboration with design duo [Neimil in November](#).

As a Design Indaba Emerging Creatives alumnus and having ranked in the top three illustrators on the Loeries Middle East and Africa list in 2019, 29-year-old Abrahams has attracted work from big-name brands including [Adidas](#), [KFC](#), Woolworths, Airbnb and [Burger King](#).

Yay Abe's designs are easily recognised by their bold colours, unique graphic style and playful, vibrant nature. For the H&M collection of apparel, he worked alongside the retailer to create a collection that uplifts. Inspired by the expression to "give people their flowers", Abrahams hopes the range will evoke feelings of appreciation, gratitude and joy.



Yay Abe x H&Mcollection. Source: Supplied

"With lighthearted illustration work and bold prints, it's an ode to everyone who has been surviving and just doing their thing over the past two years. My goal is to put a smile on my audience's face. There are baggy hoodies, bucket hats, t-shirts. There's really something for everyone. It's basics that will adorn its wearer," says Abrahams.

The illustrations used for the collection were initially hand drawn and then recreated digitally so that they're ready for print. H&M looked to Cape Town-based company Krismar Printers to print the range of apparel.

As a small business owner of colour, Abrahams recognises the value of receiving support from a large retailer. "It's creating access and representation. I think representation is so important in today's age. I'm forever grateful to be working with such great brands and I hope that my face being shown and celebrated directly inspires other young POCs to chase their dreams and to just do their thing!" he says.

As Youth Month kicks off in South Africa, we chat with the young design talent about his journey in design, the new H&M collab, and how he keeps fit creatively.

■ ***Russell, tell us a bit about yourself and your upbringing...***

Growing up as a Cape Town kid, I was always surrounded by bright colours, art loving people and a nice mix between nature and city life. I was always into drawing but never thought much further than it just being a hobby. I think it was around age 14 when I discovered photoshop and the rest became history.

After studying at CPUT and graduating in 2014, I jumped straight into the freelance world and it was definitely a challenging task but here we are, and I couldn't be happier.

■ ***When did you notice you had an affinity for design?***

I think it was back in Grade 9 when I jumped on to Photoshop for the first time. It honestly blew my mind and all I wanted to do was to create. It was definitely a turning point for me and the purity of the whole process is something I like to tap into with my work today.



Source: Supplied

■ ***How would you describe your design aesthetic? And where do you draw inspiration from for your work?***

I would say I dabble in the pop art or super flat art movement. I think my work aesthetically is quite bold and minimal at the same time. I like the whole "less is more" approach for sure. I really draw inspiration from so many avenues. From people, to buildings to colours. I love finding meaning in the little things we do often take for granted.

■ ***You've worked with a number of big brands, most recently with H&M. What do you look for in the brand partners you collaborate with?***

I really want collaborations to be exactly that. A collaboration between myself and a team of people who have great vision. Once we start mixing and matching ideas it's always such a pure process and that's why I love this H&M collaboration. It was definitely an amazing experience and I think our audience will see and feel the passion that was poured out into this project.



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■ ***What inspired your designs for the Yay Abe x H&M collection?***

I really wanted to create a body of work that made people feel joy. It's a collection inspired by the phrase "give people their flowers", so it's basically a collection focused on gratitude and the idea of giving people their flowers while they're still here. It's a celebration of all of us and I truly hope people will feel the good vibes.

■ ***What was the collaborative process like working with H&M on this range?***

It was a fun process. I think making illustration work can become quite linear sometimes. However, with this project it was a true collaboration from start to finish. The H&M team really stole my heart with how delicately they treated my ideas and work. The proof is in the pudding for sure and I'm so proud of how we've presented it all.

■ ***How do you get your creative juices flowing when it feels like they're running a little dry?***

Music and Instagram for sure! My Instagram buddies all create such beautiful work so I'm surrounded by peers who constantly push the boundaries when it comes to creativity. I love it!

■ ***What's your top tip for staying ahead in your field?***

Persistence and patience. It goes a long way.



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■ ***How would you like to see your Yay Abe brand grow or evolve over the coming years?***

Yay Abe is naturally growing into its own entity and it's exciting. But, looking towards the future, I would love for it to become a space that nurtures young creative talent in this country. So that we can open the gates to more and more people.

■ ***In light of Youth Month this June, what advice do you have for young South African designers trying to make a career out of their work?***

Getting your work out there is so important. I'd say message the brands you'd like to work with. Share your work on Instagram so that your friends can hype you up. Lastly, as cliché as it might sound, never give up on your dreams. Be proactive, make the work you want to see in the world and in time, the right people will pick you up.

The Yay Abe x H&M collection is now available at H&M V&A Waterfront, Canal Walk, Sandton City, Menlyn Mall and Gateway.

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