

ONE TO WATCH

What makes a made-in-Africa handbag desired by women around the world?

It's the ingenuity of the designer, who works craft into commerce, and elevates an age-old street art to the realms of global fashion. Akosua Afriyie-Kumi, founder of AAKS (pronounced 'axe') luxury handbags in Ghana, has done just that, slowly reviving a Ghanaian craft and taking the colors of Africa to the world.

The timing couldn't be more perfect, as African fashion, design and art are now center stage internationally.

An AAKS handbag is vibrant; its creator infuses it with hues reminiscent of the rich red earth, the sweet yellow ripeness of mangoes, or the deep greens and blues of an African coast.

Being a creative had long been a part of Afriyie-Kumi's life in Ghana, where she was born and grew up until the age of 19.

Fashion was a logical choice for her, but it proved difficult to study it in Ghana as the country offered no formal means of education in the arts at the time.

Afriyie-Kumi chose to study in the United Kingdom (UK), where

she completed her studies at Oxford Brookes University and Kingston University, graduating in 2009. By the time she was ready to return to Ghana in 2013, she had interned for luxury womenswear label Peter Pilotto and British designer Matthew Williamson.

By then, she had already been toying with the idea of creating woven bags.

"I knew that there was basket-making in Ghana. Before, I was thinking I'll stay in the UK and do it from there, then realized it's best if I [go back]," says Afriyie-Kumi.

"It was me really coming to Ghana and seeing baskets around, and I felt [that] nobody has reinvented this product. It was just a basket being sold by the roadside, and nobody had moved it on.

"I felt I would be the best person to do that with my fashion background, to be able to push it to another level, and make it more [about] luxury."

Returning to Ghana to start a business wasn't easy though: she had to travel to the north of Ghana, almost 12 hours way from her home in the south, with no guarantee the weavers would be able to bring her vision to life.

Ghana, like many other African countries, may not be vast in size but makes up for it with its multiple languages.

Twi is more widely spoken in the south of Ghana, and Frafra is its equivalent in the north, which meant conversing with the weavers was a challenge for Afriyie-Kumi. And they were also used to weaving with straw, as opposed to raffia, the core material of her handbags.

Despite the initial hurdles, Afriyie-Kumi launched her brand in 2014; the handbags are handcrafted by women from 100% local material sourced in Ghana. They are stocked in stores in the UK, United States, South Africa and Kenya. The retail price for a small AAKS bag starts at £67 (\$98), and from £210 (\$306) for a larger piece. Whoever said there was no money in indigenous natural fiber? **FW**

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Bag And Forth



Photo by Nana Gaza photography

Akosua Afriyie-Kumi creates handbags reminiscent of ripe yellow mangoes, the rich red earth and the deep blues of a Ghanaian coast. They don't come cheap but she has takers around the world.

WORDS WILHELMINA MABOJA



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