

Chris Seydou – ‘the father of African fashion’

Today, African designs are regularly seen in fashion shows. Companies that sell sustainable clothing often rely on local African small businesses. They like the quality and the originality of the clothes they produce. But this would not be possible without pioneers from Africa who brought African fashion to a bigger audience. One of these is Chris Seydou.

Seydou was born in Kati in Mali on 18th May 1949. He grew up in the clothing trade. His mother was an embroiderer, so from his early childhood he was familiar with different cloths and materials. His mother had copies of European fashion magazines and Seydou used to read them. He became fascinated by the photographs of elegant women and their beautiful dresses.

When he was fifteen, he left school and got a job with a local tailor. But he wanted to learn more and moved first to Ouagadougou and then to Abidjan in 1969. At that time the city was one of the most important for African fashion, and Seydou became famous designing clothing for wealthy and influential women. He also changed his name. His original name was Seydou Nourou Doumbia. He kept Seydou from his family name and Chris came from Christian Dior, who inspired him. In 1972 he went to Paris and studied European design and dress styles. Together with two other African designers he started the International Federation of African Fashion. It still operates today and is an important centre for African designers. In Paris his reputation grew and he became well known internationally, especially for the African sensibility of his designs.

He adapted and transformed Malian designs. One of the major influences in his work was bogolan, sometimes called mud cloth. Traditionally, this is made by men. They make squares of cloth and then colour them using a mixture of leaves and water. After that they make patterns on the cloth using a special kind of mud. The patterns are often very complex and take a long time to produce. Each piece is unique and the symbols in the patterns often tell a story. Chris Seydou thought the traditional patterns were too complex. So he simplified them for the clothes he made. He used them on all kinds of clothes, from mini skirts to hats and motorcycle jackets.

In 1990 Chris Seydou returned to Mali. He came to Bamako and wanted to find out more about the traditions of making bogolan and about the original

authors of the patterns. One of his most popular projects came the same year when he collaborated with a textile company in Bamako. He designed a fabric influenced by bogolan, which was sold all over the world and brought great attention to Mali. Through Seydou's creations – he even designed a suit for the President's wife – Mali's cultural treasures became better known throughout the world. Without a doubt Chris Seydou has inspired new waves of designers. He showed them how to aim high and honour your culture and your traditions at the same time.

New words for this article

bogolan	special cloth called 'mud cloth'
sustainable clothing	clothes made from natural products
embroiderer	someone who does specialist sewing
throughout the world	over the whole world

Comprehension Questions

1. Companies like local African businesses because they are cheap
2. Seydou learned to sew from his father
3. Seydou worked at a tailor's while he was at school
4. Abidjan was a centre for African fashion in the late 60s
5. Seydou was one of the founders of the International Federation of African Fashion

Comprehension questions

1. In fashion shows
2. They like the quality and the originality
3. Pictures of elegant women in magazines
4. Designing dresses for wealth women
5. He went to study in Paris

Answers