

VOGUE

Four African-Designed Labels Get Their Big Break at Pitti Uomo

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Four African-designed labels were handed the opportunity to present their collections on the runway at the Pitti menswear fair in Florence today. And, as part of the same show, three asylum seekers recently arrived in Europe were given the chance to model. This progressive piece of casting was by way of an announcement from the Ethical Fashion Initiative (an offshoot of both the United Nations and World Trade Organization), which organized the show. Speaking after the last model had left the flagstone catwalk, Simone Cipriani, founder of the Initiative, announced the creation of a pilot program to train a group of 30 asylum seekers, with a view to finding them permanent work in Italy's textile and ready-to-wear industries, or equipping them for employment if and when they return to the country of their birth. It was extremely unusual, and heartening, to see an issue as profound as Europe's refugee crisis tackled with such pragmatism in the context of fashion.



Ikiré Jones Photo by Stefania D'Alessandro/Getty

On the runway, South African designers Likhanyo Mdingi and Nicholas Coutts of Likhanyo Mdingi X Nicholas Coutts applied woven panels, sometimes beaded, to a pared-back masculine template: The belted-on scarf as statement piece was a strong thought. U.Mi-1, a brand founded by “world citizen” Gozi Ochonogor—she has lived in the U.K., Nigeria, and Japan—played with Yoruba tribal imagery in a collection notable for its interestingly tweaked tailoring, including double-cut jacket vents and cuffed loose pants. Under the flag of their label AKJP, South African designers Jody Paulsen and Keith Henning proposed punchily printed workwear-profile overcoats and minimally drawn culottes and pants—there was a touch of [Vivienne Westwood](#) to the styling.

Particularly pertinent to the initiative announced at the show was the Ikiré Jones collection. Designed by Walé Oyéjidé—a Philadelphian by way of Nigeria—it featured pleasant tailored separates and accessories among which some shawls, bags, and jackets came printed with Oyéjidé's “sampled” art history designs. In these, he inserts African figures into the context of foreign art history traditions, in this case European and Japanese. Just like the Ethical Fashion Initiative's admirable training program, this collection was about migration and challenging our perceptions of it.