

# Russian-Ghanaian designer wows Dakar Fashion Week

By Fran Blandy (AFP) – Jul 8, 2011

DAKAR — Designer Beatrice "Bee" Arthur's creations are as eclectic and mixed as her Russian-Ghanaian heritage, and she is proving at the Dakar Fashion Week that African fabric and design can be "funky and fun".

The flamboyant 41-year-old has mixed linen with Malian mudcloth, African wax print with net and sequins into modern, cosmopolitan designs that can be worn on the streets of Accra or in the world's fashion capitals.

"The fabrics are a complete mix of everything. I am a very open-minded, free person, I don't like to limit myself to anything. I pick motifs from everywhere," the designer told AFP in an interview.

She is one of 13 designers taking part in the ninth Dakar Fashion Week, privately organised by Senegalese designer Adama Paris who this year has brought Malian, Moroccan, Ivorian, Spanish and French designers to the west African capital.

Arthur was born in Odessa in Ukraine where her beginnings in the Communist Soviet Union -- where she was seen as exotic and different -- taught her to "funkify" her boring garments with anything she could find.

She returned to Ghana 20 years ago from Odessa where "people starve to look good, everyone is a tragic fashionista."

"I wanted to dress funky but I wanted something that had an African touch to it. Everything that was fun and funky was from Europe and everything that was made in Africa was always the traditional stuff.

"I was pushed into this industry by frustration," laughs Arthur, who holds a degree in sociology and speaks five languages.

In 2001, while still a student, Arthur won the coveted KORA fashion award in Sun City, South Africa, and hasn't looked back. She now sells to singers, actors, diplomats and others from her store in the Ghanaian capital.

The wife of former UN secretary general Kofi Annan also owns several of her creations.

Arthur says she has a big market for her clothes in Africa, and the Europeans who buy from her mostly come to her shop in Ghana. Like many African designers she relies on word of mouth to sell her creations.

One of her biggest challenges is overcoming what she says is an "inferiority" complex on the continent, and getting Africans to buy from local designers.

"It seems to me that Africans have this mentality that if it has a European logo, even if it is made in China, they will pay thousands for it. But if it's something done by local designers they don't want to pay good money for it."

As African fashion finds itself a la mode on international catwalks, local designers like Arthur want to show that good quality can be found on the continent.

"I hate those things where people say, let's buy this bag (of African design) for one euro because people in Africa are dying of hunger. I want them to buy it because it's nice, because it's well done, because it's beautiful."

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Bee Arthur put on an eclectic show in Dakar Fashion Week



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