

Portrait of a Designer

Tiffany Amber is becoming one of Africa's foremost fashion brands.

The fashion house is headed by none other than the formidable Folake Folarin-Coker, an award-winning and internationally acclaimed Nigerian designer, renowned for her eclectically contemporary designs. Beyond fashion however, Folarin-Coker is an astute businesswoman, who understands the importance of marrying the art of fashion with the art of business.

"I think the key is being able to strike a balance between fashion and business. I believe this is where my strength lies," she tells *New African Woman*. "The fashion business is a process of seduction that ultimately leads to desire. In the process of trying to seduce your client, you throw money out the window and if it lands in the right place, it comes right back through your door. The key thing is to know which window to throw at."

Born in Lagos, Nigeria, Folarin-Coker studied in Switzerland, the UK and Scotland, and holds a Law degree. But it was in fashion that she found her true passion. After relocating to Nigeria in 1998, she launched the label, Tiffany



Amber, and in her own words "hasn't looked back since".

Tiffany Amber is now an iconic brand with collections that demonstrate the designer's love for luxurious fabrics and intricate embellishments from all over the world, which she intelligently and immaculately weaves into her African heritage to produce timeless, feminine and effortlessly stylish pieces. The brand's vibrant and seductive collections exude an air of sophistication with their classical looks that include eveningwear and blazers. Tiffany Amber's magnetic and delicate pieces have graced over 40 runways across Africa, Europe and America.

The only African designer to have shown twice at the New York Fashion Week, Folarin-Coker won the coveted Designer Of The Year at the 2009/2010 Arise Africa Fashion Week, South Africa, and in 2011, made

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African Designer of the Year 2009/2010: Folake combines business acumen with unique creative flair

The Business of fashion

"The time for Africa is now," says Tiffany Amber creative director and entrepreneur Folake Folarin-Coker. Interview by **Belinda Otas**.



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Folake impresses Italian Vogue editor Franca Sozzani with her designs

her London Fashion Week debut with Tiffany Amber's spring/summer 2012 collection, 'Siren of the Nile' (see NAW Issue 11).

Folarin-Coker's achievements to date can be described as astounding, particularly given the climate she works in – lack of infrastructure and institutional support for the arts, culture and fashion. Yet, after 13 years in the industry, she says she did not envisage being able to build a career and brand in the fashion industry. So what does she put her success down to?

“A constant dedication to building the brand,” she says, adding: “As an entrepreneur, I don't see obstacles. The constant drive is to make a success of the business side of it. The creative side was less challenging because I think creativity is innate and the boundaries come from within. Whereas the business side is dedicated by your surroundings. It was the constant dedication to keep it going and not allowing anything get in the way of making the brand a success.”

Tiffany Amber has four flagship boutiques – three in Lagos and one in Abuja. You can also find Tiffany

Amber pieces at Temple Muse, an upscale luxury boutique and Nigeria's mini-version of Harvey Nichols. This is in addition to international interest in stocking her creations outside Nigeria.

While the brand is financially successful, Folarin-Coker does not feel the monetary worth is crucial to its success: “The most powerful and invaluable thing in my business, is the name itself because I spent the last 13 years building this name. This name can now be monetised by branding as many things as possible. We plan to go into accessories, even perfumes, make-up, the whole range, because if you look at the international fashion market, no fashion house makes money from clothing alone.”

She adds: “When the editor of *Vogue Italia*, Franca Sozzani and the designer, Roberto Cavalli, were in Nigeria, one of the things they said was that making clothes, the high-end pieces, is really just for show. They are not the pieces that sell. So I got a lot of insight as to how the international market works and there is no confusion in my mind that we need to explore and diversify.”

Folarin-Coker's time in Europe and exploration of diverse cultures from her travels is a huge part of her work. As such, she believes that the concept of African fashion is worth it.

“The time for Africa is now. The world is looking to us for inspiration. Although the African fashion industry is very much in its infancy, we have a certain uniqueness about us that the world has picked up on. They cannot exploit it the way we can because it's in our DNA.”

She adds: “It's deeper than using Ankara to make things. It goes deep into our sense of style because of our culture – Africans, wherever we go, we make sure we carry our culture with us. But the world will not take us seriously if we don't put a proper structure on the ground.”

Evident that some designers on the continent and in the diaspora are still negotiating the terms of building a brand, let alone a global African fashion base, Folarin-Coker adds that securing the success of African fashion depends on building a continental industry.

“African fashion is the way we are going to enter the global market and once we are established, the wall is going to be knocked down. We can't go in without an identity. African fashion designers need to stop thinking as individuals and we need to think as a collective because as a group, our voice is louder.”

As a forward-thinking businesswoman, it is Folarin-Coker's vision that her brand becomes a legacy. Using the example of Christian Dior, she says: “My brand will outlive me because I don't work for the present, I work for the future. If I didn't do that, I would have closed shop a long time ago. We want it to become the premiere Africa lifestyle brand. It's not about fame for me anymore, it's about the proper structure and business.”

With the mindset of staying true to being a trailblazer, Folarin-Coker continues to do what has enabled her to remain a success. “I continuously reinvent myself without changing the DNA of the brand,” she says. “That's why I believe everyone knows what the Tiffany Amber look is about and that's what has kept us.” ■

The Africa Experts

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