

Four decades of formidable fashion with Marianne Fassler

 By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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With an illustrious career spanning 40 years, designer, icon, businesswoman, mentor and all-around creative Marianne Fassler remains a formidable force in South Africa's fashion industry.



The award-winning garments created by Fassler and team at her Leopard Frock studio in Saxonworld are uniquely African, inspired by the colours, textures and cultures of the continent. Her designs are diverse, creative, eclectic, and because it doesn't rest heavily on short-lived trends, they're also timeless. For Fassler, her work transcends the boundaries of fashion, and instead, she chooses to see it as her chosen "art form".

Her creations will once again be gracing the catwalk at [Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Joburg](#), taking place later this week at the Mall of Africa. The traces of a recent trip to Morocco by Leopard Frock creative director Lezanne Viviers provides the leitmotiv for the SS17 collection, reflecting the craft, the colours and the connectedness of everything on the African continent. Expect originated prints that tell a story and a colour palette of poppy red, turmeric yellow, rose pink, terracotta and Majorelle blue that evokes Africa from north to south.

This [Women's Month](#), the fashion doyenne shares her thoughts on the evolution of SA's fashion industry and the valuable lessons she's learnt as an integral part of it.

■ ***As somewhat of an industry veteran, how has South Africa's fashion industry evolved in the last four decades?***

They say that the more things change, the more they stay the same. There has been an increased visibility of the designer due to the establishment of Fashion Week as a platform.

Social media such as Facebook and Instagram have also brought fashion to the consumer instantly. The fashion industry as such has been through various cycles, but it is clear to me that South African design has matured and the demand for South African designed goods in general, has increased.

Unfortunately the same cannot be said for the manufacturing sector. I have seen it shrink over many years and we find it very difficult to manufacture high-end product on a larger scale. The sophistication and depth of product is just not catered for. With the rise of online platforms for retail, it has also become evident that we can serve a limited audience here in ZA, but I am finding it very difficult, logistically, to serve global customers.

We are far from the marketplace with expensive shipping costs and long turnaround times. I do however think that the local market is hungry for interesting new choices and we often hear from tourists that they battle to find South African fashion readily available in shops.

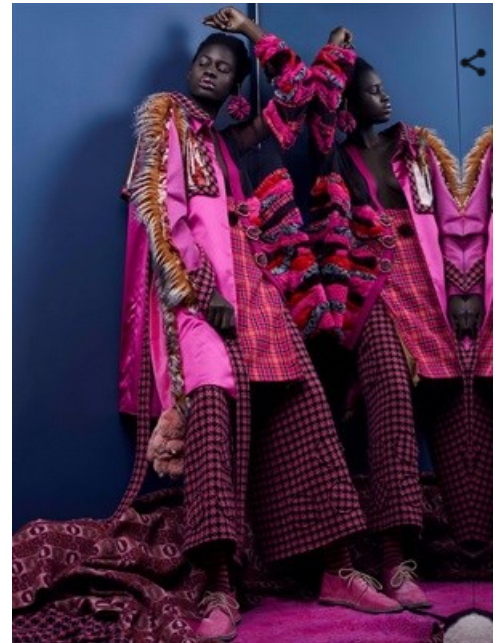
■ ***In line with this, would you say the 'Marianne Fassler aesthetic' has evolved as well?***

I should hope that the Marianne Fassler aesthetic has evolved. Surely a brand should evolve to reflect new trends and to remain relevant to a new client base. As a creative person, I also constantly search for fresh inspiration and new frontiers...hence the relevance of this brand 40 years later.



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■ ***How do you think our local fashion industry compares globally?***

This is a very broad question. Lezanne and I have just returned from an intense six days in New York. This is a really 'grown-up' fashion and retail space and I find it really difficult to compare our fashion industry to global locations.

I believe that the local industry lacks depth and most designers cannot afford to employ another layer of expertise to enable them to become exporters. There is a naive assumption that export is easy and the world is just waiting for your product. The feedback I get is that a lot of South African products are very expensive, and not really up to standard. This comment is based on the goods available at the most recent [exhibition Le BHV/Marais in Paris](#).

We still think small and believe that our exchange rate will save us from most of the impediments of supply chain markups. But, having said that, there are success stories and we remain focused on the brands that will give ZA credibility. I believe the South African Department of Trade and Industry should be playing a part here.

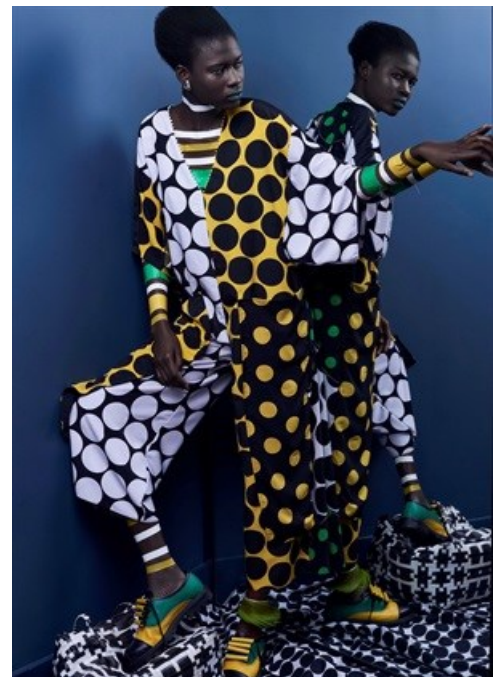
■ ***Your designs will once again be gracing the runway at Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Joburg 2017. What goes into preparing for an event of this magnitude?***

We bring our everything to the ramp. It is a very important showcase to keep orders pouring in throughout summer. We always re-invent old favourites because our clients look out for them, but in the retelling of our story, we add newer twists and turns. We continue to develop new prints and silhouettes. This new collection is both fresh and sophisticated...and definitely turned heads on the streets of NY.

■ ***How do you think the public could be encouraged to purchase more locally-made fashion?***

The public will buy what it likes at the right price. Service and quality also play a huge part. I believe the consumer should always buy with a conscience, i.e. not buy imported flowers, foods or consumables without considering the local options. To be a conscious consumer is a global trend, but alas, here in ZA there isn't always the luxury of buying with a conscience. Often Chinese knockoffs are just cheaper in this instant fashion environment.

■ ***What is the most valuable lesson you've learnt on your career journey?***



I always put the client first. The client is at the top of my pyramid and I, as a designer, am at the base of the pyramid. I celebrate the person who pays good money to enable me to be in business. I have also learnt that the best advertisement is always a happy client. The layers of referral are very valuable. I have generations of clients and friends of clients who spread the good word. No amount of social media exposure makes up for that good old fashioned word of mouth exposure.

■ **What is your message for Women's Month?**

Always be the best possible version of yourself. Learn to understand the power of being comfortable in your own skin. Wear what you love and what you intuitively know, expresses the person you are.

Visit [Marianne Fassler's website](#) for more info and connect with the brand on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

ABOUT LAUREN HARTZENBERG

Managing editor and retail editor at Bizcommunity.com Cape Town apologist. Dog mom. Get in touch: lauren@bizcommunity.com
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