

News

Rihanna's Debut Fenty Collection Was Inspired by the 'Black Is Beautiful' Movement

Her references include photographer Kwame Brathwaite and black female fashion activists called the Grandassa Models.

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Praise Riri! Today, Rihanna's luxury clothing line Fenty is now shoppable online, so say goodbye to all your coins. Joining Rihanna's burgeoning business empire that includes lingerie and a beauty brand, Fenty is also the first luxury line helmed by a woman of color at fashion conglomerate Louis Vuitton Moet Hennessy (LVMH). Accordingly, Rihanna took that groundbreaking spirit and infused it into every detail of Fenty's first collection. In conversation with Vogue UK, Rihanna spoke about the campaign's imagery, which draws inspiration from the 1960s Black Is Beautiful movement. In the images, Rihanna takes us to history class, as she juxtaposed her models directly against vintage photographs by Kwame Brathwaite. In the 1950s and 60s, Kwame was a photographer who documented the cultural richness of Harlem's African-American community. He also organized pageants to celebrate Black beauty; the pageants were so successful that they ran for five years and inspired the term Black is Beautiful.

"When I was coming up with the concept for this release, we were just digging and digging and we came up with these images," Rihanna told Vogue UK. "They made me feel they were relevant to what we are doing right now," adding that she received permission for Kwame (who is now 81) to use the images. "It was a really strange and powerful parallel."

That parallel plays out in the stark campaign images. Using Kwame's photos of the Grandassa models — a group of pageant models and activists who promoted the Black is Beautiful idea — Rihanna tied together historical depictions of Black women and the Fenty aesthetic. In one image, Nomsa Brathwaite (Kwame's sister-in-law) wears a headwrap and a long chandelier earring; next to her, Rihanna's models play together in white power suits, wearing rhyming earrings.

Ultimately, the campaign serves as a necessary reminder that, at one time, Black beauty was not widely promoted or accepted as activists had to fight for visibility and acceptance of African-American features and styling. Even today, beauty diversity is still nowhere close to

where it needs to be — though Rihanna, through her makeup and clothing, has been instrumental in encouraging accessibility in the fashion industry.

Still, Rihanna is careful to explain that while her clothes embrace the legacy of black creatives, they aren't necessarily meant to be political themselves. "Well, I don't know if it's political so much as embracing the fact that people should be more aware," she said. "But definitely, we want people to see the parallels between what was then and what this is now, in a modern way." And Fenty's clothes are definitely modern, with their sharp tailoring and monochromatic colors.