

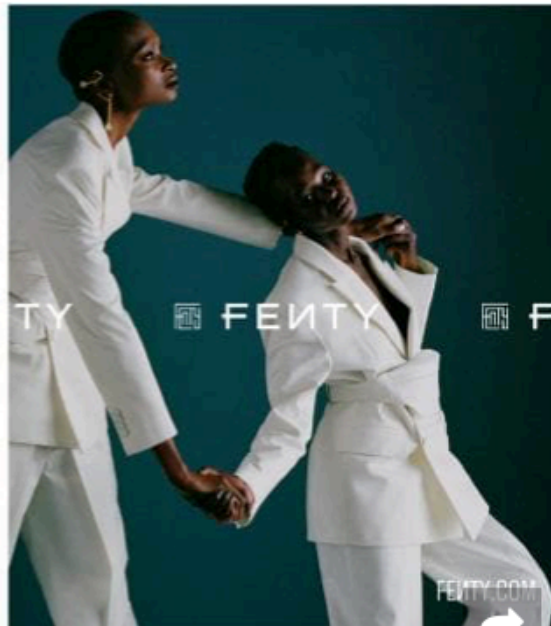
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FASHION > NEWS

Rihanna reveals the story behind her latest collection's imagery

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“We want people to see the parallels between what was then and what this is now, in a modern way.” – Rihanna tells *Vogue* about how the 1960s Black Is Beautiful movement and its most influential players, photographer Kwame Brathwaite and the Grandassa Models, inspired her latest Fenty fashion collection. *Image credits: Kwame Brathwaite Fenty*



There was a definite glint in the famous green eyes when Rihanna said, “Every collection will change – you’ll see that to come,” at the launch of the first release of her fashion collection with LVMH in Paris last week. We’ve come to expect surprises from Ms Robyn Rihanna Fenty – CEO and creative director of the Fenty enterprise – but what few knew last week was that she had another move up the super-long sleeves of her white jacket-dress: the reveal of her collection imagery, alongside photographs by Kwame Brathwaite, hero of the Black Is Beautiful movement instigated by African-American creative forces in New York in the 1950s and 1960s.

“When I was coming up with the concept for this release, we were just digging and digging and we came up with these images – they made me feel they were relevant to what we are doing *right now*,” Rihanna tells *Vogue*. Among the now 81-year-old New York photographer’s archive, she came across a documentary about black female fashion activism in America – a group of young women, known as the Grandassa Models, who got together in the early 1960s in New York. “It was a really strange and powerful parallel,” says Rihanna. “And he gave me permission [to use the imagery], obviously that is a big deal.”

Intent on exercising fashion and beauty as a medium of empowerment and change against the dominance of white-centric popular culture, the Grandassa Models organised sell-out shows that reinvented super-elegant, high-style black beauty, African clothing references and natural hair. Critically influential, years before mainstream designers reappropriated and recast these references, the models were backed up by Brathwaite and his older brother, graphic designer Elombe Brath. All of them were integral players in the coming together of musicians, writers and politicians of the Black Power movement.



The backstory interweaves Rihanna’s personal Bajan history with wildly re-affirming connections between the past and her present. For starters, there is a close-to-home coincidence, she says: “Kwame Brathwaite is from Barbados! And, his last name is my grandfather’s name, which was my mother’s name before she was a Fenty.”

Rihanna points to a 1964 studio portrait of Nomsa Brathwaite in a high headwrap and spectacular below-the-shoulder earrings: “She’s his sister-in-law!” (Nomsa was married to Brath). Another photo of Nomsa shows her smiling in front of a map of Africa in 1968 – the

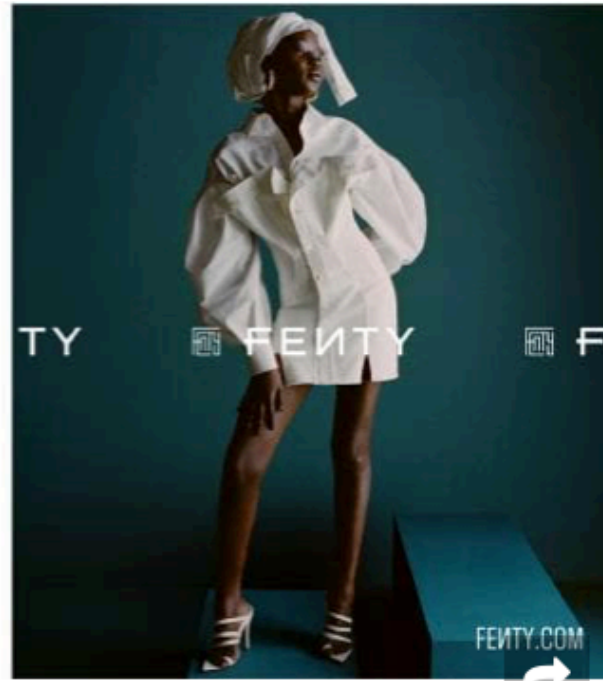
time when the political and social movement was reaching out beyond America to support the struggle for liberation in Africa and the Caribbean.



Another photograph, dated 1968, shows Grandassa Models at the Renaissance Casino Ballroom in Harlem on Garvey Day. In the background, a poster reads “Buy Black”. As soon as she began looking into it, Rihanna wanted to know more – cue more “digging” to turn up the fact, via writer and historian Tanisha C. Ford, that the Grandassa Models designed and made their own clothes. Aside from looking incredible, their radical reclaiming of African inspiration, elegant robes, headwraps and jewellery led to a wave of female entrepreneurship, creating self-owned boutiques and a whole community of black designers, stylists, hairdressers and makeup artists.

The through-lines to how Rihanna organises her world as a multi-hyphenate musician/performer/ fashion designer/beauty change-maker are hard to miss. How does she manage her music career alongside her massively successful Fenty Beauty business, the Savage X Fenty lingerie collaboration and now Fenty fashion? She laughs, leaning in: “Well, I work *all* the time. I visualise Fenty as a hub, bringing in creative people. We travel together, we eat together, we’re always working. That’s how I want to keep it.”

In other words, she’s the digital-age, hyper-connected, 21st-century manifestation of exactly the kind of discipline-crossing way of working that Kwame Brathwaite documented. In bringing up his photographs for her legion of followers to discover, she’s re-establishing that connection; giving them the opportunity to be inspired by this progressive, elevated black cultural revolution that happened not so long ago, when music, fashion, beauty, art and politics overlapped, and everyone worked in unison.



“And here are the men who started the Black Is Beautiful movement,” Rihanna concludes, pointing to her last choice, a 1961 photograph of six slim-suited collaborators of the African Jazz-Art Society and Studios, set up “to reclaim jazz as the music of contemporary African traditions that should be controlled by black artists,” she explains. Kwame Brathwaite holds his camera at the back; Elombe is seated at a layout desk.

So, seeing Brathwaite’s work intermixed with pictures of model Debra Shaw and images of London, does Rihanna want people to discover a political message as they shop her latest Fenty collection? “Well, I don’t know if it’s *political* so much as embracing the fact that people should be more aware,” she shrugs, smiling. “But definitely, we want people to see the parallels between what was then and what this is now, in a modern way.”

Kwame Brathwaite: Black is Beautiful by Kwame Brathwaite, Tanisha C. Ford and Deborah Willis, is published by Aperture.