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Homes: African graphic textiles

From catwalk to cushions, African graphic textiles are having a moment

Trish Lorenz
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Boubacar Doumbia (on right) prepares the mud that will be painted on to fix the dyes in his fabrics. Photograph: David Crookes

The sun is scorching the courtyard in suburban Ouagadougou, capital of [Burkina Faso](#), where Malian designer Boubacar Doumbia has set up a temporary workshop. Swatches of fabric from his new collection – hand-painted in intricate detail – are drying on the hot, dusty ground. A young assistant appears, bringing a bowl of mud. Deep grey, it has the consistency of custard and smells of river water and metals.

Doumbia runs his fingers through the liquid and, finding the texture to his liking, dips a paintbrush into the bowl and begins to coat his fabrics. Given that it has taken him and his team nearly two days to dye, paint and dry these fabrics, covering them in strong-smelling mud feels counterintuitive. But, as if by some elemental magic, when it dries and is rinsed off, the mud has fixed the fabric's monochrome palette.

These elegant, geometric fabrics will be turned into cushions and sold through Habitat

in the UK this September. Prints from, and inspired by, [Africa](#) are big design news. Having appeared on catwalks for a few seasons, courtesy of the likes of [Kenzo](#) and [Matthew Williamson](#), they are now in evidence in our [homes](#): shots of colour and pattern that lift plain sofas, armchairs and beds. From London's trend-setting [Darkroom](#) boutique to House of Fraser and the V&A museum, which launched an African Pattern range this summer, the continent's vibrant palette is everywhere.

Tall, with slim, elegant fingers, Doumbia is the leading proponent of *bogolan*, Mali's traditional mud-dyed textile design process. Cotton is locally grown and coloured with plant-based dyes, while the mud is as organic as the river in which it is found. Iron in the mud reacts with the dye and turns it black – three coats for deep black, two for grey. It's a truly sustainable technique that, coupled with eye-catching contemporary design, means African textiles are reaching the audience they deserve.

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