

The Telegraph

LUXURY



VanLeles Legends Of Africa earrings in 18-carat rose gold with yellow, orange and blue sapphires, ruby and tsavorite, £15,075

JEWELLERY

VanLeles: out of Africa

With designs that showcase the best of her home continent's gems, West African-born jeweler Vania Leles brings a breath of fresh air to Bond Street, says Annabel Davidson



BY ANNABEL DAVIDSON
SEPTEMBER 15, 2015 12:09

I'm just going to come right out and say it – there aren't enough black faces on Bond Street. I'm not talking about the customers (I haven't stood on the corner with a clipboard recently), nor the sales staff, but actual jewellers. But given how many of the world's diamonds originate in Africa (65 per cent according to the World Diamond Council), not to mention other gemstones – emeralds from Zambia, pink opals from Ethiopia, rubies from Mozambique – it seems wholly disproportionate that Vania Leles is the only black person I have ever come across in the industry.

An independent designer with a beautiful salon upstairs on Bond Street, this fact obviously hasn't escaped Leles herself. "My father couldn't believe I was going into jewellery, specifically diamonds, when I told him I was going to study gemstones," Leles recalls. "But as I pointed out to him 'Most diamonds come from Africa, where we are from!'"



VanLeles Lyla's Bow Ring in 18-carat white gold and diamonds, £3,750

[Enlarge](#)

In an email after our meeting, Leles commented that she thinks she is probably the only black woman in the industry (any others out there, please put your hands up!), and the fact that she is a woman is important too. There are lots of female jewellery designers out there – currently holding creative director roles at Boucheron, Cartier, Chaumet, and Boodles to name a few – but black women with their own

jewellery companies? Not so much. So Leles's presence on Bond Street is a breath of fresh air in a diversity sense, but importantly, she's also a real design talent.

"I've put my life savings into this," Leles tells me in faintly Portuguese-accented English – she was born in Guinea-Bissau, West Africa, but educated in Lisbon when her family moved to Portugal. A former model, she had always felt drawn to jewellery, and eventually studied gemstones at the GIA before working for Graff Diamonds, De Beers, and ultimately Sotheby's in the jewellery department ("my dream job," as she refers to the latter role).

Now, with her own salon on one of the most iconic jewellery streets on the planet, Leles has poured everything she has into the business. Outfitted in feminine greys and whites, with her beloved butterfly images on the walls, VanLeles, the name under which she operates, is a discreet, light-filled salon showcasing Leles's jewellery, which ranges from utterly classic to promisingly unique and original.



VanLeles Bridal earrings in white gold with emerald and diamonds, £23,850

[Enlarge](#)

There are sweet diamond bows (a classic jewellery motif) knotted as earrings, rings and bracelets, but these bows are pleasingly askew. There are pink sapphire flowers clustered together in the Enchanted Garden collection, their leaves picked out in green tsavorites or enhanced with soft pink tourmaline drops. But for me, the really

exciting pieces are the Legends of Africa earrings – rough maps of the continent in a rainbow of coloured sapphires, rubies and tsavorites, or in vibrant pinks via emeralds, rubies and tourmalines.

Leles knows she's onto something here, but she's also being sensible by providing a classic line of familiarly beautiful styles that customers won't find too directional – this is Bond Street, after all. But scraps of paper on her office wall of West African women in traditional costume, samples of Dutch Wax fabric and sketches show that Leles has her roots in mind – and the more that comes out in her designs, the better.

VANLELES
vanleles.com



MORE LIKE THIS



In My Jewellery Box: Vania Leles



Poring over Cartier's panther

End of summer jewels

Dior's high jewellery diffusion line

+ SAVE TO NOTEBOOK