



VANIA LELES

A BEJEWELLED JOURNEY

| By Smitha Sadanandan

Guinea-Bissau-born jewelry designer Vania Leles has a penchant for finding delightful inspirations – be it in nature, travels or fond childhood memories. This time, she has scoured through the annals of history all the way to Africa and back. On this creative journey, she stumbled upon a gem of a story: a story of two phenomenal women; a story of hope and triumph mired in the saga of slavery.

Vania's arduous research helped her discover more about these extraordinary women from the 19th century: Dido Elizabeth Belle and Sarah Forbes Bonetta. Dido Belle was of mixed-race and her father, who was a naval captain, brought her to England and raised her as a free woman. Dido Belle went on to become "Britain's first Black aristocrat." Sarah Bonetta was a West African girl from the Yourba clan, who was captured in a slave hunt and later sold as a 'present' to Queen Victoria. The Queen took the girl under her wing, and soon her life was transformed.



LEGENDS OF AFRICA

Positivity joined forces with creativity, as Vania collaborated with Gemfields. She crafted a five-piece high jewelry collection – featuring ethically sourced Zambian emeralds and diamonds – for her Legends of Africa emerald collection that was released this summer.

Comprising two bold rings, an asymmetrical collar necklace, chandelier cascade earrings and an eye-catching cuff, the collection is an ode to Dido Belle and Sarah Bonetta. “I was struck by their stories and how, from difficult beginnings, they were swept up by English aristocrats and welcomed into British society. They are wonderful stories of hope and I found that really exciting,” says Vania, who took nearly two years to put together the Gemfields Legends of Africa collection.

With Gemfields and Vania both sharing “the same ethos and commitment to the local communities where the materials come from,” it was only a matter of time that they joined hands to come up with a sparkling surprise.

A former catwalk model, Vania studied at the Gemmological Institute of America after which she honed her skills by working for luxury jewellers De Beers and Graff. She accrued industry expertise at Sotheby’s Jewelry Department before launching her own line, VanLeles Diamonds, in 2011. “In some ways it has been hard for me to break into the high jewelry world, as I did not have any previous connections. But the journey has, so far, been a really exciting one and I’ve found people have been very supportive of me,” says Vania, who works out of her atelier on New Bond Street in London.

During her research, the designer stumbled upon photographs of these women dressed in scalloped dresses. That’s how fashion came to play a key part in accentuating the silhouette. “I used elongated arches that echoed the shapes of the scalloped dresses, but incorporated them into modern pieces, inspired by the strength of the spirit of these remarkable women.” The design – rendered in round cabochons, faceted pear shapes, faceted round brilliant-cut emeralds and round diamonds – has a Goth accent to it. Vania has, for the first time, used blackened gold in her design to create the perfect backdrop that most complemented the emeralds. “I found that the emeralds really stood out if set in a soft blackened gold,” says the designer, whose fluid design has pear-shaped emeralds cascading down the form.

MUSSULO COLLECTION

She has crafted two more stunning exquisite sets, both of which romance her heritage and culture. For the Mussulo sapphire and diamond creations, Vania draws upon the namesake peninsula off Luanda, where she used to visit during holidays with her family. “We mainly travelled throughout Africa, exploring the continent and were exposed to



its beauty, richness and strength. That’s why I have so many positive memories and feelings towards the continent and all that it has to offer.” Moreover, when possible, she sources her materials from Africa – it is, after all, the continent richest in natural resources and the perfect place to source magnificent gems for high jewelry.

ZANZIBAR COLLECTION

Vania’s elegant Zanzibar collection is adorned with fine Paraibas that are evocative of lush blues and turquoise of the sea. The clever use of the gems from Brazil and Mozambique, varying in color tones, lends an ethereal look to the gorgeous pieces. “I always find that if you play with slightly different tones of the same stone, it gives the jewelry a feeling of life and depth. This was really important in these pieces, as they were inspired by nature which is never uniform.”

Red, she divulges, is the gem color of choice for her forthcoming pieces. “It’s a surprise! But it will be bold and full of color.” Vania’s surprises are always precious. It’s guaranteed to be worth the wait.