

Blending artisanal craft and African storytelling with Thabisa Mjo

 By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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Thabisa Mjo has designed one of South Africa's [Most Beautiful Objects](#), been named one of the country's [hottest young designers](#), and listed among the *Mail & Guardian* [200 Young South Africans](#) - all before the age of 35.



Thabisa Mjo. Source: Supplied

Her penchant for creatively telling uniquely African stories through the medium of design has earned Mjo recognition not only on home soil but abroad, seeing her work exhibited at the likes of Milan Design Week and forming part of the permanent collection at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris – a first for a local designer.

The renowned museum acquired two of her pieces – an eye-catching Mjojo cabinet and the iconic Tutu 2.0 lamp which was voted the Most Beautiful Object in SA in 2018.



Mojo cabinet and Tutu 2.0 lamp. Source: Supplied



The creative entrepreneur, who owns Johannesburg-based Mash. T Design Studio, sees herself as a storyteller first, designer second. Her famous Tutu 2.0 lamp is a case in point, being inspired by the structural, tiered layers and colourful vertical pleats of Xibelani skirts worn by Tsonga women, which reminded Mjo of the iconic ballet tutu.

This lighting design earned her the Nando's Hot Young Designer talent search title in 2015, alongside Samantha Foaden, and rocketed Mjo to success.



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Artistic collaboration and tradition behind Alfred's Lights

Over the last few years, as her Mash. T Design business has grown, Mjo has increasingly sought out collaborations with artisans who use techniques that are quintessentially South African.

"For me, arts and crafts, and anything handmade, represent luxury, and my aim is to merge these traditional production methods with forward-thinking design," says Mjo, whose design studio focuses on furniture, lighting and accessories that celebrate African craft."

Her latest collection, called Alfred's Lights, is a line of striking telephone wire pendants created in collaboration with Elizabeth Joubert of interior design studio, Tin Lab, together with the recently deceased master weaver Alfred Ntuli, who was known for weaving geometric patterns with telephone wire.



Alfred's Lights. Source: Supplied

Telephone wire weaving is a longstanding local artisan practice rooted in the 1960s, when Zulu night watchmen started weaving scraps of telephone wire around their traditional sticks. The practice became popular among Zulu communities, and today there is great creativity in the use of this medium.

Commenting on the collaborative effort put into the new collection, Mjo says, "As usual, nothing we do is ever just a single person's efforts. From the management team at Bambizulu, who connected us with bab' Alfred, to the artisans at African Art Centre, who helped produce the pendants, and our collaborator, Elizabeth Joubert, whose idea it was to create a telephone wire pendant, the final product is a community effort – a result of everyone's hearts and skills coming together."

Here, Mjo reflects on her approach to her work and her entrepreneurial journey in the creative industry.

■ ***Thabisa, you've created an illustrious career for yourself in quite a short space of time. When did you notice you had an affinity for design?***

Unexpectedly, winning a design competition is what made me discover that I had this ability to design products.

■ ***Can you comment on how you've aimed to weave storytelling into your designs, and why you believe this to be important?***

The idea that people can use their hands to lovingly and sometimes in great discomfort, create beautiful things speaks to human ingenuity. And particularly in the South African context, these are skills passed down from generation to generation – a most beautiful inheritance.

I feel so proud that I can do my part to share them with the world and to help create a platform that these crafters can use to generate an income.

■ ***You now run your own Mash T Design studio. What are some of the lessons you've learned starting and running your own studio?***

So many lessons that I'm still learning. The value of having systems in place, building a team, communicating the values and vision in such a way that it inspires said team, correct pricing is everything.

Humility, having a teachable spirit, listening to understand and not just to respond. Having clarity on who your market is and how to get your brand in front of them. There's tons, and I could keep going, but I'll spare you.

■ ***What led you to specialise in lighting and furniture design?***

My desire to create things that people can use and enjoy in their daily lives.

■ ***What was it like working with Elizabeth Joubert and Alfred Ntuli on the new collaborative collection of telewire pendants?***

It was challenging and in the end, gratifying. Bab' Ntuli just recently passed away so this very special project has become even more meaningful.



Alfred's Lights. Source: Supplied

■ ***Can you expand on your viewpoint that "anything handmade, represents luxury"?***

Because it's not only the hours spent making the thing, but it's the maker's life experience woven into that piece; their time, their goals, their best efforts, their minds; making something with your hands is all-consuming. That's luxe!

■ ***You're the first SA designer to have their work form part of the permanent collection of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris (huge congrats). What does this achievement mean to you, and do you believe the world is taking enough notice of African designers?***

Thank you. It feels very cool, like I'm on the right track. But above that, it speaks to the value of community: the community it takes to make these products; the communities whose stories and heritage inspire us all the time; the community of early adopters of Mash T.



Musée des Arts Décoratifs adds SA designer's work to permanent collection

27 Oct 2020

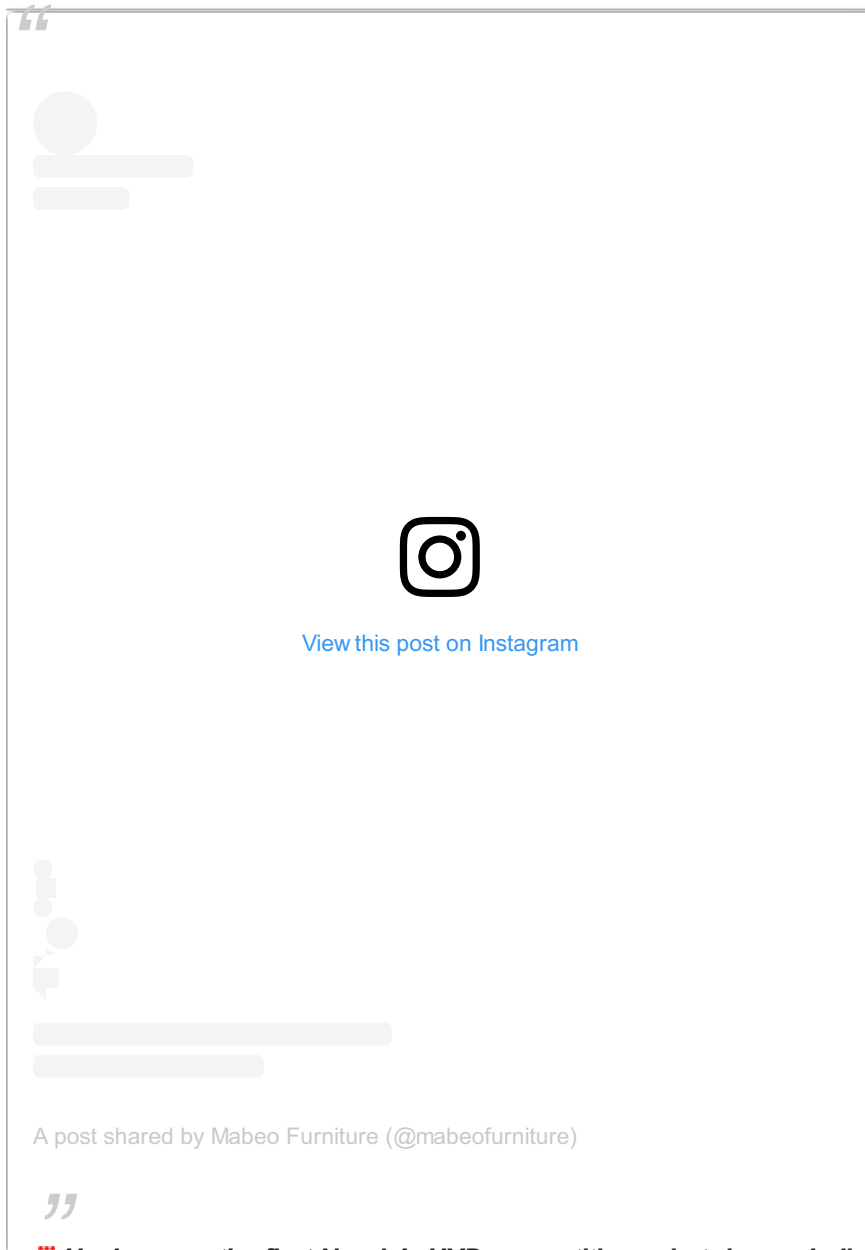


■ ***How do you get your creative juices flowing when it feels like they're running a little dry?***

I try not to think about it and just believe that "it will come". It always comes.

■ ***What is the world's most beautiful object, in your opinion?***

Why the Tutu of course. Every time I see it, I think "dammit she's pretty", after all this time. Also, the entire collection that Peter Mabeo just made for Fendi. Absolutely breathtaking!



A post shared by Mabeo Furniture (@mabeofurniture)

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■ Having won the first Nando's HYD competition, what do you believe platforms such as these can offer aspiring young SA designers trying to make a career out of their work?

They're invaluable. It's a platform for us to test our ideas, to make things well and to generate sales, which enables us to keep going, to get better and to eventually create jobs.

Nando's has opened entries to its fourth Hot Young Designer talent search. For info and entry details visit: <https://clout-sadesign.co.za>. Entries close on 31 May 2022.

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