

**ROSITA MISSONI**

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# Ideas in Design



## STUDIO VISIT **Virgil Abloh**

*The multidisciplinary talent and Kanye West creative director speaks with us about hip-hop, Modernism, Martha Stewart, and the Internet from his Milan design studio.*

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**You're wearing a Sterling Ruby for Raf Simons shirt. What happens when art and fashion come together?**

There's a synergy that happens when you cross-pollinate. When you use an artist's work in a deeper conceptual context, something greater than fashion or art comes out. I look to do the same in my own work. I work with a lot of young artists and thinkers.

**You studied architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology, where the New Bauhaus was founded and where Mies van der Rohe taught and designed the campus. What inspired your transition to fashion, and how does architecture inform your designs?**

My parents are from Ghana in West Africa. Getting to the States was an achievement, so my dad wanted me to be an engineer. But I was much more into hip-hop and street culture. At the end of that engineering degree, I took an art-history class. I learned about the Italian Renaissance and started thinking about creativity as a profession. I got a master's in architecture and was particularly influenced by Modernism and the International Style, but I applied my skill set to other projects. I was more drawn to cultural projects and graphic design because I found that the architectural process took too long and involved too many people. Rather than the design of buildings, I found myself interested in what happens inside of them—in *culture*.

**Then you started working with Kanye West as his creative director.**

We're both from Chicago, so we naturally started working together. It takes doers to push the culture forward, so I resonate with anyone who's doing that. It's a whole lifestyle. To me, he's the most influential artist today on a popular scale. And that's because he actively participates and studies and stays well-informed. That's why he has this mass influence.

**In terms of pushing culture forward, where would you like to see things headed?**

This is a new thing that I think about a lot: What if our generation isn't living up to the past? We have one foot in the Internet, one foot in the world; who's the next Alexander McQueen or Rem Koolhaas? Are we just on the Internet and consuming things? Unless we are pushing things and making great art, I feel like it's giving a sense of false awesomeness. On a general scale, what makes art great is a resonating, lasting impact. I base a lot of my interests on youth culture and juxtaposition.

**Your influences range from Mies van der Rohe to Martha Stewart, surf culture to Caravaggio.**

I think the only way to push forward is to break barriers. I love the barriers that exist to make a culture what it is. I want to represent the young kids that I relate to. They want to play as well. No longer do you have to go to a design school or be privileged to be a designer. This is the post-Tumblr generation — people naturally have taste. They're more exposed to it. When you break the barriers, you get something new and innovative. Social media makes that all happen.

**So how do we distinguish good from bad culture?**

It's a collective group that decides what matters and what doesn't: How many Instagram likes do you get? Is it in magazines? Do you see it on the streets? A lot of my career burst out of the Internet. It's influenced how I design clothes. I often joke that when I'm not on Instagram I make something for Instagram: I make something square that I want to post.

**How has this post-Tumblr era changed the way we experience the world?**

You can purely live through the Internet now. You don't need to own something to get instant gratification. If your friend meets Madonna and you follow that person, you sort of meet Madonna, too. It gives an emotion and the ability to relate. When you spend time on Tumblr or see other images it opens your mind. You start to relate to other people, cultures, get a sense of being somewhere. You can get the feel of Paris Fashion Week or Art Basel; you don't even need to fly around as much, whereas before, these experiences were only for the subcultures that had access to them.

**You've always been particularly influenced by hip-hop.**

I was born in 1980 — it was the death of rock music and the birth of hip-hop culture. The root of it is style. Hip-hop is about brands. It's about how you present yourself. It's purely about lifestyle, with possessions, a way of speaking, and music. It's a very beautiful socioeconomic thing as well. By nature, hip-hop isn't chic, but if you juxtapose chic with a hip-hop shape, you get something that's awesome. That's what I do when I design clothes.

**You're friends with street-style photographer Tommy Ton. How has fashion changed in the age of social media?**

He's part of that post-Tumblr generation, and he broke the genius idea of capturing people, not just models. Styling is more interesting than brand names: That's the new cool. Looking at street-style images is part of my design process. I love these people dressing up and showing up at fashion shows just to be photographed.

**You're working on a children's book, a book about your work, a store, and a furniture collection. What are you thinking about right now?**

Right now, I'm focusing on the furniture. I'm working with marble and metal-mesh grids. Everything is made in Italy by an Italian supplier and obviously I'm not just gonna leave it as a super-tasteful marble slab. I've hand-carved graphics and words onto the marble. In this series, it simply says the word "White." It's a mix of all the things that make up the ideology of my brand. You can't do that with T-shirts, so I feel that I have to do both. I'm also working on a book on my design process and the Internet. It's important to document these things in book format. I'm working on a trail of books — and I don't even read. Books add a sort of permanence; culture needs to be captured in print format to be around later. I don't trust the Internet. It's so fragmented.

**Throughout these projects, you've been searching for your voice. How would you describe it?**

My Instagram defines me.



(LEFT TO RIGHT) A mix of street style and opulence at Abloh's studio in Milan. Shirts from Abloh's brand, Off-White.

