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MAY 2010





# An African Dream

Anna and Tonio Trzebinski were once leaders of Nairobi's modern-day Happy Valley set, known for their wild lifestyle. He was a painter, while she promoted his art and dabbled in fashion. Together the pair were the celebrity couple of Kenya. But everything changed in 2001 when Tonio Trzebinski was shot dead. The future was left in Anna's hands and necessity dictated she must make a living for herself. Today her fashion designs, inspired by Africa's tribal traditions and ancient handicrafts, permeate the upper echelons of the fashion world with Kate Moss and Princess Caroline of Monaco among her fans, and she lives an entirely different existence.

Anna Trzebinski is in Hong Kong with a trunk full of her unique, indigenous designs which she is offering exclusively in a private show at The Upper House. The designer seems totally in awe of the city whose variance to her homeland of Africa must be immense. From rural expanses stretching to the horizon and filled with exotic wildlife, Trzebinski has come to a city that is vertical, its high rises towering above the concrete streets, the contrast of life in the commercial city terrifyingly foreign to a woman whose existence today revolves around life in the hinterlands of Africa.

This wasn't always how it was for Anna Trzebinski. Once upon a time life had a very different flavour to it. Anna Trzebinski was born Anna Cunningham-Reid and is a descendant of Lord Delamere, one of the first Europeans to settle in colonial Kenya. Although born in Germany, she grew up in Kenya in a small but powerful white colonial enclave of the African nation. Though she studied at boarding school in England, following that up by graduating from London's School of Economics with a degree in Economics and International Politics, and going on to do a History of Art course with Sotheby's which served to inspire her creative side, she returned to Africa soon afterwards.

Back in Africa, Anna started seeing British abstract painter Tonio Trzebinski, himself a high-flying member of white Kenyan society and a talented artist. Both were involved with other people when they met but passion overtook the pair and in 1991 they married. They settled in Nairobi, Anna dedicating herself to supporting her husband in his work, using her contacts to attract galleries and establish his name in the art world.

Tonio was a passionate artist but was also known for his wild antics and the two of them made a name for themselves through the lively parties and extended gatherings that took place in a blur of alcohol and cocaine at the beautiful home they had built for themselves. Things between Tonio and Anna often looked rosy from the outside, but at times other women got in the way and shortly before Tonio's death Anna discovered that her husband was having an affair with Danish model, hunter and writer Natasha Illum Berg, though both Tonio and Illum Berg insisted it was a purely platonic relationship.

It was on Tonio's way to visit Illum Berg that he was murdered, his body discovered just feet from his car. A bullet had been fired from close-range and in such proximity to Illum Berg's house that her servants had heard the gun shot and a car speeding away.

Tonio's murderer has never been discovered and questions continue to surround his killing. Most have settled on the answer that it was an attempted car jack gone wrong, a frequent occurrence in Nairobi. However Tonio still had a significant sum of money in his wallet, his watch remained on his wrist and the car was left behind, characteristics not entirely in keeping with such a crime. Only his mobile phone was taken. Others have suggested a premeditated murder, either related to his affair or to his drug use. Loved by many, Tonio was nevertheless known for his temper and arrogance and inevitably had enemies. However, while suspects were aplenty, no one has ever been reprimanded.

Though Anna and Tonio were not on speaking terms at the time of Tonio's death and Anna knew about his affair with Illum Berg, she was devastated by the loss of her husband and for a long time found it difficult to even fathom how she and her two children, Stas and Lana, could go on. Tonio's work had been on the rise at the time of his death and he was becoming a sought-after artist but that was all over and it was now her turn.

In 2001, just before Tonio's murder, Anna had accompanied her husband to an exhibition in New York, bringing with her a suitcase full of pashminas that she had begun to adapt, adding ostrich and flamingo feathers or Maasai beading to the scarves, lending them a distinct African edge. She had sourced the pashminas from Nepal and they were of the highest quality - an expensive investment, but one that would pay off.

Fashion for Anna had begun after girlfriends quickly became enamoured with pashminas that she had customised for herself. Wearing them out and about she couldn't believe how well they were received, and from Nairobi to New York, the world for Anna Trzebinski and her fashion began to open up. She would take her pashminas, and later suede coats and accessories to the homes of the wealthy in New York and London, often following the tour of Tonio's art. It was at these private sales that













she made essential contacts for the future. "I was introduced to buyers at Donna Karan, back when she still owned it. They put in a whole order for their lifestyle department where you could buy one-off pieces. When she opened her Soho shop, (one of my full-length suede) coats was in the window. It still had my label in it," enthuses Anna. From Donna Karan she was picked up by Paul Smith, and under the label Anna Trzebinski for Paul Smith she did pashminas and kaftans. It was every emerging designer's dream.

However, for Anna fashion was just something that she was pursuing on the side. She spent most of her time and energy helping Tonio with his art. But after his death it was up to her. She had just delivered her first creations to Donna Karan and Paul Smith and it was the perfect opportunity to jump on the bus and ride it as far as she could. "Necessity makes you do things. Overnight I needed to start making a living quickly. I didn't go off and get a job. I think it's braver to do something you love doing. You just need the focus and drive to sit back and think," says the designer whose exclusive items still have a strong following behind them today.

Anna expanded her collection and increased the frequency of her trunk shows and supplied her products through various other retailers, particularly in London. However, today although she still travels the world with a suitcase full of her unique items, she no longer sells through other outlets, but solely through her studio in the outskirts of Nairobi. Though unconventional, this approach creates less hassle and Anna no longer has to adhere to the standard retail seasons but can continue to produce classics, each of which is contemporary and wearable, yet distinct and tribal-inspired and elusively difficult to get hold of.

Anna's studio consists of around 40 women, most of whom have worked

with the designer since she started in 2001. One of her aims is to ensure that she not only supports traditional handicrafts but also indigenous women. Her workers are paid between US\$300 and \$500 a week so they have a regular income and their hours are flexible.

"I'm so fascinated by the sensibility of the traditional crafts of indigenous people because I can't do it myself. It takes time and energy to do that and not get paid much," she says, referring to the intricate beading work and detailing that features on many of her items. "It's a high-end product

for sophisticated customers. It's all rooted in the abilities of someone and is something that is dying out. The women take so much pride in their work and their original pieces are a direct translation of their own culture."

Anna's designs make use of a variety of materials, many from her African home, but others from further afield yet sourced and used with the same dedication to craftsmanship and heritage. The ostrich feathers that adorn her silkily smooth Nepalese pashminas hail from South Africa, along with the crocodile that forms the spine of her belts. Guinea fowl feathers and hand-collected flamingo

feathers from the various lakes of Kenya also make an appearance on her accessories while hand-carved cow-horn buttons fasten up her stylish coats made from German suede. Her cashmere is currently sourced from Mauritius though she is looking into Mongolian cashmere, reputedly the world's best. Traditional Maasai beading adorns many of her designs in the classic black, red, yellow, white and green colours, from bags to sandals to jackets, and on occasion you can dig deep into her trunks and discover antique silver and one-off jewellery pieces, though, as all her items are handmade, each Anna Trzebinski product is a unique work of art as well as a striking creation. "It's not like something that is out there and that people can just go and buy," she explains. "What people buy and wear says a lot about them, and I make things that say a lot."

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Nevertheless, the designer's work is not easy. "Africa is so organic. It's so hard to get things done and to get them done perfectly. There is not the mentality of getting something done properly and perfectly. (Being in Hong Kong) makes me realise how much easier my business could be!" she laughs, amazed at the efficiency of the city. However, she is quick to go on to state that Africa is not a place that she could ever leave. While her parents may have been expatriates in the African nation, she considers herself African through and through, if not by blood, then at heart. "Africa is my roots. It has something so strong. It's where I'm from. My products have integrity and roots. If I did manufacturing in China it would be a betrayal. My inspiration comes from traditions."

At the moment Anna is looking to develop her business and expand into homeware products, becoming more of an all-round lifestyle brand. "In my dreams, I would like to be known as the Hermès of Kenya," she says. Anna's passion in the realms of artistic creativity actually began with interior design in the form of the incredible house that she and Tonio created and in which she continues to live today. Today, her furniture and other household pieces that she has designed adorn the camps that the designer also runs alongside her fashion business with new husband Loyaban Lemarti, a Kenyan tribal warrior of the semi-nomadic Samburu tribe.

Anna met Lemarti while trekking through the Laikipia region as she tried to clear her head a year after the murder of Tonio. Lemarti worked there as a guide and the two immediately connected, eventually marrying in 2005. Today they have a young daughter together as well as their collection of three camps under the banner name Rites of Passage. It is here that Anna's distinct design sensibility can be found.

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Combining African-inspired interior design with contemporary luxury, Anna and Lemarti have created a rare oasis in Kenya's Laikipia Plateau. The camps are built on tribal land and the tents have been furnished by Anna who has designed many of the contents herself, from sofas and tables to sculptures and the engravings on glass. "The camp is a jewel of a thing. It's unparalleled in the rest of Kenya," says Anna. They take guests into the lives of the tribal people and offer an experience that isn't about safari and animals but is more about the culture of the natives (the land is inhabited by the Samburu and Maasai) and the experience of the Kenyan environment. "It's so touching to be so completely taken in by indigenous people. There is that combined with style. He's Samburu and I'm not, so

there's a unique sense of style. And it's not hospitality, it's heart."

Anna and Lemarti's camps offer a real experience of Africa, one that is primitive and traditional, one that gives a different kind of insight into the lives of its indigenous people and offers the opportunity to live among them, as one of them, yet in a setting that has been lovingly created and luxuriously designed by the stylish hand of Anna who says that the camps are "for people with a genuine connection to the place they stay; it's all about the experience."

Anna Trzebinski is a true African who provides exclusive, unique and contemporary indigenous designs and experiences as she strives to keep tradition and culture alive through her business. For something totally different, luxurious and elite, Anna Trzebinski is becoming an all-encompassing lifestyle brand, creating something truly African that translates. It all began with a dream, in this case, Anna's African Dream, which is slowly but surely becoming a reality.