



# LAURENCE AIRLINE

*A fashion brand and creative community – with a pool.*

**Turning points don't come much bigger. In 2015, Laurence Chauvin-Butnaud was running her brand Laurenceairline between Abidjan in the Ivory Coast and Paris in France.** Then her headquarters caught fire. The blaze was serious – burning down her workshop almost entirely. And yet, to her surprise, ‘the fire saved the company’. In a way, she continues, ‘the process gave me the opportunity to turn tough experiences into beauty’.

Raised between the Ivory Coast and France, Laurence started her career working at a big luxury fashion brand. Soon, however, she realized she wanted to channel her creativity into her own work. She spent a few years learning the ropes of fashion production as well as designing womenswear and stage costumes, once for Nigerian singer-songwriter Keziah Jones. But it was her first menswear collection – tailored shirts made of African textiles, released in 2010 – when she hit her stride.

‘When I was starting my brand, it wasn't trendy to make African fashion,’ she says. ‘All the raw material was coming from Africa but was transformed outside Africa.’ She wanted to integrate local culture into her finished products, ensuring they weren't viewed as seasonal or cliché. Her designs, she explains, ‘are really African, [as well as] modern and well-made’.

Growing the brand with stockists all around the world took a personal toll. ‘When I finished a collection, I was buying, producing, delivering. I was always executing,’ she says. ‘After five years, I was totally burned out. And then my factory burned.’

Laurence took it as an opportunity to reset the balance of the brand – and her life. She found a house in Grand-Bassam – a quiet seaside city about an hour and a half from Abidjan – and pared back the business. She kept on seven employees, moved her workshop into the garage, stopped releasing seasonal collections and focused on sustainable materials and unisex designs.

The story of those who make each collection is a central part of how she sells her work – each garment is accompanied by a message from one of her team of master tailors. ‘I make my customers understand why I create,’ she says.

Now, Laurence's days are less about the grind and more about mindfulness. She calls the new iteration of her brand a ‘creative ashram’ – a holistic approach to building a business and life that puts care for the community ahead of production goals. ‘To help people feel good is the base.’

Her slower approach isn't limiting the company's growth. She's turned part of the house into a boutique, gallery and hang-out space for the local community and visiting artists, and artist residencies and travel retreats are in the works.

Thinking beyond fashion – and imagining how a business can give back – is Laurence's focus moving forward. ‘It's been a constant evolution, to be present to hear the needs of my community, the needs of those I'm working with, the needs of my clients, and to create something that resonates with the needs of the planet,’ she says. ‘For me, my creativity is connected to everything.’



Laurence's base in Grand-Bassam mixes her personal and professional lives. But keeping everything in one place allows her to attend to the daily needs of the business – managing finances and tracking production – while balancing her creative practice, such as dreaming up new projects and taking time for meditation.

‘In one space, I have my personal apartment; downstairs, I have the boutique atelier; in another space, there's a workshop; in another space, there's an apartment for people in the

arts residency or who've come to work,’ she says. ‘It's a space where we work all together, but there's space where everyone can breathe and have a personal life.’

With this in mind, she designed the boutique less around making sales and more around sharing space.

‘I took time to create this – it's not a supermarket,’ she says. ‘If you come to visit the space, take off your shoes, let's share a proper moment. Time is so precious – it's the only thing we'll never get back. Let's give value to the time we share.’



'I didn't see myself in my business. I wanted to be more in my feminine energy.'



After the fire in Laurence's factory, she had time to slow down and learned an important lesson - as well as set herself a challenge. 'I realized it's not just about doing things to do things - I didn't see myself [in my business],' she says. 'Could I share something from a space where I felt good in myself? I wanted to be more in my feminine energy.' From there, she focused on creating a more holistic business, with thoughtfully produced designs alongside workshops and retreats.



'If you do something where you put in care and love, it's powerful.'



The wider fashion world quickly took to Laurence's unique vision of combining African fabrics and craftsmanship with western tailoring. But, these days, she's focused more on staying true to the internal team that's driven the brand forward.

'More than a brand, I'm a creative and, if I continue to do fashion, it's not because I love fashion - it's because I built a story with my team,' she says. 'Some of the people I work with, we've known each other for more than 20 years - it's a life story.'

Her clothing collections have been inspired by this community, particularly growing up in West Africa in the eighties. Her material choices are also increasingly shaped by sustainability and the desire to keep production local: 80% of materials in her most recent collection were handwoven by a community of craftspeople in Burkina Faso and dyed using natural pigments.

'I'd like to do clothes that are made with care and love - if you do something where you put in care and love, it's powerful,' she says.



After three years of hosting her workshop in her garage, Laurence was able to buy a portion of the house she lives in - which she has transformed into a public-facing boutique and gathering space for the brand. 'I dreamed of a small garden - a small paradise where people can come and recharge,' she says.

While Grand-Bassam may not garner as much attention as major art hubs

like Paris (where she also launched a store this year), opening the doors to the boutique has created a gathering space for the local and international arts community.

'We're creating a sense of destination - if you come to visit one artist, you can visit another,' Laurence says. 'During the weekend, people like to come here - they appreciate having the chance to see

something unexpected and discover something beautiful but connected with an experience.'

Laurence has found that basing her brand in the Ivory Coast has helped to surround her with people who find inspiration globally. 'Grand-Bassam has something that's local and international - touching people who like the slow life but want to be connected to the world.'

