

African Heritage

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answers about Africa, which bugged him.

And while people fell short in their assumptions that Africa was war torn or famined, Rugamba was thinking of a way to share his appreciation for his culture and heritage in a more creative and constructive way.

"My desire was to show the good side of Africa, a more positive image, to be an African that creates a narrative for Africa rather than just what others describe," he said.

Ideas for a potential project followed him back home to Rwanda during the summer of 2011. There, he took to the markets and purchased a bunch of African wax prints or Ankara.

Rugamba says he chose the prints for their history. Over hundreds of years, the prints' bold, rich colors and patterns have been used to celebrate different things: Red for brotherhood through blood, yellow for abundant sunlight, green for prosperity, and some, donning the faces of kings.

Depending on which parts of Africa the designs are based mean different things. When Obama was elected, Kenya sold prints decorated with his face. "It's like wearing a historybook," he said.

Searching for a tailor to construct his designs, Rugamba was approached by a lady from the market who offered to help. He was surprised when she led him to a back alleyway where she had set up shop with one light bulb, a charcoal iron and no real roofing.

Hesitantly, Rugamba explained his sketches to the woman. In three days, he came back was delighted by the quality of her work. He took the bowties to show his two aunts, who immediately asked him if they could use them in a photo shoot they were producing for an article about other young entrepreneurs.

The photos from the shoot came out fantastic, said Rugamba. He then realized he needed to use all the money he had made over summer, which should have been used on books, to make more bowties.

With House of Tayo still in stages of infancy, Rugamba is catching on quickly to fashion production. "I am developing an eye for fashion as I go along," he said. "It's a lot more complicated than it seems—people really care about the art."

Rugamba's collection of bowties and snoods soon built a following on Twitter and Facebook. It wasn't long that the photos he posted wearing his product caught the eye of African Prints in Fashion bloggers.

The young designer was invited for an interview, and two weeks after the article ran, Rugamba was getting calls from other blogs and magazines. "I was blown away," said Rugamba.

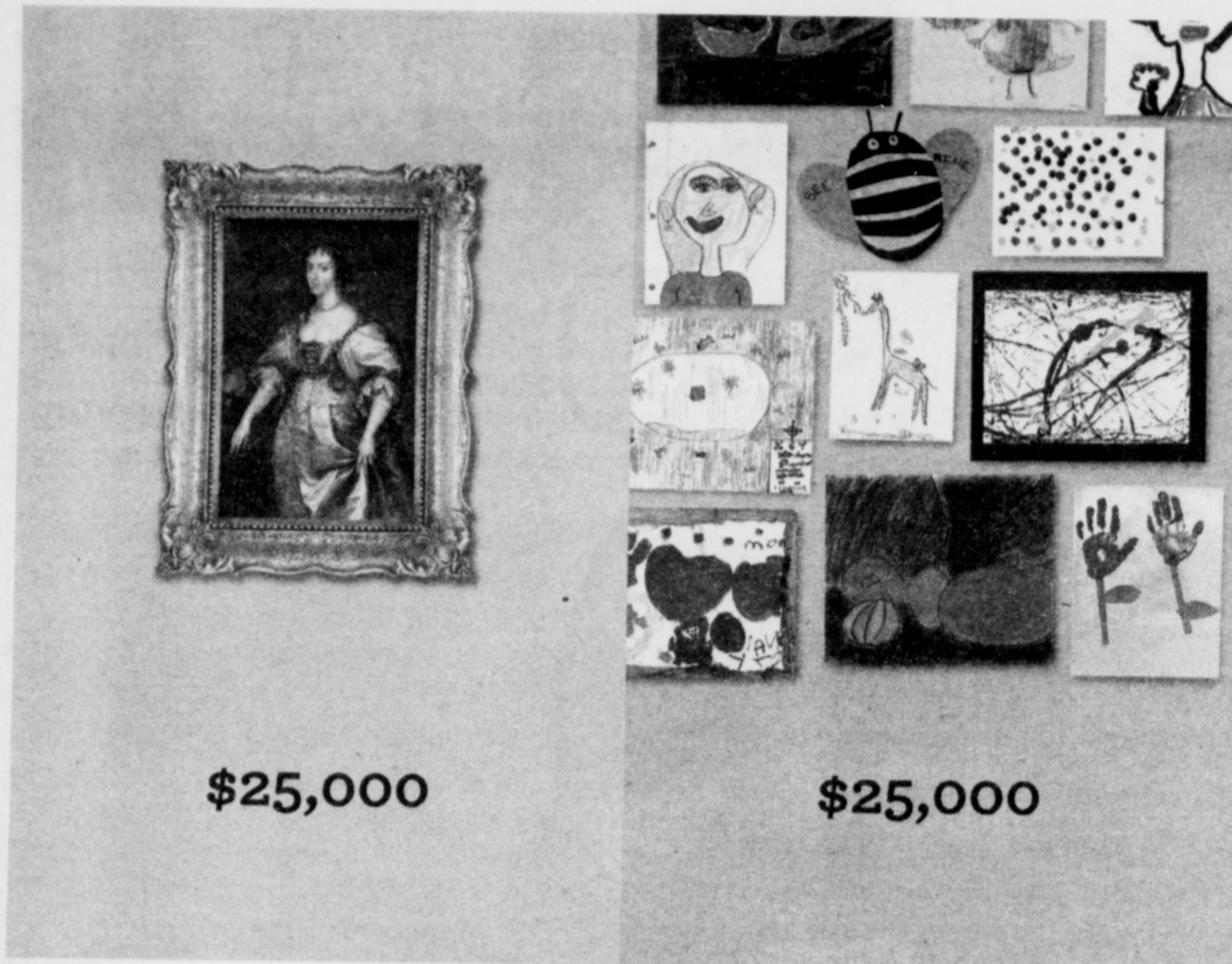
While flattered, he worried demand for his product might be moving faster than he was ready for. He had just a sample collection to bring to a show in Chicago, but they flew him out anyway. Before he left, Rugamba jokes that he watched YouTube videos to familiarize himself with the fashion show run down. "...Do I clap for myself?" he joked.

When African Fashion asked him to be a part of their London show this last August, Rugamba called his family to tell them the news.

"My parents were so confused," he said. "My aunts said this is ridiculous," but were ready to help him design a new summer collection, which he worked 13 hours a day, seven days a week to create. "That was crazy," he said.

Once in London, Rugamba stood out as one of the fashion show's youngest designers. He was shoulder to shoulder with people who had been designing in the industry for more than 30 years. A feeling of self-validation finally came over him.

"That's when I realized full steam



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