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Only Collect: a craft fair infused with a sense of place and identity

From India to Nigeria, makers at the London event were inspired by indigenous materials and traditions

Collect, held at Somerset House, features textiles, jewellery, furniture, ceramics, metalwork, fibre art and glass from 40 galleries and more than 400 artists © David Parry/PA

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As you gaze at your reflection in one of French furniture maker Anton Laborde's marquetry mirrors, you find yourself surrounded by a tropical jungle. Palm fronds appear to dance in the breeze on its wooden frame and the blue ocean stretches out to your left.

Laborde's sculptural furniture and wall panels — on show at London's Collect fair, March 3-5 — draw on the landscapes of a childhood spent in Auroville, India, and other palm-fringed environments such as the Egyptian coast, rendered in woods including Indian amaranth, African padauk and European pear trees.

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With names such as Rivages d'Egypte, and Incredible India, each piece is designed to replicate the feeling of a region through its materials, albeit with a European spin. Such windows into places and cultures abound at Collect, the Craft Council's annual fair featuring the work of more than 400 international makers.

“Craft is often deeply connected to a specific place — influenced by regional materials and making traditions,” says fair director Isobel Dennis. A walk around the fair at Somerset House will transport you across continents.

Anton Laborde's wood marquetry mirror Rivages d'Egypte

In Laborde's case, it's through the lens of childhood nostalgia. For others, the story is more firmly linked to the maker's own cultural identity.

The Nigerian artist Samuel Nnorom creates his colourful wall hangings from recycled Ankara wax cloth — a cotton first manufactured in the Netherlands for the Indonesian market but now synonymous with west Africa.

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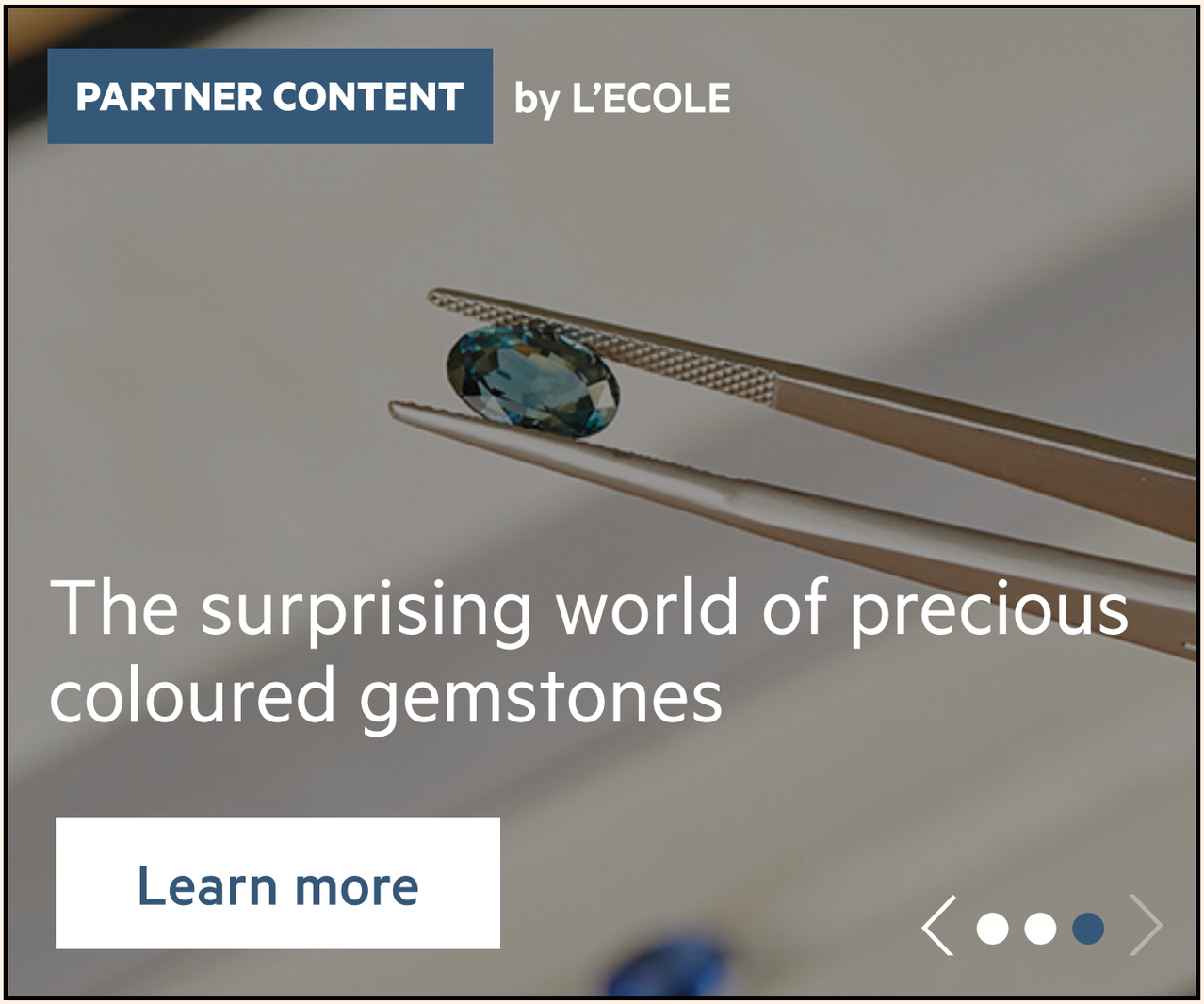
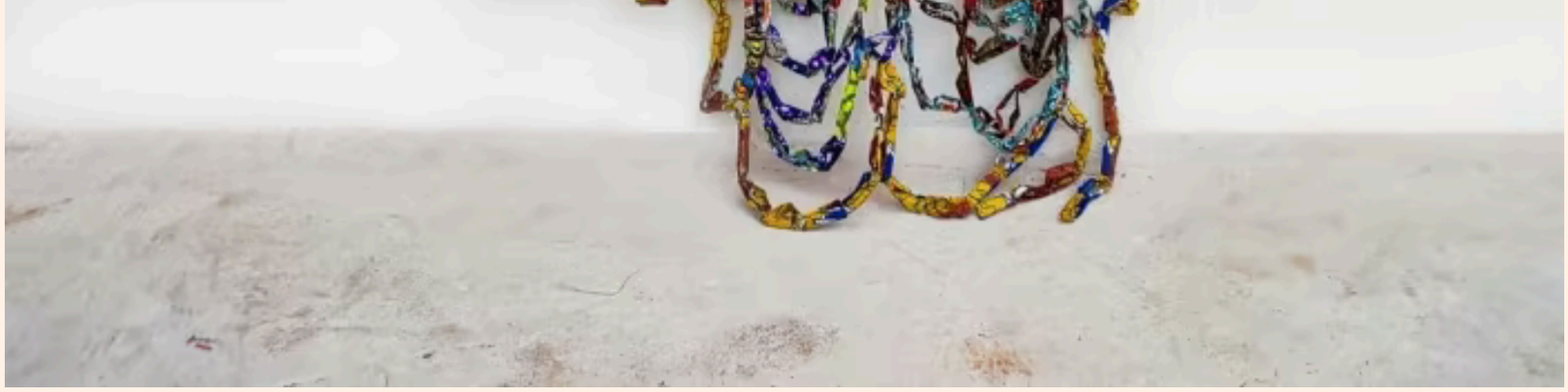


"I wanted to work with a material that represents me, my people, my culture in different ways," says the Nsukka-based artist. "Ankara is an important material worn for celebrations and funerals."



Samuel Nnorom's 'Obianuju' wall hanging made from Ankara wax cloth © Courtesy Galerie REVEL and the artist

Samuel Nnorom: ‘Different regions and tribes in Nigeria have their own languages, which is echoed in their crafts’

He stuffs, stitches and weaves the textile into intricate constellations of bubbles, a riff on the social and economic bubbles that shape our lives. The types of stitches used, such as in Obianuju (2022), reference the weaving style of Akwete cloth — made in Akwete, in the south-east of Nigeria. “Different regions and tribes in Nigeria have their own language, which is echoed in their crafts,” he says.

Both Laborde and Nnorom are represented by Bordeaux-based Galerie Revel, a newcomer to

Collect. “Our artists push the possibilities of their materials, using them to tell stories and address sociopolitical issues in the global south,” says Prince Malik Jewiti, who opened the gallery in 2022 with co-founder Jordan Geloto. “We want to encourage conversations between this region and the rest of the world.”

Ripe by Kampala-based Sanaa Gateja, who uses old newspapers and magazines to create beads, which are hand-tinted with vegetable dyes then stitched on to barkcloth

Nnorom is one of a strong cohort of makers from Africa and its diaspora at this year's Collect. London-based 50 Golborne returns to the fair, bringing the work of makers from Senegal and Uganda. "Artists in Africa have long used the materials available around them as a way to talk about their culture and differentiate their work from the oil-painting tradition in European art," says the gallery's founder Pascale Revert.

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Many artists are doing this with recycled materials. Kampala-based Sanaa Gateja uses old newspapers and magazines to create beads, which are hand-tinted with vegetable dyes then stitched on to barkcloth — an ancient material made from an east African ficus tree. Works such as Ripe and Ready, depicting a tree in bloom, evoke natural landscapes and artefacts from the region.

Now that Covid-19 travel restrictions have eased, galleries from Asia are returning to the Collect fair, including the Beijing newcomer BR Gallery, founded by Sally Li in 2018, with a focus on metalwork.

Banquet (aluminium, tin, polycarbonate) by Yu Zhang, from Beijing 's

Her passion for craft stems from her childhood in Yunnan Province. “My father was a mythologist and he studied the different myths, religions and cultures of the ethnic minorities, often taking me on trips to their villages,” she says. “Seeing different metalwork traditions sparked my interest.”

Her artist Yu Zhang highlights the dying traditions of the Dai people of Yunnan Province and uses them in contemporary styles. For his series of vessels, Banquet, he takes cues from the gold architectural ornamentation of the region but renders it in black aluminium, tin and polycarbonate to sharpen its silhouette.

Lacquer, made from the sap of trees indigenous to south-east Asia, is another medium inherently connected to a region. Hong Kong lacquer specialist The Gallery by SOIL is displaying a tea caddy by Gan Erke, who also has pieces in the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Erke has spent years recreating the techniques for “rhinoceros skin lacquer” that were lost in the 20th century.

Gan Erke, who uses lacquer from the sap of trees in south-east Asia

With the help of historical records, objects borrowed from collectors and a process of trial and error, the resulting dappled effect uses colourful mineral powders. Erke has added a few tricks of his own, inlaying gold, silver and semi-precious stones to add an ethereal glow.

“His work has breathed artistic life into the Huizhou lacquer tradition,” says gallery director Susanna Pang.

As Collect consultant Daniella Wells puts it:

“There’s so much you can learn about the world through the handmade.”

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