

Forbes

This Designer Combines His Nigerian and American Heritage with Spirituality

By Y-Jean Mun-Delsalle
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Nigerian-American designer, [Ini Archibong](#), presents his own vision of spiritual reality, where his pieces are artifacts grounded in storytelling or mythology and based on universal or spiritual themes. He speaks of his background and cultural influences and shares how his works are physical manifestations of the sacred or the spiritual.



Shade table in polished obsidian and glass. PHOTO ANDREAS ZIMMERMANN FOTOGRAFIE

You were born in 1983 in Pasadena. Tell me about your background, your parents and what your childhood was like.

I got in trouble a lot. I was definitely a hyperactive child, really creative. I grew up in a Nigerian household, very academic and high achieving. Those were non negotiable. Both my parents are engineers, my older brother studied pre-med at UPenn, my little

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brother and my dad studied engineering at Columbia, my mom studied computer science at Rutgers. It's a very scientific and academic focused household, you could say. I played a lot of sports and went to polytechnic school, which is a very academic school. I think that the things that I take from my childhood are mostly that that was a time when I developed the skills that help me now, like playing sports, being in the orchestra, figuring out how to score well on tests even though I didn't do any homework – all that stuff kind of trained my mind to be the type of problem solver that it is now.



Below the Heavens collection for Sé. PHOTO CÉCIL MATHIEU

What did your parents think when you decided to go into design?

I think they were confused. Like most people back then, I don't think they knew what it was. When I started working for architects, I think they saw that as something concrete. They understood what architecture was. I don't know necessarily how much they approved of it, but I think one thing that I would say is that going back to college was

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something that they were very happy about, and they were very supportive. I ended up moving back home, and they really took care of me during that time period when I was a young adult, who, by all normal standards, should have already been out in the workforce, but, instead, I was going back to college. I think they fully started to understand when they came to New York and saw my exhibitions at the ICFF. I know that's when they started to understand more about design in the world that I was entering into.



Dark Vernus chandelier in blued steel and glass.
PHOTO ANDREAS ZIMMERMANN
FOTOGRAFIE

they do it purposefully or not, they're making things that represent the amalgamation of all of their experiences up to that point, and how that has shaped their world view. So you can't really escape, if you've lived somewhere that is going to influence the form or the use of the objects that you create.

How have all these experiences and mix of cultures, growing up in California, but having a Nigerian heritage, inform your design today?

I don't really think about this stuff when I'm actually designing, but after I design things and I look at them, I can definitely see the influences of things. I think that I'm somewhat of a cultural sponge, and it allows me to move comfortably in foreign places. I've been to a lot of places where I don't speak the language, where I don't know the cultural norms, but I absorb a lot and I think that when I end up making things, I can look at them afterwards and see. For example, when I look at the pieces in the Sé collections, it's clear the influence that living in Asia had on my design aesthetic. It becomes also clear, if you look at, especially some of the tables, you can clearly see a West African kind of sensibility with a very Asian aesthetic and then a very European material palette. I think that's probably why that collection does pretty well in Beijing or Shanghai. In

retrospect, I can see all the cultural influences quite clearly.

It enters your work subconsciously...

Yeah, I think it's just how it is. I think that any creative who's making things, whether

Your work is grounded in a certain sort of spirituality and mythology. How did you develop a passion for world religions?

I think it probably leads back to this cultural thing where I guess my curiosity about cultures, the spirituality of any culture is usually a great way to understand that culture. So I think that curiosity helps make it a passion. I think growing up in the church, growing up Christian and having a very church-centered life as a kid opened my mind to it, and then also being an avid fan of fantasy and things like that, nature, it makes it quite natural to feel a connection to the spiritual realm, and when you feel that connection, then exploring it and learning more about it is just kind of natural. It started with just collecting and reading books about the mystic side of different religions and continuing to explore and learn more.