

# Pirelli's Next Calendar Shines a Spotlight on Africa

Recent editions have been a form of cultural commentary on issues like race and gender.

By ELIZABETH PATON

LONDON — Wearing a gold strapless gown, the actress Angela Bassett stood before two massive gilded doors while resting one hand on a giant key. She was standing inside a shallow makeshift pool that had been set up inside a heavily guarded photo studio on a muggy Thursday in June. Around the pool's edges, assistants were crouched down and sipping the water with their hands to make waves that lapped at Ms. Bassett's feet.

The actress had come to the studio on an industrial street in North London at the invitation of Prince Gyasi, 28, a Ghanaian artist and the photographer of the 2024 Pirelli calendar: a lavishly produced promotional product bankrolled by that Italian tire manufacturer. It is not sold but instead given to a group of around 12,000 clients, public figures and people Pirelli deems influential, which has made it a sort of collectible.

"I am not a gatekeeper in this scene," Ms. Bassett, 65, explained during a breather from striking poses in the pool. "I'm triumphantly opening the doors wide and telling a next generation to come on through."

While Pirelli has yet to make its calendar widely available since first releasing it in 1964, the company has lately sought to make it appear more accessible. It hired Mr. Gyasi, who is from Accra, Ghana, to produce the calendar at a time when African creatives across fashion, music, film and art are enjoying overdue critical and influence on the global stage.

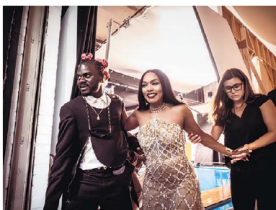
In recent years, Pirelli has mostly moved away from the overtly sexual photographs of scantily clad women that characterized the calendar for decades after it was introduced as a type of high-end pinup amid the sexual revolution. Instead, the company has sought to use the calendar as a form of cultural commentary on issues like race (the 2018 edition featured an all-Black cast) and gender (the #MeToo-inspired 2019 edition aspired to portray its female subjects as dreamers and thinkers).

Though the images in the calendar have become more diverse, the 2024 edition was the first installment produced by a Black photographer.

Known for making bold, colorful images, Mr. Gyasi, who is also the first African photographer to shoot the Pirelli calendar, has tried to challenge traditional narratives about Africa as well. Working with local artists in his work. He said the opportunity to shoot the calendar was too good to turn down, partly because he would be following in the footsteps of celebrated photographers like Annie Leibovitz, Tim Walker and Albert Watson.



PHOTOGRAPHER BY ALESSANDRO SCOTTI



Featured in the 2024 Pirelli calendar, clockwise from top: Ghanaian royalty; Idris Elba; and Angela Bassett.

For his edition, which focuses on the themes of Black empowerment and mastering time, Mr. Gyasi also assembled an all-Black cast. Along with Ms. Bassett, it included the actor Idris Elba, the supermodel Naomi Campbell and the Nigerian pop star Tiwa Savage. Everyone featured in the calendar has inspired him, he said, "at times when I've thought cracking the ceiling and to belong in certain spaces was just not possible."

"Now, together, we're closer to removing

the roof for everyone," he added. "It is a victory for Black representation."

On the set in London, Mr. Gyasi wore a black suit with spliced cutaways and gold Schiaparelli earrings, and his electric-pink-tinted hair was in Bantu knots. Before photographing Ms. Bassett, he had been shooting in a different corner of the studio that had been arranged to look like a classroom with sunshine yellow walls and a blue chalkboard.

Around the board were the poet Amanda

'It's a victory for Black representation.'

PRINCE GYASI  
PHOTOGRAPHER OF  
THE 2024 PIRELLI CALENDAR

Gorman, who was scrawling equations devised by Mr. Gyasi while hanging from a pink ladder, and the "Hidden Figures" author Margot Lee Shetterly, who sat on a stool nearby. Both women had their hair in intricate braids and were wearing custom gowns made with painted hay.

While her braids were being unwound after the shoot, Ms. Gorman, 25, said she and Ms. Shetterly, 54, "looked modern, but also like we could be queens from another time or even dimension." Mr. Gyasi's cast of Black subjects, she added, "was an enormous source of power and inspiration."

Despite the calendar's limited distribution, Ms. Gorman said, "Pirelli still has incredible liquid cultural capital — especially online."

"It still matters," she added.

Lucie Greene, a trend forecaster and the founder of Light Years, a consulting firm in London, said that Pirelli's decision to hire Mr. Gyasi could make the new calendar more relevant among a younger demographic.

"The brands with the most appeal to Generation Z sell a point of view over their product," Ms. Greene said. "That audience sees themselves as polymathic creators and curators, side hustlers and entrepreneurs; they like those values," she added, noting Louis Vuitton's recent hiring of the musician and hip-hop producer Pharrell Williams as its men's creative director. (His predecessor, Virgil Abloh, was also a multi-hyphenate creative.)

In addition to using the calendar as a way to honor individuals who have inspired him, Mr. Gyasi said he also wanted his edition to spotlight his home country, Ghana, where he has produced some of his most memorable photographs, including a color-saturated series he shot using an old phone from his uncle that helped to kick-start his career.

In July, Mr. Gyasi checked that box with a photo shoot in Accra, where he ushered in another milestone for the Pirelli calendar by shooting its first royal subject: Otuomuo Osei Tutu II, the king of the Ashanti empire in Ghana. The king, who has been on the throne for 25 years, was photographed in traditional robes while surrounded by a court of almost two dozen elders.

"Ghana is part of me, who I am and my identity," Mr. Gyasi said. "I wanted to showcase all its beauty, its majesty and its potential."

"My calendar," he said, "is a reflection that Africa's time is now."

PIRELLI AND GYASI'S 2024 PIRELLI CALENDAR PHOTOGRAPHER BY ALESSANDRO SCOTTI

pressreader