

Introduction

Protection, prestige, power, beauty and pure decoration are some of the ways various cultures use textiles. This commonality permits all people to appreciate the textiles of West Africa.

Inspiration for design is derived from their culture and spiritual world in almost everything Africans make: spoons, carved *calabashes* (gourds), gold weights, pendants, the designs in pottery and on mud walls, the details on carved house posts or on masks, as well as in the traditionally patterned fabrics of Africa. This exhibit includes costumes, fabrics, hats, jackets and textile masks which contain classic examples of traditional African textiles and textile designs. It provides a unique opportunity to learn about Africa, its costumes and its cultures.

Africans often wear their art, which is rich in visual symbols. The designs carry meanings integral to the cultures: the coiled snake supports the world; should the snake become uneasy, his nervous undulations cause earthquakes. The symbolism, in this example, comes from the Fon people of Benin.

The famous motifs of the Bambara people of the Ivory Coast include antelope heads, turtles, lizards, snakes, fish, a mask and geometric images. The use of these fabrics did more than merely cover the body, the motifs also represented a person's rank. Stories were told with each symbol and decorative line.

In Zaire, men produce 20-foot lengths of fabric made from beaten palm; the naturally tan colored material is applied and stitched with dyed raffia thread and may only be worn by the King and his wives.

Silk *Kente* cloth from Ghana is woven in a pattern of stripes and decorated squares, with each square telling a tale.

African cloth is often woven on a loom, which produces a strip from 1½ to 12 inches wide. These strips are then sewn together to form large textiles, blankets and clothing. The strips may be plain, using undyed homespun cotton, or beautifully intricate and colorful. Materials may include cotton (homespun or commercially made), silk (wild and homespun, or unraveled thread from oriental cloth) or synthetics. The use of appliqué, tie-dye, resist dye and painting are also used in the creation of these textiles. Western designers have "discovered" African textiles and are now copying some of these patterns and techniques. Even recent historical events can be the inspiration for new patterns, which, if they are popular, become standard and traditional.

Our display honors the creativity and artistry of these mostly unknown African craftsmen.

Roda Graham, Curator



Patchwork Skirt With Raffia Embroidery: Kuba, Zaire

Raffia cloth made from the raffia palm is decorated with abstract dark embroidery outlines. Sometimes the pattern is created by the outline of a patch. By stitching under the surface weave and over the back weave, the pattern emerges on one side with the obverse remaining blank. Many pieces of raffia cloth are sewn together to form these long skirts, which are worn by men or women. The skirts are held in place by belts decorated with cowrie shells imported from the Indian Ocean.

"As highly prized objects of value, these decorated cloths are used as gifts in establishing relations of reciprocity. For example, at a betrothal a youth's female relatives embroider a skirt that he has woven for the bride-to-be. ...Men's or women's skirts serve as compensation in legal settlements, such as in adultery or divorce cases. The use of decorated garments is integrally linked with public ceremonies." ¹

Roda Graham, Curator, Dr. Gilbert Graham, Curator

¹Adams, Monni, "Kuba Embroidered Cloth," *African Arts Magazine*. November 1978, Vol. XII, No 1, p.30.



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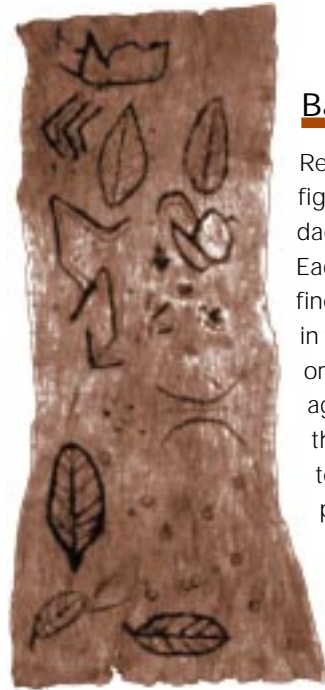
THE Spirit OF West african textiles

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This exhibit is organized and circulated by the Council for Creative Projects, NY.

Wrapper (Blanket): Baule, Ivory Coast

The Baule village (Duassau) is famous for the pottery made there. It has only one weaver, Djeng N'gorau, who weaves a 3 1/2 inch-wide decorated cotton strip with geometric designs. The pictured blanket is made of commercially spun and dyed cotton. Blankets like this one would be ordered from the weaver by a noble, worn by him for his official duties, funeral ceremonies and at dances.



Barkcloth: Pygmies, Zaire

Remarkably, repeated harvesting of the bark of certain fig trees causes no harm to the tree. The tree is banded with banana leaves and heals in about one week. Each subsequent harvesting (up to forty times) produces finer and finer barkcloth. After removal, the bark is soaked in water until it is soft enough to be worked. Using ivory or wooden pounders, one or more men beat the bark against a smooth horizontal tree trunk. The width of the bark expands about tenfold and the length about ten percent. The natural interlacing of the bark fibers produces a soft, felt-like material. After drying, delicate patterns are applied by women using black dye made from the juice of the gardenia seed.

Although these cloths come from the Pygmies, many other African cultures have used barkcloth. The neighboring Kuba still use it in ceremonies, calling it the "clothing of the ancestors." The primary

centers of barkcloth production are in the Congo basin, but it has been made far to the north in Ghana and to the east on the island of Madagascar.

Korhogo (Mud Cloth): Senufo, Ivory Coast

Using simple tools, men make fine line drawings of human and animal forms on coarsely spun, narrow-woven cotton strips sewn together to form the large hanging. Their "paint" may be brown or black fermented mud or modern pigments which they apply while sitting or kneeling in front of their homes. The designs relate to paintings that decorated ritual houses in years past.



The artists take free reign in creating the stylized human, animal, bird and snake forms, some relating to costumed dancers. When entering a Korhogo village, the visitor is met with hundreds of these drawings attached to mud-brick walls and spread on the ground. Today they are made for traders and tourists.

Kente (The Cloth of Kings): Ghana



Kente cloth is made by the *Asanti* (Ashanti) people of Ghana in silk, cotton, rayon or combinations of these yarns. *Kente* is a word in Akan language translated as, "Whatever happens it will not tear." It is a beautiful, rich and complex fabric. Each *Kente* pattern is named and has a meaning. It may recall a historic event, a famous person or a proverb.

Certain patterns were originally reserved for the Asanthe (the king) and the royal family. Often the gowns were large and very costly. Some were made of foreign silks which were unraveled for the thread and rewoven in Ashanti patterns. The intricately designed narrow strips were then sewn together to form the wondrous gowns. These were worn gracefully, thrown over the shoulder in the Roman toga style.

Juliet Highet Brimah writes that traditionally the Ashanti King "...wore a cloth of dark green silk. In Ghanaian symbolism the color green is associated with fertility, vitality, puberty and youthful life: worn during initiation ceremonies or at the beginning of a new year or for the planting season. ...The Asanthe kept close control over the use and distribution of patterns of *Kente* cloth. New designs were (first) offered to the court... ." Thus many designs did not find their way to the open market at the nearby village of Bonwire, which is still the center of *Kente* weaving.

In modern Ghana other Akan cultures such as Ewe, Ga and Fanti also weave *Kente* cloth. For them too, its importance is emphasized by its use in ritual, social and political events.

Elephant Masks: Cameroon



Elephant masks are the most important masks of the Bamileke people of Cameroon. The long front panel represents the trunk and the ears of the elephant are the projecting side panels. Repeated use of this old mask has necessitated replacement of the ears.

These masks belong mainly to the Kuosi Society whose members include royalty and warrior-status titleholders of the kingdom. The Society's high entrance fees were once used to procure arms in time of war.

In addition to appearing at members' death ceremonies, Kuosi sponsors bi-annual public celebrations, not unlike other Bamileke secret societies. The richly beaded masks and their accoutrement constitute the most dazzling and ostentatious display of a Bamileke kingdom's wealth. There are ranks in Kuosi membership masks and vestments. The beads are usually imported. The fabric here is factory-made broadcloth and hidden beneath is

handwoven raffia cloth. The effect is uniquely Cameroon! Just imagine the trunk and ears flapping as the masquerader moves to the beat of the music.