



DAVID ADJAYE SELECTS

COOPER
HEWITT

WORKS FROM THE PERMANENT COLLECTION

JUNE 19, 2015 - FEBRUARY 7, 2016

David Adjaye Selects: Works from the Permanent Collection is the twelfth exhibition in the Nancy and Edwin Marks Collection Gallery series devoted to showcasing the museum’s collections. London-based architect David Adjaye is of Ghanaian descent and has traveled extensively throughout Africa. He has been deeply impacted by African textiles, and their geometries and abstractions are often reflected in his buildings. For this installation, he has mined the museum’s little-known collection of West African textiles to create a “collective form” of vibrant patterns.

David Adjaye Selects is made possible by the Marks Family Foundation Endowment Fund.

UNRAVELING THE NARRATIVES OF PLACE AND CULTURE

BY DAVID ADJAYE

Textiles are powerful sources of exploration and citation. Inherent in their production and design is a narrative about culture that I consider absolutely critical to the practice of architecture. When given the opportunity to explore Cooper Hewitt’s collection, I was immediately struck by its West African textiles.

The diverse techniques and abstractions associated with these works from Africa have long been a source of inspiration for me, both personally and in my work. My design process is based on a fundamental notion of responsiveness: the idea that the built environment

should be in meaningful conversation with the geography and culture of its surroundings. In our current globalized and commercialized world, architecture can often feel imposed, offering a spectacle of modernity rather than specific and contextualized paths into the future. This is of particular concern in Africa, where we are only very recently coming to understand the continent’s distinct expression of modernity. This cavity of understanding is what motivated my eleven-year urban exploration of the continent, during which I visited nearly every capital city in an attempt to better understand the histories and cultures there.



Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, DC (current); Rendering: Adjaye Associates

Through this research, it became clear to me that the political map of Africa distorted our capacity to recognize the amazing diversity of culture across the continent—and the critical role that geography has played in shaping it. It drew into sharp focus a need for architecture that utilizes the lessons of the past to offer possibilities for the future.

Examining textiles has often informed and guided my work. The process of unraveling the unique forces that have given rise to their construction reveals the specific cultural narratives of place. Sometimes this relationship is quite explicit, as in the case of the *Adinkra* wrapper (see pg. 12), which features symbology

that communicates the core values and historical touchstones of Asante culture. Other times, it is the construction process that directs us to the sympathetic relationship between culture and geography: it is often the character of local materials that determines the crafting process and, in turn, materializes an incredible diversity of design. This is powerfully illustrated in the *Bamana*’s resourceful exploitation of mud solution in their textiles (see pg. 17), and in the stunning Yoruban *adire* wrapper (see pg. 4), dyed with indigo derived from the leaves of local flora. These techniques can be seen as inspirational for modern architectural initiatives seeking to provide a more sustainable and culturally relevant built environment.



Alaara Concept Store, Lagos, Nigeria (current); Photo: Studio Hans Wilschut

These textiles also tell a human story. They reveal the narrative of human experience behind wide-sweeping changes that have touched the continent. The Kalabari use Indian cotton as a starting point for their cut-thread *pelete bite* wrapper (see pg. 16), but through an intricate process involving the selective removal of specific threads, the fabric is transformed into something entirely different.

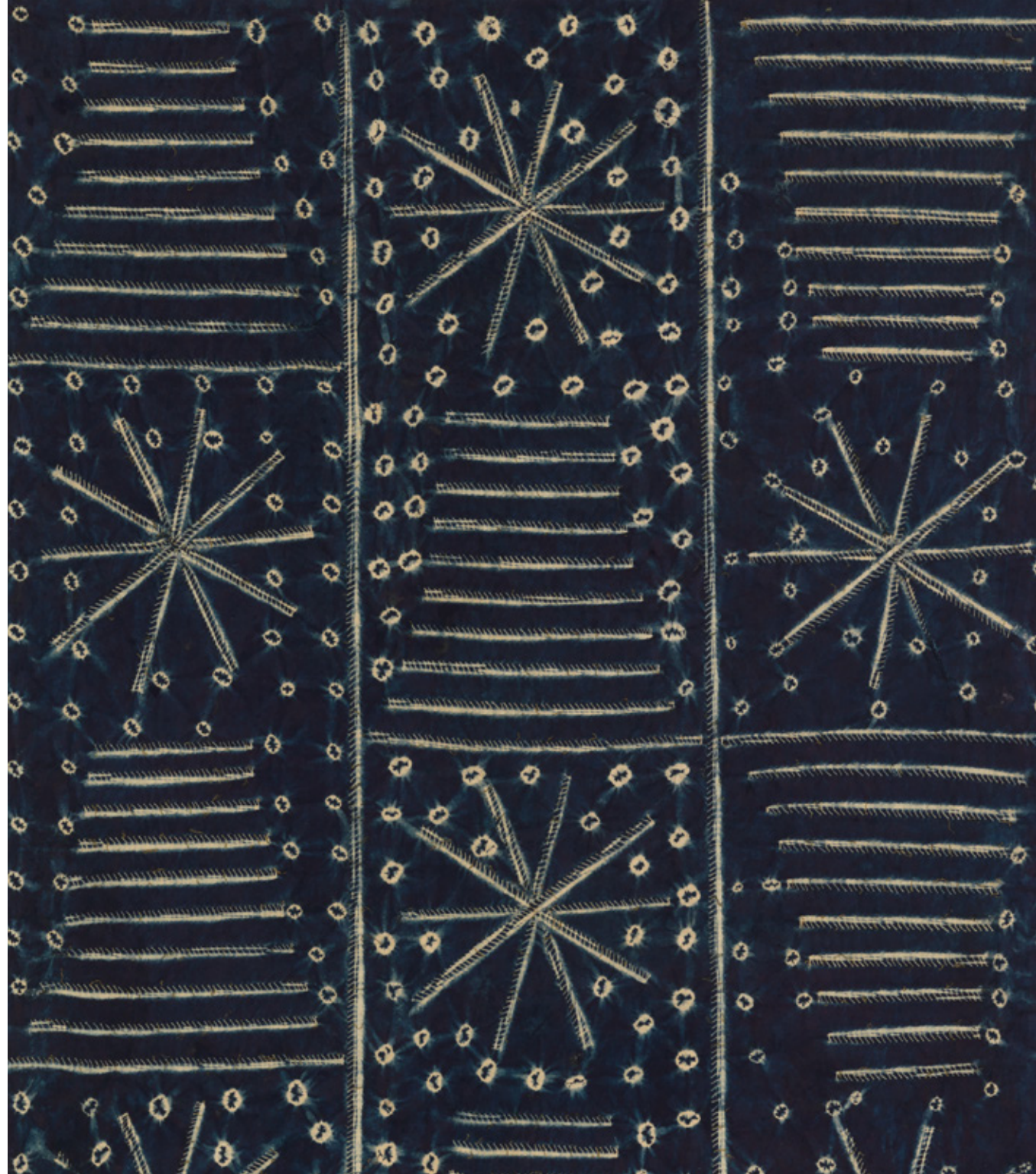
An example of using colonial trade goods as the basis for creating a new version of the cloth, the *pelete bite* demonstrates the Kalabari's agency in the face of top-down changes imposed by outside forces. The cloth reveals the myopia of telling stories about place overly determined by the unbalanced perspectives of the most powerful. Indeed, these textiles are not simple artifacts of a cultural past, but in fact, material representations of the significant changes in the daily lives of their crafters. As such, their meanings are never static. Instead, they continue to change as new generations reinterpret them and as transformations on the continent recontextualize their significance. Examples of these ruptures include the displacement of many Dyula people during the colonial era, resulting in their weaving techniques being closely associated with Baule tradition (see pg. 15), and the transformation of kente prestige cloths (see pg. 11)

ADIRE WRAPPER

Yoruba peoples, Nigeria, ca. 1960
Factory-woven cotton, plain weave, tied- and stitched-resist patterning, indigo dyed
191.1 x 82.6 cm (6 ft. 3 ¼ in. x 32 ½ in.)
Gift of the Estate of Mary Kirby, 1962-117-2

The delicate tracery of white forms on the deep-blue background of this *adire* wrapper reflects the interaction of raffia embroidery with indigo dye. Patterns are sewn into cotton cloth with a needle and raffia fiber. When dipped in indigo,

the raffia resists the penetration of the dye, and the embroidered patterns are recorded with an absence of color. Women are responsible for both the stitching and the laborious process of indigo dyeing.





Rivington Place, London, UK, 2007; Image: Adjaye Associates

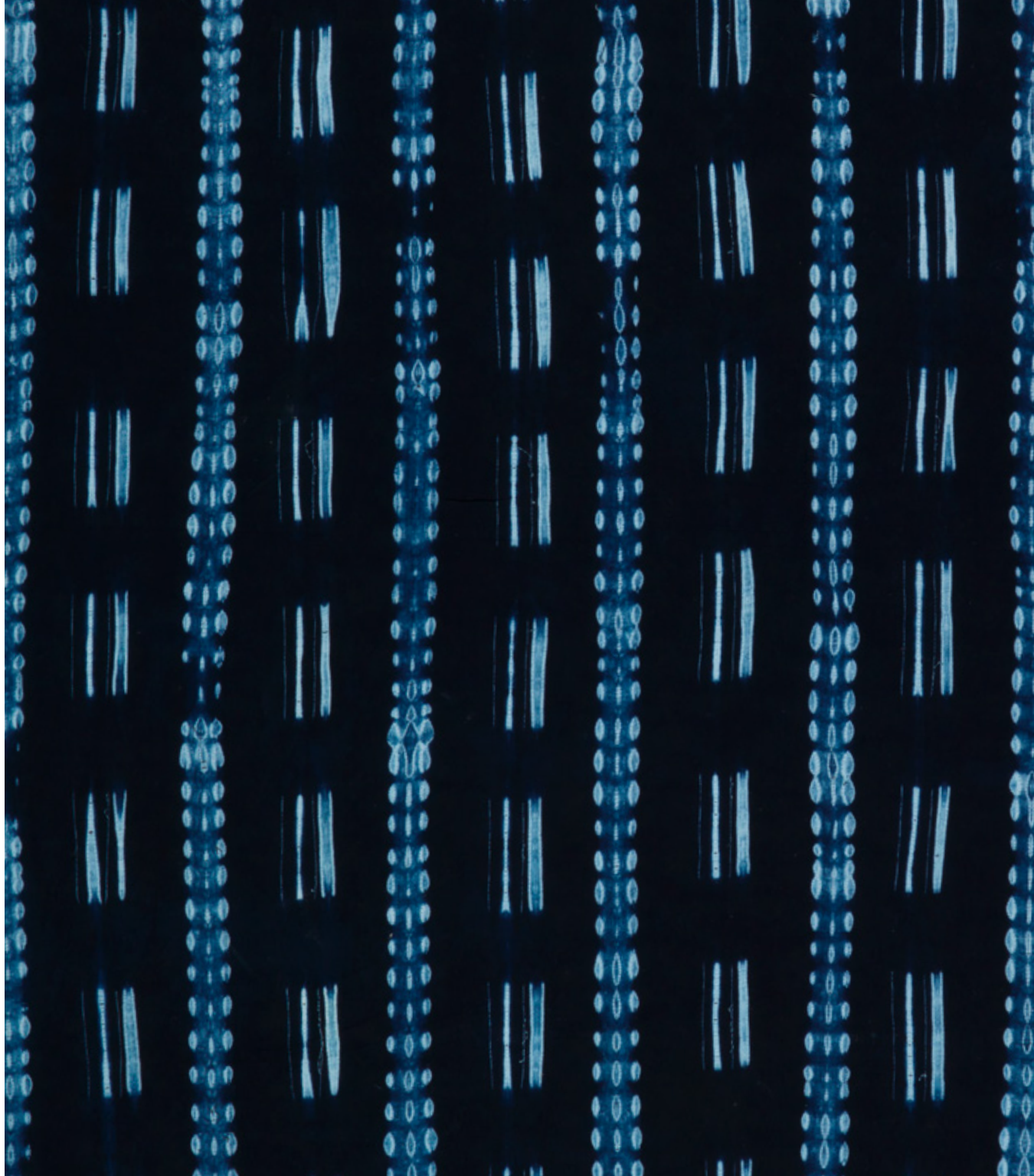
from a locally significant craft for the Asante and Ewe people to a symbol of pan-African pride both across the continent and for many people of the diaspora, following Ghana’s independence in 1957. The evolving nature of these cultural narratives is incredibly important in my work; for it is my desire never to return to any one period, but always to move forward through a process of integration, through the unifying, merging, and recombining of seemingly disparate historical legacies to craft a modernity that acknowledges them all as part of a single, inerasable whole.

Importantly though, these textiles are inspirational not only for their potent cultural content, but also for their geometry and form. The textures and patterns found in this collection have powerful effects on perception in ways that alter our relationship with space and surroundings. Through the combination of color, scale, and repeated geometries, these textiles convey depth and partition space in very specific ways. These techniques have had palpable influence on my work, from the façade designs of Rivington Place in London (*left*) and The Francis A. Gregory Library in Washington, DC (*see pg. 8*), to the use of color as a tool for space demarcation in the Stephen Lawrence Centre in London.

ADIRE WRAPPER

Gambia, ca. 1990
 Factory-woven cotton, damask weave,
 machine stitched-resist patterning,
 indigo dyed
 143.5 × 132 cm (56 ½ x 51 ¾ in.)
 Museum purchase from General Acquisitions
 Endowment Fund, 1993-136-2

Sewing machines were introduced to West Africa around the turn of the last century and were quickly adapted to the creation of *adire* fabrics, which were in high demand for women’s wrappers. Imported cotton shirting fabrics are pleated by hand, and between two and four rows of stitching are made near the folds, creating straight or curving lines or dashes. The technique is most suitable for linear designs, although the quality of line can be quite varied.





Francis A. Gregory Library, Washington, DC, 2012; Photo: Jeff Sauers

Displaying these fabrics upright in the exhibition—as opposed to the more common method of laying them flat—offers the chance to appreciate them as architectural elements, particularly as they contrast with the more traditional, European-inspired features of their housing gallery. The impetus for this stems from Gottfried Semper’s influential thesis, which saw textile art’s covaluation of design and functionality as a direct predecessor to architecture. And indeed, these two forms of design are very much united in the ways in which they work to protect, enclose, and identify.

By presenting these textiles as part of an architectural continuum, I hope to suggest the possibility of alternative ways of thinking about space—one of which acknowledges the relevance of mundane African details in helping with the abstraction of the modern world. By demonstrating the vast diversity inherent in vernacular African culture, I hope to offer alternative possibilities for thinking about the way we organize our space, our lives, and our worlds, ones that can honor and welcome the rich legacy of works such as these. It is this—the promotion of possibilities—that I strive for in my work, both on the continent and around the world.

CATALOG OF THE EXHIBITION ❖

Susan Brown, Associate Curator of Textiles, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum

MAN’S CAP (LAKET)

Kuba peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo, late 19th–early 20th century
 Looped raffia, embroidered with wool and raffia
 11.4 x 17.8 cm (4 ½ x 7 in.)
 Museum purchase from Au Panier Fleuri Fund, 1957-110-13

MAN’S CAP (LAKET)

Kuba peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo, late 19th–early 20th century
 Looped raffia, raffia pom-poms
 16.5 x 23.5 cm (6 ½ x 9 ¼ in.)
 Museum purchase from Au Panier Fleuri Fund, 1957-110-14

Among adult Kuba men, the *laket*—a small conical cap characterized by four lobes along the lower edge—is the most common type of headwear. It is worn perched on the crown of the head and secured with a long iron or brass pin through a tuft of hair reserved for that purpose. Made exclusively by male specialists working with a single needle, *laket* are noted for their subtle ornamentation, which may include small amounts of dyed raffia or wool embroidery and areas of openwork. Further embellishments such as cowrie shells, beads, animal skins, or feathers may be added to this basic form as additional titles, responsibilities, or honors are conferred. Caps with a large raffia pom-poms on each lobe are worn exclusively by titled soldiers known as *iyol*.¹

1 Patricia Darish and David A. Binkley, “Headdresses and Titleholding Among the Kuba” in *Crowning Achievements: African Arts of Dressing the Head*, ed. Mary Jo Arnoldi and Christine Mullen Kreamer (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum of Cultural History, University of California, 1995), 165.

* See also wrappers on pages 4, 6.



MAN’S TWO-HORNED CAP

Mbundu peoples, Angola, late 19th–early 20th century
Looped and knotted raffia and wool
19.1 x 15.2 cm (7 ½ x 6 in.)
Gift of Mrs. Benjamin Ginsburg, 1960-242-1

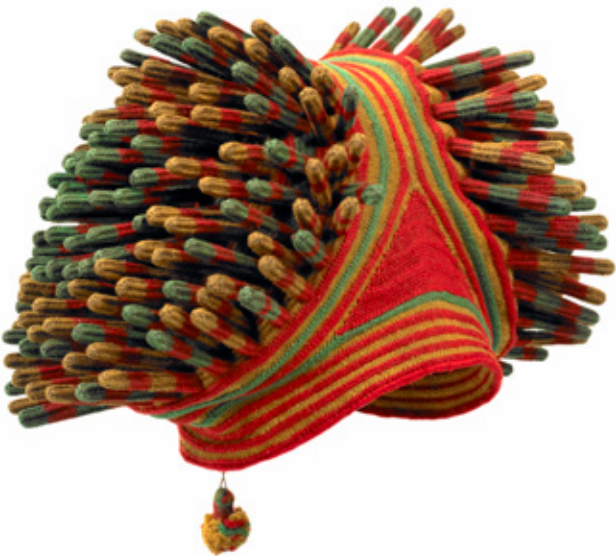
This exquisite cap of office, made by a male specialist, features two striped *jimbinga*, or horns. The horned cap was first described to Europeans by Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecuccolo, a Capuchin friar who lived in Angola from 1654 to 1670. An engraving of a chief wearing such a cap was included in his five-volume description of the lives of the Kongo and Mbundu peoples.²



MAN’S HAT (ASHETU)

Cameroon, after 1957
Crocheted cotton, wood splints
19.1 x 35.6 cm (7 ½ x 14 in.)
Museum purchase through gift of Mrs. William Goulding, 2003-3-1

The burls on each side of the *ashetu* hat are seen as physical manifestations of the wearer’s inner head, considered the center of intelligence and spirituality. This green, gold, and orange example was probably made after Cameroon achieved its independence and adopted the pan-African colors for its flag. A nearly identical hat was worn by the new *Fon*, Jinabo II, in 1976, when he was presented to the public for the first time.³



2 Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecuccolo, *Istorica descrizione de’ tre regni: Congo, Matamba et Angola* (Bologna: Per Giacomo Monti, 1687), referenced in Gordon D. Gibson and Cecilia R. McGurk, “High-Status Caps of the Kongo and Mbundu Peoples,” *The Textile Museum Journal*, IV, no. 4 (1977): 75.

3 Lorenz Homberger, ed., *Cameroon: Art and Kings* (Zurich: Museum Rietberg, 2008), 83.

KENTE PRESTIGE CLOTH

Ewe peoples, Ghana, early 20th century
Hand-loomed cotton and mercerized cotton, weft-faced plain weave
320 x 194.3 cm (10 ft. 6 in. x 6 ft. 4 ½ in.)
Museum purchase from General Acquisitions Endowment Fund, 2007-8-1

Prestige cloths, or kente cloths, are one of West Africa’s most important forms of visual expression. Worn at religious celebrations, festivals, and important life transition events, the cloth’s voluminous size, lively patterning, and rich, warm palette of golds and pinks ensure a majestic appearance.

The cloth is initially woven in one long, narrow strip. It is then cut into pieces of equal length that are sewn together, side to side. Kente cloth normally alternates warp- and weft-faced patterning. This *titriku*, or thick cloth, is distinguished by being composed entirely of weft-faced stripes, a design common to the coastal area of Ghana.⁴ The constantly changing weft stripes and patterns must have been very slow work for a highly skilled colorist.

4 Malika Kraamer, “Ghanian Interweaving in the Nineteenth Century: A New Perspective on Ewe and Asante Textile History,” in *African Arts* 39, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 52, fig. 23.



ADINKRA WRAPPER

Akan peoples, Asante group, Ghana,
mid-20th century
Factory-woven cotton, plain weave, dyed,
printed with carved stamps
182.2 × 114.3 cm (5 ft. 11 ¼ in. x 45 in.)
Bequest of Mary Kirby, 1962-123-2

The *adinkra* symbol-language of the Akan is a potent example of a graphic system used to communicate and reinforce commonly held ideals among community members. Hundreds of unique symbols have been identified, but their rich historic and metaphoric meanings are not easily decoded. Some represent physical objects—such as the king’s stool—but most are culturally specific visual cues related to proverbs. Some of the proverbs evoked by this cloth include: “There is nothing wrong with learning from hindsight”, and “No one lives who saw the beginning of the world, and none will see its end, except God.”⁵

Adinkra is traditionally worn for funerals, and the selection of symbols and their placement on the gridded cloth are understood as a form of communication between the living and their ancestors. Stamps carved from pieces of dried calabash gourd are used to print the designs with a thick, tar-like ink on the dyed cloth. Here, the black-on-black pattern is only visible due to the gloss of the ink.

5 English translations of proverbs expressed in *adinkra* are often quite varied. The interpretations cited here are taken from G. F. Kojo Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor: (Re)Reading the Adinkra Cloth Symbols of the Akan of Ghana* (Legon, Ghana: Centre for Indigenous Knowledge Systems, 2001).

WOMAN’S HEAD WRAP

Okene, Nigeria, early to mid-20th century
Hand-loomed cotton, plain weave with
supplementary weft patterning
256.5 × 60.3 cm (8 ft. 5 in. x 23 ¾ in.)
Gift of Mrs. Calvin W. Stillman, 1969-11-5

A head wrap, or *gèlè*, must be worn by a married woman in order for her to feel fully and properly dressed. The manner in which she wraps her *gèlè* is a personal creative expression. With each wearing, the eight-foot length of cloth is folded, pleated, pinched, tucked, and spread into a new form. Because the inner head is seen as the center of individuality and spirituality, a beautifully adorned head honors the sacred self.⁶ This hand-woven cotton cloth has enough body and stiffness to create dramatic sculptural forms.

6 Mary Jo Arnoldi, “Headdresses and Hairdos,” in *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion Vol. 1: Africa*, edited by Joanne B. Eicher and Doran Ross (Oxford: Berg, 2011).

WOMAN’S WRAPPER

Igbo peoples, Akwete, Nigeria, early to mid-20th century
Hand-loomed cotton, plain weave with supplementary weft patterning
168.9 × 118.7 cm (5 ft. 6 ½ in. x 46 ¾ in.)
Gift of Mrs. Calvin W. Stillman, 1969-11-9

Akwete cloths are woven by Igbo women, primarily on commission from Rivers patrons in the Eastern Niger Delta, who use them for both special-occasion wear and ceremonial purposes, including girls’ coming-of-age rituals and funerary displays.⁷ The ritualized use of textiles acquired through trade may impact the nature of the designs, but Akwete weavers prize innovation, and over one hundred unique motifs have been identified. This dramatic black-and-white piece uses bands of a single motif, a variation on the *ikaki*, or tortoise pattern. *Ikaki* is, in fact, not an Igbo word but a Rivers term, reflecting the importance of the client/ designer relationship in Akwete design.⁸



WRAPPER

Dyula peoples, Ivory Coast, mid-20th century
Hand-loomed cotton, tied-resist (*ikat*) patterning, indigo dyed, plain weave with rayon supplementary weft patterns
174 x 104.1 cm (5 ft. 8 ½ in. x 41 in.)
Museum purchase from Textile Department Fund, 1979-23-1

The dynamic checkerboard effect of this wrapper was created using the *ikat* technique. Before weaving, the warp yarns are tie-dyed in two contrasting stripe patterns—one predominantly blue and the other predominantly white. The dyed yarns are then woven in a continuous narrow strip and further embellished with scattered, brightly colored, brocaded motifs. The strip is cut and the pieces sewn side-to-side, carefully aligning the pattern areas to create a checkerboard design. The transition between the blue and white squares has the blurred effect characteristic of the *ikat* technique.

This type of cloth has become associated with the Baule people. The complex *ikat* technique, however, is rarely used in Africa and was undoubtedly brought to the Baule by Dyula dyers, who had major trade routes throughout the region; many Dyula migrated to Ivory Coast during the 1950s and ‘60s. The single red border is also characteristic of Dyula weavers.⁹



9 Christine Giuntini, Conservator in the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; email message to Susan Brown, November 24, 2014, regarding the unpublished research of Jerry Vogel.

7 Lisa Aronson, “Patronage and Akwete Weaving,” *African Arts* 13, no. 3 (May 1980): 63.

8 Ibid., 66.

PELETE BITE WRAPPER

Kalabari peoples, Nigeria, 1930s
Hand-loomed cotton, plain weave with
withdrawn-thread patterning
363 x 87 cm (11 ft. 10 ¹⁵/₁₆ in. x 34 ¹/₄ in.)
Museum purchase from General Acquisitions
Endowment Fund, 1988-56-1

The island group occupied by the Kalabari peoples is located in the Niger River Delta. This strategic position brought them into contact with traders and travelers from many African and non-African cultures over a period of centuries. Their dress traditions are marked by an eclectic and cosmopolitan combination of cultural references.¹⁰

Cut-thread cloth takes imported Indian cotton madras as a starting point. But the subtractive process by which it becomes *pelete bite* is a transformative one, and the finished product is distinctively Kalabari. Beginning with simple stripes, plaids, or checks, women selectively remove threads from the fabric by picking them up with a needle, cutting them with a razor blade, and pulling them from the weave. Often the lightest and brightest threads are removed, leaving a striking dark geometric design on a lighter checked ground.¹¹

10 M. Catherine Daly, Joanne B. Eicher, and Tonye V. Erekosima, "Male and Female Artistry in Kalabari Dress," *African Arts* 19, no. 3 (May 1986): 48.

11 Joanne B. Eicher, "A Ping-Pong Example of Cultural Authentication and Kalabari Cut-Thread Cloth" in *Appropriation, Acculturation, Transformation: Proceedings of the Textile Society of America 9th Biennial Symposium*, Oakland, October 7–9, 2004: paper 439.

BÒGÒLANFINI WOMAN'S WRAPPER

Bamana peoples, Mali, mid-20th century
Hand-spun, hand-loomed cotton, plain
weave with hand-applied mud-dye
patterning
160.7 x 109.2 cm (5 ft. 3 ¹/₄ in. x 43 in.)
Museum purchase through The Grodzins
Fund for Textile Acquisitions, 2000-22-2

This Keith Haring–like design, which almost seems to vibrate, is made by a deliberate process that belies the seeming spontaneity and vitality of its motif. The white designs are actually reserved in the undyed cotton, while a mud dye is painted on to cover the background surface.

Iron-rich mud is collected from the deepest parts of streams and ponds, and is fermented for a year, until it becomes black. The hand-woven cotton cloth is soaked in a solution made from the leaves of certain trees, which dyes the cloth bright yellow and also serves as a mordant that allows tannins in the mud to bind to the cotton. After the pattern is outlined with a stick or metal tool by a female artist, the entire background is carefully covered with a thick layer of mud. The meticulous application of mud is repeated at least twice to achieve a rich, dark color. Finally, the reserved patterns of the design are painted with a bleaching agent to remove the yellow dye and make the fabric white again.

This wrapper combines the airplane design, a symbol of modernity, with the lizard's head, derived from a type of lizard used for medicinal purposes. The spotted upper border, which would not be seen when the wrapper is worn, refers to a string of white beads worn around the waist by young women—a potent symbol of femininity and fertility. A wrapper like this one would be worn for significant events in a woman's life: excision, marriage, the birth of her children, and burial.

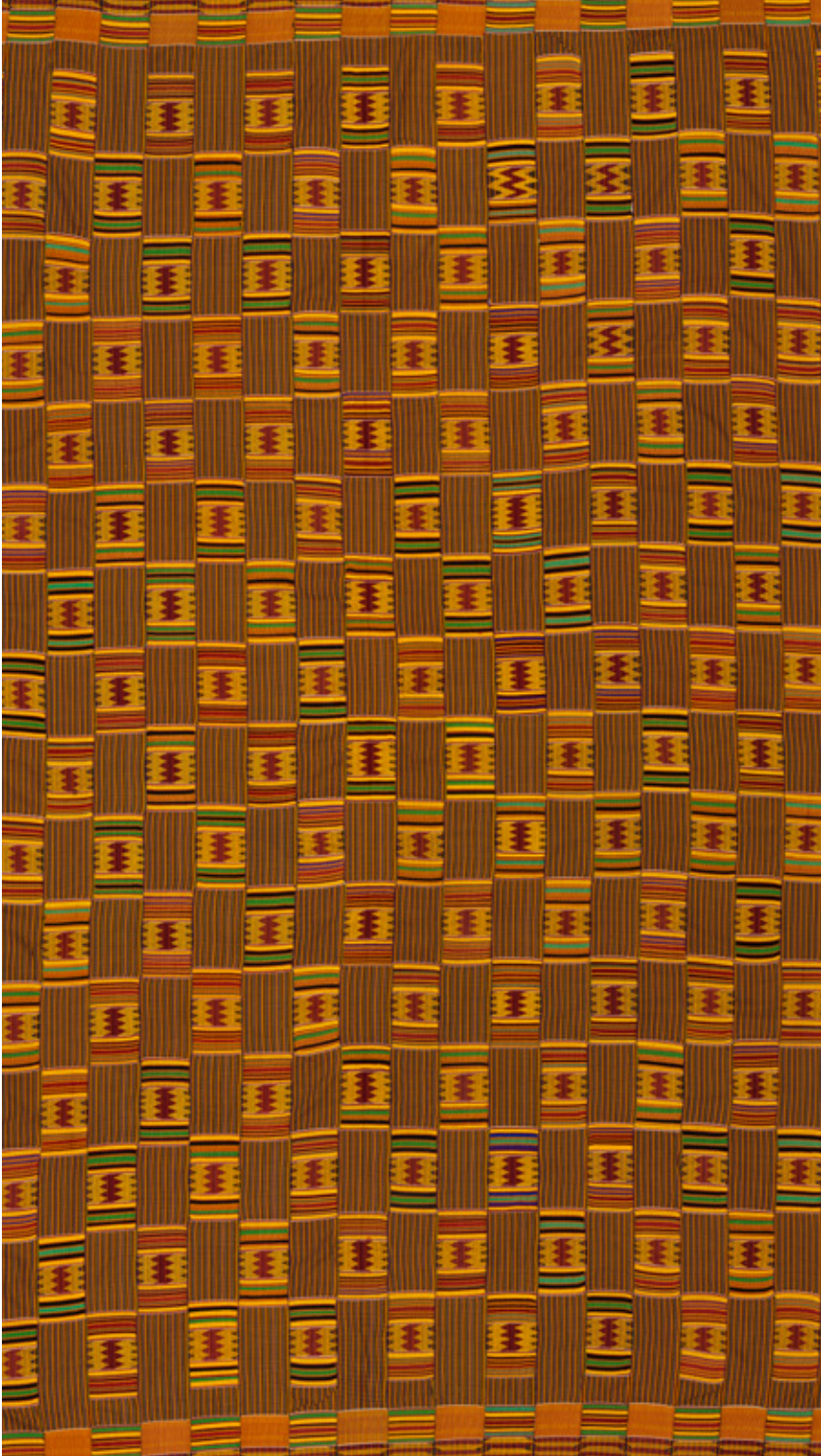
KENTE PRESTIGE CLOTH

Asante peoples, Ghana, early to mid-20th century
Hand-loomed viscose rayon, plain weave with alternating warp- and weft-faced pattern blocks, supplementary weft patterning
328.9 x 217.2 cm (10 ft. 9 ½ in. x 7 ft. 1 ½ in.)
Gift of Mrs. Calvin W. Stillman, 1969-11-1

The Asante strip-woven cloths commonly known as kente are among the most iconic and prestigious African textiles. The Asante have a powerful ruling court, and a large community of artisans work in the village of Bonwire in the service of the royals to produce the stunning visual displays expected for court occasions.

The complex interplay of designs is the result of alternating three different patterning systems: a balanced-weave check, weft-faced stripes, and supplementary weft zigzags. Because the cloth is woven in a single continuous strip, which is then cut into identical lengths, a checkerboard design like this one requires the weaver to carefully measure each pattern block while weaving to ensure that they align correctly when sewn together. The pattern is called *susudua*, for the measuring stick he uses.¹²

12 Kraamer, “Ghanaian Interweaving in the Nineteenth Century: A New Perspective on Ewe and Asante Textile History,” *African Arts* 39, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 51.



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COOPER HEWITT LABS

David Adjaye Selects will be the first exhibition at Cooper Hewitt to feature **Object Phone**. The service allows visitors to access exhibition-related text in audio or SMS format using their mobile phones. Object phone is a pilot project produced by Cooper Hewitt Labs. For more information please go to **objectphone.cooperhewitt.org**.

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