

African Costumes and Textiles: From the Berbers to the Zulus.* Anne-Marie Bouttiaux, Frieda Sorber, Anne van Cuseum, and John Mack. Milan, Italy: 5 Continents, 2008. 318 pp.

Reviewed by Juliette Leeb-du Toit

Textiles in Africa represent one of the many creative manifestations of cultural identity that have shaped communities occupying its diverse regions. Cultural, religious, and ritual meanings are conveyed in color preferences, materials, embellishments, and design, as well as reflecting priorities associated with behavior, age-grade, and ritual practices. Textiles and dress also function as important barometers of change, intrinsically allied to trade, inter-cultural contact, political and ideological change, and shifting religious adherence, aspects central to understanding economic and cultural links between nations and continents.

Any new publication on textiles and dress in Africa is keenly awaited by a growing body of researchers, collectors, and laypersons, increasingly aware of the significance and function of these items as salient markers of identity and cultural encoding. Interest in this field also reflects a more inclusive aesthetic and cultural appreciation that has evolved in the West over the last century, John Mack aptly reminds us that interest in African textiles by artists such as Henri Matisse and Roger Fry constituted one of the many contributing aspects in the development of a Western Modernist aesthetic.

This publication is centered on a particular collection of dress and textiles amassed relatively recently (over the last three decades) by Zaira and Marcel Mis. As a consequence it is understandably fragmented, possibly still to be amplified, but it nonetheless boasts exceptional examples of various textiles and dress from most regions in Africa. We know very little about the Mis couple as collectors, other than that the collection was prompted in part by the collectors' respective interests in fashion, design, and art. This doubtless resulted in the focus of the collection being largely on the more visually appealing garments and textiles with specific ceremonial and cultural usage. But fortunately the collection also comprises everyday and less aesthetically seductive wear, where the dyeing, weaving, or design are prominent. Here other factors would have been upheld, such as their function, their reflection of local preferences in design, or as an intrinsic reflection of exceptional capacities in those who made them. The textual information would have been particularly valuable had more discussion on the aesthetic premises that prompted both the textile and costume making (and their selection) in at least some of the examples in this collection been included, as would the aesthetic appreciation by the collectors.

I for one would have been fascinated to learn more about how the items were acquired, why they were selected, and what the role of mediators such as dealers and specialists was in the shaping of the collection. The acquisition process is increasingly regarded as a significant aspect in understanding the process of selection and the nature of trade in African art and artifacts. This was seldom disclosed in earlier writings, for several reasons, but in current writing such

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disclosure is an invaluable aspect of the process of mediation, aesthetic development, and the cross-cultural reception of art and culture.

The primary function of publications such as this is to foreground a specific collection with a view to increasing knowledge about its costumes and textiles and to becoming an important reference document for future collectors and scholars. The target audience for such publications is often identified as the “general public,” but such publications invariably attract a wider audience, including specialists in the field. John Mack notes that such publications function as important documentation of a collection that has seldom been foregrounded for public view, as similar collections are only to be found in museums. The uniqueness of the items and the visual impact of the photographs are significant features of such publications and the quality of the photography in this text is good, enhancing the items, thereby further enriching the publication.

The accompanying regionally associated essays in this publication have no pretensions of providing groundbreaking research on the items and their cultural usage. If anything the introductory essays are limited by the wide cultural sourcing of the collection, which obviates against an in depth examination of any particular item. Brief and introductory, these texts often provide only rudimentary contextual sketches of the region, its costumes and textiles, and cultural distinctiveness. However, documentation accompanying the images should ideally be as thorough (if not as comprehensive) as possible to prevent the perpetuation or initiation of erroneous attribution and identification. The use of the vernacular in describing items is imperative as is the providing of correct contextualization associated with the item’s usage. This has mostly been realized, with some exceptions, where an item is given one term in the main text (e.g. the *boubou*) and another in the legend attached to the image (see for example pp. 90, 134). For the layperson this might be confusing and could have been avoided in that it results in the perpetuation of the “popular” term rather than in providing and instilling the retention of more accurate terminology. So too rather trite speculation about an item’s design, motifs, or even shape (p. 185) should have been avoided. If the function or origins of an item is not known, uninformed speculation appears patronizing and detracts from the integrity of the text as a whole.

It would have been valuable to the “general public” and specialists alike to have included a map of Africa in the opening pages of the book, followed by rudimentary, focused regional maps at the inception of each text and photographic essay. These would have provided a valuable contextualization for the specific items as well as indicating possible regional borrowings or similarities, should these occur. So too there is little data on the wearing and function of the items, which could have included contextual photographs that show the full dress of which the item collected might constitute merely a part. The textiles and garments are often only one aspect of an entire dress or even masquerade (as Susan Vogel and Joanne Eicher and others have so often argued), thus the reader is left with a partial aspect and information. Understandably, recent debate on cultural representation challenges writers to respect the integrity of cultural practice and accountable sourcing.

There are a few instances where information provided is erroneous, again perhaps the result of uninformed speculation. The suggestion that the Zulu *isicholo*, still worn ceremonially, has been substituted by Zulu women opting instead for western hairstyles is partly flawed due to its generalization. While some have adopted western styles and hair straightening, mostly in urban

areas, there has been an upsurge in the development and reiteration of regional styles, some harking back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In part this is located in the widespread upholding of 'authenticity' in the recovery of African identity and an associated assertion of difference. This has also resulted in widespread experimentation with plaiting techniques and hair extensions, many styles derived from other parts of Africa thereby reflecting the diasporic nature of present day South Africa. Further, a distinction needs to be made between rural and urban traditions and, more recently, the impact of nationalism and ethno-nationalism which has contributed to the revival of the use of the *isicholo*, both in a cultural and contemporary fashion context. Besides this example, other commentary is at times also rather generalizing in descriptions and assumptions, but then again in a publication based on such a widely sourced collection this is perhaps to be expected.

Despite the few concerns highlighted in this review, the merits of this publication are substantial and both the authors and the publishers are to be commended on its realization. This publication will hopefully engender increasing demand for others of this nature drawn from an increasing body of research on dress and textiles from Africa for wider local and international reception.

Juliette Leeb-Du Toit is a Senior Lecturer in Art History at the Centre for Visual Arts at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. She has contributed to many publications in the field of South African art studies, including Spiritual Art of Natal (Tathom Art Gallery, 1993).