

Africa Interweave: Textile Diasporas.* Susan Cooksey, ed. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011. 160 pp.

Reviewed by Beth Buggenhagen

If textiles have rarely made their way into major museum exhibitions of African art—perhaps due to the presumed ephemeral qualities of cloth, the association of textiles with craft production, and the predominance of sculpture—then *Africa Interweave: Textile Diasporas* offers a significant and rare glimpse into fiber arts across the continent and its diaspora. This exhibition, which took place at the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art at the University of Florida from February to May of 2011, includes 50 objects five of which are newly commissioned works. The collection exhibited included the work of nine contemporary artists working on the continent whose repertoires are inspired by textile techniques, aesthetics, and meanings.

Reviewed here is the resulting published volume edited by Curator Susan Cooksey, who herself contributes two important chapters: “Bazin in Mali” and “Cloth and Performance: The Work of Viye Diba and Achamyeleh Debela.” The volume includes chapters on indigo, kente, commemorative cloth, chieftaincy dress and masquerades, Asafo flags, Kanga, and Malian bazin, among others. In its breath it succeeds in representing and describing the range of techniques involved in producing woven and dyed fabrics as well as forms of embellishment across the continent and its diaspora.

Rather than focusing solely on the formal properties of the pieces, many of the volume’s authors emphasize the social contexts that give meaning to these valued objects. *Africa Interweave* highlights the social process through which textiles are produced and commissioned by patrons, worn, and circulated. These objects are above all movable objects; through regional networks and global circulation they accumulate new meanings and messages, techniques are borrowed and improved and the results are garments that rarely can be understood within a singular historical, cultural, or geographical classification.

In addition to essays that highlight what some of the authors refer to as traditional textile arts, several authors consider how contemporary artists are inspired by the meanings of cloth and the techniques commonly used in the fiber arts. Although successful in some cases, one wonders for example in one chapter why the Malian photographer, Seydou Keita, is chosen rather than contemporary artists working primarily within fiber arts to produce more conceptual pieces such as Abdoulaye Konate of Mali. Konate often uses textiles in mixed media installations and as social and political commentary.

The highlight of the volume are the 53 color plates and additional black and white images showing the beauty and complexity of textiles produced on the African continent and in its diaspora. The volume provides not only full images of the textiles, but also images demonstrating the making of similar textiles as well as detailed shots showing patterns and weaves. Photographing textiles can be tricky work. They often do not fit standard dimensions. One of the perennial problems of photographing textiles is in making decisions whether to photograph the pieces flat or to display them as the three dimensional objects that they are when worn on the body. Where the volume does display these

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objects on dress forms, it succeeds most in conveying the aesthetic value of the pieces. Another way in which *Africa Interweave* attempts to grapple with the dilemma of these three dimensional objects is by providing images of the pieces photographed flat against a white or neutral background and providing accompanying contextual photographs showing how similar garments were worn in the past. One drawback of such an approach, commonly employed by museums displaying textiles, is that these images, meant solely to provide context, often have their own complex histories. One example is a colonial-era postcard from 1909 showing a Wolof family wearing Soninke style resist dyed textiles meant to demonstrate this technique. Not a neutral object, this postcard itself is the product of a nexus of power relations of which the reader is not informed, but which had a profound impact on the production and circulation of textiles in the region.

Africa Interweave: Textile Diaporas makes an important contribution to the study of African textiles and fiber arts more generally. This volume should be of interest not only to art historians but also to anthropologists and students of material culture more generally. The nine by twelve soft cover volume is affordable and should result in a wide circulation for this important contribution to textile histories across the continent.

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