

***African Textiles: Color and Creativity Across a Continent.* John Gillow. London: Thames and Hudson, 2009. 240 pp.\***

Reviewed by Beth Buggenhagen

John Gillow's *African Textiles: Color and Creativity Across a Continent* surveys the production of cloth and clothing across the African Continent. Each of the five sections covers a region of the African continent (West Africa, North Africa, East Africa, Central Africa, and Southern Africa). Importantly, all of the examples covered are handcrafted. Gillow does an impressive job of including not only woven textiles, but tied and dyed and beaded textiles as well as leatherwork and other examples of clothing wrought from skins. *African Textiles* includes a glossary, resources for further reading, a guide to museum collections, and a map of the continent.

In a brief introduction, "The Diversity of African Textiles," Gillow suggests that despite a vast literature on cloth and its production in African societies, there have not been any systematic attempts to survey the artistic practices of the entire continent. Gillow thus aims to survey the techniques—including fibers, dyes, and looms—through which these extraordinary textiles are produced. In each section, Gillow highlights the techniques for producing and embellishing textiles that are only found on the African continent. He also briefly discusses the historical contexts and changing gender relations surrounding the production of cloth in various societies. He argues that the handcrafted textile tradition is kept alive by the desire for locally woven and dyed cloth for life cycle ceremonies and by demands in the West for African fashions such as Malian bogolanfini mud cloths.

Rather than a comprehensive survey, the volume presents a number of well-known artistic traditions of textile production including Ashanti and Ewe strip weaves, Malian bogolanfini mud clothes, and Berber weaves among other examples. The textiles chosen to represent each region are often considered by Gillow to be the indigenous, traditional arts of a particular region or people. Gillow does not include modern or nationalist textile productions, such as tapestry weaving in Senegal for example. For scholars and laypersons interested in the more vibrant, stunning, and highly circulated examples of printed, dyed, and woven African cloth, this book is an invaluable resource. For scholars looking for data concerning less common forms of textile production, this book may not be as useful. Because Gillow attempts to cover such a vast geographical region, he necessarily must sacrifice the more in depth coverage that a regional survey could offer.

The volume contains an impressive number of images of cloth and this is its primary strength. Gillow's volume relies on the visual impact and aesthetic draw of these color illustrations. There are primarily images of the textiles themselves. In most cases the textiles are abstracted from their social context and placed on the page (or double pages) as singular objects laid out against a white background. For scholars looking for more information about these illustrated objects, the limited text accompanying these objects may be a disappointment. Much of the analysis focuses on the textiles themselves and how they are made rather than how they are used, worn, or circulated. Without this larger context, it is difficult to ascertain their importance in life cycle rituals and to understand what the future holds for this form of artistic production. In some cases the large photos of the

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textiles are accompanied by smaller images showing either their production or use in particular societies. There are a small number of images of crafts persons involved in textile production. Some photographs also show the reader how the textiles were worn. The majority of photographs that depict how these textiles were worn are historical, often colonial era, photographs. Given that the emphasis in this volume is on the visual images themselves the limited text and insubstantial bibliography may not interest specialists in the region. However, all are sure to enjoy paging through this visual feast.

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