

African Pattern Trends in Contemporary Textile and Fashion Design: Exploratory Study in African Sources and Technology in Fashion, Art, and Textiles

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Abstract : African fabrics based specifically on the Dutch Wax Print, or Ankara, popularized during Africa's colonial era, have had an enormous impact on western fashion (especially in the US and UK), in the last half-decade. The trend has had an effect on the world of visual arts as well, which circuitously, also heavily impacts fashion design. In fashion, and notably in celebrity apparel choices, this is in part due to 'identity' and taking pride in one's African roots; in the visual arts, artists such as Yinka Shonibare and Njideka Akunyili Crosby are making statements about identity politics, colonialism up through post-colonialism, and racism. The 'global village' brought on by the internet has driven this proliferation, as have improvements in the printing technology with which the Ankara print is made, combining wax-resist with roller printing. The newest patterns can now be designed authentically in western African and easily sent electronically to Europe for printing. Examples of Ankara's new reach across the Atlantic abound. They have taken several paths, which the paper will detail. Briefly, the first is its greater utilization in the fashion world, from authentic textile shops in African American neighborhoods to copied (knocked-off) low-end reproductions in discount chains. Secondly, we are seeing far more uses of these textiles/patterns in important works of fine arts from major museums, in Philadelphia to Palm Beach to the Mass MOCA (in the US), all the way to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, and everywhere in between. And lastly, but quite significantly, we see this trend throughout social media thanks to Instagram, Pinterest and celebrity photos –even at the recent royal wedding. What shall sustain this major new design direction is that Ankara changes with and adapts to the times. Some of it is now printed in West Africa, often in the Nigeria area. And some may be designed in Europe or even at knock-off apparel studios in NY or Asia. But it stays utterly relevant because the motifs are based on objects and scenes in everyday life. In my design studio and university design classes, this idea is first and foremost, from our big spiritual eye motifs to drawings of our art supplies to the 'politically-loaded' chain patterns. This first-hand creativity experience becomes part of the research of this paper, along with historic and contemporary sources of inquiry, both through a literature/image search and anecdotal experience into what is behind this exciting and surprising trend.

Keywords : African wax print, Ankara, identity (politics), textile design, surface design

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