

New Threads: Textile Diasporas at the Harn Museum of Art

SUSAN COOKSEY

In preparation for an exhibition on African textiles at the Harn Museum, “Africa Interweave: Textile Diasporas”, which will explore the interplay of aesthetics, technologies, and socio-cultural factors that have affected the movement of textiles, I have engaged UF faculty and students who travelled to Mali, Nigeria and Ghana to collect and study textiles. Their research will be incorporated into the exhibition’s catalogue and other interpretive materials. Art work they procured will be presented in the exhibition and added to the Harn’s collection.

Robin Poynor (Art History) will be writing about the prominence of woven textiles used in performances in the context of lavish second burial ceremonies, or *ako*, based on his research in Owo, Nigeria. Poynor has contributed several textiles he collected in Nigeria to the museum and three will be used in the exhibition. Victoria Rovine (Art History) travelled to Timbuctou and commissioned a sacred woman’s garment, or *tilbi*, from master embroiderer Baba Djitteye. She also travelled to Bamako in early 2010 on behalf of the Harn, to collect other samples of textiles and garments. Rovine has also conducted research recently in Mali on a type of garment known as “Ghana Boy” which have embroidered images derived from mid-20th century popular culture. A “Ghana Boy” tunic she collected will be loaned to the exhibition.

Jordan Fenton (doctoral candidate, Art History) recently returned from Calabar, Nigeria, where he conducted his fieldwork on Ekpe. He procured a masquerade ensemble, including full body costume, and accoutrements, from



prominent mask-maker. Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa. To complement this ensemble with its highly innovative design and materials, he also collected an ensemble of chiefly dress that reflects a more canonical aesthetic, but also blends globally inspired elements.

Courtney Micots, who recently completed her doctorate in art history, researched Fante Asafo flags, which will be featured in the exhibition, collected cloth commemorating President Obama’s visit to Ghana, and also helped negotiate a commission of two *kente* cloths from master weaver Samuel Cophie of Bonwire. Chris Richards (a doctoral candidate, Art History) has done preliminary research on textiles and fashion in Ghana in 2009 and 2010. He documented globalized fashion trends, including the fusion of historically important textile genres with new design elements, and witnessed the impact of the Obama visit on textile production. He also interviewed Samuel Cophie about the cloths he created for the museum, including a *kente* designed to honor

President Clinton, and a new design with appliquéd *adinkra* patterns. MacKenzie Moon Ryan, whose preliminary doctoral fieldwork in Tanzania intensified her interest in the kanga and kitenge cloth histories, will contribute her essay on the global sources of kanga design and production. She is also assisting with interpretation of examples from the Harn’s collection.

The collaborative efforts of these faculty and students, with contributions from scholars at outside institutions, will culminate in the exhibition and catalogue that will be used to enhance curricula across many university disciplines. The addition to the Harn’s African collection of historically and aesthetically significant examples of textiles will be an enduring legacy for the Museum and for the university community. The exhibition will open February 8, 2011 and run until May 8, 2011.

Susan Cooksey is Curator of African Art at the Samuel P. Harn Museum and affiliate faculty with the Center for African Studies.