

Clothing, Colonial Expositions, and Images of Africa

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I am currently on sabbatical, working toward completion of my book on African fashion design and Africa's influence on Western fashion design. This subject has provided me with opportunities to explore the presence of indigenous fashion design in Africa, documenting how dress innovators have produced new styles outside the orbit of the Western-dominated global fashion system. I have also investigated the many strategies designers use to absorb distinctively local dress practices into their work, in some cases through direct adaptation of textiles or ornaments, in others through conceptual references to local histories and cultures. All of this, as well as my analysis of the constructed images of Africa in Western dress history, brings fashion fully into the study of African visual culture.

During the past year, I have presented papers on new aspects of this project at the Triennial Conference on African Art at UCLA, on a panel that I organized, and as part of a speakers' series at Michigan State University. I have published an article in *African Arts* and an essay in the Harn Museum of Art's wonderful *Africa Interweave* catalogue. In addition, I published a paper on the colonial era exchanges between Africa and France via fashion in *Images Changeantes de l'Inde et de l'Afrique* (L'Harmattan, 2011).

While most of my fashion research has focused on modern and contemporary Africa, using interviews with designers and analysis of recent garments, I am increasingly intrigued by the historical aspects of the interaction between African and Western cultures. More specifically, I hope to return to a longstanding



fascination with the colonial expositions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as part of my next research project. These events provide rich material for visual analysis; much has been written about European (largely British and French) representations of their African colonies through dioramas, photographs, collections of art and artifacts, and even the importation of African people to create actual "villages" for Western visitors' edification (and entertainment).

What was the impact of these events in Africa? How did African people involved in the expositions respond to the construction of their cultures? For years, I have gathered information on the African side of this exchange wherever I have found it, in archives, museums, works of art and literature. Mali's Archives Nationales contain letters between colonial officials and the artists who sought passage to France

to take part in the potentially lucrative public events. In coming years, as I pursue this interest, I hope to use the expositions' engagement with the visual arts to reveal much more about the African involvement in, and resistance to, the Western construction of the colonies. I have proposed a panel for the 2013 College Art Association conference on the artistic impacts of the expositions, which I hope will lead this research in as yet unimagined directions.

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