

# Africa at the Colonial Expositions: Representation through Visual Art

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I recently completed my book, *African Fashion Global Style: Clothing, Innovations, and Stories about Africa*, which will be published in fall 2014 by Indiana University Press. I'm very excited about the book, in part because I will be able to illustrate the work of a great many designers. The book will have ninety images, all in color. This extensive illustration program was made possible in part by a College Art Association award, from the Millard Meiss Publication Fund.

This past summer, with support from a Fine Arts Scholarship Enhancement Fund award, I initiated a new research project. This work grows out of one aspect of my fashion research, focused on the intersection of African visual art and European constructions of Africa during the early twentieth century. I will address the two major colonial powers in Africa, England and France, through the representation of their African colonies at two key, hyper-visual events: the British Empire Exhibition of 1924, and France's 1931 Exposition Coloniale Internationale. These expositions, part of a history of colonial-era events, were government-sponsored celebrations of French and British national achievements in a wide range of areas, including promotion of the nations' colonial endeavors.

The 1924 and 1931 events were each the largest exposition of their respective nations, and both made extensive use of works of visual art from Africa (classified as "craft" or "artisanat") to encourage public interest in the colonies and to assert the potential value of African forms as sources of inspiration for British and French artists. In Africa, my focus is on the British colonies of the Gold Coast (Ghana)

and Nigeria, and the French Soudan (Mali), and I plan to conduct research in each country as I pursue this project. Each of these colonies was prominently featured at the expositions through objects as well as through the presence of colonial subjects themselves, whose clothing and other body adornments enhanced the presentation of the "exotic" colonies. Through archival re-

search, investigation and analysis of public and private collections that hold objects created for/displayed at the expositions, and through interviews with people who have connections to the events through family members--such as the children of West Africans who participated in the expositions--I will piece together the stories of specific objects, art forms, and people to describe the uses and misuses of visual arts as a tool for colonial propaganda.

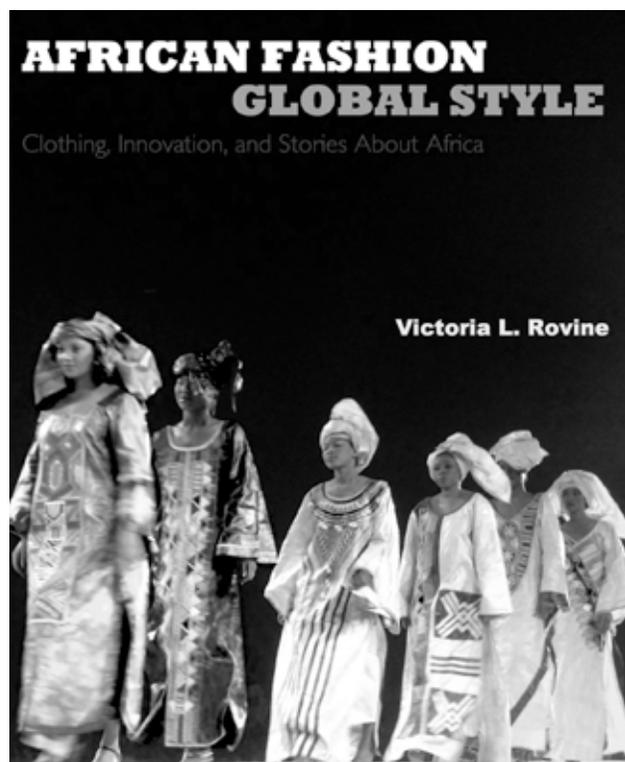
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the most prominent media used to enhance the African displays at these events. They were included as industrial products that highlighted the important cotton production of the colonies, and, in the form of European-made textiles for African consumers, they celebrated Africa as a major market for French and British industries. My own expertise in African textiles makes this element of the project a natural extension from my previous work. The architecture of the expositions, which included many buildings built expressly for these events, reflected British and French responses to the indigenous architecture of their colonies.

Last summer, I conducted research in Senegal's Archives de l'Afrique Occidentale Française (1895-1959). I also worked in several libraries, museums, and archives in France, including the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the archives of the Quai Branly, and the Archives Nationales d'Outre-mer, located in Aix-en-Provence. In the UK, I worked in the National Archives and the British Library's Asia, Pacific, and African Collection. I found hundreds of fascinating documents, some of which I will use to write my first paper on this new research subject, which I will

present at the Triennial Conference on African Art in New York City this March.

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I plan to make two key artistic media the center of my investigation: textiles and architecture. Textiles were among