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**A New Start: Re-thinking the Display and Interpretation of
African Textiles at the Detroit Institute of Arts**

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Introduction

When the DIA began implementing its renovation, restoration, and expansion project in 2001, its objective was to make essential upgrades to the Museum's aging facility, improve traffic flow and way-finding patterns and increase gallery space. The enormous task of the building project presented the unprecedented opportunity for the Museum to reshape the visitor experience, not only through an upgraded building and new amenities, but also by rethinking how to present its world-class collection to the public.

More than 5,000 works of art have been reinstalled in some 150,000 square feet of gallery space in a way that allows visitors to more easily make personal connections with the art and to understand the objects in the context of their own place and time. Instead of grouping objects strictly by time period or style, many galleries are now arranged according to the stories the objects have to tell and explore themes that resonate with each visitor's personal experiences, such as spirituality, travel, and the cycles of life.

The Big Idea

Special exhibitions have always had "big ideas" that provide the organizing principle or story on which the show is based. In the new DIA installation, the big idea was applied to the permanent collection. Left behind were the traditional divisions by nationality, geography, and time periods. Eighteenth-century French art is no longer arranged by style but around ideas such as Splendor by the Hour, where visitors walk through galleries arranged to evoke a day in the life of a European aristocrat. Seventeenth-century Italian art is not presented as Italian baroque painting but rather as Art as Theater, with the emphasis on the dramatic approaches many artists of the time used in their work to revive religious devotion. The Grand Tour of Italy tells the story of the journeys taken by wealthy young men in the Eighteenth century to complete their education and African art, once organized by place of origin, now revolves around the role objects play in African life, whether in ceremonies celebrating birth, puberty, marriage, or death, as symbols of sacred kingship, or as a means of commemorating ancestors.

To plan the reinstallation, three cross-departmental teams were formed that included curatorial, education, conservation, marketing, and development staff. The teams researched the collections, determined what stories the objects had to tell and developed ideas or storylines that guided the gallery installations. Art scholars and experts in other fields, such as visitor research, were called in to provide feedback and to vet the intellectual integrity of the teams' ideas.

The Museum also instituted several focus groups to test ideas and solicit opinion on a range of issues. People with a variety of backgrounds, ages, interests and familiarity with museum going participated over nearly eighteen months of discussions. DIA staff collected their perspectives and opinions and listened to the challenges they perceived or faced as museum visitors. This

information was used to address issues of visitor comfort and support new interpretive tools for the reinstallation itself from touch-screens to concise and clearly illustrated wall labels.

The result is what DIA Director Graham Beal has described as a series of discrete special exhibitions. The Museum has installed and interpreted art this way for temporary exhibitions for years. Now it has been done this way throughout the entire museum, making the DIA's spectacular permanent collection much more engaging to the general visitor.



Figure 1. The African art galleries.

The Collection

The textile holdings at the DIA are encyclopedic and range from 11th Century Tiraz textiles to Kermit the frog. By far the most textile intensive galleries are, however, those devoted to the arts of the Indigenous Americas and Africa.

African art is inextricably tied to the founding of the Detroit Institute of Arts and remains one of the institution's important hallmarks. In a community with a large African American population the new African galleries occupy a prestigious position within the re-designed museum and are key to the Institutions stated goals of attracting more visitors with an emphasis on people that have to date not traditionally been museum-goers.

The DIA's African Art collection comprises some rare world-class works from nearly one hundred cultures, predominantly from regions south of the Sahara desert. While the collection is diverse, and ranges from sculpture to textiles, religious paraphernalia and body ornamentation, it is heavily weighted toward the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

From a conservation standpoint the condition of the bulk of the African textile collection accessioned before the 1990's is in good to fair condition, while most of the work needed for reinstallation has been and continues to be carried out on objects which have been collected

recently by Dr. Nii Quarcoopome the Curator of African Art - and there has been a lot of work. Textiles are amongst the most susceptible objects in museum collections to degradative factors such as light and humidity and so all textiles throughout the whole Museum are rotated every three to four months. The DIA is fortunate to have a collection of such depth that allows this. The frequent changes in the galleries also feed into the “big idea” of making more use of the permanent collection and giving the public more reason to make frequent return visits.



Figure 2. The calligraphic cloth shirt before conservation treatment.

Batakaris: connectors of cultures

To further illustrate the approach of making connections between different cultures and the art in the galleries there are probably no better objects in the Museum than the collection of Ghanaian Batakaris or warrior and hunter tunics, especially those made using calligraphic cloth and covered with sacred amulets which blend traditional African beliefs with the imported influence of Islam and stand as sentinels at the crossroads of the African Art galleries and those of the Arts of the Islamic world.

For well over a millennium, West Africa has been in contact with, host to, and influenced by Islam, a presence that has deeply affected indigenous social, political and economic organization, beliefs and value systems. The historic pattern of Islamic penetration into West Africa occurred in three stages, each characterized by a different type of interaction. Beginning about 1200 years ago Islam moved into West Africa through the agency of trade and peaceful proselytization. The early trading communities and individual immigrants had little impact on their host societies. Although they were treated with awe and respect because of the command they had over goods and especially over the written word, interaction was limited. Like all newcomers to a community, distinctiveness of behavior, of belief, of dress, and of manners identified them with each other while setting them apart from local chiefs and commoners. Only when Muslims in

part achieved status and started to integrate into the nascent political hierarchies did indigenous ruling elites begin to exploit Islamic symbols and assimilate them into traditional behaviors. Finally, it was with the advent of political rule in the name of Islam that society at large converted. In percolating down to the commoners, the material symbols of Islam became Africanized and further abstracted (Prussin 1986).

West Africa has traditionally been non-literate; consequently visual decoration has always been of paramount importance in communicating societal identity, and along with oral traditions maintaining continuity over time and space. Two-dimensional symbols such as the written word are easily appropriated and can be recognized instantaneously, and as Prussin (1986) points out in her book 'Hatumere: Islamic design in West Africa' when two-dimensional models are introduced into non-literate societies they often have great power. Over time the introduction of Islamic script transformed into a richly elegant pattern work displayed on surfaces of both the personal and physical environment in Islamized West Africa.

The Hausa, in present-day Nigeria, were one of the first groups to convert to Islam and the respected Hausa scholar David Heathcote (1977) believes that the calligraphic cloths that were endemic to many groups of West African people were traditionally drawn by Hausa scholars to supplement their meager income. The combination of script, magic squares, pentagram motifs, and crosses all formed by the arrangement of script implies that the design pattern work is itself imbued with a magical quality and the power to protect.

Batakaris are worn for festivals, parades, and other gatherings to distinguish hunters and warriors from the rest of the community while simple, unadorned clothing is typically worn for the actual hunt or into battle.

The shirts in the DIA collection are attributed to the Akan people, a linguistic group mainly centered in modern day Ghana that includes the Ashanti and Fante. Though not Muslim the Akan have adopted this talismanic calligraphy and through their strong warrior tradition were no doubt proud to embrace an Islamic custom that celebrated valor and the protective power of the Qur'an's written word.

Protective powers

The shirts themselves have a simple shape and construction. Most are pieced together from narrow strips of woven cotton, which often feature the traditional indigo stripes of men's cloth over-dyed using a concoction of herbs and pigments that are thought to infuse the cloth with spiritual power. In a blending of traditional African religious beliefs and Islam small leather amulets or sebe sewn around tightly folded papers containing Islamic prayers or magic squares also adorn the shirts. The fact that these amulets contain a verse from the Qur'an is thought to be more important than the individual prayers themselves, and many amulets on the same garment contain the same prayer, like the prescribed spoken repetition of a verse from the Qur'an they increase the arsenal of resistance to danger and impart the wearer with further spiritual power and protection. The concentration of amulets is often most dense around the neck hole to protect the vulnerable head and neck. Hats that are also covered in amulets are also often worn to further protect the wearer's head. Like the calligraphic cloths, the amulets are also prepared by Islamic scholars or Marabouts who write in locally made black ink and bless them before binding.



Figure 3. The contents of two amulets after opening.

Although the traditional belief is that the amulets lose their power if unwrapped, a couple that Dr. Quarcoopome collected were dissected so that one of the prayers with its distinctive script could be displayed alongside the shirts to enable people to more fully comprehend the connection between Islam and traditional African beliefs. Interestingly several had to be opened as it was found that not all of the amulets contain inscriptions, this one contained a triangular shaped chunk of a flip-flop sole, however, two pages were unwrapped and both were found to contain the same opening lines from the 128th Surat al-Tauba or chapter of the Qur'an:

In the name of God the compassionate, the merciful... Now hath come unto you an Apostle from amongst yourselves: It grieves him that ye should perish: ardently anxious is he over you: to the Believers is he most kind and merciful. But if they turn away, say "Allah sufficeth me: there is no god but he: On him is my trust, He the Lord of the Throne (of Glory) Supreme!"

Heather Ecker, the Curator of Arts of the Islamic World at the DIA thinks this passage was chosen as it contains a shahada or one of the creeds of Islam *there is no God, but God and Mohammed is his apostle and ever watchful.*

Some amulets are wrapped in animal skins and many shirts are also adorned with animal bones, claws, horns, wood and shell. The traditional use of batakari by hunters is an old West African custom and may explain the addition of animal elements such as horns bound in leather and the use of cat, snake and hyena skins to cover amulets. Animal materials add the powers of the bush and its dangerous and stealthy animal spirits to the protective powers of the Islamic charms. They also represent a monetary outlay in terms of the success of the wearer as a hunter and the number worn is an indication of his power and wealth.

Outside of city life, many communities in Africa depend on controlling an unpredictable environment as a means of food and livelihood. Traditionally, hunting has provided more than food - a successful hunt is a symbol for general prosperity for the entire village and although hunting is disappearing as a way of life in most of Africa, hunters still join together in associations that sponsor meetings and group hunts where rituals are performed to assure safety and success before they leave the protection of the village and venture into the wilderness, a

space that is still viewed by many as a place of dangerous animals and spirits and yet also the source of magic, healing, power, and spiritual knowledge.

Conserving the DIA Shirts

Dr. Quarcoopome acquired all the shirts for the DIA in 2005 from a dealer in his Native Ghana. Some were in better condition than others. The one shirt made with calligraphic cloth in the collection was by any standards in terrible condition (Fig. 2 and Fig. 4). It exhibited extreme levels of particulate soiling and was full of insect frass and some sizable spider egg cases.

The shirt was also structurally very weak. There were many holes throughout, most were probably caused by a combination of wear and tear and insect grazing but some were 20-30cms in length and width and were likely the result of rodent damage. After thorough surface cleaning using low-powered vacuum suction, the shirt was humidified using dampened blotting paper and sheets of Gore-Tex to relax the heavy creasing.

The amulets are attached to the shirt using leather ties that are knotted through to the shirt's underside. As a result the damaged areas were supported using patches that could be fitted around the leather ties and the large knots. Plain weave cotton broadcloth was chosen as it simulated the structure of the original well, and dyed using Procion MX coldwater reactive dyes. The patches were applied to the reverse and the damaged areas supported using laid thread couching and long and short stitch worked using threads pulled from brown polyester crepe line.



Figure 4. The calligraphic cloth shirt after conservation treatment.

Another of the shirts in the collection stands out because of the number and quality of the amulets decorating its surface. This one truly embodies the blend of African and Islamic influence with the amulets covered in leopard, lion, hyena and wildebeest skins. It was collected with an accompanying hat, also covered in leather-wrapped amulets and a large leather-wrapped horn, a horse or zebra tail switch and a medicine containing pouch complete with lion tooth decoration. Unfortunately it arrived from Africa with an infestation of a bright red West African spider beetle. Although they were tiny, no chances were taken and the shirt and accessories were wrapped and sealed in polythene until the beetle was identified by entomologists at the Michigan State Department for Agriculture and proved to be non-venomous. The sealed shirt was then frozen

repeatedly over a period of two weeks to kill the resident beetles, which it is thought were using the object for shelter rather than as a food source.



Figure 5. Shirt with animal skin covered amulets, hat, fly switch and pouch before conservation treatment.

Unlike the first tunic made from calligraphic cloth this tunic was constructed from coarsely woven strips of cotton that were stitched together in the vertical direction. It has a simple sleeveless shape with a flared skirt. This tunic was in reasonably good condition. It was, however, heavily soiled overall. The tunic, already stained from preparatory treatments has probably darkened further through wear and exposure to UV and atmospheric pollutants. In addition, the front of the tunic was also heavily encrusted in a thick resinous material that could be a combination of many unguents including blood and was probably applied during ceremonial use.

Many of the amulets had suffered insect attack, particularly those covered with animal hair. The leopard skin wrapped amulet highlights insect grazing patterns. A red wool wrapped amulet was also badly affected by insect activity with what remains of the wool on the front almost completely detached. A couple of amulets on the front and back were also loose. One amulet on the back of the tunic was badly damaged, the leather binding along the sides is missing and the interior layers are starting to separate.

The first shirt set something of a protocol for the other treatments that were to follow and again after surface cleaning and humidification a stitched patched support system was chosen as the most appropriate method of treating the structural damage. This time heavy weight cotton duck was used for the patches. Several attempts were made to dye the cotton the correct shade using Procion MX cold-water reactive dyes; however, it was a problem achieving the correct depth of shade. As a result, the use of fabric paints was employed.

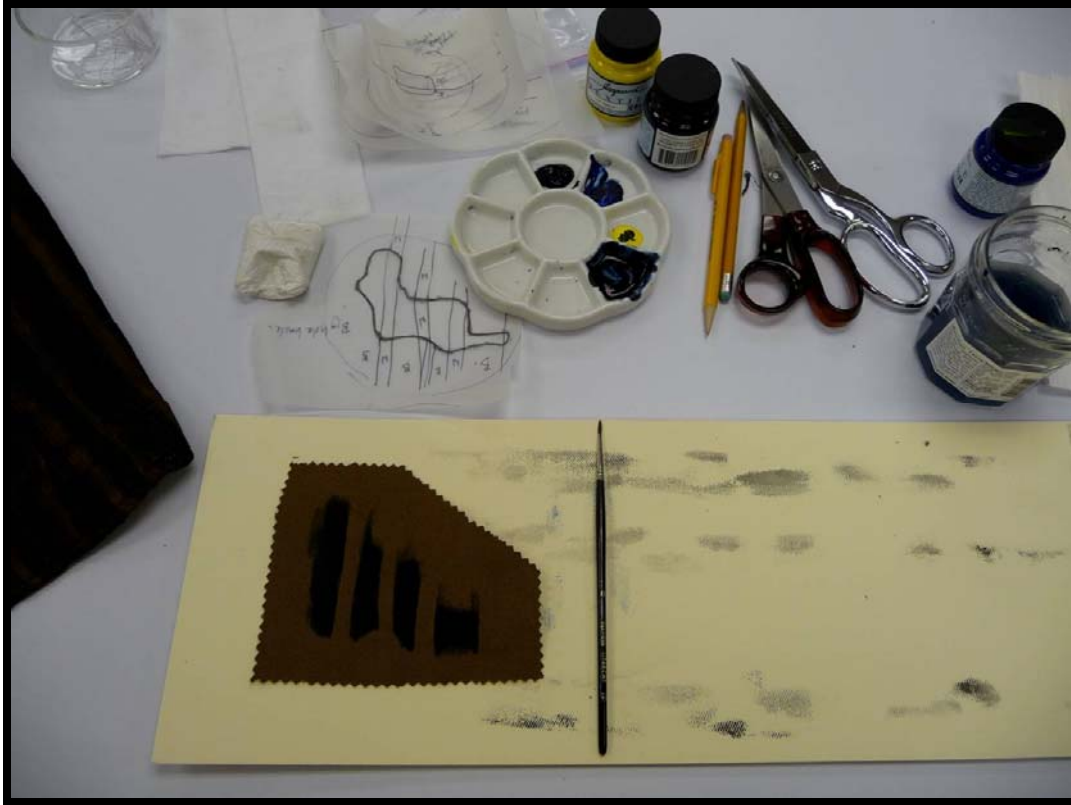


Figure 6. Fabric painted patches.

Templates of the missing areas were taken using Mylar. The hole was drawn around and the area then cut away. When placed against the patch it provided a guide to enable the corresponding shape to be painted onto the cotton using ProChem fabric paints. This also allowed the fine indigo lines in the original cloth to be replicated, something that has been repeated in the treatment of a further two shirts. Once dry, the paints were fixed using heat and then washed before use. The patch was then applied to the reverse of the damaged area with the painted infill corresponding with the hole. Damage was secured using a combination of long and short stitch and lines of laid thread couching. There were a couple of holes hidden behind amulets. These were supported from the reverse using an overlay of fine nylon net dyed using Lanaset acid dyes. All stitching was carried out using threads pulled from brown polyester crepe line.

The front of the red wool amulet was encapsulated using a layer of adhesive coated nylon net. The net was dyed the appropriate color and was coated with a layer of 5% Lascaux, a type of thermoplastic adhesive in de-ionized water. The adhesive layer was reactivated using a heated spatula. The nylon net was stitched in place along the leather bound edge of the amulet and the excess trimmed. The separating layers of the damaged amulet were secured using small pieces of Beva 371 adhesive film reactivated using a heated spatula. Loose amulets were secured by stitching using appropriately colored DMC cotton.

A mount was made for the tunic using an Ethafoam® core padded out using polyester wadding and polyester needle punch felt. In turn this was covered with a top layer of black cotton jersey.



Figure 7. Shirt with animal skin covered amulets after conservation treatment and mounting.

Conclusion

In conclusion this group of objects has been very enjoyable to work on, perhaps not the most exciting and innovative in terms of the conservation required but very satisfying in terms of the process and the transformation of the objects from beginning to end.

Since the DIA opened in November 2007 it has experienced record levels of attendance and one thing that has become clear is that visitors want to make connections and enjoy the new presentation. Not only is there a desire to learn about different cultures and their art, but they also want to make connections between those cultures and their own.

The survival of these culturally complex objects is now assured and hopefully they will go a long way to helping the Museum in that mission.

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