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1988

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*Indianapolis Museum of Art*

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Gilfoy, Peggy S., "Theme and Variations: Creative Improvisation in African Textiles" (1988). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 638.

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Theme and Variations: Creative Improvisation in African Textiles

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ABSTRACT

The Euro-American textile patterning vocabulary focusses on compartmentalization and symmetry. We describe textile design schemes as "repeats;" and as with many aspects of our lives, we divide our expressions into neat cubicles. The art historian, Meyer Shapiro, who wrestled with this cultural trait expressed it this way:

"Hardening of the categories causes art disease."

Yet, for many art-producing cultures there is scant division between the working world and the spiritual, the procurement of food and maintenance of order; relating history and group entertainment. Art is life. The function of artistic structure and the tenets of life are often interwoven.

Theme and variation takes on a particular richness among Subsaharan groups. In myth and music, as well as in textile design rhythmic placement, improvisation and layering of information are combined with great sophistication.