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Dahomey Appliqués and the Politics of Production

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My name is Holly Paquette and I am currently a Textile Merchandising graduate student. The textile that I chose to study was a Dahomey appliqué wall hanging from the Fon tribe of Abomey in West Africa. Along with the Dahomey appliqué wall hanging I studied a mass produced cotton fabric featuring Dahomey motifs from the University of Rhode Island's textile collection. I was initially drawn to this textile because it reminded me of artwork done by the French artist Matisse. Later on, through my research I learned that some of Matisse's artwork was influenced by a trip he took to Africa; after which his art grew bolder and became more abstract.¹ The cotton fabric paired with the Dahomey appliqué interested me because I thought it would be fascinating to investigate how designs originating from the Fon tribe ended up on a mass produced textile. Today, I will give a brief summary of my research, but will mainly address our learning process of creating a display case on the ground floor of our building. First I will discuss the goals and objectives for creating a display case and secondly I will explain the process of executing the display case in two stages: initial and final installations.

The history and original purpose of Dahomey appliqué cloths are embedded in politics, but the present production of these appliqués no longer serve its traditional purpose. "Appliqué is the word used to describe the process of adding further materials to an already-woven textile base and the technique is indigenous to Africa."² The Fon people of Abomey, the capital city of the kingdom of Dahomey, created the art of making striking appliqué cloth for state umbrellas, hammocks, cushion tops, cult clothing, military and religious banners.³ According to Kate Kent, author of *West African Cloth*, "applique was not produced elsewhere in the kingdom, although it was used by royalty in all major towns; Ashanti state cloths may have been known to other West Africans, but it survives only in Abomey."⁴

Dahomey appliqué cloths were not traditionally available to ordinary people, but reserved for individuals of rank within the Fon tribe of Abomey. "Important chiefs and warriors memorialized their honors and achievements on appliqués given to them by the king."⁵ The appliqués were traditionally placed on top of large white umbrellas measuring around 200-365 centimeters in diameter and would be carried to shade the elite member the applique was made for.⁶ Through the cultural timeline of the Fon people of Abomey, I discovered influential changes surrounding this African textile art that can be attributed to politics and the influence of the tourist trade. Throughout history the exchange of African textiles, have found a way into the realm of mass production, such as Dahomey appliqués: conforming, advancing, and in some cases, exploiting cultural tradition to thrive in today's textile market.

¹ "The Art of Henry Matisse," last modified February 2009, <http://www.henri-matisse.net/artofmatisse.html>

² John Picton and John Mack, *African Textiles*(New York: Harper and Row, 1971),169

³ Kate P.Kent, *West African Cloth*(Denver Colorado: Denver Museum of Natural History, 1971),70

⁴ *Ibid.*,70-72

⁵ *Ibid.*,72

⁶ Monni Adams, "Fon Appliqued Cloths," *African Arts* , 13 (February 1980): 31

During the transformation of the market, a new kind of appliqué cloth was created for the tourist trade known as a summarizing cloth.⁷ The first appearances of these summarizing cloths were seen in tourist markets in the 1950s⁸, demonstrating how artists strayed from the traditional purpose of appliqué cloths for a commercial end-use. Taking a, once highly regarded, textile that was only used by nobility and turning it into a mass marketed and consumed product.

In the next section of this presentation I am going to focus on how our object based research was incorporated into a display case. The purpose of the display case was to learn how to develop the skills to present information to a wider audience. The initial objectives for the information being presented was to attract, engage, and educate a wider audience to the research Textile, Fashion Merchandising, and Design graduate students were currently conducting. Another goal was to highlight the diverse array of textiles found within the University of Rhode Island's textile collection and to showcase how the collection can be used as an extension of research for other majors. The display case was constructed around the idea of presenting a clear and engaging message that would intrigue our audience. The installation was changed at each stage of our learning process in order to captivate viewers.

In the initial stages of constructing our display case the theme of Textiles and Politics came to the forefront in the form of University politics. At every stage of the decision process the politics of negotiation came into play. The first dilemma encountered was getting permission to repaint the display case to make a more appealing background. The University's paint department was contacted to see if they were willing to paint the case for our class. Through many discussions and the constant persistence of our professor, we were not only able to get the display case painted, but the paint department generously donated their time and effort for free.

The first items that were installed in the display case were our pictures, the title of our textile and the abstracts we wrote for this conference. Along with the title, the accession number of the textile and whether it was purchased or donated was included. The class wanted to highlight the donors in order to provide a connection to the people who support the textile collection at the University of Rhode Island. In addition each student signed their name to their abstracts for a personal touch. A banner that read Textiles, Fashion Merchandising, and Design department along with the course proposal was placed in the center of the case.

Soon after the initial installation, the photos, mounting sheets etc. started to fall down. We quickly realized that the mounting materials we had used, such as glue dots, were not working due to the lights heating up the adhesive and causing the glue to melt and unstick. Through trial and error the class learned that the best tools to use were a staple gun and double-sided scrapbook tape. Constant attention to maintaining a display, particularly one that is a learning tool, is essential to managing the politics of community engagement.

In the final stage of installation, the Textile, Fashion Merchandising, and Design banner was removed and a map took its place. The large world map was used to create a diagram in order to communicate the vast array of cultures being presented. The posters from our session were installed in the display case, however due to the limited space the posters had to be printed smaller than the usual conference presentation size. An issue that was of concern during the installation of the posters was order and

⁷ Ibid., 37

⁸ Ibid., 37

placement. Since each poster had its own color scheme, the class wanted to balance out the darker posters with the brighter ones. The incorporation of the posters into the display case presented the posters to an extended audience. The posters provided an extensive summary of our research and gave further insight into the politics surrounding the textiles being studied. After the class final our professor put up the acceptance to this conference as a concluding statement of our learning process.

Overall, our display case generated great responses from the faculty, staff, and students at the University of Rhode Island. The Dean's office of our college really loved the display and there was a great amount of positive feedback. A lot of our viewers commented on how much they enjoyed the constant changes and updates made to the display. Confirming that our goal of keeping our viewers intrigued was met. It was even noticed that people were constantly stopping to take pictures; this can probably be attributed to some of the more risqué textiles being exhibited such as the penis sheath. We succeed with our display case because it proved to be a way in which we could extend our learning experience to new levels.

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