

## **Book Review: African Textiles Today by Christopher Spring 2012**

**Nelso P. Graves – Reviewer**

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This handy well-bound book with convenient pagination, colour photographic plates (either full page or quarto size plates) and very convivial layout format in simple typography is titled *AFRICAN TEXTILES TODAY*. A simulation of the textures of El Anatsui's sculpture *Women's Cloth* emblazons the front half of the book's cover, and Samuel Fosso's C-print photograph *Le chef: celui qui a rendu l'Afrique aux colons* (*The Chief: the one who sold Africa to the colonizers*) dominates the other half of the cover. Christopher Spring is an artist and scholar, who crisscrosses from academia to the real house of African artifact and material culture, at The British Museum, as curator.

Beyond drawing attention to the following: (i) textiles as arguably the most obvious signifiers of culture throughout the African continent and the Diaspora (6), (ii) the ontology, fashion, status and aspirations of people maybe read through the colours and patterns of textiles, the means and materials from which they are made, and the occasions on which they were worn or otherwise, utilised (6). This Introduction is a summary with leading notes on the discourses that engage this book. Spring, the curator of the British Museum, takes advantage of the Museum's excellent collection of African Textiles, to give a selective overview of the many textile traditions of Africa, as well as insight into how they have inspired

and informed the works of contemporary artists and photographers. Spring further lays out the critical discourses that engage this Read: (I) Textiles as a symbol of emancipation and esoteric communication, citing his analysis in East Africa, Kenya and North Africa, Egypt; Spring spreads his analysis to include other African nations, Tanzania, Mozambique and Ghana. In the entire story, he draws attentions to the role of pioneering European exhibitions of textiles as instrumentalities of growth and development in the art. He also presents textiles as a cynosure of history; emphasising the significance of the iconographic contents of cloth in the reading of the history of migration. Following, he establishes textiles and trade as coterminal to each other, citing the importance of the place of “the trade winds and the watery road for silk and other textiles across the Indian Ocean and to East Africa.” Debunking Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness* and the stereotypes of Africa; instead foisting the reality that “fashion and haute couture” are shaped by African textiles’ creative designers. Besides, for Spring, dynamic African traditions, especially textiles remain inspirations for the continent’s foremost contemporary artists and photographers.

Spring puts the art historian Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie’s remarks in the essay “El Anatsui’s intercultural aesthetics and the representation of Africa in global culture,” in (ed.) Y. Kawaguchi, *A Fateful Journey: Africa in the Works of El Anatsui*, Osaka (2010, pp. 38-39), the central thesis in Chapter II, Textiles and Contemporary art, and the entire book. It makes sense to ponder and reflect on Ogbechie’s remarks, rather than scuff at them as this review would show. Hence, Spring draws attention to the large Textile exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art that utilised the collection of the British Museum; and the Grey’s Art Gallery, both in New York (2008) to highlight that reality. These Shows drew attention to the fact that the works on display were not merely imitative of the traditions of African textiles; instead, they utilised those traditions as means towards engaging ideas and concepts which debunked notions of national or even continental boundaries.

The author cites El Anatsui’s works in the “*Gawu*,” Oriel Mostyn Gallery, Llandudno (2003) as exemplars of art that have not only drawn inspirations and ideas from African textiles but explored

and enriched themes of transformation and discourse of contemporary world art everywhere. Kernelled on that exhibition as an instrumentality of growth and development of art, its history, a larger discus of textiles meshes on the threshold of artistic practice "*Cloth is one of the main repositories of history in Africa*" (pp. 30-51; 55). El Anatsui's *Gawu* remarks (p. 55) deserve our attention for they emphasise the place of Africa's oral traditions as accurate histories.

Growth and development of the history of art and the studio (textile and sculpture practices, p. 55-68) are engaged to demonstrate how Anatsui's artwork, and several other artists of his generation, have engendered a fresh paradigm for abstraction; conjuring a hitherto for fascinatingly overlooked context in which that paradigm can and will flourish. The critic Robert Storr (2010) asserted that El's work is big news from Africa, but, even more important; it is world news for art. That paradigm has flourished in Africa, from West Africa – Nigeria, with the "*natural synthesis*" cognomen in the Zaria Art School, and Ghana; and whirl-winded as far away as Ibrahim El-Salahi Khartoum Art School. Despite the patronizing hype by the author, citing distinct personalities as principal and causal to the matter; *natural synthesis* remains the prerogative of all humanity: We all are children of the same artistic fecundity!

Grounded on an exhibition in the British Museum, Spring expands the discus of Ghana "wax" and "fancy" factory prints, simulacrum of Javanese batik, to include all of West Africa. The narrative begins in Ghana, where factory made prints are trendy; but kernelled on the inclusion of the well-established original print style Asante *Adinkrafabrics*, hand stamped and distinguished by iconographical imageries incorporated as dynamic visual elements of illustration. Chapter IV: Kanga, Capulana and Shweshwe are the stories of textiles in eastern and southern Africa. Chapters III, IV and V pit textile as a leitmotif, in fact, a postage stamp that links the continents of Europe, Asia and Africa in a fascinating history of trade and migration. *Kanga* in eastern and southern Africa (p. 77-97), exemplify textiles as a means of asserting an independent collective identity, and the place of the European and Asian merchant



classes at the successful industrialisation of the industry as well as the popularity of locally handcrafted textiles (p. 100- 119).

Indeed, the reality of historical occurrences *via* the currency and symbolism of cloth (p. 127), although linear, draws attention to disruptions as well as continuities as time fleets on. Foucault's anti-historicism stance conceives of history within a variant of cycles that are affected by "regimes of occurrences." In line with the canons of art history, Spring engages Michel Foucault discourses on Power and other hermeneutic tools to further the tidying up of the metaphoric analogies of "currency of trade" and maintains the symbolism of the river networks (p. 124) and the trans-Saharan caravan with its portmanteaux of Islam. Even the Portuguese as the first Europeans to navigate and establish trade in eastern and southern Africa; all as the vast corridors that knit the nations together (p. 125 ff).

With the previous conceptual frames, Spring directs the last segment of the book and concludes the analysis of textiles by simulating notions of power and iconography to underscore the reality of prestige and power (p. 142-144). Communication within different structures is often mediated through the cloth. The art historian M. Ann Holly claims that these schemes in which representation in synthetic medium intuit forms are suggestive of sensuous expressions that direct the assimilation of experience (1984:141). In tandem with the discipline of art history, these are the contexts that map the fabrics and their contents. Playing on the networks of trade routes established over time by African traders, Asian and European cloth merchants, *African Textiles Today* draws attention to a business driven entirely by African tastes and patronage. Spring corroborates Ogbechie's remarks that in spite of a western aesthetic preference for sculpture, these distinctive African textiles have a universal recognition that African sculpture can only dream of (p. 55). Though subject to the scrutiny of the growing modern-day fashion industry (p. 145) that there is probably no better indicator of culture change throughout the world than cloth and clothing, and in Africa, the great variety of textile traditions makes the continent's textiles a particularly significant sign for such change. This book engages useful photographic plates accompanied by

elaborate definitive legends as memory aids to buttress the narratives. The approach is commonplace throughout the discourse; for example, pp.79-99; pp. 145-167 *etcetera*.

*African Textiles Today*, although its essential coverage of Africa, does not put Nigeria, the largest black nation in Africa center-stage in its discourse. The other leading writers on African textiles, including his mentor John Picton (to whom this book is dedicated) in *African Textiles*, coauthored with John Mack (1989) put Nigerian textiles and its processes centre stage. For an exhaustive study and even a historiography to the subject of textile and clothing, the keen reader must look at Jean Borgatti's impressive work *Cloth as Metaphor: Nigerian Textiles from the Museum of Cultural History* (2012) as an invaluable reference.

*Textiles Today*, however, is valuable for pedagogical purposes. It does present in visual and textual material sufficient for a historicity of modern and contemporary African textiles (p.236). This book offers an almost photographic album art historiography alongside texts that ethnographers encouraged in the past for African art history (Ugiomoh, 2004). "The work of art, however, requires an intelligent spectator who must go beyond the pleasures of the eyes to express a judgment and to argue for the reasons for what he sees," as Lucian the Greek rhetorician argues. It is, therefore, the burden of the pedagogue who would choose this book as an original text to dare bring the works in it alive along with the author's adjudged competence. As images that bring the survey of African textiles, these pictures and imageries demand of users a forging of discus and linguistic analysis beyond the offer that the author has so ably lead. Such conversations make the narratives mentally more fulfilling. Intellectually, therefore, each chapter demands an expansion in rigorous research that would reveal the shape of their contents. I think that is the key benefit of this "champion" text on African textiles. In essence, this book is commendable and its value in various spheres where knowledge is sought and put to us for both developments of self and national consciousness. *African Textiles Today* is a valuable companion for the teaching of modern and contemporary art history and criticism.

## References

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