



THE TEXTILE MUSEUM

DISCOVER THE PATTERN, RHYTHM AND TEXTURE OF AFRICAN TEXTILES

“Weaving Abstraction: Kuba Textiles and the Woven Art of Central Africa”

Opens October 15 at The Textile Museum

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This photo of the *Nyimi*, Bakuba king and Kuba leader shows the most lavish example of the culture’s dress. Photo by A. Cauvin, the Pierre Loos collection. Reproduced in catalog for *Weaving Abstraction* (The Textile Museum, 2011).

August 8, 2011, Washington, DC— The Textile Museum in Washington, D.C., will open a groundbreaking new exhibition this fall titled “Weaving Abstraction: Kuba Textiles and the Woven Art of Central Africa” (October 15, 2011 through February 12, 2012) The exhibition showcases some of the best examples of this complex tradition. Ingeniously woven from palm fiber, Central African textiles distinguished the wealthy and powerful. Skirts, reaching over 15 feet in width, were layered on top of one another and worn with decorated belts and hats. Woven art from the Kuba kingdom makes playful use of a language of over 200 patterns and its signature aesthetic brings to mind the rhythms of improvisational jazz.

The exhibition includes **approximately 140 objects** ranging from small, exquisite baskets to skirts measuring more than 15 feet in width. “Weaving Abstraction” presents new research and is accompanied by a **full-color, 218-page catalog** by guest curator Vanessa Drake Moraga.

To compliment this exhibition, The Textile Museum will present its fall

symposium on the topic “Central African Textiles: Art and Cultural Narrative” (October 14-16, 2011). “Weaving Abstraction” places Kuba textiles within the larger context of Central African culture by including fiber art and baskets from the Kongo, Tutsi and other peoples. It is the most comprehensive exploration of this beautiful and impressive art form to date in the United States.

About the Kuba Kingdom

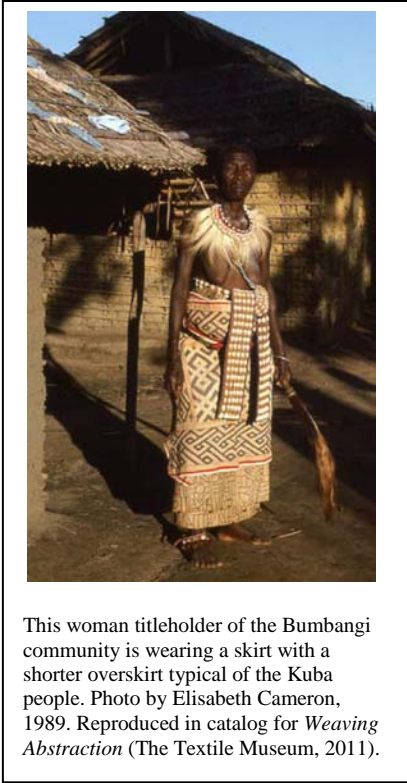
The Kuba Kingdom emerged in the early 17th century and grew to approximately 20 culturally related ethnic groups across a region in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo. Referred to as the



Man’s status cloth, D.R. Congo, Shoowa people, early 20th century. Collection of Matthew Polk and Amy Gould.

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“people of the lightning, people of the cloth, people of the king,” Kuba culture is defined by the richness of its costume and the importance placed on art and embellishment. Thanks to their control of the ivory trade in the region, Kuba society was relatively wealthy and leisure time was dedicated to artistic pursuits. Unlike surrounding cultures, the Kuba kingdom was closed to foreigners until the 1890s, which protected its artistic traditions from outside influence.



This woman titleholder of the Bumbangi community is wearing a skirt with a shorter overskirt typical of the Kuba people. Photo by Elisabeth Cameron, 1989. Reproduced in catalog for *Weaving Abstraction* (The Textile Museum, 2011).

Masters of the Textile Arts

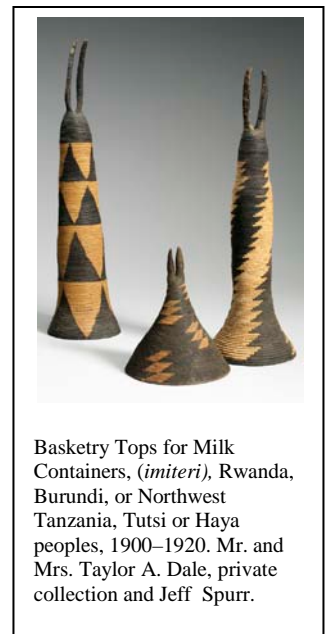
The textiles on view in “Weaving Abstraction” are not made of wool or silk, but instead are constructed almost entirely of raffia, a fiber made from the leaves of a palm tree that grows throughout Central Africa. It is short, coarse and difficult to work with—but it was used with skill to make skirts, headwear, nets, mats, baskets and even the walls and roofs of homes. Raffia was spiritually important for the Kuba, and textiles defined status, ceremonies, funerals and other important occasions.

Kuba textiles are renowned for their creative use of pattern and expert technique. Kuba designs are not only decorative, but use a system of “sacred geometry”—symbols only fully understood by members of the culture. African societies often relied on oral traditions and iconography to communicate their worldview, making geometric designs an important way to convey moral, spiritual and philosophical beliefs. The Shoowa, a subset of the Kuba people, were especially skilled at a textile technique which created a plush, or velvet-like, texture. Weavers played with the striking contrast between gold raffia and dark natural dyes, and combined a smooth weave with this three-dimensional texture.

Surrealist and Modernist artists of the early twentieth century were greatly influenced by African art, and this included textiles. When introduced to the western world in the early nineteenth century, the Kuba aesthetic was coveted by collectors and influenced artists, including Henri Matisse, Sonia Delauney, Paul Klee and artists of the Harlem Renaissance.

On View

“Weaving Abstraction” includes approximately 30 skirts and overskirts, 70 baskets and 27 “status cloths,” in addition to several hats, belts and other accessories. Wrap skirts worn by Kuba women and men were often layered below exquisite overskirts with intricate borders. These skirts are displayed flat, showcasing their abstract designs. When displayed in this manner, the objects resemble paintings, ones filled with the bold patterns and striking juxtapositions that attracted Modernist artists.



Basketry Tops for Milk Containers, (*imiteri*), Rwanda, Burundi, or Northwest Tanzania, Tutsi or Haya peoples, 1900–1920. Mr. and Mrs. Taylor A. Dale, private collection and Jeff Spurr.

These skirts are displayed alongside prestige panels, sometimes referred to as “velvets,” which were collected by Kuba men and indicated wealth and status.

Excellent examples of the fine baskets made by the peoples of the Great Lakes region of Central Africa are also on view. Large baskets with peaked lids were used for grain storage, and smaller versions were used to safeguard precious goods or were displayed to communicate status.

About the Textile Museum

The Textile Museum expands public knowledge and appreciation—locally, nationally, and internationally—of the artistic merit and cultural importance of the world's textiles. Founded in 1925 by George Hewitt Myers, The Textile Museum is an international center for the exhibition, study, collection and preservation of the textile arts. The Textile Museum collection encompasses more than 18,000 objects that date from 3,000 BCE to the present, including some of the world's finest examples of rugs and textiles from the Near East, Central Asia, East and Southeast Asia, Africa, and the indigenous cultures of the Americas. Included in the collection are extraordinary holdings of the Islamic world and pre-Columbian textiles. The museum's 20,000 volume Arthur D. Jenkins Library of Textile Arts is among the world's foremost resources for the study of textiles.

The Textile Museum is located at 2320 'S' Street, NW in Washington, D.C. The museum is open Tuesday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. An \$8 suggested admission is requested of non-members.

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