

A fascinating closing essay by Kevin Dumouchelle details the process through which the *Heroes* exhibition was conceived and developed. The overall project, he explains, was informed by the work of scholars such as David Friedberg and Alfred Gell, who have emphasized that the power of images, which far exceeds artists' initial intentionalities, is enmeshed in a complex historical choreography of endlessly shifting interpretations and political contestation. Works of art, in effect, take on complex lives and afterlives in often tumultuous new contexts. This graceful autobiographical commentary would serve as an excellent stand-alone reading in a museum studies course on contemporary postcolonial curatorial practice. (In hindsight, the chapter is also, if I might be permitted a plaintive aside, an elegy for the prematurely removed *Heroes* exhibition, which was unfortunately closed by NMAFA's former director during her short, controversial tenure at the museum.)

Mirrors and reflective surfaces have a venerable history in African divinatory practice. At times embedded in mortuary and power figures, mirrors call upon the beholder to enter into revelatory dream worlds that may be destabilizing but which are, at the end of the day, deeply transformative. We glimpse puzzling images of those who have come before intermingled with fragmented refractions of our own visage, hinting at where we and our posterity might be headed. Such operations depend on degrees of didactic shock—in James Fernandez's felicitous phrase, on "edification through puzzlement." Holding open this large, engaging, and provocative volume in our hands is, I suggest, rather like holding up a large mirror, which calls us into the mythic dreamtime of African spiritualities and enduring struggles for collective liberation. As we page through these magnificent works of creative genius from across the Mother Continent and the Black Atlantic, we are given back a prophetic gift, seeing whom we, as individuals and as communities, might yet become.

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book review

***Cosmopolitanism and Women's Fashion in Ghana: History, Artistry and Nationalist Inspirations* by Christopher L. Richards
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reviewed by Amanda M. Maples

Thoroughly researched and thoughtfully written, Christopher L. Richards's 2022 *Cosmopolitanism and Women's Fashion in Ghana: History, Artistry and Nationalist Inspirations* documents the sartorial expressions of Accra's fashionistas. Ghana's fashion world, which the author has worked in and documented since 2009, has been overwhelmingly male dominated, as has fashion internationally. To counter this, Richards highlights the voices, histories, and creations of female designers, particularly those of younger generations whose contributions, though significant, are largely undocumented. However, designers were chosen on nongendered criteria, being deemed the most culturally and artistically significant of the twentieth and twenty-first century. Each demonstrated: 1) documented and sustained success locally and globally; 2) the existence of a sufficient array of garments; and 3) a commitment to producing original and innovative designs that engage with Ghanaian dress practice while affirming a cosmopolitan identity. In each of the book's seven chapters, examples and research remind the reader that fashion matters and its layers of cultural, social, and historical significance defy class, age, gender, and ethnicity. Often aspirational, it habitually challenges preconceptions about its reach and importance, and about the wearer's status and daily life. Most importantly, fashion "embodies change through the innovation of existing and historically significant materials and styles of dress" (p. 6).

The primary aim of the book is to archive and celebrate individual fashion designers known for consistency and branding (p. 7) while expanding scholarship to include specificity. Accordingly, Richards moves beyond "designer fashions" and into the everyday, drawing particularly from periodicals and magazines such as the *Sunday Mirror*, *Drum: Ghana*, and the *Daily Graphic*. Richards's effort to read between the lines of everyday experience in Ghana is admirable. For example, in summarizing a blend of Chinese and Ghanaian fashion in *kabas* which "take your mind to China and other Eastern countries, but are still essentially Ghanaian," Richards notes the indirect acknowledgment of Accra's international fashions and how designers often "fuse styles, while maintaining a degree of foreignness" (p. 44). He rightly points out that the contemporary concept of tradition has moved beyond essentialization and "permeated African cultures, resulting in a term that is understood and employed by a diversity of Africans" (p. 20). The author chooses to embrace a Ghanaian usage of tradition "that is fixed in its cultural relevance and assumed legacy, but adaptable in its form of expression," ensuring its continuity (pp. 20–21). Yet, it would have been more convincing and significant a claim if Ghanaians were here quoted or specific local examples given. One quote does bookend the publication, that of Joyce Ababio: "Ghanaians have always been fashionable" (pp. 22, 244) and the introductory chapter pivots from it, situating Accra's fashion culture within the concept of "cosmopolitanism" and as a means for unifying individuals despite perceived differences.

Tracing the presence and significance of fashion's emergence in Accra beginning in the early 1950s and citing women's unique ability to navigate its complexities, the lengthy and well-illustrated chapter 2 historicizes the author's arguments emergent in the rest of the book, arguing that hybridization during this period led to the creation of specifically Ghanaian designer fashions. It explores how pre-Independence spheres of fashion and collective energies of Independence, distilled especially through prime minister and then president Kwame Nkrumah's ideologies and the city's women, contributed to Accra's dynamic fashion and culture. Richards differentiates "World and European fashions" and "International fashions" (though this reader found the differentiation between the two to be hazy), from "local fashions" which Richards concedes are difficult to define, since they are regularly based on forms and silhouettes of world, European, and international fashions. Despite this, he argues that even if hybridized, the forms are still unique to

Ghana, and even more specifically to Accra. As such, the rest of the chapter is dedicated to nationalist fashion movements and the various ways that Ghanaians modified, articulated, and asserted the notion of an "African personality," most particularly in the now quintessential kente, a deeply cultural and meaningful form of dress that has resisted fossilization (p. 57). Several examples were given of actual kente being cut and reworked into fashion designs to tailoring innovations that privileged kente. See for example the "It's made from kente" picture published from the *Daily Graphic* (fig. 2.12, p. 61) and the kente uniforms created for Ghana Airways' female flight attendants' as paragons of the newly independent country (p. 62). One of the most interesting examples in the chapter, however, is the "Jaguar" style, an expressive and controversial variation on the *kaba* whose nickname may have echoed the prestige of owning the luxurious Jaguar automobile.

Chapter 3 dials in on the forerunners of Ghana's fashion designers—scientist Letitia Obeng and seamstress Laura Quartey—as representative of the countless unknown or casually documented Ghanaian women who actively participated in or shaped Accra's historical dress culture. I was particularly taken with Richards's use of "microrevisions" here which, like informal networks, aided in the drastic sartorial revisions of the Independence era and, as Richards compellingly documents and argues, directly contributed to or encouraged the development of Accra's burgeoning designer fashion culture. Despite their contributions being poorly or underdocumented, Richards asserts their relevance, leaving the chapter intentionally brief, his brevity underscoring the dearth of information and extant garments associated with Quartey, Obeng, and other anonymous fashion contributors. The *kaba* (the African equivalent of the tailored top and skirt) and the *ntama* (which Obeng defines as "the three-piece costume that Ghanaian women wear"), as well as Obeng's education abroad receive the most attention. Richards ends the chapter highlighting a few other underappreciated contributors to Accra's historical fashion scene and as in all other chapters, a more personal and reflective narrative approach lauds the families and the trust they instilled in him and the pursuit of tenuous yet serendipitous research leads. Richards reminds us to step outside of calcified methods of inquiry and embrace the poetic, to pull the loose thread to see what unravels.¹

Using a loose chronological framework to explore another paragon of Ghanaian fashion, chapter 4 traces the career and designs of Juliana Kweifio-Okai and her

label Chez Julie through a robust analysis of garments featured in print media, museum collections, family photographs, and "personal reflections" that start each chapter. Richards argues that Kweifio-Okai's garments revolutionized historic dress, epitomizing the newly independent Ghanaian woman and paving the way for Accra's future designers. Like Obeng, Kweifio-Okai was trained in Europe, afterward traveling to further globalize her fashion knowledge and to differentiate herself from competition. Her most important designs, specifically her kente *kaba* and female Akwadzan,² are highlighted to indicate her continued commitment to innovation, while actively preserving and promoting culturally meaningful and cosmopolitan forms of dress. Richards notes a decline in fashion reportage beginning in the mid-1970s until the first democratic elections were held in 1992. Despite this decline, and widespread anti-elitism that significantly affected Accra's designers, the Chez Julie brand persisted, culminating in a 1991 fashion show celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of her brand. Batik, tie-dye, "Splash," and screen-printed designs proliferated along with various jewelry designs, but sadly, her genius died two years later at the age of 60. In this chapter Richards also significantly argues that the widespread association of wax print with African identity and malleability relied at least in part on the "ability of African women to directly influence [its] design and production," with Ghanaians having a direct impact on its resurgence during post-Independence (pp. 117–18). Richards provides a brief and serviceable history of wax print that is useful in understanding the broader shift and the role of designers like Kweifio-Okai in revamping them, and why imported textiles were still considered of higher quality and more desirable. The standout designs of this section are "Four Corners"³ and the "Day and Night" ensemble, in which Kweifio-Okai removed several of the circular designs from the pattern to simultaneously expose and obscure the torso and create a scalloped neckline.

Richards's chapter 5 does an excellent job of illustrating Beatrice "Bee" Arthur's ability to "be interesting" rather than "nice"—to push the boundaries of Ghanaian fashion and remain true and honest to herself. The garments Richards chooses to highlight are the ones on the "other" rack that make Arthur happy" (p. 154) and are almost unwearable, yet laden with symbolism that challenges the divide between art and fashion—a consistent (and accomplished) preoccupation of the book. Layers of personal meaning and histories imbricate her design choices, and her most recent collections are themed around such controversial subjects

as sexual harassment and failing infrastructures. As Richards argues in this chapter, fashion is, or can be, a means of "visual protest and social critique" (p. 152). The continually revised *matryoshka* dress is one of the most interesting, but a claim that it "may symbolically speak to the subjugation of male power" is not backed up with quotes or confirmation from the designer (p. 161). The other remarkable designs come from the Hands Off—Eyes Only collection, which Richards frames in West African histories of nudity and the vulva, and specifically Nkrumah's "antinudity campaigns" of 1958–1966 (p. 175). The bold confrontational "eyes" created through cutaways and inventive trimming are a standout and empower and protect from the unwanted gaze while simultaneously attracting it.

Chapter 6 details Aisha Ayensu, argued as the most successful and prolific of a younger generation of designers who have revitalized Accra's fashion culture. Ayensu's internationally recognized Christie Brown brand (named after Ayensu's seamstress grandmother) blends wax print and local forms of dress with global materials. While Ayensu's brand is expensive and thus inaccessible to many, the chapter chronicles its democratic and lasting effects, such as the proliferation (and imitations) of wax-print-clad buttons and bib necklaces. Richards summarizes Ayensu's career, emphasizing the hallmarks of her brand: "asymmetry, volume, embellishments, sartorial surprises and kinetic flourishes" (p. 196). Unlike Kweifio-Okai and Obeng, Ayensu studied at the University of Ghana before choosing a fashion career and establishing her brand in the late 2000s. Some of the most iconic styles that exemplify her determination to reimagine wax print for a globally connected clientele, to this reader, are dresses from the Xutra collection (see fig. 6.4, p. 201), the 2017 one-sided "hanging-hem" skirts (see fig. 6.9, p. 204), and the Conscience collection (pp. 206–207, 218, see especially fig. 6.17). Less voluminous but with equally discerning attention to detail and sophistication is a stunning lace gown from Ayensu's 2012 To Dye For collection that features a surprising shock of wax print cascading from the back (figs. 6.13–14, pp. 213–14). The designer argues that for those from southern Ghana, like herself and her grandmother, it is wax that flashes at festivals, not kente or *batakari*, though a later section focuses entirely on Ayensu's use of *batakari* (pp. 219, 225–32).⁴ Some of the best quotes and examples regarding the history and reimagining of wax emerge in this section of the book, but when Ayensu revisits *batakari* later in her career, her efforts to challenge its overtly masculine history and to adapt culturally relevant

textiles, truly wins (see especially fig. 6.22). Arguing that the brand and its many imitations “reflect a growing desire, among Ghanaians and members of the African Diaspora, to embody a heritage-based cosmopolitanism” (p. 233), Richards muses on the future of Christie Brown and eases into the brief and final chapter 7, which he uses as an opportunity to review African fashions and designers more broadly, and the distancing of younger designers from the stereotypical tropes of African fashion and a packaging of identity that is discernible to outsiders. Richards again emphasizes fashion’s inherent adaptability, which parallels the flexibility and change of history itself. Fashion responds nimbly to the past in a way that shapes history in the present and for the future.

Written with a smooth, personal voice, Richards brings together everything that is satisfying about great scholarship and passionate literature. The plethora of intriguing examples draw you in and make you feel as if you were walking the streets of Accra or leaning on the balcony with him, which makes the learning effortless. The author’s clear, direct narrative make it suitable for teaching, as it references significant existing scholarship while remaining accessible and legible to wider or less-experienced

audiences, perhaps new to fashioning and its innovations, global reach, and local sensibilities. If read in large chunks, however, the book has its problems, with repetitive word usage and a reliance on dominant models of “Art” without unpacking terminology—for example in his definition of “haute couture.” As indicated when noting the “personal reflections” interspersed between formal chapters are “vignettes”: brief personal reflections similar to that seen in the Introduction. These are indeed evocative, illustrative, and creatively acknowledge the author’s positionality, but at times felt jarring. Overall however, Richards’s book is an absolute delight to read. Accra’s dynamic pulse grounds the entire book, for “to understand Ghanaian fashion, one must understand the city” (p. 24). Indeed, one can imagine sitting in the garden that is Accra—with its enigmatic smile and endearingly crooked teeth, its fading architectural detritus looming from the shadows of luxury hotels as markers of “progress” and postindependence aspiration—charming your heart to pieces and planting itself firmly in its crevices. As he reminds us, appearances of decline can be deceptive and capricious. It is a gorgeous ode to Accra and its unsung female fashionistas—one hopes that we too thrive and flourish in unpredictable ways.

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Notes

1 One of the most compelling arguments made in the chapter is the self-assertion by Quartey that she was not a fashion designer but a dressmaker, and the considerable role dressmakers and seamstresses have played (and perhaps still do) in the building of fashion culture, as evidenced in the equally underappreciated informal archive of the home and random encounter.

2 Akwadzan is “named after the Ga term for wrapping a body with cloth” (p. 133) and is historically a man’s cloth. Here it is converted into a manageable outfit. “[T]he purpose of the Akwadzan was straightforward: to create a garment that mimicked the appearance of a wrapped textile, but eradicated the need for any wrapping or adjusting” (p. 134). It’s essentially a cloth meant to be wrapped that Kweifio-Okai made into a garment you can slip over your head.

3 This style was unveiled in a 1970 fashion show and was sewn from a GTP wax print (GTP is a factory in Ghana opened in 1966) that appears to radiate out from the wearer’s neck and midline and includes an eye-catching V-shape poncho.

4 Admittedly a deviation from her dedication to wax and arguably more erratic (and therefore less successful overall?), it receives quite a bit of length, nonetheless, and a 2009 example on view at the Harn Museum of Art is pictured (see Fig. 6.20).