

Textile Arts Council

The Bay Area Forum for artists, aficionados & collectors of weaving, rugs & tapestries, baskets, costume & wearable art

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Curatorial: Connecting with Ancestors through Object Research

By Zainab Ayoade Balogun, Collections Cataloging Fellow

The word ‘egungun’ carries multiple related meanings: it is a Yoruba word meaning ‘powers concealed,’ a way to refer to ancestors. It is also the name of an ongoing Yoruba masking tradition, encompassing many different types of masquerades that are created and performed to honor ancestors and family lines at various ceremonies and celebrations. Egungun can also refer to the society of practitioners that perform the necessary rites and lead the spiritual elements necessary to activate the masquerades and connect the worlds of the living and the dead (Campbell 2020). An egungun costume¹ is the medium through which ancestors are channeled into the world of the living.

The egungun garment in the Fine Arts Museums’ collections was acquired by the museum in 1998 from the Eric Robertson gallery in New York. Based on my research, I identified it as belonging to the ‘paka’ type, characterized by a wooden horizontal bar across the top of the garment, from which lappets are suspended, and which sits on the masker’s head to form the rectangular shape of the garment. It was first displayed in the textile exhibitions at the opening of the new de Young in 2005.

Aside from the visual beauty of the egungun, its lappets are layered with meaning. The many layers built up over time and the hundreds of fabrics joined together make this egungun a living archive. Egungun is both rooted in a specific place – this particular style is specific to Yoruba culture hailing from Oyo state – and also global in nature, with varied textiles providing a snapshot of the trade of textiles and popular tastes in Nigeria within a global market during the time the egungun was made. For instance, the nine coins fixed to the front and back of the garment are not currency, but keepsakes minted by a textile manufacturer. The firm, J.W. Jackel (or Jaekel), was active in west Africa as early as the 1930’s through as late as the 1950’s (van der Laan 1983). This window of time helps substantiate the date of creation of the egungun. Jackel’s firm was one of many international textile manufacturers to sell their textiles in west Africa, and its minting of these coins provides an example of the ways

(continues on page 2)

In This Issue

Curatorial	1-3
From the Conservation Lab . . .	4-6
From the TAC Chair	7-8
Upcoming Lectures	9

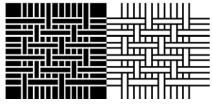


Front view of the egungun in the de Young Textiles Lab

Paka Egungun (Egungun ceremonial dance garment), ca. 1930–1970
Nigeria, Oyo Yoruba
Cotton, synthetic fibers, vinyl, wood; commercially printed cloth, patchwork, appliqué, embroidery, looping (mask), applied glass mirrors, metal amulets, coins, shell buttons)
69 x 50 x 18 in. (175.3 x 127 x 45.7 cm)
Museum purchase, Volunteer Council Art Acquisition Fund. 1998.31

Photo by Natasha Becker,
Curator of African Art

¹While the word ‘costume’ is often inappropriate to use to describe garments belonging to a particular culture or carrying spiritual importance, it is used across literature on egungun, including by Yoruba scholars. My take is that, when using English, this helps differentiate the actual garment from the full embodiment of ancestors through the egungun when it is activated and performed. Another appropriate word to use would be ‘ensemble,’ especially to refer to egungun with multiple pieces, such as those that include masks, sashes, or staffs.



Connecting with Ancestors through Object Research

(cont'd)



The coin fixed to the front of the Egungun, with a lion in the center, and reads “J.W. Jackel & Co. Lucany n/N Czechoslovakia. Trade Yarn.”

Photo by Author



The back side of one of the lappets, with a printed textile reading “Republic of Nigeri(a).”

Photo by Author

in which textile companies catered to their west African customers, in this instance, through participation in the tradition of commemorative coins across west African cultures.

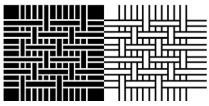
In another example, the use of a commemorative cloth reading ‘Republic of Nigeria,’ suggests the commemoration of the independence of the Federation of Nigeria from Britain in 1960 and its inauguration as the Federal Republic of Nigeria in 1963. This provides a sense that this egungun was created and added to throughout transformational eras in Nigerian history, placing it in the context of colonial and postcolonial legacies.

One of the primary motivations for my research is to improve the care of this egungun and make sure that its care is aligned with its cultural contexts. Thus, the egungun allows us to lay groundwork in the care of objects of spiritual importance in the collection. Working closely with the curator of the arts of Africa at the museum, a major step in the care of this egungun was the development of a culturally sensitive protocol or guide for working with it. At the center of this protocol is a libation ceremony presided over by a curator each time the garment is handled, moved, or worked with physically. Egungun are generally considered to be ‘active’ or ‘inactive’ as a channel for ancestors. The pouring of libations to acknowledge, thank, and explain the work being done to the ancestors previously channeled through this egungun are an important step to respect the garment’s original intended use and to acknowledge its enduring spiritual power, even as it is presumably ‘inactive.’ Beyond the visual and the material, the egungun has intangible qualities and potencies that we, the current stewards of the garment, can never fully comprehend.

On a personal level, this project has been a window for me to connect with a piece of my culture that, like me, now exists in diaspora. As the work continues, I hope to share what the egungun has taught me: that connections with my ancestors can be a way to understand the current moment, consider my own posterity, reconcile difficult histories, and to consider what I owe to those who came before me.

Campbell, Bolaji. *Fabric of Immortality: Ancestral Power, Performance, and Agency in Egungun Artistry*. 2020. Print.

van der Laan, H. Laurens. “A Swiss Family Firm in West Africa: A. Brunnschweiler & Co., 1929-1959.” *African Economic History*, no. 12, 1983, pp. 287–97. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3601329>.



Garment Research \ Intern Report

By Corazon (Cora) Downey, Curatorial Intern

In July, I had the honor of receiving the 2022 Jack Handford Summer Internship sponsored by the Western Region of the Costume Society of America and was welcomed to the de Young Museum for a four-week internship. I am in my final year of undergraduate studies at the University of California, Berkeley, where I study Art Practices, Costume Design, and Journalism.

This past summer provided me with a warm introduction to the inner workings of a museum and granted me unmatched opportunities to handle, engage, and learn about costumes and textiles in a way I have never been able to before. My enthusiasm for costume history was welcomed in full force as I jumped right into development meetings, research, and collaborative conversations for the exhibition. In September, following my summer program, I was offered a continuing intern role at the Museum made possible by the gracious support of the Textile Arts Council (TAC).

I joined the Costume and Textile Arts curatorial and conservation teams as they prepare for an upcoming special exhibition in 2024 with the working title, *San Francisco Style*. This exhibition is set to showcase the department's collection of twentieth- and twenty-first century haute couture and high fashion. The exhibition will also be accompanied by the first-ever catalog of these holdings.

Under the guidance of the exhibition curator, Laura L. Camerlengo, and the department's former curator in charge, Jill D'Alessandro, I am conducting primary source research utilizing the extensive scholarly resources available through the Museums' Library and Textile Study Center. My research is excitedly positioned around gathering any historical references, news coverage, images or information pertaining to the garments, designers, and their donors. The working object list includes a range of 100+ garments made from the 1900s to now, designed by over 45 different designers, and donated by roughly 35 donors. Over the past six months, I have developed supportive documents for the department



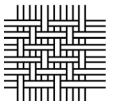
Two unique silk chiffon Lucile evening gowns from the Museum's collection (2005.153.4 and 2005.153.3) made circa 1915.

which gather my findings, from news articles, designer books, digital archives, and beyond, with the curatorial team's hopes of presenting the ensembles with period-appropriate accessories and hairstyles.

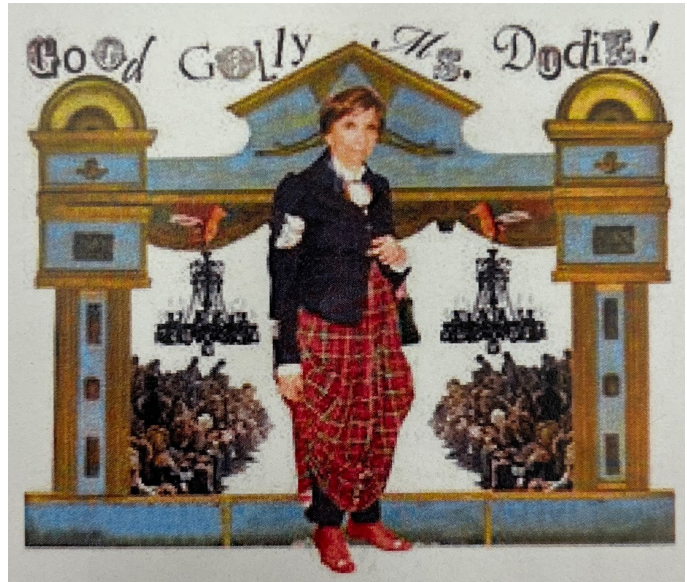
I have developed a true love and appreciation for my research as it allows me to read and learn about costume history in a manner that not only helps the team, but also broadens my own design knowledge, familiarity with the collection, and overall curatorial literacy. Some of my favorite discoveries over the last few months include my introduction to Kaisik Wong, a Chinese-American fashion designer from San Francisco, the uncovering of information on two unique Lucile gowns in our collection, and finding documentation of one particular donor's unique styling choices.

In November I was ecstatic to find primary images and information about two unique silk chiffon Lucile evening gowns from the Museum's collection (2005.153.4 and 2005.153.3) made circa 1915.

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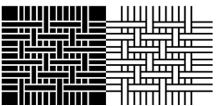


San Francisco Style (working title) is being developed on the basis of exhibiting garments donated by female philanthropists in San Francisco. It is curious that the styling choices for the exhibition may differ from commercial or runway pairings and rather reflect choices in line with the donors' true style. One great example of this is from a look worn by donor Dodie Rosekrans, who donated several of the exhibition's included garments. I was excited to find documentation in a news archive of her unique pairing of two garments: a 1996 John Galliano navy blue wool jacket (2012.42.75) and a 1973 Comme des Garçons plaid skirt (2012.42.17). I am excited to share small discoveries like this as they inform how the looks are developed for the exhibition.



A 1996 John Galliano navy blue wool jacket (2012.42.75) and a 1973 Comme des Garçons plaid skirt (2012.42.17)

I am continuously excited by my research work at the Museums and am grateful for the opportunity to grow as a scholar while working under the direction of professionals that I aspire to be. I will continue this supportive research for the Spring exhibition and through my graduation in May. A huge note of gratitude to the staff at the de Young Museum for welcoming me with open arms and inspiring me to continue pursuing a career in costume and textile arts, and to the Textile Arts Council for providing me with this unmatched opportunity.



News from the Conservation Lab
By Beth Szuhay, Head of Textile Conservation

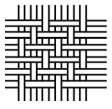
This summer, the Textile Conservation Lab hosted intern Lauren Van Dessel, who is a student from the MPhil Textile Conservation program at the University of Glasgow. Lauren joined the lab as part of her credited summer placement, which takes place between the first and second year of the program.

During the internship, Lauren undertook two main projects, one of which was to create a storage proposal, with possible treatment methods, to advise on the immediate and long-term storage changes that would benefit the tapa collection.



An example of creasing and material loss of a tapa cloth through the combination of embrittlement and folded storage.

(continues on page 5)



News from the Conservation Lab

(cont'd)

Tapa are dyed or painted sheets of barkcloth usually used as an item of dress or as wall partitions, and are traditionally produced across the Polynesian islands, as well as some parts of Africa. The majority of the collection at FAMSF hails from Samoa and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

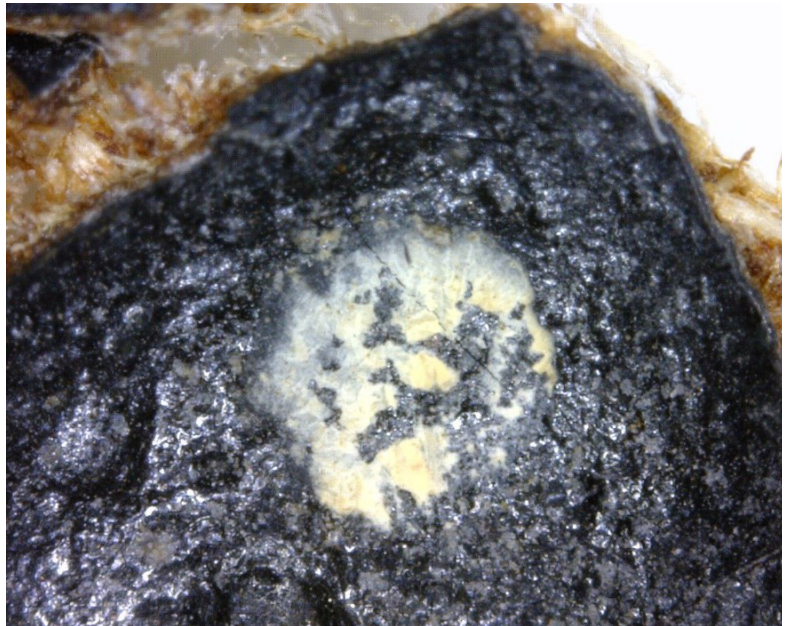
Working with museum technicians and the registrar of the permanent collection, Lauren conducted a condition survey of a representative selection of the tapa to ascertain the main condition issues and storage limitations. The key problems appear to be associated with desiccation of the fibers: embrittlement, tearing, material loss, creasing, and delamination seem to be the almost inevitable consequences of the material's ageing, many of which are exacerbated when coupled with folded storage. It is therefore ideal that tapa are stored flat, yet the museum's limited storage space and the large size of many of the objects (the largest tapa surveyed measured almost 3 meters in length) demand alternative solutions, such as rolling on large diameter tubes or padding out the folded layers.

An anomalous condition feature on one of the tapa attracted the conservators' attention in particular, the likes of which the barkcloth experts consulted had never before seen! These small, white spots scattered across the tapa and were originally presumed to be mould. However, when one of these spots was examined under a digital microscope it had the appearance of another kind of "bloom" entirely—that of salt or fat. Is this a possible result of the tapa's finish with candlenut oil, a product often applied to tapa in places like Samoa? This is an interesting phenomenon that warrants further investigation.

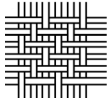
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Lauren unrolling a large tapa cloth during the condition survey.



The mysterious white substance photographed using a digital microscope.



News from the Conservation Lab

(cont'd)

Alongside the tapa collection, Lauren also had the opportunity to treat a designer dress by Maggy Rouff titled "Sucre d'Orge" (1958-9). In preparation for catalog photography as part of the upcoming exhibition "San Francisco Style," the dress required localised cleaning, weave re-alignment, fringe straightening, and extensive support stitching to make it safe for mounting.

The structural complexity of the dress and the voluminous layers of skirt hindered easy access to the areas in need of support stitching and provided a wonderful challenge for bolstering a student conservator's stitching skills. Another part of the treatment involved assistant textile conservator Laura Garcia-Vendrenne introducing Lauren to the theory and application of gels for cleaning textiles. This was an exciting opportunity to experiment with a relatively novel technique in the field of textile conservation. After many hours of challenging treatment, test mounting the dress under direction of costume mounting technician Erin Algeo was a satisfying conclusion to the placement.

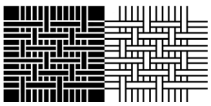
Lauren would like to thank the Textile Conservation team for providing her with a supportive and interesting placement and extends her gratitude to all staff at FAMSF for their warm welcome and generosity throughout her stay.



Lauren preparing agarose gel to clean the dress.



Lauren and Erin test mounting the dress.



From Shirley Juster, Textile Arts Council Board Chair

March 2023

With both congratulations and a touch of sadness, we are bidding goodbye to our long-term curator, Jill D'Alessandro. In a move that will add further to her acclaim in the textile world, Jill has accepted the position of Director and Curator of the Avenir Institute of Textile Arts and Fashion at the Denver Art Museum.

It has been a joy working with Jill for many years as both a chair and member of the TAC board. I have so much enjoyed our close working relationship that has benefited TAC, the Textile Department, and the museum itself. It was a pleasure working with Jill during her preparation for some of the most exciting exhibitions at the Fine Arts Museums, among the most recent being *Gui Pei: Couture Fantasy* in 2022 and the *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* in 2018 where she served as co-curator alongside Laura L. Camerlengo and Reina Lewis.

I have particularly fond memories of *Pulp Fashion: The Art of Isabelle de Borchgrave* in 2011. I was new to the board, and this was my first opportunity to closely observe the thought, labor, and passion that goes into such a presentation. Jill shared all of this with us, and the exhibition was beyond my expectations. I still cherish Jill's catalogue for this show, as it truly speaks from her and to the textile community. I will miss her, and I wish her all the best on this wonderful chapter ahead.

We are once again designing our events around your in-person participation. Our Saturday lectures are now presented in the Koret Auditorium, giving you the opportunity to visit the museum and meet with fellow TAC members and guest speakers. Saturday lectures will continue to be broadcast via Zoom as well, with recordings archived for future viewing by our members.

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Photo by Randy Dodson

Key publication credits in D'Alessandro's name include 2022's Guo Pei: Couture Fantasy, Yale University Press. D'Alessandro served as co-editor of Contemporary Muslim Fashions, and authored the lead essay for the 2018 catalogue. Additional publication highlights for D'Alessandro include Summer of Love: Art, Fashion and Rock & Roll, San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2017, which she co-authored with Colleen Terry and featured her essay "Stitching a New Paradigm: Dress Codes of the Counterculture." Her chapter, "With beauty all around me, I walk," in Routledge's Anthropology and Beauty: From Aesthetics to Creativity, edited by Stephanie Bunn (2018) shone a light on Indigenous textiles, as well as D'Alessandro's expertise on Diné/Navajo weavings. She also authored Pulp Fashion: The Art of Isabelle de Borchgrave, 2011, an incredibly popular volume that saw three printings.

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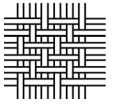
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From the Board Chair

(cont'd)

Save the Date – Add these dates to your calendar!

Upcoming Lectures:

- **April 15 - The California Art Quilt Revolution: From the Summer of Love to the New Millenium** with author and art historian, Nancy Bavor
- **May 20 - Embellished Art Histories** with Professor Julia Bryan-Wilson of Columbia University
- **June 17 - Fashioning an Exhibition: How Textile Conservators Prepare Christian Dior's Junon for Display** with the Textile Conservators of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

Tours and Workshops:

- **March 25 (Tour) - Studio Tour and Kakishibu Workshop** with Ana Lisa Hedstrom
- **April 5 (Tour) - The Amish Quilt Collection of Faith and Steven Brown** at Joe Cunningham's studio
- **May 10 and 17 (Virtual Workshop) - Designing with Pieced Fabric** with Jeanie Low via Zoom

More opportunities to come are now in the planning stage for May through September.

Textile-oriented Travel:

- **March 25 and 26 - From Workshop to Nomad: New Thinking about Rug Weaving Categories and Design Influences Symposium** at the Denver Art Museum
- **September 14 through 24 - Textile Tour of London**, led by Melissa Leventon

Looking back on 2022, we ended the year with celebration and community. Our Textile Bazaar on November 12 was a huge success, considered by many to be the best ever. After an absence of three years, our Holiday Party at St. Mary's Cathedral was a welcome opportunity to reconnect and catch up with each other. We look forward to seeing more of you in the coming year.

Shirley Juster

Textile Arts Council Board Chair

TEXTILE BAZAAR

Thanks for supporting TAC's Textile Bazaar!



Save the Date!

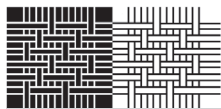
Textile Bazaar

will be held on

November 4, 2023

St. Mary's Cathedral

TAC'S HOLIDAY PARTY



Textile Arts Council

deYoung \ fine arts museums of san francisco

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