



Kuba cloth

Not on display

Title/Description: Kuba cloth

Born: 1901 - 1999

Object Type: Textile

Materials: Textile

Measurements: h. 3820 x w. 800 x d. 2 mm

Accession Number: S.107

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo

Cultural Group: Kuba

Credit Line: Donated by Lisa Sainsbury, 2010

This ceremonial Kuba Cloth was presented to Lady Sainsbury after she entertained the King of Kuba to lunch at her home in March 2001. The King of Kuba, (nyim) Kok Mabiintsh III, was the guest of honour to celebrate the opening of the Sainsbury Africa galleries at the British Museum. [1]

Kuba barkcloth originated in the 17th century in the Kuba kingdom of central Africa, in modern-day Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Kuba have long placed a high value on producing textiles. They are known for their complexity of design and bold geometric surface decoration. Most barkcloths are a variation on rectangular or square pieces of woven palm leaf fibre executed in linear embroidery and other stitches.

Among the Kuba, it is the men who do the weaving, and the women who do the embroidery and applique work. It is produced on an inclined heddle loom, usually by male weavers. At this point, another round of dyeing or kneading may take place, before handing the piece off for "finishing" work typically carried out by women. These decorative techniques can include embroidery, appliqués, or patchwork, and result in a cut pile cloth whose texture resembles velvet. The cloths have many ceremonial uses as ceremonial skirts, tribute cloths, headdresses and basketry. They designate status and sometimes currency at the apex of the Kuba society. A single placemat-sized barkcloth can take several days to complete. Often, many articles are joined together for larger prestige pieces, which were historically used to denote the wealth and supremacy of Kuba rulers. This example, likely to be a woman's wrap skirt, is around 12 feet in length and worn wrapped around the body.

Calvin Winner, October, 2022

[1] Correspondence with Prof. Steven Hooper, Director of the Sainsbury Research Unit, UEA
14/01/2019

Exhibitions

'Power Plants: Intoxicants, Stimulants and Narcotics', Sainsbury Centre, UK, 14/09/2024-02/02/2025

Further Reading

Monica B. Visona, Robin Poynor, Herbert M. Cole, Preston Biler, A History of Art in Africa (Pearson; 2nd edition, 2007)

Provenance

Gift to Lady Lisa Sainsbury from the King of Kuba, (nyim) Kok Mabiintsh III in 2001.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 2010.
