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Retold: African fables conceptualized into fashion artwork

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Keyword: design, concepts, fables, story-telling

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to divulge the benefits and methodologies of using fables in fashion artwork. The conceptualization of African fables into the apparel and textiles industry aims to bring a deeper understanding of the rich cultural heritage of peoples.

Significance: Unfortunately, there is still a “profound ambivalence” in the true historiography of Africa; much of what we understand is the “victimhood and romanticism” of the people (Beinart, 2000). According to Beinart, historians and social scientist specializing in African history have been uneasy about incorporating environmental elements of the culture into their work partly because of their lack of familiarity with the subject matter. Sharing the true culture and humanity of Africans is the aim for the current research, by means of utilizing African fables to help “tell the story” of the environmental lives of the people. “Fables were another important sphere of African culture which explored encounters with the natural world. Many fables illustrated perceived animal characteristics and abounded with metaphors and observations drawn from nature, but also offered a mirror to human society” (Beinart, 2000, p. 300).

Theoretical Framework: The perspective of the “anthropology of art” was used to frame a concept of “creative flow” by means of African fables. The “anthropology of art” requires an

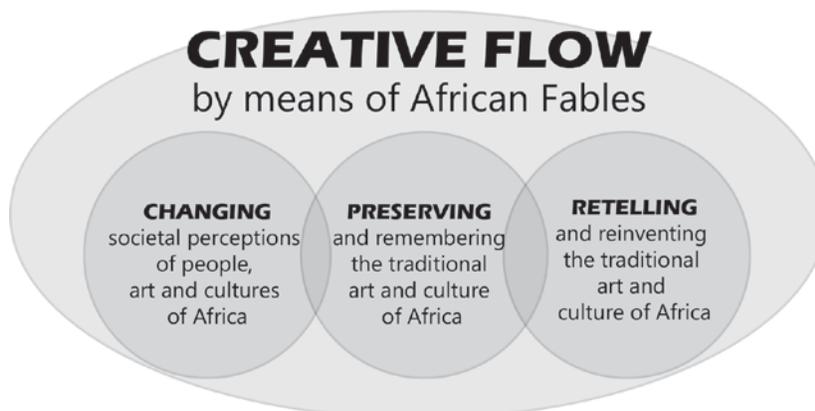


Figure 1 Creative Flow by means of African Fables (inspired by Csikszentmihalyi’s systems model of creativity)

indigenous interpretive context and must accentuate the cultural meaning behind the work—the metaphysical essence of the society from which it came (Morphy & Perkins, 2006).

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1996), individuals who have creative “flow” are people who change our culture, decide which art is worth being recognized and preserved, these individuals also come up with new ideas based on our culture.

Methods: The fable is chosen by researching books and online resources dedicated to African fables. When a fable is read and if the story remains fresh in the author’s mind for more than a month or so and it continues to dream up pictures in the mind of the author, it becomes obvious that this is the one to retell with fashion. The author begins to formulate research questions from the fable. When developing new design concepts, the author always contemplated how to tell the complete story without words, only texture, pattern, and silhouette. It is very important in the process not to alter the story but retell it as closely as possible to its original message. The media of choice always ranges from batik, to leather crafting/etching, to digital printing. Fabric choices are

extremely critical to the design results, as natural fibers (mostly cottons) are always used to reflect the environmental and animal focused fables. The inspirational images are collected and the idea is sketched out. Then, the draping process begins. As this process transpires, the details are tweaked and finalized. Last, the final fabrics are cut, embellished and sewn.

Design Results: The latest fashion art works done using the above process includes: Ashanti's Procreation (Figure 2)—the retold story of the Ghanaian tribe's ideology of procreation involving a python. This piece was created with a cotton canvas bodice, a leather crafted snake and silk organza skirt representing the dwelling waters of the python. Singed: How the zebra got its stripes (Figure 3)—the retold story of San people's fable of how the all-white zebra got into a scuffle with a baboon and got stripes burned onto his body in the process. The actual garment's hem was burnt. Baobab: A.K.A the Upside Down Tree (Figure 4)—the retold story of the baobab being planted upside down when God was creating the world. The coat was designed to appear to be worn upside down. Amma's Chaos and Order (Figure 5)—the retold story of the Dogon tribes' ideology of the beginning of human life. The printed pattern is of the Seagull nebula partnered with Sirius, the proverbial star of creation.

Conclusions: From these works the author has learned to be organic with the media. The author's perfectionist ways had to be laid to rest as the media was going to do as it willed. The author has learned to "flow" with the results in the conceptualization phase. If the fable does not resonate after it is first read, then it is not worth spending time on. These works help break down barriers for other artists/designers looking to incorporate anthropological art in their work. These garments offer inventive ways of using unique forms of media—both traditional and contemporary—to accomplish the goal of storytelling and designing successful fashion artwork.



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

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